Magnolia Longing: The Plantation Tour as Palimpsest

Tanya Shields

This article draws on the author’s 2009 tour of South Carolina’s Magnolia Plantation as a primary text to examine how nostalgia for the 19th-century plantation and the Lost Cause Confederacy continues to limit entangled understandings of the past. Plantation tourism reveals how participants negotiate the layers of the past and the present—bringing in new and tense forms of engagement with a dismissal of the past (and present), of consuming it, and of rewriting one’s heritage. These tours’ audience ranges from those haunted by the past to those who want to celebrate the ubiquitous idea of “the gallant South.” The erasure and containment of the site’s horror indicate how tour operators profit from redeployments of the South. The plantation’s architecture, particularly the Big House, reverberates as a site of symbolic, political, and familial power. These aspects of tourism, nostalgia, and memory illuminate the palimpsestic presence of the plantation in daily life.

Keywords: Big House, hinge generation, Lost Cause Confederacy, palimpsest, plantation, postmemory, tourism, white fragility

Nostalgia for the South and White Fragility

South Carolina endured an extraordinary 2015. That year’s latter half illustrated the continued brutalization of black bodies by official forces with the beating of a young black woman in her Columbia Spring Valley classroom. Biblical floods also devastated the state, driving people from their homes and disrupting the economy. Such moments highlighted the extraordinary force of nature-cum-the force of the police that garnered countrywide attention with the killing of Walter Scott in April. These and other racial atrocities led North Carolina social activist, Bree Newsome, to remove the Confederate flag from the South Carolina statehouse before the legislature officially sanctioned its withdrawal in July.¹

¹ISSN 1099-9949 print/1548-3843 online
DOI: 10.1080/10999949.2017.1268517
Perhaps South Carolina’s greatest atrocity in 2015, the murder of nine parishioners at the Mother Emanuel Church on June 17, demonstrates a longing for an imagined performance of Southern gallantry by invoking the terrorism endemic to the Confederate cause. This summoning of a white person’s right to control, police, and punish black bodies speaks loudly to the invisibility of slavery and the lack of historical education, while the visibility of narratives of loss imagined by whites, particularly men, is exemplified by the murderer Dylann Roof. Before the carnage, Roof is believed to have posted his manifesto to the white supremacist blog, the Last Rhodesian. There, he indicates that the Council of Conservative Citizens and his hatred of black people radicalized him. These words effectively illustrate his white supremacist ideology:

I think it is fitting to start off with the group I have the most real life experience with, and the group that is the biggest problem for Americans. …

Niggers are stupid and violent. At the same time they have the capacity to be very slick. Black people view everything through a racial lense [sic]. That’s what racial awareness is, its viewing everything that happens through a racial lense [sic]. They are always thinking about the fact that they are black. This is part of the reason they get offended so easily, and think that some thing [sic] are intended to be racist towards them, even when a White person wouldn’t be thinking about race …

Modern history classes instill a subconscious White superiority complex in Whites and an inferiority complex in blacks. …

I wish with a passion that niggers were treated terribly throughout history by Whites, that every White person had an ancestor who owned slaves, that segregation was an evil an [sic] oppressive institution, and so on. Because if it was all it [sic] true, it would make it so much easier for me to accept our current situation. But it isn’t true. None of it is. We are told to accept what is happening to us because of ancestors [sic] wrong doing, but it is all based on historical lies, exaggerations and myths …

Segregation was not a bad thing. It was a defensive measure. Segregation did not exist to hold back negroes. It existed to protect us from them. …

Now white parents are forced to move to the suburbs to send their children to “good schools.” But what constitutes a “good school”? The fact is that how good a school is considered directly corresponds to how White it is. I hate with a passion the whole idea of the suburbs. To me it represents nothing but scared White people running.

