

Defetishizing the Plantation: African Americans in the Memorialized South

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Landscape is important because it really is *everything* we see when we go outside. But it also is everything that we do not see.¹

Plantation museums would appear to be natural sites in which to learn about the lives of enslaved Africans and African-Americans in the United States. Yet, at the numerous restored plantations that dot the states of the former Confederacy, places with regal sounding names such as Woodlawn, Magnolia, Stratford, Oak Alley, Berkeley, Monmouth, and Belle Grove, the word “slave” is rarely, if ever, uttered. If the enslaved are mentioned they are often referred to as “servants.” Most of the narratives presented at these Taraesque (as in *Gone with the Wind*) sites are not stories of the enslaved laborers that made the plantation economy possible but rather they are “big house” stories, stories of the white master’s home, wealth, possessions, and worldview. This racial erasure has been well documented by many scholars in the humanities and social sciences, including geographers.²

Marx describes a commodity fetish as occurring when the link between labor and the product of labor has been broken – when human-wrought objects appear to come from nowhere.³ Just as we seldom give thought as to how the things we consume come to us today, the products of the American plantation – sugar, cotton, indigo, etc. – were consumed outside of the South with little thought as to how they were produced. They seemly appeared in markets and shops *ex nihilo*.⁴ This disconnect is highlighted by the campaign of 18th century abolitionists to make the link between sugar and those who toiled to produce it explicit. By 1792 as many as 400,000 Britons had discontinued purchasing sugar and rum imported from slave plantations in the Caribbean.⁵

Plantation museums are a peculiar type of fetish commodity. They are sites that capitalize the plantation by using it as a stage for the selling

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of a “big house” story of planters, masters, and mistresses, while neglecting the stories of those whose labor built the estate and whose wealth generation furnished it. In a painfully ironic sense these plantation museums present a master’s master narrative—i.e., a story of the powerful.⁶ These sites profit from a narrative that centers on manifestations of the master’s social and economic power, the big house being the most conspicuous example, while eliding the narratives of the enslaved labor that made such edifices possible. In this sense plantation museums are recycled landscapes, which posthumously extract wealth from the labors of former slaves. Hence, the place of the enslaved on and through the landscape is doubly obscured.

Just as eighteenth-century abolitionists defetishized sugar by making consumers aware of the enslaved labor behind the commodity’s production, we are interested in de-fetishizing and complicating contemporary plantation museum narratives that privilege the master’s lifestory over the experiences, contributions, and struggles of the slave community. Accomplishing this intervention is a large-scale intellectual and political project that is not accomplished in the pages of a single article. Re-introducing the enslaved into the public history of the Southern plantation obviously requires a direct re-writing of the tours and exhibits at these heritage sites and changing what visitors hear about slavery. At the same time, the process of de-fetishizing the plantation also requires that we re-introduce the lives of the enslaved into the larger circulation of ideas and knowledge. Carrying out this broader, conceptual rewriting of the master’s narrative is especially needed when we consider that some plantation museum docents and managers claim, whether legitimately or not, that they would talk more about the history of slavery if they actually knew more about it and had stories to share with visitors. It is difficult to believe that plantation docents and site managers are unaware of the growing literature on enslavement, but such a claim speaks to how the politics of forgetting slavery can become compounded over time as generations of museum staff continue to draw from and rely upon the selective historical narratives used by their predecessors. This claim also speaks to the continuing need for scholarship that ensures that the enslaved are seen and heard, thus providing a potential resource for heritage tourism practitioners as they take on the challenge of re-imagining the memorialized South and the plantation in more inclusive and just ways.

