

White Nostalgia: The Absence of Slavery and the Commodification of White Plantation Nostalgia

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Abstract: Since the 1960s, the United States has experienced a rise in heritage and plantation tourism that plays a significant role in passing on cultural narratives and constructing memories. In cases of plantation tourism, some narratives are constructed that deny the history of slavery or mention it only as a side effect. This absence of critical engagement commodifies a specific type of nostalgia: white nostalgia. White nostalgia exemplifies an attempt to escape issues of race by downplaying their implications and rejecting the legacy of slavery. Plantation tourism sites tend to celebrate personal narratives depicting the antebellum South as a time and place of union and jauntiness despite the fact that their histories are inseparably connected with slavery. Refusing to engage in critical discussions on slavery, these historical plantation sites can be regarded as comfortable spaces of refuge longing for an uncritical and colorblind—yet unrealistic—past. In this essay, the commodification of white nostalgia will be investigated by looking at seven plantation websites, thereby examining how white nostalgia not only distorts the history of the antebellum South but also how it sells history without racism and performs memory that distances itself from emotional legacies of slavery.

When I walked through my host mother's grandmother's living room in rural Georgia, my eyes fell upon a small oil painting depicting a plantation and African Americans working in a cotton field. My host grandmother was standing next to me and must have seen the interest with which I looked at the painting. She told me that it was painted by her ex-mother-in-law, who wanted to illustrate a 'typical' scene from the antebellum South. I was interested in the story of the painting: Why did she choose this scene? Was it her family's cotton field? Did her family own slaves? What happened to the field and the enslaved people after the Civil

War? These questions remained unanswered. Instead, I vividly remember how my host grandmother talked about the “good life” slaves had had, describing how they were “taken care of,” provided with food and shelter, and did not suffer from oppression. This painting and her accompanying statements represent a glorifying nostalgia, a whitewashed narrative about the antebellum South, which presents a dominant and distorted perspective on slavery.

There are unmistakably differing stories, perceptions, and understandings of the history of the antebellum South: Some stories recall the antebellum period as heroic and great, obscuring unpleasant aspects; some approach it from a historical perspective trying to provide a more balanced picture; still others focus solely on the terror of slavery and oppression. Since the 1960s, the United States has seen an increase in heritage tourism, which “perpetuate[s] appealing visions of the timeless past, [...] of history with a minimum of conflict and a maximum amount of aesthetic and patriotic appeal” (Kammen 691). In the case of plantation tourism, one can encounter these appealing images and stories in the form of nostalgia. On historical plantation sites throughout the US South, narratives are constructed and knowledge is distributed by depicting plantations’ histories and the history of the antebellum South in general. As simplified images and representations are easier to digest, more complex narratives are often broken down and remembered in simplified terms. Therefore, nostalgic images created and perpetuated in cultural texts allow for simplified memories. This explains why specific and prefabricated ideas about the South—be they glorified or horrific—circulate. This may depend on whether one has spent more time with stories such as Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind*—without critically engaging in debates on the text—or with texts such as Alex Haley’s novel *Roots*. Antoinette Jackson argues that the “[p]ublic perceptions of antebellum and postbellum plantations are influenced by depictions that posit the centrality of a master-slave dynamic without critique” (27). This absence of critical engagement characterizes a number of plantations because they commodify a nostalgia—which they refer to as tradition or history—that celebrates ‘unproblematic,’ personal, and whitewashed narratives depicting the antebellum South as a time and place of union and jauntiness (cf. Alderman and Modlin; Butler; Eichstedt and Small; Modlin).

In this essay, the commodification of what I refer to as ‘white nostalgia’ is investigated by looking at the websites of seven plantations.¹ My analysis reveals that

1 Kensington Plantation and Monticello were specifically chosen for this project. I visited the former myself during a study tour to the US South in 2011, and I am familiar with the latter from a previous project on the usage of artifacts in historical fiction, especially in the context of African American history. The remainder of the websites was chosen according to the websites’ accessibility, the sites’ touristic endeavors, and the broad historical overview of the respective

White Nostalgia: The Absence of Slavery and the Commodification of White Plantation Nostalgia

some of the examined plantation websites sell a history without racism, thereby performing memories that deny the terror of slavery in order to make a profit by maintaining white nostalgia. While trying to challenge white nostalgia, some plantations address slavery more extensively in their narratives; however, they still commodify the history of slavery in different ways. On the following pages, I will firstly contextualize my use of the concept of white nostalgia and then explain how constructed memories are commodified. I will then analyze the plantations' websites and elaborate on how the absence and presence of slavery in the plantation narratives displayed online are commodified.