Roof’s manifesto demonstrates his far-reaching ideas, his willingness to confront white nationalist ideas that he disagrees with and the grievances he believes that his race has endured. His masculinity goes largely unexamined though his compassion for white women and his belief that he is defending white lives goes hand-in-hand with white masculinity that has been a force of most of the terror in this country. Roof’s obsession with his racial identity and, in a less pronounced way, his masculinity, permeates the document and his sense of self, but he does not articulate that as his racial lens. Embedded in his analysis is a feeling of victimhood and a desire to take the United States back to a mythical past of white rule and order.
Entitlement for the Old South and the “Lost Cause” of the Confederacy infuses Roof’s comments. Discourses of the “Lost Cause,” emerged at the Civil War’s end and, like much of Roof’s rhetoric, are riddled with historical inaccuracies, particularly regarding the slaves’ happiness and the benign nature of enslavement. Lost Cause ideology further invokes the fallacy that the Civil War was fought over states rights and not slavery and is buttressed by hagiographic accounts of Confederate leaders. Consider Roof’s assertion: “I am not in the position to, alone, go into the ghetto and fight. I chose Charleston because it is [the] most historic city in my state, and at one time had the highest ratio of blacks to Whites in the country.” He is not personally aggrieved by instances of strife with a black person; rather, he is acting as one of the oft-memorialized Confederate soldiers defending white people.

The memorialization of the Confederacy and the disillusionment with the loss of the imaginary white South may be manifest in individuals like Roof. Yet it also pervades a range of structures. Plantation tourism is one such example. Known for its award winning gardens along the Ashley River, Magnolia Plantation (Magnolia) is located in South Carolina’s southeastern region. Magnolia, founded in 1676 by Thomas and Ann Drayton, was a rice-producing plantation before its fields were converted into garden lakes in the 19th century. Although it was burned by General William T. Sherman’s troops during the Civil War, Magnolia Plantation remained in the Drayton family and opened to the public in the 1870s. In this article, I narratively return to my 2009 visit to Magnolia Plantation, as an analytic pillar, to explore the accounts of events, the pleasures, the forms of knowing, and the rewriting of the self in relation to nation that emerge under plantation tourism. Like a palimpsest, I argue, the narratives of plantation tourism bleed into our contemporary environment. Nostalgia is an active ingredient in plantation tourism and encourages a type of traumatic transfer (postmemory) that diminishes the horrors of enslavement.

South Carolina in the Age of Obama

Understanding the Palmetto State’s historical and contemporary context as well as its placement within the “Age of Obama” is necessary to comprehending which kinds of national stories are foregrounded, while others remain untold and invisible. South Carolina bears a history as a site of black resistance to white supremacy and white panic from the 17th century to today. This state’s history, like all history, has been reimagined by various generations. In its current reimagined iteration, “the South”
(and South Carolina specifically) has been envisioned as and yearned for as a place of peace, calm, and order with good, kind masters and obedient slaves. Prosperity reigned because of the enslavers’ efficient management of their benighted labor force. This fantasy finds relevance as each generation rearticulates the narrative. Enslaved societies were stratified; stratifications were calcified in policy, religion, and culture.

Barack Obama’s ascendance to the U.S. presidency after the 2008 election signaled great promise, a promise that extends to how the South is imagined and studied. Obama, a black man with a white mother and African father, seemingly ushered in post-racial America. This is to say that the United States transcended the stain of enslavement and subsequent discriminatory policies and the pervasive wounds that racism engenders vis-à-vis his role as the first African American to hold the executive office. Obama’s election became another strand in national mythmaking. Post-racialism inferred an erasure and amelioration of the history of enslavement that infects this country’s establishment: its founding documents, its economic system, and the relations that these things fostered. In the “Age of Obama,” the Black Lives Matter movement, the rise of white nationalist groups and nativist sentiments, this imagined South circulates and is longed for by many whites across economic strata. Their whiteness lingers in the essence of this fantasy perpetuated in cultural texts (recall *Gone with the Wind* and *Sullivan’s Island*) and political policy (color-blindness). The curtailing of these expected rights and privileges fosters a deep sense of grievance and the belief that whites today are paying for their forefathers’ sins. These fabricated notions of history and unfairness then bleed into public discourse and policy as stubborn fact.