Ensuring that the enslaved are heard is done in this paper by using a methodology framed around Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the oral histories of former slaves. A primary focus of CRT is narrative, particularly counternarratives. The oral histories of former slaves are the counternarratives to the master narratives being disseminated at many plantation museums. Museums are part of the “edutainment” industry—“the joining

together of educational and cultural activities with the commerce and technologies of the entertainment world."⁷ They compete with other entertainment activities for consumers' leisure time. Just like novels, movies, television, and even sporting events, museums attract consumers through the stories they tell. All museums tell a story (a narrative) that they hope their consumers will find engaging. As mentioned earlier, the story most often proffered at plantation museums is the master's story. The master's story is the comfortable and safe "lives of the rich and famous" narrative. As the owner of Oak Alley plantation states, "They [plantation visitors] come for the hoopskirts, the grandeur and the elegance. That's a part of the story, and maybe a better part to tell."⁸

The master's narrative

In their extensive survey of plantation museums in the American South, Eichstedt and Small state that their "primary goal is to understand how plantations reflect, create, and contribute to racialized ways of understanding and organizing the world."⁹ They found that the presentations at these plantation museums could be categorized into one of four types of "regimes of representation": (1) symbolic annihilation and the erasure of slavery, (2) trivializing and deflecting the experience of enslavement, (3) segregation of knowledge, and (4) a complication of the master's master narrative.¹⁰

Symbolic annihilation is the rhetorical and visual act of eliding slavery. This was performed at these sites through several types of strategies, the bluntest being not to mention slavery at all. Twenty-five percent of the plantation museums employed this form of symbolic annihilation.¹¹ Most of the rest annihilated the slave by tightly focusing on planter families and even more so on the material wealth and reputation of these families as exhibited primarily in their homes and furnishings. Adams notes that this adoration of furniture is "a kind of anti-commodity fetish—not for sale itself, it disguises the presence of people at the plantation who were."¹²

The strategy of trivializing and deflecting slavery at plantation museums functions not through silences and shrouding, but rather through palliation. This is chiefly performed by means of "they were not slaves, they were members of the family" narratives. These family narratives are often bolstered by noting that many slaves chose to remain on their former masters' plantations after emancipation. While it is true that many slaves chose to stay on the plantation, this is only a half-truth. It neglects two other sides of the choice, one being where would people lacking education and skills other than what was learned on the plantation go—to another plantation? This member-of-the-family narrative also neglects the

fact that many slaves did leave the plantation, most in search of actual family members sold away by their masters before emancipation.¹³ Eichstedt and Small found this type of representation of the enslaved at 27 percent of the plantation museums they surveyed.

Segregated regimes of representation are self-explanatory. At plantation museums that present this type of narrative visitors can choose to go on the big house tour, or they can choose to go on the slave quarters tour, or they can choose both, often for an additional fee. In many cases these tours are visits to adjoining, yet separate, white and black spaces. Such sites are odd, anachronistic, “separate but equal” enclaves, which are even more bizarre given that during the plantation era there was little separation and even less equality between whites and blacks in these spaces. Eichstedt and Small found that only a few museums used this rather clumsy form of representation. Interestingly, one of the sites that employed segregation, Laura Plantation in Louisiana, found that their slave quarter tours became increasingly popular over time. Recently, they dropped the two different tours and integrated them into one tour. Laura is one of the few plantation museums that has successfully complicated the master’s master narrative. Laura complicated it by not only letting the master and his white family speak, but by also giving voice to the enslaved.

CRT and oral histories

Foucault informs us that power and knowledge do not exist independently; rather they are mutually constituted fields, where power demarcates the range of knowledge, while knowledge buttresses the aims of power.¹⁴ Knowledge exists within regimes of truth that are delimited by authoritative and hence rarely examined discourses—narratives that are presumed to be truths unto themselves, i.e. master narratives. This is why Critical Race Theorists take narratives seriously.¹⁵ In *And We Are Not Saved* and *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, Derrick Bell, a founding Critical Race Theorist, employs composite “allegorical stories” to illuminate concealed aspects of American racism.¹⁶ Critical Race Theorists use these narrative re-descriptions as counterstories in the performance of memory work—“acknowledging what was forgotten, what was not seen, and what was lost in the process of remembering and reconstructing the past.”¹⁷