1. PLANTATION NARRATIVES AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF WHITE NOSTALGIA

In his *Salon* article with the title “Why We Still Can’t Talk about Slavery,” Peter Birkenhead reports on a trip through the US South during which he participated in several plantation tours, stating sarcastically that “Southern apologists earned sudden fortunes in a gold rush of nostalgic forgetting.” He points to the effort of particular agents—which he calls “Southern apologists”—to market memories of the antebellum South by denying the terror of slavery and celebrating the ‘noble life’ of white upper class society often narrated in touristic plantation tours. While Birkenhead discusses his firsthand experiences from visiting plantations, this paper focuses primarily on online promotional texts of historic plantation museums, analyzing how slavery is represented and how the commodification of memories leads to the construction of white nostalgia. Scholars have long acknowledged that the experiences of slavery have frequently been absent from discussion at plantation museums (Alderman and Modlin 266). Previous investigations into this absence include how slavery is marginalized and excluded from tourist representations such as guided tours (Eichstedt and Small; Modlin), brochures (Butler; Eichstedt and Small), as well as websites (Alderman and Modlin). In their study of plantation tourism in North Carolina, Derek Alderman and Albert Modlin point out that when it comes to “writing history and expressing heritage” as well as to constructing memories, “[t]he Internet has emerged as an important promotional and political medium” (267). As a multimedial form of text, including written texts as well as visual and audio material, websites are interesting advertising tools that potentially attract and inform visitors. Furthermore, because

plantation’s history. Unfortunately, while all of the websites were current and accessible at the point of my analysis, some no longer are.

websites are easily accessible worldwide, plantation operators are able to reach larger audiences. This chapter establishes the theoretical background of this paper before turning to the commodification of white nostalgia in plantation tourism and the analysis of the chosen websites.

1.1 WHITE NOSTALGIA

Whereas in the late seventeenth century the term nostalgia described an illness afflicting the body, its meaning has since changed, today describing a psychological condition that exceeds an individual's physical condition (Boym xv, 4-5). Svetlana Boym describes nostalgia as a mode of remembering and a feeling of longing related to place and time, often experienced by groups of people. In the process of remembering, an ambiguous space is constructed that allows a larger group of people access to it. For example, one need not have lived in early nineteenth-century Georgia to engage in nostalgic memories of the antebellum South as they are portrayed in texts such as *Gone with the Wind* or *Birth of a Nation*. Boym defines modern nostalgia as “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed” (xiii). Feeling nostalgic means remembering and yearning for a constructed space, “a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values” (Boym 8). This desire to go back to a mythical space is, in Boym's understanding, closely linked with the mourning of not being able to do so. It seems to be “a romantic captivation with one's own fiction of an ideal home” (Drobnick 352). In this fascination, in which “the real is no longer what it was,” nostalgia appears as a simulacrum in a Baudrillardian sense, simulating a place and time with no or very little connection to reality (Baudrillard 6). Accordingly, Jessica Adams calls plantation museums “theaters of memory” (56). Along these lines, nostalgia exposes plantation heritage museums as simulacra: They claim to be places of authenticity, but in fact feign history and traditions by reconstructing rooms and furniture, displaying relics and artifacts, and sharing stories and information, all of which simulate a whitewashed past.

The memories and places constructed with the help of nostalgic narratives on historical plantation sites often create a specific form of nostalgia, which I refer to as ‘white nostalgia.’ Scholars previously emphasized the absence of slavery and lack of inclusive narratives at historical plantation sites; however, they use white nostalgia in different contexts. Wini Breines, for example, connects the term to the marginalization or exclusion of black women in the second wave feminist movement. Alison Winch uses the expression ‘white nostalgia’ to describe the portrayals of racist stereotypes in

White Nostalgia: The Absence of Slavery and the Commodification of White Plantation Nostalgia

contemporary movies and TV series that claim to produce ‘authentic’ characters, such as the movie *The Help* (117). In examining how white racial identity is constructed with the help of nostalgia narratives, Michael Maly, Heather Dalmage, and Nancy Michaels make use of the term ‘white nostalgia narrative’ in reference to shifts in neighborhood landscapes in the mid twentieth century (765). In this article, I refer to white nostalgia in the context of memories of the antebellum South as constructed at plantation heritage museums. It describes an escape into constructed memories of a more glamorous, heroic past where slavery plays only a minor or no role at all. As a concept in general, I understand white nostalgia as a mode of remembrance celebrating a specific time and place in history by erasing narratives of racism and by whitewashing memories. This enables the concept to be applied to various historical contexts related to race.

