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Tourist plantation owners and slavery: a complex relationship

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This paper examines owners of plantation heritage tourism sites as memorial entrepreneurs who control and negotiate the inclusion and specific treatment of the history of African enslavement. Interviews with owners of four South Louisiana plantations are used to document and analyse their complex relationship with the topic of slavery. Interviewed owners reveal varying understandings of tourist demand for the inclusion of slavery on tours and differences in their own personal desire to advertise and fully narrate enslaved heritage. Indeed, owners continue to propagate common myths surrounding the nature of slavery. Conceptualizing owners as memorial entrepreneurs has implications for understanding the interpretation and delivery of heritage tourism not only as a product but also a set of social values about the past.

Keywords: tourist plantations; slavery; Louisiana; memorial entrepreneur; plantation owners; heritage tourism

Highlights

- Tourist plantations in southern USA are sites of memory and under growing pressure to say more about the history of African enslavement.
- Owners of tourist plantations can be conceptualized as memorial entrepreneurs who shape and regulate the interpretation of slavery heritage.
- Lengthy semi-structured interviews reveal that plantation owners in southern Louisiana have a complex relationship with the narration of slavery history.
- Interviewed owners rely upon and propagate common myths about the nature and importance of slavery, historically and as a tourism commodity.

1. Introduction

The American travel industry, particularly heritage tourism destinations in southeastern USA, has traditionally adopted a white-centric perspective that marginalizes the histories of African-Americans while also perpetuating racist stereotypes of black life (Alderman & Modlin, 2008). These racial inequalities in the narration of the past produce a selective and unequal distribution of citizenship for people of colour that clearly limits their identity not only as welcomed visitors but also as fully recognized members of the broader society.

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A growing strand of research advocates for a socially responsible and just model of heritage tourism that brings together historically divided groups in an effort to widen the social benefits of tourism and address long-standing racial disparities in resources and sense of civic belonging (Alderman, Benjamin, & Schneider, 2012; Barton & Leonard, 2010; Miller & Cochran, 2013). Yet, while the growing popularity of developing and marketing an anti-racist heritage product makes a great deal of sense economically and morally, this fact does not make the process any less fraught with tensions and contradictions. And industry proprietors and leaders – with their own identities, ideologies, and interests – can occupy complex and contradictory points of influence in the rewriting of heritage tourism in more racially and historically sensitive ways.

Perhaps no other region of the USA best captures the racialized manner in which the history of African-Americans has been ignored and misrepresented than the Southeast or South Atlantic states, with their long history of black disenfranchisement in the realms of travel and hospitality as well as public memory and commemoration (Alderman & Modlin, 2013). Tourist plantations (also widely known in the literature as plantation museums) are perhaps ground zero in the South's racial politics of heritage tourism and African-American alienation. For many African-Americans, the plantation marks the beginning of their ancestral connection with the region and the nation, but these antebellum sites have been widely represented as bastions of white planter culture and wealth. Owners and operators of tourist plantations have traditionally provided the travelling public a glimpse into the architectural grandeur of the plantation mansion or “big house,” tales of the wealthy lifestyles of the antebellum master family, and displays of the estate's antique furnishings, furniture, and artefacts (Eichstedt & Small, 2002; Bright & Butler, 2015).

Although southern tourist plantations have historically been unwilling to discuss the contributions and struggles of enslaved Africans and African-Americans, they are under growing market and social pressure to “excavate,” materially and symbolically, these repressed histories and identities (Alderman & Campbell, 2008; Butler, 2003). Research suggests that the public considers museums one of their most trusted sources of information (Gallas & Perry, 2015). A growing number of visitors expect to be challenged by controversial topics within museums, and they are “ready to talk about the legacy of slavery” (Graft, 2014, p. 82). In the post-civil rights era, new social history practitioners increasingly call for museums and other historic sites to move beyond being “shrines to a mythic past” but become “places where critical dialogues about history might be staged,” creating a new culture of accountability and responsibility for all heritage tourism sites but especially those associated with race, racism, and slavery (Tyson, 2008, p. 246).

In their now influential edited book, Horton and Horton (2006) reflect on the politics of recovering and representing the enslaved experience in the contemporary US. As they assert, slavery is the “tough stuff” of American memory because it “is a shameful tale of inhumanity and human exploitation” (Horton & Horton, 2006, p. x). The history of slavery “is not merely a painful part of our shared past” that evokes powerful emotions about trauma, violence, and oppression; it also raises highly charged but necessary discussions about racial justice, healing, and reconciliation (Gallas & Perry, 2015, p. 16). Doing full justice to the memory of the enslaved is also frequently limited by a wider educational system in the USA that has taught the subject insufficiently and even sought, in the case of conservative Texas, to erase the mention of slavery from textbooks (Fernandez & Hauser, 2015). The heritage tourism industry, while labouring under its own racial anxieties, appears preoccupied with crafting and ensuring the “emotional comfort” of their visitors rather than necessarily achieving historical accuracy and responsibility. Even at museums

and other historic sites that take on the painful history of slavery and racism, the service economy pervades and shapes the production and performance of historical meaning.

The contemporary owners and operators of tourist plantations (hereafter called “owners”) often play an important role in designing the heritage experience. While not discounting the work and decision-making power of other plantation staff, owners are responsible for negotiating the inclusion and specific treatment of slavery in docent narratives, exhibits, and the spatial layout of grounds and preserved structures. Strangely, despite the important influence owners have over the production of public memory of slavery, these actors and their perspectives have been amazingly absent in the growing number of pages devoted to the study of plantation tourism. Our work begins to fill this void by examining the complex relationship between plantation owners and the narration of the history of slavery at their destinations.