Kobayashi and Peake’s re-description of the 1999 Columbine high school shootings and Price’s re-description of the 1999-2000 Elián González saga are but two examples of how CRT counterstories have been employed to reveal the veiled elements of race and racism in both of these events.¹⁸ These re-descriptions, however, do not use allegorical composites as their counterstories. Instead they both deconstruct and re-represent the news coverage of both events. They use the words of those who lived and

reported on these events as the material for their counternarratives. In the same vein as the counterstories of Kobayashi and Peake, and Price, this study uses the words of those present at the event. We use the actual words of the enslaved.

Oral histories are the reminiscences of individuals who have a firsthand knowledge of a time period, an event, or a place.¹⁹ They are similar to written autobiographic materials in that they tend to be personal in nature; however, they differ from written recollections in that they are usually recorded at some distance in time from what is being recalled. The fact that they are spoken rather than written recollections is significant in two ways. First, a writer's immediate audience is the writer. Oral histories begin as interviews between an interviewer and a narrator. Having an audience can affect what is said, how it is said, and what is not said.²⁰ Second, writing is a skill of the privileged. It requires not only literacy but also time, space, and writing materials. Because of these necessities, oral histories tend to be the stories of non-elites and the marginalized in society. This is particularly true with slave narratives. They tend to be organic counternarratives.

The oral histories for this project come from the Library of Congress's website *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*.²¹ The site contains more than 2,300 first-person slave narratives. The interviews were compiled as part of the Depression Era work program for unemployed writers—the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The informants were former slaves over the age of 75. Most of the interviews took place in the homes of the informants. With few exceptions the interviewers were white, much younger than the informants, and with cultural backgrounds that differed in significant ways from their informants. These differences between informants and interviewers bring up questions concerning the power dynamics of these interviews.²²

The writers were not professionally trained interviewers or speech transcribers. In transcribing interviews, writers were instructed that "words that definitely have a notably different pronunciation from the usual should be recorded as heard."²³ The following is a passage from a transcription of an interviewer soliciting a former slave for an interview on a street in Birmingham, Alabama, on May 14, 1937:

Interviewer: I'll drop a dime in your hat uncle if you'll stand here and talk to me for a few minutes.

Former slave: Sho' boss, iffen you wants, I'll talk all day fo' dat much money. I'se been here fo' a long time an' I knows plenty to talk 'bout. What does yo' want to know?

This passage brings up several ethical issues both past and present. The passage strongly suggests that the interviewer (who very likely was white) holds a higher social status than the older black man. Just from the description of their encounter in the transcript it seems obvious that the interviewer does not view himself as being the older man's equal. The reverse is also true—the former slave addresses the interviewer as “boss” while he let himself be address as “uncle” rather than sir or mister. Of course this is all taking place in the American South during the early part of the twentieth century, but what are the current ethical implications of their use?

Slave narratives have been the basis of other academic projects, most notably among them the works of Yetman, Blassingame, and Hartman.²⁴ On the issue of the contemporary ethical implications of the use of slave narratives Hartman makes the point that “reliance on the interviews conducted by the Works Progress Administration raises a host of problems regarding the construction of voice, [and] the terms in which agency is identified....”²⁵ Specifically, the point that Hartman (as well as Yetman and Blassingame) makes is that the narratives are not the pronouncements of fully unconstrained individuals. First, there is the fact that these interviews were taking place in a context that Blackmon describes as “slavery by another name.”²⁶ Simply put, the end of the Civil War dispossessed masters from their former slaves, but it did not free the slaves. Former slaves often lived as little more than thralls to the whites in their communities. Second, these narratives were not the product of one individual, rather they were authored by up to two to four individuals—the former slave, her or his interviewer, and either one or two editors of the transcript. What former slaves said and how they said it was filtered through one to three other individuals. The interview between the former slave W. B. Allen and his interviewer J. Ralph Jones provides one example of how this filtering led to distortions in the narrative. The edited transcript records Allen using “de” for the word “the,” “dis” for the word “this,” and “chillums” for the word “children.” In the original unedited transcript that Jones produced, Allen speaks in Standard English.²⁷ Evidently, the editors of Jones transcript were unaccustomed to hearing black people speaking in this way and assumed Allen's interview was mis-transcribed. They could not imagine an educated black man.