White nostalgia exemplifies an attempt to escape racialized discourses by downplaying social, political, and economic implications of racism. Michael Kammen argues that “[n]ostalgia is most likely to increase or become prominent in times of transition, in periods of cultural anxiety, or when a society feels a strong sense of discontinuity with its past” (618). Heritage tourism—such as visiting historical plantation museums—saw an increase in the 1960s, which aligns with Kammen’s argument and can be explained by looking at the false promise of nostalgia: History is sometimes misinterpreted as being fixed and static, something that represents more safety and stability than do the present or future (Lowenthal 4). Hence, people finding themselves in situations of insecurity and fear of the future—as in the case of the 1960s²—seem likely to turn to the past, to memories, and, eventually, to nostalgia. In this way, nostalgia reveals more about the present than the past. The longing for memories that almost exclusively construct images of white plantation life—referring to the life of the plantation owners, the grand architecture, etc.—demonstrates a wish to return to an idealized, whitewashed antebellum setting. This, in turn, might decrease plantation owners’, guides’, and visitors’ interest in addressing current issues related to systemic racial injustice. Adams argues that “[i]t is a very powerful thing to deny something obvious and have that denial accepted as truth. [...] [P]lantation houses and their tourist apparatus still call imaginary worlds into being” (54). When the turn to the past becomes an escape from the present as well as the future, it reveals a longing for stability and security. The use of white nostalgia at plantation museums speaks to the repression of certain anxieties in contemporary US American society and culture.

2 The 1960s marked a particular time of anxiety about the threat of nuclear war, a surge in counter culture movements, the Vietnam War, the New Frontier, etc.

Within society, there are various agents of public memory such as historians, politicians, and media agents, who are involved in processes of remembering and forgetting past events. Thereby, they participate in the construction of memories and influence the way in which the past is (re)constructed in the present. Those social and public agents engaging in and perpetuating white nostalgia “create an imaginary sense of homogeneity and [...] reify a symbolic national community and national identity,” a process Christine Buzinde describes in reference to heritage tourism sites (234). The picture of unification and homogeneity these sites create reveals racist notions as it glosses over power relations connected to race. Analyzing a number of narratives written by white individuals after the Civil War, David Anderson finds evidence for a purposeful construction of nostalgic narratives, and concludes: “In their memoirs and reminiscences white southern elites salvaged from remnants of the Old South only those elements that would best serve to form both individual and collective identities in the present. Why dwell on a painful present when one can dwell on a painless past instead?” (131). Anderson’s study reveals the attempt of white elite figures who “flooded the literary market with autobiographical literature” (110) as misrepresenting events of the past by narrating in a scattered manner. The significant absence of slavery in plantation narratives suggests that agents of memory—who in these particular cases could be the owner(s) or representatives of Southern plantations—are not interested in race issues of the past or the present. In both the nostalgic narratives of the post-Civil War period and the plantation websites, the construction of an ‘unproblematic’ past reveals an attempt to construct an ‘unproblematic’ present.

1.2 PLANTATION TOURISM AND THE MARKETING OF WHITE NOSTALGIA

Referring to plantation museums as “themed environments,” Vida Bajc emphasizes the strong connection of memories and objects within these environments. Defined as a “type of cultural space within which particular memories are able to be imagined, brought to life, and experienced by tourists” (8), plantation museums as themed environments attach collective memories to objects, inviting individuals to experience and remember those memories. David Lowenthal argues that “[m]emory and history both derive and gain emphasis from physical remains” which “provide a vivid immediacy that helps to assure us there really was a past” (xxiii). For cultural spaces of memory, such as plantation sites, the connection between memories and objects is crucial. Bajc notes that the act of connecting narrative and object not only creates a cultural space of memory, it “transforms the experience of imagining that narrative into the experience of reliving the story” (8). However, the memories visitors are asked

White Nostalgia: The Absence of Slavery and the Commodification of White Plantation Nostalgia

to remember and experience are far detached from any possible experience, as the memories attached to the objects are always already constructed—all of which constitutes a simulacrum. Lowenthal describes this contradiction as follows: “[W]e can no more slip back to the past than leap forward to the future. Save in imaginative reconstruction, yesterday is forever barred to us; we have only attenuated memories and fragmentary chronicles of prior experience and can only dream of escaping the confines of the present” (4). Visitors do not actually experience memories, they only believe they do. This means that visitors’ experience of ‘memories’ on plantation sites is really an experience of nostalgia. Along those lines, Derek Hook emphasizes that nostalgia is an “imaginary activity that idealizes the past and that remains necessarily linked to the operation of fantasy” (13).