To explore the role of the plantation owners in the construction of the tourist plantation experience and the inclusion of slavery in that experience, we interviewed the owners/operators of four South Louisiana plantations in spring 2013. Given the sensitive nature of our conversations with the owners, identifying information for each manager and the associated site has been purposely limited, both in terms of specific geographic location and details of the heritage destination. Our interviews reveal varying owner perceptions about tourist demand for the incorporation of the enslaved and differences in their own personal desire to incorporate slavery into the plantation heritage experience, although some of this inclusion involves propagating common myths about plantations and the lives of slaves and the planter/master family as well as the general importance of discussing the history of slavery. The myths latent in these views of the plantation continue to emphasize the white planter family’s lifestyle and worldview over the contributions and struggles of the enslaved, thus giving persistence to a whitewashing of these sites’ past and the tourist gaze. Our use of the word “myth” is not just meant to recognize the capacity of tourist plantations to marginalize or misrepresent the remembering of the enslaved. Rather, our emphasis on myth is also meant to capture the pervasiveness of these discourses within society and how these selective narrations of history take on the power of social fact and become established rationalized ways of knowing, thinking about, and constructing the plantation experience. Our paper is structured around these areas of findings along with a review of important conceptual background.

While plantations in South Louisiana increasingly participate in the narration of slave history, and possibly do so more than other American South antebellum heritage sites (Alderman & Modlin, 2008; Butler, 2001), interviews with owners suggest that there are clear limits to their participation. These limits speak to an anxiety and uncertainty, if not resistance, on the part of some owners and operators to fully remember and come to terms with slave life. The social power and persistence of the myths articulated by owners – even in the face of their efforts to highlight cultural and racial diversity – demonstrate the difficulty of fully challenging the racism perpetuated through heritage tourism experience. Such a finding provides an important cautionary reminder that we are not witnessing a wholesale and uncontested change in the place of slavery and the discussion of racism within plantation interpretation. Important to that point, our paper presents evidence that future work to create a more socially responsible plantation tourism industry must understand and address owners as “memorial entrepreneurs,” influential agents in the politics of remembering (and forgetting) the history of slavery. Conceptualizing owners as memorial entrepreneurs has implications for understanding the interpretation and delivery of heritage tourism not only as a product but also a set of social values about the past.

2. Complexity of plantation tourism

“The complex relationships between tourism and heritage are revealed in the tensions between tradition and modernity” (Nuryanti, 1996, p. 249). Heritage is broadly associated with inheritance across generations. Tourist plantation owners, as operators of heritage sites, serve as carriers of historical values and cultural tradition. Heritage tourism reinterprets the past and reflects societal debates between tradition and modernity and the interchange between the two is often characterized by contradiction. The desire of humans to experience the nostalgia of a utopian past and the modernity needed to uphold this manifestation are riddled with historical tensions and misrepresentations. In heritage tourism, the social process of representing the past has been described as “messy” because memory is not value-neutral. Memory has multiple and sometimes contradictory connections with people’s identities, individual and collective (Greene, 2003–2004). Heritage is inherently dissonant and can take any number of different forms and meanings as the needs and demands of the present vary socially and geographically (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996). Modlin (2011) notes that remembering the history of slavery at tourist plantations is especially prone to dissonance and is characterized by uncomfortable interactions between academicians, visitors, and plantation staff – including owners and operators of those sites.

Tensions surround tourist plantation management because of the challenges inherent in doing justice to the long neglected historical contributions and struggles of the enslaved. The remembering of slavery, as Alderman (2010) argues, is not a straightforward process of simply adding or joining another people’s story into existing heritage interpretations. Rather, the process of recovering and depicting the historical experiences of slavery is a contested process of “surrogation,” a struggle to find a commemorative surrogate or stand-in for the enslaved that fills the voids left open by a history of racialized trauma and memorial neglect. Surrogation involves a complex series of interpretive choices that are open to multiple and sometimes contentious reactions from members of the public, some of whom may think the representation of slavery says too much (excessive) or too little (deficient) (Dwyer, Butler, & Carter, 2013).

The complexity of tourist plantation management also comes from the different political ideologies, management approaches, historical interpretations, and personal interests that owners bring to designing the plantation experience for tourists. It is crucial to understand the various ways – some supportive, some oppositional, some ambivalent – in which owners view and react to the question of slavery and the extent to which the enslaved should be remembered or forgotten at their respective plantations. The contemporary owner’s genealogy and personal relationship with the plantation and its past are important. If an owner is a descendant of the site’s original planter/master, then it is quite likely that a full and critical discussion of slavery will be avoided in light of the impact it might have on family reputation (Butler, 2001). In some cases, however, there is evidence of managers actively excavating and presenting the history of slave life on a plantation as a result of tracing their lineage back to the site’s enslaved community (e.g. Redford, 2000).

Importantly, as with all tourism managers, there is no one monolithic plantation owner. Just as there are a variety of plantation visitor types (Bright & Carter, 2015), there are a variety of plantation ownership structures and similarly a myriad of tourism plantation management styles. Common types of plantation ownership structure include privately held (individual or corporation), not-for-profit (including foundations and historical preservation societies), and government (local, state, or federal). Ownership type in turn influences the type of management style exercised at a site and potentially the emphasis or lack of focus on

slavery at tourist plantations (Butler, 2001). For example, if privately held, a plantation can hire and fire employees at will as well as easily create and change tour scripts and historical narratives in response to market forces, such as the demand for including more about slavery. At a government-operated plantation, there may be employment protections, a decentralized decision-making process, and other bureaucratic structures that can inhibit rapid change in the inclusion of the history of slavery.