South Carolina’s legacy as a black majority colony at the time of the Declaration of Independence made it unique during the colonial period and marks it as a space of white agitation. As with all colonies, whether they had a black majority or not, rebellious behavior—from running away to insurrection—was part of life. White fear of rebellion, their own potential deaths, and their desire to control their black labor force led to the disciplining and killing of black bodies by local authorities particularly governors, state militia, and patrollers. South Carolina’s history of black resistance began in 1824 when enslaved people revolted against their Spanish overlords by setting fire to their huts. This tradition of struggle continued with overt rebellions such as the Stono Rebellion (1739) and Denmark Vesey’s uprising (1822) to more subtle forms of opposition.

These incidents, coupled with South Carolina’s role as the site of the original shot fired in the Civil War (Fort Sumter), remind us of the complicated relationship between memory, history, heritage, and our brutal present. These extensive entanglements are manifest in the Big House tour available at Magnolia Plantation (other excursions include slave cabins, which became available for exploration less than ten years ago; and the grounds, which are available for weddings), and whose symbolism is as palpable as it is long. The Big House endures due to profound nostalgia for an imagined Southern past. Such longing coexists with eruptions of psychic and physical violence.
Similarly, the actions of Officer Michael Slager who shot Walter Scott, were also part of the legacies of slavery and the power of the state to discipline black bodies. The slave patrol evolved from any white South Carolinian’s ability to “apprehend or chastise” enslaved people with the formation of the first policing entity in 1704. In the Carolinas, the patrols’ primary function was to (1) recapture runaways; (2) to maintain plantation discipline, often through terror tactics; and (3) deterrence—prevent trouble from starting or escalating, also a function of modern policing. As Philip Reichel puts it, slave patrols had elaborate search and seizure powers as well as the right to administer up to twenty lashes. A 1740 revision specifically included women plantation owners as answerable for patrol service but both male and female owners were allowed to procure any white person, between age 16 and 60, to ride patrol for them. One result of the “patroller for hire” process was patrols consisting of boys or idle men whose primary ambition … seemed the harassment of slaves.

Legacies of the slave patrol come together in Slager and Roof. Slager employs the state’s power to terrorize, while Roof, like “patrollers for hire,” utilizes extrajudicial means. Both men embody the plantation’s enforcement mechanisms—how patrollers and random white people policed black bodies. This history of state and individuated white power to control black bodies permeates white entitlement and a sense of white loss. This context is vital: it is deeply intertwined with the narratives and desires that plantation tour operators cultivate among their predominately white audiences.

**Plantation (Heritage) Tourism, Nostalgia, and Postmemory**

Heritage tourism is an evolving term. It emphasizes the commodification of cultural practices and artifacts encouraging tourists to visit a place they might not otherwise consider without the imprimatur of heritage. Heritage has become a way of organizing, knowing, and experiencing “the past”: it is “our living connection to history.” The fissures in heritage tourism are the competing interests and interpretations of the past. Heritage sites purport to represent “our history” but rarely indicate when the “our” was fractured. For instance, visiting a plantation that calls enslaved people “workers or servants” (as some tours have been known to do) or calling slave quarters “cottages” misrepresents the past and insufficiently examines the contested nature of the past and the past in the present. Indeed, the Magnolia Plantation website lauds their five-year-old, award winning “slave dwellings” program, but the language hides the realities:

> Magnolia recognizes the importance of acknowledging the vital role that Gullah people and culture plays in any interpretation of Lowcountry history. By addressing this often overlooked part of the region’s narrative, Magnolia seeks to respectfully afford credit where credit is due.

Visitors have the option to take a shuttle to the cabins, where they will experience an engaging and interactive discussion of the dynamic issues that shape this delicate inquiry. Afterward, time is given to allow everyone the opportunity to explore each cabin to appreciate the lengthy period in which the buildings were
This description of the “slave dwellings” avoids discussing enslaved people. It references Gullah people and later African Americans. These less charged characterizations coat enslaved peoples’ experiences. I am dismayed by the longevity of the cabins’ use, “from the 1850s to the late 1990s.” The timeline, from “slavery to Civil Rights,” undercuts the economic realities that enslaved people’s descendants lived in these spaces until the end of Bill Clinton’s presidency. So well beyond the Civil Rights period, people lived through the Vietnam War, the 1970s global energy crisis, George H. W. Bush’s “no more taxes,” and Clinton’s welfare reform and economic globalization in these cabins. Magnolia’s managers crafted a careful message full of temperate adjectives: respectful, delicate inquiry, overlooked, and acknowledging. Such tour narratives—with all their gaps, silences, and erasures—represent “our” collective past and are taken, not as limited constructions, but as authentic representations. This hegemonic “our” is based on racial heritage, and the political and economic power wielded by the white majority.