By reenacting an ‘unproblematic’ history and telling stories—emphasizing certain aspects while silencing others—plantation heritage tourism sells a particular form of nostalgia to their audience. In her book *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*, Tara McPherson investigates how nostalgia “functions as a displacement, reflecting dominant culture’s inability to imagine the traumas of slavery in a manner that connects slavery to its historic locale and context: the plantation home and its white inhabitants” (45). While an “inability to imagine” implies a lack of intent, plantation tours that do not address slavery should be regarded as examples of conscious forgetting and thus as refusals to imagine. For when particular narratives become attached to objects, conscious decisions are made: Those who design the tours would rather connect a closet in the mansion with a story of beautiful dresses worn to grand dances than with a story of a female house slave who might have slept in the closet while her family lived in slave cabins far removed from the mansion. In her analysis of the Hampton plantation, Buzinde describes the “unproblematic construction of ‘home’ and its selected traditions invoked as an affective response describing feelings of common experiences, unity, purity, identity, and comfort” (243). In this process, the commodification of emotions relies on the assumption that these emotions are ‘common.’ This idea targets a specific audience to whom these emotions can be sold. However, audiences are not entirely predictable, and therefore react to the selling of white nostalgia in different ways.

As elaborated above, modern day plantation museums function as simulacra, places that reconstruct narratives, locations, and times that have no ‘real’ or physical referent. Along these lines, Roberta Bartoletti argues that such a place is not “a place of memories but rather a place for consumption and entertainment.” Bartoletti infers this from the unreachable state of memory, saying that the absence of a ‘real’ or physical referent allows agents to (re)invent this place, thereby “creating new occasions for consumption” (25). A number of plantations, such as those analyzed in this article,

have been turned into places of consumption where visitors may consume nostalgia, either by paying for tours through the property, buying souvenirs, or booking the grounds for weddings. Laura plantation in Louisiana, for example, sells “Corn Husk Mammies,” which are “unique dolls [...] made locally of corn husks and come in 3 different styles: feather duster, rolling pin and sugar sack” (“Corn Husk Mammies”). These dolls depict and perpetuate romanticized and mythologized stereotypes about black women as mammies. Although, in this example, slavery is *not* absent in the narrative of the plantation museum, the act of commodifying the mammy—a stereotypical figure characterized as a caring, patient, tolerating, and understanding black nanny and/or maid—ultimately reinforces romanticized plantation narratives in which slaves and white owners lived lovingly together. In *Wounds of Returning*, Adams writes that “now tourists can take black people home, too, as slavery shrinks into a memory of leisure anchored by re-commodified things” (54). Connecting the narratives of union and jauntiness told at plantation sites to objects, such as racialized dolls that can be purchased and taken home, renders the act of commodifying white nostalgia highly problematic.

To write off the dynamics of commodification—the selling and buying of objects and services that were not recognized as marketable before—simply as characteristic of capitalist societies would be an underestimation of the implied power dynamics. Alderman and Modlin elaborate that specifically “[p]lantation marketing, rather than a seemingly innocent commercial act, is a power-laden process of claiming the right to tell (or to ignore) the story of the enslaved” (267). Many plantation heritage museums acquire economic capital by selling narratives that silence slavery and perform white nostalgia (cf. Alderman and Modlin; Butler; Eichstedt and Small). Plantation heritage promoters and guides profit from telling and selling narratives connected to objects—which can be seen in the aforementioned example of the corn husk dolls—and thereby prompt their visitors to experience white nostalgia. However, those plantations that address slavery—and seem to put effort into constructing narratives that include memories of slave experiences—also need to be critically investigated, as they, too, commodify the memories of plantations by including slavery only to a degree that is marketable to their white audiences (Eichstedt and Small 6; McPherson 43-44). As sites directly connected to the memories of slavery, plantation museums are significant agents of memory that impact how slavery in the United States is remembered and forgotten (Modlin 269).

2. SLAVERY AND ONLINE PLANTATION NARRATIVES

Due to my research interest in how plantation sites present themselves online, this chapter is devoted to analyzing how the plantation museums I selected address slavery and how, through their narratives, constructed ‘memories’ become commodified nostalgia. I divided the plantations into two categories: plantations that seem to follow a strategy of denying slavery and creating white nostalgia and plantations that make efforts to create counter narratives and/or integrate memories of slave experiences. There are four plantation websites in the first category—Foscue in North Carolina, Oak Grove in Georgia, Kensington in South Carolina, and Battersea in Virginia—and three in the latter—Monticello in Virginia, Boone Hall in South Carolina, and Laura in Louisiana. The readings of the websites rely on the theories of nostalgia and memory presented in the previous chapter.