While ownership type is likely a crucial factor in shaping the representation of the enslaved at tourist plantations, scholars have yet to fully examine the specific effects of ownership structure on negotiating the complexity of slavery heritage interpretation. For instance, a government-operated plantation might be well positioned to narrate the history of the enslaved given its resource basis, responsibility to the public, and sensitivity to growing academic calls to enact a more inclusive social history. A profit-oriented, commercial plantation enterprise might actually show hesitancy in creating a slave-centric historical narrative for fear of alienating its established and largely white customer base, although past research shows that some white travellers strongly desire to hear more about slavery (Bright & Carter, 2015; Butler, Carter, & Dwyer, 2008).

Three of the four South Louisiana plantations that serve as the basis of our analysis are owned privately while the fourth is operated by a not-for-profit organization. However, a corporation controls the latter plantation's board of directors, making it private in practice. While our examined plantations do not reflect the full range of ownership types, we think that there is great value in understanding how the cultural dynamics and tensions of remembering slavery intersect with the politics of private ownership, where owner/operators have presumably more authority over the design and management of the plantation experience. Private owners arguably face the greatest pressure to have their heritage tourism operations succeed given the great expense of buying and maintaining these estates, which can easily run into millions of dollars (Hill, 2012).

One of the strengths of this study is the depth and honesty of discussions held with plantation owners, a testament to the long-term working relationship that our research team has established in Louisiana for the past several years. Without that relationship and the history of sustained public and industry engagement, there would have been little chance to collect such meaningful interviews. Established relationships with the owners allowed us to encourage them to speak freely to reveal not just their management approach but also how they make sense of the past ideological and political positions, as well as management approaches. Owners' level of comfort allowed them to reveal strong opinions and biases to us. As the interview process is about constructing social meaning (Herod, 1999), we acknowledge the tensions between respecting working relationships and presenting controversial perspectives. The interviewed owners were given the opportunity to anonymize their comments and have them held in confidence, but none elected to do so. It is complicated when a researcher seeks to gain the trust of respondents who may have antagonistic views and who may not fully know at that time how these views will be interpreted publicly. Consequently, we sought to protect the identity of plantation owners, despite their waiving of anonymity, while not releasing them of responsibility for making what could be interpreted as uncomfortable comments. Participating owners and operators were made aware of the authors' intentions to use interview to understand and eventually report to a larger academic audience the complexities of how slavery is viewed and treated within the plantation tourism industry.

Because of the richness of those dialogues with owners, our attention is focused on empirical exploration over doing an extensive development of theory, although this study compliments past studies that recognize the importance of collecting data on the attitudes,

motivations, and perceptions of tourism business owners and managers (e.g. Garrod & Fyall, 2000; Sontikul & Jachna, 2013; Whitford & Ruhanen, 2014).

3. Memorial entrepreneurs

Tourist plantations represent and connect current visitors to a selective view of the past. Plantation tours have traditionally focused on the residence, lifestyle, and possessions of slave-holding whites but not the original system of production and work that these agricultural estates were once known for creating and maintaining (Corkern, 2004; Giovannetti, 2009). Carter, Butler, and Dwyer (2011, pp. 128–129) describe tourist plantations as a

peculiar type of fetish commodity ... that capitalize[s] the plantation by using it as a stage for the selling 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.

As part of this commodification, tourists are “actively encouraged to place themselves there historically – to identify with and form emotional bonds with individuals from the past,” particularly the master family (Modlin, Alderman, & Gentry, 2011, p. 4; cf. Adams, 1999; Alderman & Campbell, 2008). Buzinde and Santos (2009, p. 444) argue that through inviting phrases, such as “you would have come through this door,” plantations are bringing tourists into the metanarrative – encouraging them to envision themselves in the role of the elite plantation owners.

The result of this fetishizing, however, is often that the plantation heritage within which tourists place themselves is not always historically complete, emotionally equitable, or fair to the enslaved population who toiled and suffered in building these estates. It presents a utopian perspective of the historical so as not to disturb perceptions of contemporary reality. As Corkern (2004, p. 11) comments,

rarely does heritage tourism challenge or surprise. Heritage tourism does not present a version of history that is dirty or controversial. It does not challenge the conventional wisdom. It does not rely on the latest and best scholarship in the field.

Although one would expect the sites of slavery to have the characteristics of thanatourism or “dark tourism,” many plantations are rarely staged around death, disaster, violence, or crimes against humanity and, thus, do not fit the characteristics of dissonant heritage (Dann & Seaton, 2001). Instead, the sense of authenticity fashioned by marketing agents, docents, operators, and other staff at plantation tourism sites has often been based on a set of historical myths that marginalize and romanticize slave life in the antebellum South.

As a site of commercial mythmaking (Thompson & Tian, 2008), tourists and their expectations and contributions must also be considered. The average tourist to plantation sites is between 45 and 52 years of age, has a household income greater than \$100,000, and is married (Bright & Carter, 2015). Roughly 60% of visitors are female and about three-fifths hold a bachelor’s degree or higher. Moreover, the average tourist wants to hear more about slavery (Bright & Carter, 2015). The plantation experience, however, is not monolithic. There are differences in visitor profiles across plantations sites in this region (Bright & Carter, 2015), as well as in the freedom of the tour guides to deviate from the scripts provided by owners (Potter, 2015).