Heritage is a booming business. Many places are investing in heritage designations to boost their appeal to tourists. In the plantation tourism world, the audience now extends beyond white people looking for Southern romances, to black tourists who want gallant Southern stories and others, of all races, who seek to understand the lives of enslaved people and how slavery shaped this country’s economic, political, and social relations. Yet among these various audiences, that sometimes have divergent interests, there is a desire to feel rooted, accepted, and understood.

Until recently and with only a few exceptions, plantation tourism has been part of a system that, as Jessica Adams suggests, is “plantations without slaves.” Tourism has been central to maintaining nostalgia for the Lost Cause Old South. While some plantations highlight enslaved people’s experiences (e.g., North Carolina’s Stagville Plantation and Louisiana’s Laura Plantation and the Whitney Museum), most have downplayed this history or ignored it all together. These tours mostly broach the subject during the outdoor portions: near the labor fields or the slave quarters.

On tours that I have taken, I witnessed the work of enslaved field hands mentioned in passing and enslaved domestics’ work rarely dealt with in the house. At Louisiana’s Evergreen Plantation, the tour guides, both black and white, share the lives and work of enslaved people outdoors—at the slave cabins or the outdoor kitchen. The house is solidly the purview of the often eccentric, long-suffering, and debt-plagued masters. The narratives of enslaved people are at the tour’s periphery and their stories are not woven into the ideological center of the plantation as they were during slavery. And when these docents share the burdens of the enslaved, they celebrate Louisiana’s myth of racial democracy, which mitigates the suffering, triumphs, and labor of those previously designated as chattel.
The Laura Plantation, also in Louisiana, ruptures this celebratory representation of slavery by discussing the enslaved and the masters in most spaces. This tour speaks of enslaved people in the house, under the house, in the parlors, and gardens even as they tell the eccentric white enslaver stories. Recognizing these erasures is significant, for they define the nostalgic moment and allow the ascendancy of Southern interests—mainly from narratives that give the plantocracy the benefit of the doubt. To inter-twine narratives of the enslaved on the tours is to closely resemble and reassemble the lives that plantation economies shaped.

Yet, to these changes, that more reflect the historical experience, there has been white backlash. For instance, one conservative complained about hearing enslaved peoples’ stories while visiting Monticello. She believes that to integrate and acknowledge Thomas Jefferson’s role as a slave owner is somehow a betrayal of history. Conversely, in her poem “Enlightenment,” Natasha Trethewey writes of her visit to Monticello as a mixed raced woman, who identifies as black, with her white father. The poem speaks of the weight and justifications of history and how heritage can unite and separate—her father identifies with and excuses Jefferson, while she speaks of coming through the back door. Jefferson and Sally Hemings’ story mirrors Trethewey’s and she emphasizes being the “backdrop” and “dark subtext” of America’s continued inability to recognize its multiracial heritage.

Those who seek a narrative that is less like Trethewey’s and more like one that would satisfy the conservative woman mentioned above yearn for fictions. The Oxford English Dictionary defines nostalgia as “acute longing” and “a sentimental imagining or evocation of a period in the past.” Nostalgia warps our ability to construct a usable present by removing the sharp edges of past injustices and diluting them of any hint of controversy. Nostalgia for the 19th-century plantation limits enslaved people and slave owners alike, presenting flat and uncomplicated accounts or complicated only in as much as their unconventional stories can now be told as charming tales. Given the audience that plantation tours have historically catered to, it seems that many visitors want a celebratory past filled with rogues whose dueling, gambling losses, romance, rape, and violence are characterized as misdemeanors that are understandable given “the times.” This is so even though the wealth, the food, the clothing—the very things that made the romance (or these misdemeanors) possible were built on enslaved black people’s forced labor, family separation, and physical and psychological torture.