2.1 COMMODIFYING ABSENCE: WHAT IT MEANS NOT TO TALK ABOUT RACE

White nostalgia at plantation museums simulates a history without racism and distances itself from emotional legacies of slavery. After the end of the Civil War in 1865, many plantation homes fell into decay or were used for other purposes, for example as private homes, places of business, or museums (Matrana xiii). From the few plantations that were saved from destruction, today “only a few hundred are open to the public, and the great majority of these exist as romanticized depictions of southern antebellum life” (Matrana xiii). These romanticized portrayals are instances of what this paper refers to as white nostalgia: unproblematic, glorified, and ‘noble’ depictions of the antebellum South in accordance with what has been widely understood as the ‘Lost Cause.’ The myth and concept of the Lost Cause started in the late nineteenth century when writers, politicians, and other agents of memory tried to shape public understanding of the Civil War and the antebellum South by glorifying the war, depicting the cause of the Confederacy as justified, and celebrating a specific Southern identity and pride. Since the Confederacy fought for the continuation of the slave system, this programmatically involved denying the terrors of slavery. The myth was perpetuated by political speeches, monuments such as Stone Mountain, and books, such as Jefferson Davis’s *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*. Despite having faced criticism in the past—especially from abolitionists, intellectuals, and civil rights activists (Gallagher 2)—public discussions of the “developing Lost Cause school of interpretation” in the present “[suggest] the degree to which the Lost Cause

remains part of the modern Civil War landscape” (3). Perhaps the most prominent example of this can be seen in the recent controversy surrounding the Confederate flag at South Carolina’s capitol. All of this suggests that the Lost Cause idea plays a significant role in shaping white nostalgia.

The absence of slavery in plantation narratives is a result of multiple factors. For example, plantations owned privately “are often operated by descendants of original owners interested more in aggrandizing their ancestors’ reputation than dealing with their status as a slaveholder” (Alderman and Modlin 275). Until quite recently, the lives of white Southerners—more specifically the lives of slave owners rather than lower class whites—were the preferred subjects of academic scholarship and local historiography instead of the lives of enslaved Southerners (Matrana xii). There may be several reasons for this: the nostalgic interest in investigating and talking about the ‘noble’ lives of elite white Southerners as celebrated by the Lost Cause myth, the continuing political dominance of white Americans, and their repression of feelings of guilt and shame. The disinterest in researching slavery led to the destruction and loss of artifacts that could have helped scholars better reconstruct and understand enslaved experiences in the antebellum South.³ During a personal visit in 2011, a tour guide of Kensington Plantation stated that the still existing slave cabins could not be visited due to risky circumstances. This seemingly pragmatic explanation can both be interpreted as a result of the neglect of the material artifacts of slavery and as a conscious exclusion of slavery in the plantation narrative. In this way, the absence of slavery in a number of plantation sites represents not only white nostalgia, but a continuation of Lost Cause ideologies.

Oak Grove’s website does not address the plantation’s history of slavery, and only provides visitors of the website with information on the architecture of the house and the opportunity to use the plantation as accommodation. The website offers a nostalgic view of the history of the antebellum South, mentioning slavery only once: “An original slave house has been restored and is being used as part of the Inn’s accommodations” (“Oak Grove”). This is made more disturbing by the fact that the former slave cabins, the website’s only reference to slavery, are now being marketed as overnight accommodations, engendering a drastic disconnect between narrative and object. The conscious decision to reconstruct a slave cabin—an object of memories connected to the lives of enslaved African Americans—in such a way “represent[s]

3 However, scholars, scientists, and institutions are increasingly interested in archaeological excavations, reconstructing old buildings and cabins, as well as the narratives of those who lived and worked in them. One example of such an effort is Monticello, which will be discussed in the following subchapter.

White Nostalgia: The Absence of Slavery and the Commodification of White Plantation Nostalgia

man's inhumanity to man—vanished physical evidence of American slavery” (Matrana 257).

The plantation's use of a former slave cabin as accommodation goes further than not addressing slavery; it appropriates and dominates the memories attached to the slave cabin, destroying and whitewashing those memories. Angela da Silva, owner of the National Black Tourism Network, comments on this indecent form of accommodation: “Jesus coming down off the cross couldn't get me to stay in some gentrified slave cabin with a jacuzzi in it. The misery and pain that happened in those cabins . . . This is about shame. People who own these places want the history to go away” (qtd. in Birkenhead). In general, Oak Grove's website does not offer much detailed information on the plantation's history and its owners, instead describing various details of the architectural style, for example, how the “front windows are trimmed above with a deeply cut complex tripartite molding” (“Oak Grove”). This demonstrates that the plantation's grand narrative relies on the simulation of memories of a romanticized ‘noble’ past without allowing for any contradictions or problems.