There are, consequently, a variety of contemporary actors and factors that shape the depiction of the racialized history and culture of plantations (Hughes, 1995). Recent

studies of plantation tourism demonstrate and document the agency of tour guides and even tourists in narrating the history of the plantation and enslavement – from rehearsed performances of heritage to unexpected, improvised moments of memory (Alderman & Modlin, 2015; Potter, 2015). But it is also important to recognize the role of the plantation owner in shaping the interpretive arc of the history presented to tourists. As we have observed through many years of studying tourist plantations, some owners have a direct hand in scripting the content, spatial arrangement, and affective dimensions of docent-led tours and artefact displays. Even when docents and other plantation staff have autonomy, owners can and do establish broad rules and expectations for guiding the public's engagement with the antebellum past and the extent to which slavery is discussed.

As plantations are designed and promoted as heritage tourism sites if not historical museums, owners play a key role in presenting the country's history of race relations and constructing a national identity that is controversial for many (cf. Palmer, 1999). In thinking about the influence that contemporary owners of plantations wield in the production of heritage, it is necessary to view owners outside the strict confines of the business of heritage product development and management – although this does not necessarily mean that economics are unimportant. But economics can vary in importance depending on the ownership structure of the plantation (profit vs. not-for-profit, private vs. government-owned) and the history presented at plantations is a blurry mixture of entertainment and education (Carter, Butler, & Alderman, 2014). Owners should certainly be seen as commercial actors, but they also perform an important commemorative function in controlling the prominence of slavery heritage at plantations and what the public learns about the enslaved.

To assist with conceptualizing the cultural power of plantation owners, we suggest viewing them as memorial or memory entrepreneurs (Assi, 2010). Dwyer and Alderman (2008) theorize entrepreneurship in heritage tourism beyond people simply profiting financially from the past, recognizing that a host of personal and political interests and issues converge with and structure the commodification of the past. They define “memorial entrepreneurs” as enterprising social actors who undertake the purposeful activity of creating and managing the commemorative meanings and identities associated with heritage tourism spaces. Memorial entrepreneurship is found in a host of roles – from artists and community organizers to philanthropists and commercial managers. These entrepreneurs are responsible for the custodial process of shaping how the public conceives of and interprets historical people and places. The emphasis placed on “entrepreneur” captures the cultural innovativeness and creativity as well as economic agency of plantation owners as they fashion and direct the heritage tourism experience. Intensity of motivation is an important quality of memory entrepreneurship, especially when remembering difficult or controversial historical images and legacies. To understand the (un)willingness of plantation owners to create a place for slavery requires talking directly with them about their motivations, perceptions, and beliefs. With this in mind, we use this paper to investigate how interviewed owners view the tourist demand for slavery, their desire (or reluctance) to increase the inclusion of slavery in the plantation experience, and their perceptions of the historical relationship between their plantation and slavery.

4. Study of south Louisiana plantation owners

The owner interviews were conducted in spring 2013 at the four owners' respective plantations. According to the 1860 Historical United States Census Data, four of the seven largest plantations in the USA (measured by slave holdings) were in southern Louisiana (Blake,

2002). As of 2015, there were 44 plantations still standing in the famous southern Louisiana River Road region alone, which is heavily patronized by international and domestic visitors to New Orleans. Of these, 25 are not open to the public (i.e. private residences) and less than 10 operate regularly scheduled tours (Butler, 2013).

The face-to-face semi-structured interviews were audio recorded, with each interview lasting between one and a half hours and three and a half hours. The audio recordings were transcribed using verbatim transcription methods. Lewis-Beck, Bryman, and Liao (2004) stress that verbatim transcription is essential for establishing trustworthiness and credibility in qualitative data as it preserves the meaning and limits misinterpretation (cf. Decrop, 1999). Although Gubrium and Holstein (2002) discuss the challenges in gaining access for elite interviews, we have established a relationship with plantation owners across the American South and used this relationship to gain this valuable access. Of the owners, three are male and one is female. All the interviewed owners are white. Their ages range from mid-forties to mid-seventies. Owners were asked questions regarding their personal background, long-term visitors trends, history of plantation management, changes that have taken place in heritage interpretation over time, sources of revenue, the purpose and evolution of the tour narrative, visitor feedback, hiring and evaluation of tour guides, measuring plantation success, perception of the site as a museum, the nature and extent of the inclusion of slavery, and plans for the future.

The interview transcripts were analysed using Nvivo10. Following grounded theory methods, the themes were inductively identified from the interview data (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Adhering to the principles of emergence, we began the analysis process with the open coding of each individual interview, followed by axial coding to assess the relationships between the data for each of the four interviewees and, finally, we used selective coding to develop and analyse the themes presented within this paper (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Emerging themes from interviews with plantation owners shed important light on their views of tourist demand for the inclusion of slavery and their participation in propagating myths surrounding slavery. In analysing these myths, we used a framework introduced by Modlin (2008).

4.1. *Tourist demand for the inclusion of slavery*

Interviews with South Louisiana plantation owners reveal that they are aware of the tourists' increasing desire to hear about slavery on tours. One owner recalls conducting a survey of visitors, finding that "eighty percent of them [responding visitors] wanted to know what really happened and twenty percent wanted to know ... about the antiques and stuff like that." Despite this fact, when the owner first opened his/her plantation to the public, s/he hesitated to call it a plantation, "because people had preconceived notions of what that meant." This comment indicates the extent to which owners recognize not only the tourist demand for hearing about the history of slavery, but also the perceived difficulty of fulfilling public expectations. In fact, the issue of comfort surrounding the topic of slavery is quite complex and it is often more than an issue of the comfort felt by owners and tour guides. Potter (2015) discusses the constant negotiation that occurs in the presentation of slavery heritage in which the meaning and inclusivity of the narrative is tailored to the audience based on the guides' personal sense of comfort. As our interviews suggest, some owners wish to separate the plantation from what Horton and Horton (2006) call the "tough stuff" of remembering slavery. For some owners, tourist demand for a greater inclusion of slavery was interpreted less as a heritage interpretation opportunity and more of a chance to be criticized by the travelling public. Indeed, one owner noted that

her/his plantation has been criticized for not saying enough about slavery and focusing too much on the big plantation house and the wealthy antebellum planter family.