Adams’s Wounds of Returning argues that this nostalgia is a longing that may return, “inflicting new wounds and reopening old ones.” She relates that nostalgia for the Old South has been around since the 19th century, connecting northern and southern whites. She writes:

White[s] collaborated in an “uncritical celebration of southern heroism,” … [making] Black poverty a picturesque sight [for] white northern tourists … [as] black people became picturesque [they also became] spectacle … cast as “foreigners,” strangers [in their own] home. At the same time, interregional white courtship and marriage symbolized the reunion between North and South, recalculating the meaning of the slave South as “romantic.”
Such a romance depicting regional unity emerges in the Magnolia Plantation narrative. The website announces that the plantation owners married interregionally before and after the Civil War. In the 1830s, Reverend John Grimké Drayton married Julia Ewing of Philadelphia. More recently, Fernanda de Mohrenschildt Hastie, who owned the plantation when I visited, but died in 2013, was originally from the north and also married a southern Drayton descendant. Northern and southern connections reinforced the gallant South ideology, allowing Northerners to share the South’s nobility. White Northerners can enjoy the moral conquest of being Civil War victors and “freeing the slaves,” while also enjoying a Magnolia-scented past.

Plantation tourism also reveals how tourists negotiate, whitewash, and sanitize the past and, consequently, the present in slave societies across multiple Souths. The circuits of slavery from the Drayton family seat in England to their plantations in Barbados and South Carolina attest to the global nature of slavery. The narratives circulating in plantation America and in colonizing nations continue to be refracted and reinvented for new generations. As Anthony Payne and Paul Sutton argue, the limitations stemming from an “over-economic bias which obscured changing political interests and patterns of collaboration … permitted the essence of the plantation economy to survive without radical transformation.” These tours demonstrate how the plantation’s entire arrangement persistently turns a profit. The erasure and containment of the barbarity of these sites indicate how capital reconstitutes space and history.

I imagine these layers of history as an ancient palimpsest—a document that has been written on, erased, and rewritten, but the prior layers of text or underwriting become visible at unexpected moments. In recounting the history of slavery, the stories are not coherent, but come to the surface in fragments. These fragments function like traces or ghosts that bleed through to this moment. In plantation tourism, these tiers become more prominent with shifts in audience and attention to market forces. This reconstitution in various temporalities can strike the psyche discordantly, bringing about different types of trauma, as mentioned earlier. The grief that can be part of this process produces an unintended thanatourism.

Broadly defined, thanatourism signifies “heritage staged around attractions and sites associated with death, acts of violence, scenes of disaster and crimes against humanity.” A similar term, “dark tourism,” connotes “the exploration of death disaster, and suffering through travel [which] provides people with a way to mediate between death and modern life.” Not unlike nostalgia, grief in tourism is exploited in numerous ways. It has mainly been silent, but as more African descended people in the Americas take an interest in understanding slavery and travel to plantations, they are transforming some of the tourist industry’s offerings.

In Jewish Holocaust studies, several theorists have put forth the idea of the “hinge” generation meaning children (normally born after) the trauma of the concentration camps who “have a living connection to the memories of the survivors.” Marianne Hirsch discusses this “traumatic transfer” as “postmemory,” which she defines as:

[those] experiences [which] were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their [the hinge generation] own right.
Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors.  

This construction of the hinge generation is provocative in the context of slavery, freedom, and trauma. What, I ask, constitutes the hinge generation of African-descended populations in the Americas? Traumatic current events recall slavery and create new hinge generations within multiple communities. African American hinge generations both embody traumatic transfer, the memories of their parental generation, and the experience of new anguish in their lives. Despite enslavement, Jim Crow, redlining, land capture and divestment, police brutality, and a host of other issues that impacted African American well-being, some black people thrived. However, the collective psychic trauma of slavery remains in black communities and in the fabric of all countries that profited from slavery. Unaddressed, unnamed, and unprocessed, enslavement and its consequences resurface at critical and seemingly unexpected moments. I do not equate the racism experienced now with the violence of enslavement, nor am I saying that trauma is genetically encoded. Rather, I argue that the trauma of enslavement remains with us (and connects us) in a palimpsestic way to the past. Narratives of slavery, denial, reconstruction, and beyond seep through daily life and bleed through to the surface. There are many layers of trauma in plantation tour narratives. Some layers are more prominent than others, but the most visible one is of genteel Southerners and benign slavery that the tour industry believes will attract the most visitors. 