In addition to repurposing slave cabins, there are different ways of talking—and yet not talking—about racialized discourses on plantation sites. Despite mentioning slavery, many of these sites only refer to *numbers* of enslaved African Americans who lived on the plantation. This small acknowledgment of slavery is a perfunctory way of talking about slavery, one which objectifies and minimizes the suffering slavery caused. Visitors to Battersea's website do not even get a specific number, but are instead left with the statement that the owners of the plantation “owned many slaves” (“Banister Family Story”). The front page of Foscue's website welcomes visitors with aesthetic photographs of the plantation, presented as a slide show, which changes its picture and header every few seconds, spelling out phrases such as “[w]elcome to a Southern lifestyle: Have you ever wondered what [S]outhern plantation life was like?” (*Foscue Plantation*). However, the website only offers information on the main building, depicting plantation life in the antebellum South as a merely white experience. Visitors are left with only the quantity of enslaved African Americans who lived on the plantation, information that is not contextualized and is hardly meaningful. Arriving at the end of the text, the reader likely does not even remember the number of slaves, nor will she have an impression of what these enslaved individuals' lives were like. Similar to Foscue and Battersea, Kensington Plantation's website neglects to talk about slavery, although it is mentioned that “Jacob Stroyer (1848-1909), who was enslaved on the plantation, documented antebellum life here in his memoir *My Life in the South*, first published in 1879” (“History”). By referring to Stroyer's narrative, the text seems to shift the responsibility of addressing slavery away from the plantation promoters to the reader who can research and read Stroyer's book independently. Overall, these sites

do not investigate what it means that the plantation once possessed a particular number of slaves. Furthermore, the sites fail both to address the lives of enslaved African Americans and to confront the characteristic suffering of the slaves' conditions.

By not talking about slavery, white nostalgia commodifies a history that omits racism and racial oppression. This caters not only to modern racist depictions of the past but also to post-racial attitudes that assume that while racism was problematic in the past—acknowledging the terrors of slavery to a certain degree—racism no longer exists. In a post-racial framework, the commodification of white nostalgia seems unproblematic, and discussing racism has become challenging in a post-racial discourse in general (Gallas and DeWolf Perry 22). As I will demonstrate, the way in which slavery is addressed is crucial: Merely mentioning the terms 'slaves' or 'slavery' does not present a balanced narrative that includes the memories of slavery. The concept of a post-racial America reaffirms white power structures and perpetuates inequality by suggesting that race and ethnicity cannot be blamed for low economic and social stance but that it is now a case of personal failure. White nostalgia is thus legitimized within post-racial ideology.

White nostalgia relies on the Lost Cause myth and addresses an audience that is either unaware that the past has been changed or that accepts alterations to history (Lowenthal 263). In the latter case, a potential audience would know about racial oppression in US history but accept the exclusion of slavery in the plantation's narratives. McPherson argues that the absence of slavery in antebellum discourses can, therefore, only function among white audiences—or those not critical toward racial oppression (43-44). Furthermore, Buzinde critically observes that "local African Americans do not often engage in plantation tourism, nor are they typically employed at these sites as tourism providers" (243-44).

2.2 COMMODIFYING PRESENCE: EFFORTS IN SELLING COUNTER NARRATIVES

As white nostalgia relies on an uncritical reflection of antebellum history and the neglect of racial issues, the inclusion of slavery into a plantation's narrative leads to a different form of white nostalgia, depending on how slavery is addressed. The efforts of the three plantation websites to create counter narratives to white nostalgia contrast those of the plantations analyzed above. Monticello, Laura, and Boone Hall not only address slavery in their narratives, but also make an effort to connect memories of slave experiences to objects. This, as argued in the first chapter, creates the opportunity