When directly asked about visitor reaction to the inclusion of slavery, the plantation owners expressed being “tired of hearing about it.” One owner commented, “we [initially] didn’t want to address the issue of slavery. Because that’s a minefield to get into.” Another owner commented,

so when I first came ... I guess my background was telling me that we wouldn’t talk about slavery because I’d be afraid of offending a bunch of blacks to be honest with you, but they want to hear the story just as much as anybody else.

This is an interesting observation that provides insight into owner anxiety about the racial politics of incorporating slavery into the plantation historical narrative. Owner fear is not confined to possibly offending white visitors unwilling to hear about enslavement but also includes the uncertainty of not knowing how visiting African-Americans might respond.

Interviewed plantation owners say that they are aware that slavery has traditionally been ignored or misrepresented at antebellum heritage sites. They also acknowledge and have joined, to varying degrees, ongoing efforts in the industry to include the history of the enslaved on plantation tours. One owner notes that the vast majority of people who lived on his/her plantation were slaves, so it has to be an important part of the historical narrative. S/he continues, however, to state: “what we do here is we do not talk about slavery per se. We only talk about it in the context ... we talk about a piece of furniture, we don’t talk about it per se.” This idea of not talking about slavery “per se” and putting it in “context” points to the limits that owners may place on negotiating the complexity and, as they see it, the uncomfortableness of bringing up slavery, which then shapes the extent to which and conditions under which the enslaved community is remembered (or forgotten). While the aforementioned owner argued that his/her plantation’s contextual treatment of slavery was no different than the interpretive treatment of furniture, the two are in fact not the same and the comment reflects some of the ways in which the limited narration of slavery becomes rationalized and institutionalized by management.

There have been varying efforts to include slavery in the physical and narrative spaces of plantations, such as one South Louisiana plantation adding a historic marker near its big house. The owner of the plantation commented that “this [marker] took a lot of that pressure [to include slavery] away, because people can stand there.” The owner, in other words, believes that if a plaque is erected where people can read about slavery on the plantation, then this takes some of the burden off of docents to talk about the topic. Furthermore, it does not impose the uncomfortable topic on visitors who do not wish to stop and read the plaque in the same way that it would if slavery were addressed in the oral narrative of the plantation home tour. Data, however, suggest that while some visitors do find the topic to be uncomfortable, most visitors to plantations in the region want greater inclusion of slavery and the enslaved in the plantation narrative and landscape (Bright & Carter, 2015).

Interviewed owners showed concern about the level of (dis)comfort experienced not only by tourists but also by plantation staff when engaging the story of slavery. Some plantation owners feel that asking tour guides to discuss the topic of slavery will put their docents in a difficult position. One owner notes that although “most of the tour guides didn’t even want to speak of slavery ... and still don’t,” the inclusion of slavery has grown over time, due in large part to visitors calling for this history. “Everybody wants

to tell the good side of that plantation, you know, the fun part.” Slavery, of course, is not “the fun part” of the plantation narrative and is, therefore, often left out.

The reluctance to include slavery in the plantation experience is also evident in promotional material for plantations, and past studies have documented the absence or marginalization of slave history in print and online marketing materials produced by southern plantations (Alderman & Modlin, 2008; Butler, 2001). One interviewed owner commented that s/he does not advertise as providing a story about slavery

If you want to know about slavery, go to a place that advertises about slavery. I don't advertise slavery. I look at it [my plantation] as [a story of] a wealthy person from the early Eighteen Hundreds who made their money growing sugar cane.

Yet, this invisibility of the enslaved is out of line with what some tourists are interested in and desire to learn when touring the plantation (Bright & Carter, 2015; Dwyer et al., 2013). Interviewed owners often view what is advertised as a baseline for what the visitors should expect. One owner commented that s/he advertises and seeks to design a plantation experience that stresses:

the beauty of the gardens, the architectural significance of the house, how the sugar barons lived in the early eighteenth century, and the artwork and furniture. I don't market myself as a slave house... It's an escape. I want people to walk on the property, and forget whatever is negative, and walk on this property, and be happy to tranquil, and the way they would like to feel. And that's the whole idea of their experience, and while they're walking through, they're going to see beautiful things along the way.

This presents a general disconnect between the expectations of a growing number of tourists who seek a slave narrative and the image created and portrayed by plantation owners. This belief that the plantation is not the right place to come to terms with slavery is also reflected in the comments of another owner, who says:

I know other people consider a Louisiana plantation house a Civil War monument [and thus we should] tell the story of slavery, but in my mind, in my background, that's not true. So, I don't mind if you do that story [of slavery] someplace else, but I don't think that's for here.

These comments imply that some owners see the plantation as something that can be removed from the history of racialization and trauma that it embodies and re-marketed as a relaxing place of beauty, yet still focus on the history of the architecture, the furniture, and the white planter class. Moreover, the influential role that owners play in imagining and promoting a socially selective vision of the plantation points to their role as memorial entrepreneurs and how the work of heritage tourism is one of framing the expectations and historical interpretations of the public as well as serving the travel needs of consumers.