Undeniably, few slaves were taught to read and write and as a result former slaves had high rates of illiteracy and many spoke in ungrammatical and broken speech. This fact notwithstanding, it seems to us ethically questionable to reproduce these speech patterns when they diminish their speakers. A case could be made, and originally it was, that these vernacular speech patterns should be preserved for the sake of authenticity, but for the reasons explained above this claim of authenticity

of speech is dubious. Because we choose to respect the dignity of these former slaves all further interviews in this paper will be translated into Standard English.

The analysis of the oral histories proceeded as follows: A keyword search was performed on the narratives' bibliographic records for the word "plantation." This search produced 40 narratives. In addition to these 40 narratives the narrative of James Capes and Sarah Gudger were included because of their advanced age at the time of their interviews. It was hoped that Capes, age 100, and Gudger, age 121, being adults during slavery, would provide different perspectives on plantation life than the younger former slaves. While Capes' narrative/life was fascinating, it was also an outlier in terms of the other slave narratives – he was a Texas slave whose mother and father came directly from Africa and he was *enlisted* in the Confederate Army during the Civil War. Because Capes's story was so unique, it was excluded from further analysis. Conversely, the narrative from Gudger provided greater detail about life on the antebellum plantation.

Of these 41 narratives only those former slaves who were 80 years of age or older during the time of their interviews were analyzed. The age 80 was used as a limit instead of 75 (the Writers' Project cutoff) because a former slave interviewed at age 75 in 1936-38 would have been two to five years old when the Civil War ended. Their firsthand knowledge of slavery would have been severely limited. Seventeen respondents remained after this filtering (see Table 1). In reading the transcripts, we identified themes by the occurrence and subsequent reoccurrence of an idea or a type of event in at least five interviews. Three themes were identified: (1) "those were good days" (or were they?), (2) acts of terror, and (3) plantation families in black and white. In addition to these three observed themes a fourth silent but unavoidably present theme was identified – black rage.

"Those were good days" (or were they?)

The first theme to emerge in our deep reading of the oral histories was unexpected. Several former slaves looked back at their time in slavery with nostalgia. They had fond memories of slavery, yet when they described the conditions in which they lived it was difficult to understand why they longed for the past. Jasper Battle's interview offers an example of this seeming contradiction:

The days before [the war] were good old days, especially for colored folks. I know because my Mammy told me so. You see I was mighty little and young when the war was over, but I heard the old folks do a lot of talking about those times whilst I was growing up, and then too, I stayed right there on that same place

Name	Age
Jasper Battle	80
Midge Burnett	80
Cordelia Thomas	80
Benny Dillard	80
Nancy Smith	80
Neal Upson	81
Susan Matthews	84
Mary Colbert	84
Julia Cole	86
Abbie Vinson	86
Susan McIntosh	87
Georgia Smith	87
Lila Nichols	89
Lina Hunt	90
Tom Singleton	94
Jacob Thomas	97
Sarah Gudger	121

Table 1. Narratives of former slaves used in this study, arranged by ascending age.

until I was almost grown....When my Mammy and Daddy got married master Henry wouldn't sell Mammy, and master Billie wouldn't sell Daddy, so they didn't get to see one another but twice a week....I can still remember Daddy coming over to master Henry's plantation to see us.

Master Henry kept a lot of slaves to work [his] big old plantation where he grew just about everything we needed to eat and wear except sugar and coffee and the brass toes for our home-made, brogan shoes. There always was plenty to eat and wear on the place.