The Big House, the Cabin, and the Gift Shop (2009)

The writing and rewriting of plantations as benign or malignant places is one way palimpsestic narratives function in plantation tourism. The slave cabins tour at Magnolia, the site I visited in 2009, is an illustration of the palimpsest. The cabins were in use from the 1850s–1990s and are monuments to the generations of people enslaved and not, who lived almost unchanged economic and social relations with the plantation owners. Rice was cultivated at Magnolia, and its processing was arduous work. Generally men cleared disease-infested swamps, which were then sowed with the crop by women. Labor-intensive rice made South Carolina planters wealthy, while enslaving a massive number of blacks who died producing it. Magnolia has an added connection to my scholarship on the Caribbean because it was founded in 1676 by Thomas Drayton of Barbados, or so says the plantation’s website. There was a direct nexus between Barbados and South Carolina, both British colonies in the
17th century, with colonists from the overcrowded small island settling Charles Town (as it was known). The link persisted for years with planters and enslaved people traveling between these two spaces.\textsuperscript{48} I was particularly excited, then, to learn more about Drayton and his wife Ann (whose fortune helped him acquire the property) as well as to find out if Dayton’s Caribbean experience would be telling in the estate’s management.

Magnolia is a purebred racehorse in the plantation tourism world. It has lavish gardens, the oldest in the United States,\textsuperscript{49} now used for elaborate parties and peacocks strutting across the grounds. Magnolia’s extensive grounds, over five-hundred acres, were striking, as was the traffic on the long drive. The road wends its way to a small white guardhouse through which massive buses full of tourists, family mini-vans, and cars are forced to stop at a lowered gate. Once there, visitors decide on a tour and can purchase tickets for the big house, the slave quarters, or the grounds. Until this experience, I had not realized the world of plantation tourism was so piecemeal and so lucrative, serving the twin goals of property preservation and profit.

Our tour guide, in keeping with most that I have encountered, was a woman. I will call her “Betsy,” a slightly plump woman who, to me, appeared to be white and in her sixties. She wore her white hair with a slight blue rinse in a loose Afro, if you will. She was dressed mainly in white with a white cardigan and reading-glasses on a rope. I recall her clear plastic mules with attached flowers. They reminded me of plastic jellies that I wore years before in Guyana, my birthplace, which drew chastisement from the Rastaman making leather sandals for me. He told me that plastic was not natural and could not breathe and would make me hotter and make my feet burn. My feet were hot. And they got hotter after he spoke. I have not worn plastic shoes since.

Though it was a cool April day in Charleston, I wondered if Betsy’s feet ever burned. She gave us the rules of the establishment—stay together, do not touch anything, and ask plenty of questions. She was perky, perhaps a requirement for tour guides, and had an indistinguishable faux British accent, perhaps another affectation of her docent persona. Succinctly put, Betsy performed her role perfectly for some tour group members. Though her cheaply made plastic mules are doubtlessly a product of contemporary global capitalism and slightly at odds with the gallant South’s “rich culture” that she was imparting to her audience, her middle-aged dowager presence gave credibility to what she was saying and, like Paula Deen, she had a type of antebellum charm. The tour’s emphasis on ownership and images was dramatic, and has shaped how I approach subsequent tours. Betsy provided a furniture tour about antiques assembled before us. There was no discussion of the enslaved artisans who might have constructed the furniture, only anecdotes on their provenance.

I am now attentive to the details of owners’ stories and if and how those details shape (or allow for) the absence or presence of enslaved people’s stories. The romantic owner and the romance of ownership elide the labor of the hands that built and maintained these properties (forced work camps in Edward Baptist’s words).\textsuperscript{50} The ability to commodify and celebrate ownership is the American way, but the inability
to recall the horrors of slavery is, as Kevin Willmott argues in his satirical film, *Confederate States of America* (2005), an indication that the South won the Civil War.