White Nostalgia: The Absence of Slavery and the Commodification of White Plantation Nostalgia

to give visitors a different understanding of plantation history—in contrast to the presence of white nostalgia à la *Gone with the Wind*. Talking about the significance of relics and artifacts, Lowenthal notes that “[w]e also remold the past to our expectations by embellishing its relics” (278). Plantations commodifying white nostalgia embellish objects with glorifying stories about the antebellum South. This is partly done by restoring paintings and furniture as well as reconstructing buildings. Marc Matrana describes how after the end of the Civil War, only a small number of plantations and even fewer slave cabins were saved from decay and destruction (xiii). In this respect, Monticello’s effort to (re)construct and learn about slave quarters with the help of archaeological excavations is remarkable, since many other plantations either leave slave cabins to deteriorate or willfully destroy them. On Monticello’s website, visitors learn about Mulberry Row, a place where various outbuildings were located and African Americans lived. Several pages are dedicated to showing visitors how much effort is put into excavating former buildings like the stables, servants’ houses, and slave dwellings. A few digital animations even reconstruct how the buildings must have looked in the past (“View Places”). The decision to put such immense effort into (re)creating objects, even if only for digital consumption, points to the importance of those objects for visitors’ ability to engage with and experience memories.

As places of consumption where visitors are enabled to consume memories, heritage plantation museums not only commodify white nostalgia but also its counter narratives. In the case of Monticello, profit-driven commodification does not seem to be a concern, since the plantation is owned and operated by the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, a private and nonprofit corporation (“Thomas Jefferson Foundation”). Furthermore, the plantation is supported by UNESCO and received substantial financial support from various foundations and corporations for its project “Getting Word,” which tries to preserve the plantation’s black history through research about individuals who lived and worked there and interviews with their descendants. This project not only demonstrates the foundation’s interest in the experiences of African American families on the plantation but also asks their descendants to share their ancestors’ stories.

Despite its progressive efforts and financial support, Monticello still engages in the commodification of memories. Visitors must pay for admission as well as for specific guided tours. On the website, visitors have the opportunity to shop for home decor, jewelry, or books, thereby purchasing objects with attached meaning. Additionally, the website offers the possibility for visitors to donate money to the Thomas Jefferson Foundation. Despite the foundation’s effort to tell stories of slavery and explain the paradox apparent in Jefferson’s articulation of liberty and his status as a slaveholder,

the memories shared on the website reinforce a positive picture of Thomas Jefferson. Explaining that “[s]lavery made the world Thomas Jefferson knew,” the website tries to convince the reader of Jefferson’s complex situation, explaining that he was born into a family of slaveholders and a society that economically depended on free labor. The text further states that “though Jefferson came to abhor slavery, his livelihood depended on it” (“Society Dependent”). The explanations given might sound reasonable, but a critical perspective on this paradox is missing.

The other two plantations that acknowledge slavery seem more dependent on financial support through commodification. Boone Hall is privately run by a family who not only invests in creating a space of cultural memory by offering various tours but also continues to use the plantation for agriculture (“About Us”). Laura offers both tours and an online shop where visitors can buy various goods such as books, Christmas ornaments, and dolls. In contrast to plantations commodifying white nostalgia, Laura states that its tour exposes visitors “to compelling, real-life accounts of generations of owners, women, slaves and children who called this typical Creole sugarcane farm their home” (“Guided Tour”). Through emphasis on “real-life accounts,” the plantation distances itself from nostalgic appreciation that often obscures its relation to history. Although plantations can only construct memories and narratives, Laura’s website states that the “tour is based upon 5,000 pages of documents related to this plantation,” which can be read as an attempt to sell visitors a sense of ‘authentic’ historiography (“Guided Tour”).

Just as there are various ways to avoid talking about race and slavery, there are also different ways of addressing slavery in plantation narratives. Monticello takes a broad and professional approach to contextualizing slavery that includes conferences and other scholarly efforts. Laura includes narratives of former slaves in their regular tours and offers one specific tour dedicated to enslavement and folklore. Boone Hall advertises seven different tours altogether, among which three are dedicated to the lives and cultures of African Americans who lived on the plantation. Visitors can choose between tours entitled “Slave Street and History Presentation,” “Black History in America,” and “Exploring the Gullah Culture” (“Tours/Admission”). Additional information is only provided regarding the exhibition project “Black History in America,” where visitors engage in self-guided tours through eight original slave cabins (“Black History”). The website explains the tour as follows: “Each of [the cabins] present[s] different themes in telling the black history story” using “[l]ife size figures, pre-recorded narratives, audiovisual presentations, photos, [...] biographical information, and actual historical relics” (“Black History”). The project thus tries to construct a grand narrative of black experience in the antebellum as well as postbellum United States by reconstructing memories of the enslaved experience, emancipation,

White Nostalgia: The Absence of Slavery and the Commodification of White Plantation Nostalgia

and the struggle for freedom and civil rights. In the video gallery embedded on the website, an advertising video starts by showing the words “The road has been long and hard...,” followed by a picture of black people picking cotton accompanied by dramatic music, before the words “[t]he obstacles overcome immeasurable” cut in. The music then takes on a more positive, active dynamic, and the video goes on to show pictures of Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., and subsequently a photo of President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle. Aiming at a broader narrative that exceeds slavery and connects it to other events in the past, such as the enactment of the Civil Rights Act and the election of the first black president of the United States, entails the risk of whitewashing the terror of slavery and its continuing legacy by indicating that racism is something that has already been “overcome.”