Slave quarters were long cabins built in long rows. Some had chimneys in the middle, between two rooms, but most of them were just one-room cabins with a stick and mud chimney at the end. Those chimneys were awful bad about catching fire. No-body had glass windows. They just had plain plank shutters for

blinds and the doors were made the same way, out of rough planks. All the beds were home-made and the best of them was corded.

(Jasper Battle, age 80, place of interview: Athens, Georgia, interviewer: Grace McCune, interview date: unknown)

What exactly does Battle mean when he states that those were the good old days for colored folks? What was so good about not being able to live with your father because he is owned by a different man from the one who owns your mother? What would make him yearn for one- or two-room cabins where the chimneys frequently caught on fire? It could be that Battle, along with other former slaves interviewed, stated that those were the good old days because this is what they thought their white interviewers wanted to hear – a conclusion that is shared by Blassingame.²⁸ Or it could have been that they actually felt that they were the good old days because they were too young to experience the worst of enslavement. This explanation is countered at least in Battle's case because he was told that they were good days by his mother and other older individuals in his community – individuals who experienced slavery first-hand as adults. Another possible reason could have been that for the ones who held this sentiment in their particular cases it was good, they were slaves but they were treated relatively well.

While these are all potential explanations it would appear that in Battle's case, and probably in some of the cases of other former slaves who felt the same way about slavery, the true explanation lies in both the time period in which the interview took place and the second paragraph of Battle's oral history passage. The end of Reconstruction (1877) inaugurated a wave of white terrorism against and subjugation of blacks in the South that did not come to an end until the late 1960s. In contrast, Battle's second paragraph speaks of a life of abundance and suggests at least a modicum of concern by whites – "Master Henry...grew just everything we needed to eat and wear." Before the Civil War blacks were valuable pieces of property that needed to be cared for in order to produce a financial return. After Emancipation blacks were no longer capital; instead they were viewed by many whites as threats to the "white nation." The idea of blacks as threats to the white nation is exemplified in D.W. Griffith's 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*, whose premise is that the creation of the Ku Klux Klan was necessary in order to save the white nation from black savages no longer under the "civilizing" influence of slavery.²⁹ In light of the racial persecution occurring at the time it is not surprising that some former slaves might long for the days of slavery. Battle's longing for the plantation prompts us to reflect critically on museum narratives that assert unproblematically that slaves simply chose to stay on plantations after emancipation.

Acts of terror

Perhaps some former slaves lived on plantations where they were relatively well treated but even for these slaves there always lurked the possibility of violence. Slavery was in large part, but not in total, a system of power relations where whites used violence, and more often the threat of violence, to impel blacks to obey their wishes. This is not to say that slaves were powerless or incapable of inflicting violence upon their white masters. In total, the New York slave revolt (1712), the Stono rebellion (1739), and a slave rebellion led by Nat Turner (1831) resulted in the deaths of more than 100 whites in the United States. These along with other less successful rebellions, but in particular the successful Haitian slave rebellion of 1771, caused many slave owners to live in fear and suspicion of the enslaved. The following passages narrated by interviewee Lila Nichols offer an example of white fear and the violence used to mollify it:

Once Miss was sick, and a slave girl named Alice brought her some water and something to eat. Miss got sick[er] to her stomach, and she said that Alice tried to poison her. To show you how sick she was, she got out of the bed, strips that girl to the waist and whips her with a cowhide until the blood runs down her back. That girl's back was cut in gashes and the blood run down to her heels. After that she was chained down by the arms and legs until she got well, then she was carried off to Richmond in chains and sold.

(Lila Nichols, age 86, place of interview: Town of Cary, Wake County, North Carolina, interviewer: Mary A. Hicks, interview date: May 18, 1937)

There are three interesting elements to this passage: (1) the paranoia of the white mistress, (2) the sarcastic contempt of the narrator (Lila Nichols), and (3) the disproportionate violence and punishment inflicted upon the slave girl Alice. As noted earlier, white planters often suspected that their slaves would murder them if given the chance. A murder scenario seems to have been playing in the mind of the mistress as she got sicker after drinking the water and eating the food Alice gave her.