4.2. *Propagation of myths surrounding slavery*

The complex if not ideologically messy relationship between plantation owners and the topic of slavery is not limited to exclusion of the topic, but also includes the danger of representing slave life in incomplete, misleading, and mythical terms. There exists a co-constitutive relationship between such myths and popular memory (Thompson & Tian, 2008). These myths yield an idealized version of history that has lasting implications on how the public views and makes sense of the central role of slavery on the plantation and the

broader history of race relations in the USA (Modlin, 2008). Plantations, as businesses, are participating in commercial mythmaking – they “situate their goods and services in culturally resonant stories that consumers can use to resolve salient contradictions in their lives and to construct their personal and communal identities in desired ways” (Thompson & Tian, 2008, p. 596). Past research on plantation tourism has documented and critiqued the wide range of myths propagated about slavery (Alderman & Modlin, 2008; Carter et al., 2011; Modlin, 2008). These myths work at different geographical and historical levels and through the use of single words as well as broader discursive regimes, creating a “matrix of erasures” (Buzinde & Santos, 2009). Although these myths differ, they are united in deflecting public attention and discussion away from the importance of enslavement as part of the plantation economy and society and ignoring the complicity of the antebellum planter/master family in perpetuating the brutality and dehumanization of slavery. The myths align the plantation narrative to existing and broader cultural discourses or “narrativized worlds” (Carter et al., 2014). In this sense, owners participate in representational strategies that merge entertainment, education, and indoctrination in defining the popular memory of the past (Thompson & Tian, 2008).

Sociocultural meaning is derived and created from these myths. Plantation tourists serve as receivers of these commercially driven myths, but they also play a role in their interpretation. The visitors, more importantly, co-construct the meaning of the narratives as they interpret and respond, sometimes quite vocally, to what is presented at heritage sites (Alderman & Modlin, 2015). Yet, audience interpretations still occur within the constraints of the ideological framing of commodified history (Thompson & Tian, 2008). Myths, in this sense, have a framing effect. They frame the contemporary consumptionscape of the plantation experience (cf. Kristensen, Boye, & Askegaard, 2011). The mythic structure propagated by the plantation owners thus provides the framework for the tourists to enact and reaffirm their ideological beliefs to confer heritage identity value (Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2010; Palmer, 1999). There is, however, an emerging counter-mythology to the traditional plantation narrative emerging both within existing plantations (i.e. through adding slave cabins or slavery tours) and in plantations and other sites recently opened to focus on the slave narrative (e.g. South Louisiana’s Whitney Plantation).

When interviewed, South Louisiana plantation owners expressed a set of common myths about the extent and nature of enslavement on their plantations historically as well as the legitimacy of talking about slavery on the contemporary tourist plantation. These myths, which we discuss in the coming pages, include: (1) African-Americans are the visitors driving the inclusion of slavery; (2) Slaves were not treated that badly; (3) Slaves were treated poorly, but not as poorly as in other places; and (4) We as a society need to move past slavery. Identifying and critiquing these myths help scholars understand how tourism managers rationalize their role, as memorial entrepreneurs, in commodifying the slave past in the present as well as how owners reconcile the complex tensions that characterize their relationship with slavery heritage.

4.2.1. *African-Americans are the visitors driving the inclusion of slavery*

Interviewed owners commented on differences in how white and African-American visitors judged the plantation experience and commonly expressed the view that black visitors make more judgements about slavery on tours. Owners see African-Americans as the driving force for slavery’s inclusion, and are the final judge of when it is “done right.” One owner commented that African-American visitors want the docents to “be on their side,” although this same owner argues that docents cannot do this since they are not there to make judgements on the

issue. The difference, s/he notes, is that guides are in the business of story-telling, not moralizing, an assertion that appears to deny the socially constructed nature of all heritage interpretation. Another owner stated, “And the African-American community will tell you, nobody’s doing the job [of telling the story of slavery] right . . . Basically, [we are accused of] white-washing the story.” Similarly, s/he stated that efforts to include slavery are being made because “the African American community felt like this was not being done right.” When asked about efforts to include slavery, s/he used the judgement of the African-American community as a measuring stick of success: “Hopefully it can be successful, where the African-American community is concerned, in giving them the interpretation that they approve of.” Three of the four owners commented that they talk about slavery to attract African-American populations to their plantations. This suggests that they view the inclusion of slavery as largely an economic decision and one supposedly not of interest to white visitors.

As plantations “are linked to unresolved, contentious pasts deeply connected to current social debates on slavery, race, and racism,” it is not unexpected to see racial divides tied to the inclusion of slavery in plantation narratives (Buzinde & Santos, 2009, p. 439). At the same time, Montes and Butler (2008, p. 303) find that “while there are differences in how blacks and whites view tourist plantations, there is ample commonality, with many nuanced . . . responses that defy common generalizations.” While the appearance of concern for the perspectives and feelings of African-Americans is a significant advancement in southern heritage tourism, the owners are perpetuating a common myth that the historical depiction of slavery is only important to African-Americans. In fact, these comments appear to be more concerned about upsetting visitors of colour, who by recent counts in the region account for about 5% of all visitors (Bright & Carter, 2015). Their concern is for their commercial viability as customers, rather than their role as members of society. The owners are business operators and, as so, money is a concern. However, their business is a historical site in which a sustainable and ethical approach for addressing the history of slavery and racism is also of importance. This is the essence of the complexity of their role as memorial entrepreneurs. Owner concerns about black visitors work to create a racialized image of heritage consumption and, in effect, cut off the possibility that white tourists are also interested in the story of the enslaved, even if they hold different social positions or identities in that history as compared to black visitors.