My encounter with Magnolia Plantation also means that now I take in the images and look for graphic and/or material evidence of enslaved people—even if it is the furniture they made. Drayton descendants still privately own the property and the family often returns to the plantation for holidays. The other family stories Betsy shared were those of the Drayton ancestors. She said nothing about their time in Barbados nor what brought them to the Carolinas, but gushed about their aristocratic connections. Apparently for the last 700 years they have held a dukedom somewhere in England. There was more on the family’s history in Barbados on the website.

Three images of women reveal the nature of visibility and invisibility that disclose the desires and traumas related to understanding the past; these images function like the underwriting or *scriptio inferior* of a palimpsest, which were the words that would reappear in reused vellum. In the first roped off bedroom, Betsy regaled us with the first among many furniture tales—where the bed and other pieces came from, their quality, and usage. She then turned to a portrait of a young girl (replicas available in the gift shop) and shared the image’s mystery. No one knew who the girl was. She was not a family member, but she was on the wall and had been for some time, which was unusual because people did not have strangers on their walls.51 This image allowed for endless speculation on the girl’s connection to the family. But no connection had been found despite searching for one.

As the tour progressed, Betsy’s desire to promote a nameless white woman loomed large as no information was forthcoming about slaves or the family’s Caribbean connection. The presence of the white female enigma and the absence of what was advertised on the plantation’s own website was jarring and irritating. I asked about the Caribbean, but Betsy’s dismissive response was, “Yes, they came from there, but they were barely there. The family seat is in ENGLAND!” The awe and pleasure in her voice as she said, “ENGLAND” was comical to me. I asked a few more questions as did others, but I sensed I was a nuisance that Betsy rarely had to deal with on a tour like this one. Perhaps my black body produced a visible and uneasy reminder of the bodies who serviced this house and I was an “unwelcome shock to [her] system.”52 The slaves who inhabited every corner and breadth of this place were not adornments—and neither was I. I compressed my lips as Betsy discussed a few photographs of living family members. Our final stop on the tour was an upstairs bedroom.

In this rather cramped spot, there was another portrait of a young white woman and several daguerreotypes of figures that I could not make out. Betsy’s focus was the portrait. This image (also available for sale in the gift shop) was of yet another white woman whose identity has been lost over time. She again was not a member of the family. No one knew who she was. It was highly irregular to have an image of someone who is not family on one’s walls. But there she was! Betsy delighted in sharing this mystery with us. This second illustration of a nameless, but decorative, white woman who had no (perceptible) relevance to the plantation’s history and
whose current value was as a purchasable memento, continued the cultivation and commodification of ornamental bodies on these tours. White women outlive their imagined roles as decorative belles, who like their antebellum counterparts, would be sold or leased to improve family fortunes. Here—every story, replica, or image that might conjure a longing for bygone times served to maintain the fiction of these sites of horror as benign.

My impatience about another nameless white woman story propelled me to the wall with the daguerreotypes. They were images of black women! I was excited. I asked who they were, and this was the straw that broke the docent’s back. Betsy said she did not know and returned to the portrait’s story. The writing on the image drew me in. It said, “Mammy of Magnolia Plantation.” I interrupted Betsy to inform her of what was written on the image. There was some crosstalk, but she curtly replied, “You should take ‘the cabins’ tour.” My eyes narrowed and my brows furrowed, but I was silent, thinking: “What just happened here? Did my questions constitute an insurrection? A counter narrative?” I did not understand how that could be. While I did not think of the exchange as traumatic, it was certainly another layer of me dealing with a white person’s dismissal. Enmeshed in this dismissal is a disregard for black life. Sending me to the cabins—and relegating this history exclusively to the cabins—denotes a marginal and lower status space in tourism, but one central to the wealth of the plantation. It seems an apt encapsulation of the plantation experience—that experience as a metaphor for belonging literally and figuratively. It was more underwriting of the trauma of my hinge generation seeping to the surface.

Perhaps Betsy took my curiosity as undermining her authority as expert and as keeper of the foundational myths of Magnolia Plantation. Yet, I could not help thinking, but we are on the house tour, and these images are in the house! Why can Betsy tell me about not one, but two white women who no one knows, but not about Mammy of Magnolia Plantation, who is on the wall in the Big House? It is unclear why Mammy is on the wall if only to remain decorative and silent. Part of me understands that a silent and decorative Mammy supports the narrative these tour operators want to tell.