But how sick was she? This is the question that Nichols asks and she asked in a way that shows her contempt for her former mistress. Unlike Jasper Battle's paternal feelings for his master, Nichols does not appear to have any warm feelings toward her mistress. As slaves, Battle and Nichols lived in different social contexts. It is not known how many acts of violence against slaves Nichols witness or even suffered but the fact

that she recalls this particular act of violence some 70 years after it occurred is testament to the effect it had upon her.

A girl, not a woman, gives her sick mistress water and food. The mistress becomes more ill, which is not uncommon given that she is already sick, and she assumes without proof that the girl for some unknown reason is trying to poison her. She gets up from her sick bed, whips the girl, has her chained until she is healthy enough to travel, and then sells her away from her family and friends. What exactly could have triggered such a disproportionate response from this white woman? We only have Nichols version of the story yet it is difficult to imagine given the asymmetric power relationship between the mistress and the slave girl that she actually tried to poison her mistress. What would she have achieved by poisoning her mistress? If Alice had succeeded, she would still be a slave, and if it had been discovered that Alice had murdered her mistress she would have probably died a painful death.

There is a possible reason for the rage that the mistress felt. It was quite common for the masters of plantations to rape slaves and father their children. Perhaps Alice was the master's slave daughter, the physical evidence of the infidelity of the mistress's husband, or perhaps she was an object of the master's concupiscence. The following is an American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission interview that took place in Canada in 1863 with J. W. Lindsay, a free black who was kidnapped into slavery and who later bought himself out of slavery:

There are some slaveholders who have got pretty refined feelings about them [their black offspring], though they are great men to go into these depredation. Sometimes they get really attached to their [black] mistresses. Sometimes white mistresses will surmise that there is an intimacy between a slave woman & the master, and perhaps she will make a great fuss & have her whipped, & perhaps there will be no peace until she is sold.³⁰

The true reasons behind this incident will never be known. However, what is certain is that white fear of slaves, slave rape, infidelity in the master's family, and the interracial proof of acts of infidelity visibly every day on the plantation are issues seldom raised in contemporary tours at plantation museums. It is a part of the story that most plantation museum owners assume that their patrons do not want to know. Instead they give them narratives that depict the master as benevolent caretaker of loyal slaves.

Plantation families in black and white

In addition to the images of grandeur and elegance that many plantation museums present to their audiences are narratives of slaves as trusted servants and members of the white family.³¹ In many instances it was true that blacks were emotionally close to their white families. This is due to an ironic fact: blacks and whites in the United States have never been as close in proximity to each other as they were during the era of slavery. Blacks lived in white homes, they nursed and raised white children, they took care of whites in health and in sickness, they were sexually intimate with whites (often against their will), and they bore the children of white men. Plantations were largely worlds unto themselves thus they were unavoidably close spaces, spaces of racial congress. The passage below offers an example of one such close space:

My pappy, he lived with Joe Gudger. He (master Gudger) was old and feeble, I remember. He sent my pappy to see after everything for him. He always trusts my pappy. One morning he follow pappy to the field. Pappy he stops his work and ole master Joe, he said: 'Well, Smart (pappy, his name was Smart), I am tired, worried, and troubled. All these years I work for my children. They never do the right thing. They worries me, Smart. I tell you Smart, I have a good mind to put myself away. I have a good mind to drown myself right here. I am terribly worried, Smart.'

Pappy he takes a hold of Ole master Joe and leads him to the house. 'Now master Joe, I would not talk such talk if I was you. You have been good to your family. Just you content yourself and rest.'

But a few days after that, Ole master Joe was found hanging in the barn by the bridle. Ole master had put himself away.