According to Shipler (1997, p. 41), the plantation’s

double image shimmers beneath the towering trees. One is for those who do not consider the history; beauty shrouds the shame. The other is for those who recognize that they have come upon the site of a great crime and can feel a shiver or remembrance.

In mythical terms, the dominant white view of the plantation is supposedly of beauty, of southern romanticism, and the dominant black view being that of repression, focusing on death and brutality (Montes & Butler, 2008). These views compete for legitimacy on the plantation and have the ability to “challenge or reaffirm the racialization of the plantation.” But for the racialization process to be fully challenged, owners need to recognize the growing demand for discussions of slavery among white patrons, including the international travellers attracted to South Louisiana via New Orleans (Butler et al., 2008, p. 290).

4.2.2. *Slaves were not treated that badly*

The presence of slavery within a plantation museum does not guarantee equitable historical treatment, and there are instances in which the remembering of African-Americans can be

appropriated to reify white supremacy (Poirot & Watson, 2015). Plantation narratives can trivialize the slave experience by romanticizing relationships between enslaver and the enslaved (Carter et al., 2011). One owner commented,

Lot of people [of] African descent come here [who] are disappointed because ... [they] wanted to know more about how badly they [masters] treated [slaves]. [And I say] Ok, but I will also tell you some stories about how close they [enslaved] were to them [masters].

Another owner commented,

[slaves] weren't locked up- they were kind of kenneled up for the night. You get out during the day and you go and work in the fields and you work and you come back and it was real hard. It was a hard life, but life was hard in general. Actually, people are mistreated probably far worse in the world in some places today.

Finally, one owner discussed a monument being erected at another plantation that memorializes the slave children who died at the heritage site. Her/his criticism of the monument was that it does not address the slave owners' children who died. Similarly, s/he mentions that some people argue that s/he "sugarcoats the facts [of slavery]," but s/he believes "the house slaves were probably raised [treated] pretty well."

4.2.3. *Slaves were treated poorly, but not as poorly as in other places*

Some owners admit that the enslaved were harshly treated on plantations but they do not include their site or the state of Louisiana within that generalization. This myth of the "good master," which is a pervasive discourse found at plantations across the South, trivializes the experience of enslavement (Carter et al., 2011). One owner commented:

Up north you had indentured slaves ... They lived in worse conditions, because they didn't have – they were just on their own. They [masters] gave them terrible places to live and there was nobody who worried about their health or what happened to them. Slaves were treated better in Louisiana, because there was the French attitude towards them ... They had the Code Noir here, they had this rule of not separ[ating] – although they still separated families, but they didn't separate children who were younger than nine years old. And, you know, I mean, that was still terrible, but it was less brutal than what went on in other areas. But there's more people living in slavery today.

Similarly, another owner commented,

well, you know, when they built the other channel in New Orleans, they used the Irish because that was the peak [of immigration]. The people that owned slaves would not send their slaves because the slaves were too valuable and they ... [would have] died of cholera. The slaves were more valuable than the Irish immigrants, so I mean, what does that tell you right there?

Three of the four interviewed plantation owners expressed the belief that slaves were not treated as poorly as people think or that they were treated better on their plantations than in other places. One of four owners argued that his/her site did not have slaves. In fact, the slaves who supported his/her plantation lived about a mile and a half away, but s/he argues that they are not included in the tour of the house and the grounds because they did not live in the house or on the grounds.

The efforts of owners, whether through generally denying the poor treatment of the enslaved or depicting their own plantations as somehow exceptionally benevolent, reveal how they wish to frame the inclusion of slavery in ways that do not indict or contradict the great attention plantation staff give to valorizing the white planter/master family. This desire to memorialize the enslaved without damaging the reputation of the master is one of the complex contradictions and inequalities shaping the relationship between plantation owners and the history of slavery at their sites.

4.2.4. *We need to stop focusing on the history of slavery; we are past that*

Some interviewed owners justified trivializing enslavement or excluding it altogether by arguing that the history of slavery is something that we have moved past (or should move past) as a country. Thus, in the view of some owners, by overly emphasizing slavery, plantations are engaged in poor social stewardship and the exclusion of stories of slavery is good for the recovery/independence of those who were once negatively affected by it. One owner contended:

As a country, we have to get away from slavery and the Civil War ... you know, this white man's burden or the blacks feeling like they haven't [been treated fairly] ... and when they start talking about reparations and everything, you sometimes scratch your head, and you think, God, if you've been to Africa, and you see what's going on in Africa these days, you think God, would you rather be here or would you rather be there?

Another owner provided that he/she does not discuss slavery because “the black people that come here ... it's a part of their heritage they would like to forget, I don't think they want to learn anything about it.” The owner continued to provide that since the election of President Obama, visitors have moved beyond a focus on racial issues and that s/he has as well.

While the above comments are disturbing on many levels – including the idea that slavery somehow saved Africans from themselves and it is no longer an issue of interest to African-Americans – they speak to a political conservatism that might be frequently found among plantation owners. A critical discussion of slavery and its legacies puts the owner in the morally messy and conflicted position of reconciling his/her plantation's involvement in a broader system of racial exploitation and black victimization, an indicting connection that some owners might prefer to move past themselves. Getting past slavery might be in some owners' interest for potential financial reasons, since reparations are so closely tied to the life extracted from the enslaved on plantations. But more broadly, avoiding the topic of slavery is part of perpetuating a greater American myth and tradition of narrating heritage in consensual rather than critical terms, using the past to tell a story of unfettered progress that upholds dominant cultural ideas and values about society rather than addressing the continuing legacies of racism.