Overall, my analysis exposes a troubling and contradictory facet of the US South in which the persistence of white nostalgia is symptomatic of the continuing refusal to engage racism and discrimination within society critically. Although the inclusion of slavery into the narratives at Boone Hall, Laura, and Monticello demonstrates a positive effort by plantation museums to create counter narratives to white nostalgia, the frameworks in which they are embedded are still problematic in the sense that they, too, commodify memories of slavery to fit their own agenda. Furthermore, the plantation museums’ continued decision to construct and commodify a history without slavery and racial oppression is highly problematic because it makes them complicit in the detrimental erasure of the history of black suffering. This is institutionally endorsed when some plantations are recognized as national heritage sites, which turns them into places shaped by “a politicized effort to align the nation with essential ethnic origins that reclaim a certain Americanness associated with greatness and heroism of the white populace. [...] The end result is a heritage representation that endorses a form of racism that privileges certain cultural identities and not others” (Buzinde 248-49). The question of who decides which spaces receive this status, and why plantations excluding slavery from their narratives are worth becoming national heritage sites, is troubling. Buzinde questions these decisions, asking: “[W]hat is the heritage message that unites its entire diverse population?” (234). Having such contrasting sides in the representation of antebellum plantation history—one perpetuating and commodifying white nostalgia, and the other addressing slavery by creating counter narratives—not only leads to the creation of clashing perspectives and memories but also draws a complex picture of society; this picture depicts the persistence of white nostalgia and how it reflects the continuation of racism and discrimination within society.

3. CONCLUSION

“Unreflected nostalgia breeds monsters.”
(Boym xvi)

This quote reflects an anxiety about nostalgia, its repercussions, and its causes, and it presents quite a disturbing outlook. It seems to condemn unreflected nostalgia, a threat which Boym fears will cause the creation of “monsters.” In the case of plantations, these “monsters” are hidden behind the grand narrative of union and jauntiness that is built upon white nostalgia. Arguing that “[t]here is definitely a need for concern as such sites become locales wherein Americans learn about their past as well as their present,” Buzinde demonstrates these whitewashed plantation narratives’ inherent danger (234). White nostalgia has shaped and continues to shape perceptions and understandings of the antebellum South and feeds into the erasure of a terrible past with slavery. At the same time, Boym’s quote also holds a more positive outlook, as it implies that only “unreflected nostalgia” is necessarily detrimental. Reflective nostalgia, which is more about longing itself and does not preclude the possibility of critical observation (Boym xviii), would enable visitors to enjoy engaging in nostalgia, and to walk through a plantation creating memories of the beautiful architecture while questioning this longing and the ambivalence of the presented memories at the same time.

To conclude, the absence of slavery in four of the seven analyzed plantation websites needs to be regarded critically concerning its depiction of the antebellum South’s history. Although this paper provides examples of plantations whose narratives include slavery, the way plantation sites talk about racism and the terror of slavery still needs to be investigated critically, not just by scholars and teachers, but by visitors as well. While Birkenhead argues that “we still can’t talk about slavery,” I would like to add that even the way slavery and race *are* talked about is problematic, especially in spaces of cultural memory. These spaces often become centers of learning about history, and since people tend to mistake memories and narratives for history—as Kammen argues, saying that “the perception widely shared by most folks [is] that memory *is* history” (688)—these spaces have an impact on shaping visitors’ knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes. Jackson argues that in order to create counter narratives and become visible in public representation, issues of race will need to shift the focus of “interpretations and public representations,” which will have to “take place on a community by community level all across America” (28). The point of this critique is that the mere inclusion of slavery in the narratives of plantation tourism sites is not sufficient; these narratives also need to be critically engaged. Controversies

White Nostalgia: The Absence of Slavery and the Commodification of White Plantation Nostalgia

arising from how race and slavery are addressed were introduced in my story at the beginning of this essay: The painting depicts slaves working a cotton field, but the accompanying story as I received it was whitewashed from top to bottom.

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**White Nostalgia: The Absence of Slavery and the Commodification of White
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