(Sarah Gudger, age 121, place of interview: Asheville, North Carolina, interviewer: Marjorie Jones, interview date: May 5, 1937)

The interaction between slave and master is striking. The described interaction starts out as one between equals—Gudger “trusts” Smart and confides in him about his “worries.” Later in the passage it appears that Smart, the slave, is the dominant actor in the interaction. Smart “takes a hold” (puts his hand on) his master, “leads him to the house” and he counsils him to “content” himself. This is not the stereotypical master-slave relationship, though such relationships probably occurred more often than is commonly assumed. It is simple to understand why plantation museums would want to emphasize these types of master-slave relationships

— they give the appearance that the slave is not a slave. Such an emphasis is a lie of omission. Master Joe may have treated Smart like an equal or even a son, but how did he treat the rest of his slaves? After master Joe “put himself away” how was Smart treated by his new master, probably master Joe’s actual son or son-in-law? And the very fact that he had a new master, no matter how well he might have been treated by this new master, brings to the fore the essential point—Smart was a piece of property that could be bought, sold, or willed to someone, he was a slave. Slaves as trusted servants and members of the family narratives camouflage an economic system where people were owned by other people. A system that first made the “big house” possible and today makes the plantation museum possible.

Black rage

While the themes “those were good days” (or were they?), acts of terror, and plantation families in black and white emerged from our reading of several slave narratives, “black rage” did not emerge as a theme, which was unexpected, in that many former slaves lived lives filled with deprivation, intimidation, torment, and hard labor; and all lived their lives in bondage. It would be natural to assume these conditions would generate a great deal of anger in former slaves, but few of those interviewed by the WPA voiced this anger in their narratives. Perhaps it was because almost all their interviewers were white and former slaves did not feel that it was wise to display anger to a white person. Or perhaps the approximately 70 years since the end of slavery when these interviews were conducted, tempered this anger. This might have been the situation in most but not all cases, as evident in the words of Thomas Hall:

Conditions and rules were bad and the punishments were severe and barbarous. Some masters acted like savages. In some instances slaves were burned at the stake. Families were torn apart by selling. Mothers were sold from their children. Children were sold from their mothers, and the father was not considered in anyway as a family part. These conditions were here before the Civil War and the conditions in a changed sense have been here ever since. The whites have always held the slaves in part slavery and are still practicing the same things on them in a different manner. Whites lynch, burn, and persecute the Negro race in America yet; and there is little they are doing to help them in anyway.

Lincoln got the praise for freeing us, but did he do it? He gave us freedom without giving us any chance to live to ourselves and we still had to depend on the southern white man for work, food

and clothing, and he held us through our necessity and want in a state of servitude but little better than slavery. Lincoln done [did] little for the Negro race and from [a] living standpoint nothing. White folks are going to do nothing for Negroes except keep them down.

....When I think of slavery it makes me mad. I do not believe in giving you my story because with all the promises that have been made the Negro is still in a bad way in the United States, no matter in what part he lives it's all the same. Now you may be all right; there are a few white men who are but the pressure is such from your white friends that you will be compelled to talk against us and give us the cold shoulder when you are around them, even if your heart is right toward us.

You are going around to get a story of slavery conditions and the persecutions of Negroes before the Civil War and the economic conditions concerning them since the war. You should have known before this late date all about that. Are you going to help us? No! You are only helping yourself. You say that my story may be put into a book that you are from the Federal Writer's Project. Well, the Negro will not get anything out of it, no matter where you are from.

(Thomas Hall, age 81, place of interview: Raleigh, North Carolina, interviewer: T. Pat Matthews, interview date: September 10, 1937)

"When I think of slavery it makes me mad," said Hall. As his narrative progresses, Hall's ascending anger becomes almost tactile with the brunt of it coming to focus on his white interviewer. Hall's anger seemed to be as much about how blacks ("Negroes") in the early part of the twentieth century were treated as it was about how they were treated during slavery. In fact, Hall equates the situation of blacks in his time with the situation of blacks during slavery. His primary point in this passage is that slavery was cruel and brutal and that it did not actually end in 1865. Blacks were still living in a type of slavery in 1937.