5. Conclusions

Although plantations are tourist attractions, they are arguably viewed by many tourists as memorial sites or museums that have the power of historical fact. Plantations are “constructed and marketed in selective ways to reaffirm long-standing patterns of social power and inequality” (Alderman & Modlin, 2008, p. 266). Narrating the topic of slavery and the enslaved at southern plantations is viewed here as part of a larger American project of using tourism to interpret and hopefully come to terms with the history of racism

– both the racism that undergirded an antebellum plantation economy and the racism that has traditionally structured the South’s more recent tourism economy. Making a place for discussions of slavery at plantations is a dynamic issue involving a number of different social actors and groups with multiple and sometimes competing interests and value systems. Since scholarship on tourism plantations and slavery heritage began several years ago, the volume of research has increased, although there has been limited work exploring the complex relationship between plantation owners/operators and the topic of slavery. This paper examined four South Louisiana (USA) plantations through interviews with their owners. The interviews indicated that not all the owners approach the topic of the enslaved in the same manner, but all are approaching it in some manner since the level of visitor interest in the topic is increasing over time and will ultimately affect their bottom line of profit-generation.

Although owners presumably have an intimate knowledge of their plantations, they are not immune to the widely held discourses that have traditionally limited a critical public remembering of enslavement – including the historical myths that trivialize the suffering and hardships of the slave community, the social myths that assert that only African-Americans would have an interest or stake in hearing about slavery at plantations, and the political mythology that advancing race relations in the USA is gained by forgetting painful, unjust chapters of history. Although not all interviewed owners exhibited all of these myths, they were pervasive in the discussions we held, even among those owners positively inclined to include slavery. The contemporary consumptionscape of the tourist plantation is marked by these whitewashing myths. The owners present these myths to protect the utopian presentation of the politics and emotions surrounding the tourist plantation (cf. Podoshen, Venkatesh, & Jin, 2014). In this regard, plantation owners do not have a simple, neat relationship with slavery. Rather, the owners’ relationship with the memory of the enslaved is informed by a multitude of political ideologies, historical interpretations, and social identities (their own as well as those of visitors and perceived critics). As visitors are co-creators of narratives, their interpretations are framed by the myths in which the narratives are presented.

Plantations are geographic sites of power. As many tourist plantation museums focus on the big house and the slave-holding families that owned them, there is ample opportunity to include slavery in this narrative. Big houses were built based on a “surveillance and control” architecture, which “focuses on the issue of visibility as a primary motive for planters to design spaces to ‘make things seeable’ while also producing ‘spaces of constructed invisibility’ to monitor slaves’ behavior and conceal their presence” (Randle, 2011, p. 105). The panoptic design of the plantation provides openings for plantation staff to discuss the master’s relationship with the slave population without ever leaving the front porch of the big house.

Tourist plantations are part of an edutainment industry – they operate in a realm in which educational activities and entertainment activities are intertwined and not clearly differentiated (Carter et al., 2011). They are, however, competing for the leisure time of visitors and, as so, operate in a supply and demand structure (Shaw, Bailey, & Williams, 2011). Most plantation tourists “are looking for a satisfying leisure experience where pleasure and learning are complimentary,” but there is also a “specialized tourist segment (e.g. heritage tourists) that as a group has unique motives and needs” (Jewell & Crotts, 2002, p. 13). As the demand for a historically inclusive narrative increases among tourists, the supply will have to increase to satisfy the changing demand of tourists. In economic terms, this is necessary to secure the survival and sustainability of the plantation tourist museum as a destination site. Interviews with plantation owners can help researchers understand how these

important actors conceptualize tourist demands for slavery, identifying, as we have done here, voids and inconsistencies in how they perceive the growing calls for slave heritage interpretations and their understanding of where these calls come from socially and demographically.

Beyond the economic imperatives of better understanding how owners make key heritage interpretation decisions, there is also an ethical responsibility associated with the social justice. Our owner interviews revealed the incomplete ways that owners view slavery as a history of unequal power relations and life chances as well as the continuing legacies of enslavement within society. Given that plantations are frequently viewed as a form of museum, whether owners subscribe to this idea or not, these sites carry the burden of being perceived as places of learning and owners/operators have a social responsibility to represent the enslaved openly, fairly, accurately, and with respect and dignity. As long as ownership of tourist plantations is defined largely, if not entirely, in financial terms and the supply/demand dimensions of tourism, it will be difficult to move the conversation into necessary questions of commemorative justice and equity in tourism. Consequently, we have offered the idea of the plantation owner as “memorial entrepreneur” as a means of not ignoring business-related decisions but as a way of placing these decisions in a broader context that recognizes the role that owners also play as agents of public memory-making.

The plantation is not just a tourist attraction – it is treated and viewed by the public as a museum or heritage site. This carries ethical implications. The tourist plantations owners are memorial entrepreneurs and, as so, they are shaping and regulating the interpretation of slavery heritage. They are providing the ideological framing of the plantation as a commodified history. The owners, as presented in this research, are perpetuating a mythic presentation of the plantation. In this, they are conferring heritage identity value that does not reflect historical inclusion or the ideological and political direction of our diverse nation. As a memorial entrepreneurs play a major role in shaping how we see the past, they serve as a memory agent. There is a complexity, even conflict, between presenting the plantation as a landscape of utopian consumption of American heritage and presenting it as a form of thanatourism that highlights the brutality of slavery. Our future research will continue to focus on plantation owners as memorial entrepreneurs, but it will extend the conceptualization to more plantations across more regions. Furthermore, we will continue to follow the changes made at the four plantations presented within this research to better understand the evolution of these sites in the context of societal change.

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