A common element of the narratives presented at a number of plantation museums is that many slaves chose to stay on the plantation after the Civil War and their emancipation. For example, Jasper Battle grew-up on his former master's plantation. This is presented to plantation museum consumers as evidence that the masters of the plantations were good men, but as Hall suggests, the emancipated slaves had few options.³² They were freed and largely left to their own devices, and with the end of Reconstruction they were largely forgotten outside of the South. This slavery-after-slavery story is rarely told at plantation museums.³³

One last point of interest about Hall's passage is that in parts it is similar to Jasper Battle's "those were good days" passage. Both Hall and Battle agree that their current situation, being black in the American South in the 1930s, is far from ideal, yet in their remembrance of slavery they differ, begging the question of why? Though both men were too young to actually remember very much about slavery, both would have been around nine years of age when the Civil War ended, Battle talks about slavery in more specific terms—he describes the food, the houses, the chimneys, even what the beds were made of. In contrast, Hall merely describes slavery in non-personal generalities—he speaks of brutality but he does not imply that he or anyone close to him were ever victims of it nor does he describe brutality in any detail as Lila Nichols did with her story about the whipped slave girl Alice. One gets the sense that Hall is less ashamed at having once been enslaved and more angered by the situation that he and other blacks found themselves. It appears that he expected more from freedom.

Concluding remarks

Give name to the nameless so it can be thought.³⁴

The aim of this paper has been to conduct a general critique of the narratives presented to most audiences at plantation museums, recognizing that these heritage sites are portrayed in a fetishized manner that hides rather than reveals the historical contributions and struggles of the enslaved. Most audiences at these museums are given master narratives to consume—stories about the white master, his white house, and his white family. The slaves who made the lifestyles of whites on these plantations possible, if presented at all, are often presented as ancillary characters in the master's story. This defetishization of the plantation should be carried out on multiple fronts, both in terms of the specific practices and narratives found at sites and more broadly in how these sites are imagined within society. An engagement with Critical Race Theory stresses the need to uncover and make visible counternarratives that challenge the master narratives dispensed at most plantation museums. Slave oral histories put forth an alternative way of viewing and knowing the Southern plantation.

The power to get one's story told is the power to shape understanding and the production of knowledge. This is illustrated by a survey of 1,266 visitors to Laura plantation.³⁵ This study of plantation museum consumers, which was conducted before Laura integrated its tours, found that only 3.5 percent of all visitors were African American. This is striking given that Louisiana's population is 31.9 percent African American; St. James parish, where Laura is located, is 49.2 percent African American; and New Orleans, which is an hour away, is 63 percent African American.

Granted, locals tend not to visit tourist sites in great number. Yet, these numbers are telling particularly given that at the time Laura was one of the few plantation museums to offer a slave quarters tour. One cannot help but think that blacks stay away from these sites in part because they expect to hear a white story, a story that has little relevance to African Americans. Conversely, West African slave castle tours are becoming increasingly popular among African Americans.³⁶ Many blacks from the Diaspora view these sites as sacred and make the journey in the hopes of making a spiritual connection with lost ancestors and finding or creating a new identity for themselves.

But why travel across the Atlantic Ocean to visit slave castles when there are slave sites in your own country? There are probably multiple reasons for this. Undoubtedly, one reason is that through stories – from *Birth of a Nation* to *Gone with the Wind* to contemporary plantation tours – the plantation has been narratively recycled into a white place. These museums continue to appropriate the labors of the enslaved as well as prevent the descendants of slaves from claiming the plantation as part of their heritage.

This does not have to be the case. The stories of the enslaved can be, and have been in the case of a few museums, incorporated with the stories of white masters to present a more complicated story of the plantation. As Laura Plantation demonstrates, there is an audience for these complicated stories and not all visitors come just for “the hoopskirts, the grandeur, and the elegance.”

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