While Betsy could not (or refused to) answer questions about Mammy of Magnolia Plantation, mammy dolls were available in the gift shop. Mammy’s story is not told on the Big House tour, but the people who run Magnolia Plantation know something about “Mammy of Magnolia Plantation” and they understand the money-making power of Mammy dolls (probably manufactured overseas). The language of violence and the language of commerce in the Mammy dolls commingle, despite a weak gesture of inclusion. As Tiya Miles notes in her study of plantation ghost tourism, objects “like stuffed bears, figurines and slave ghost dolls bought by tourists ‘inoculate’ [them] against genuine emotion and weighty contemplation.” Silence around the historical woman’s story at Magnolia Plantation, the ubiquity of the doll in the gift shop, and the invocation of the Mammy stereotype feed how this plantation machine represents itself.
The Big House’s architecture retains its position as a site of symbolic, political, and familial power. Not only does the Big House tour erase the presence of enslaved people who worked in these forced work camps, but it also recasts generations of slave owners as harmless nobles. On the Big House palimpsest, new narratives are written, erasing the ones of enslavement. New narratives take hold because we have not dealt with the trauma of slavery. These narratives create no space to theorize trauma, acknowledge it, or bear witness. The lush and well-manicured lawns, the glossy and well cared for furniture evince the gaps of the stories not told: there is a profound stubbornness not to tell. The Big House, the images of bodies, the gardens, and Betsy all work together to promote a particular silencing. These choices, and as we have seen in the age of camera phones, keep violence against black bodies muted by making us living palimpsests.

Memory, Trauma, and Tourism

The commodification of memory, trauma, and tourism means that there is a certain complicity in oppression. While we can have some resistances marked, the industry’s overwhelming point turns us into consumers, subjects who fall under Inderpal Grewal’s assertion of consumer nationalism. In buying belonging, even in the midst of grief or thanatourism, we enter into a discourse about the power of memory—which memories and which mementoes. The legacies of plantation owners wield the power to tell stories and to decide how they are told. The plantations in private hands have the power to complicate the story or to maintain the gallant South’s fiction. These accounts are not rooted in the lives people lived, but rather in the fantasies perpetuated about those lives. As South Carolina taught us in 2015, the continued miring in historical fabrications has deadly consequences that continue to traumatize black and white citizens. Nostalgia for the Lost Cause South entrenches plantation hierarchies and maintains racial and economic animosities.

Nostalgia—as conveyed through tourism—has the potential effect of further traumatizing some black tourists when those stories are unacknowledged, incomplete, and erased.

The narratives promulgated in heritage tourism provide a glimpse of what is at stake—a fictionalized version of ourselves, or one rooted more closely to the facts. We are tied to the past, our present hinges on how we understand the past and which layers of past traumas we can and do confront. The motivations of every African American descendant hinge generation are to understand and further embody the very nature of freedom. The hinge generations are not about erasing or even healing the trauma, but confronting the silences around it.

ORCID

Tanya Shields @ http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1459-0024
Notes


2. Rev. Clementa Pinckney (41), Cynthia Hurd (54), Rev. Sharonda Coleman-Singleton (45), Tywanza Sanders (26), Ethel Lance (70), Susie Jackson (87), Depayne Middleton Doctor (49), Rev. Daniel Simmons (74), and Myra Thompson (59).

3. Roof’s desires mirror those of the Knights Party, whose Soldiers of the Cross (SOTC) Summer Institute counseled: “Most white people, still don’t get it! … Their sensitivity has been made numb by television, schools and the church which has convinced them that it [racial pride and separation] really doesn’t matter. This mass deception has thoroughly penetrated and corrupted the ability for critical thinking causing people to repeat inane nonsense as if it were the Wisdom of Solomon. … “Diversity is our Strength” … “Guns cause violence” … “There is no such thing as race.” Using the Bible, white nationalisms, and selected historical moments, the SOTC Summer Institute argues that, “The current political system embraces ideals, teachings and concepts that are completely foreign to our values, morals and justice. What is evil has now been called good and that which is good is now called evil. Where will it end?” (from: http://sotctraininginstitute.com/?page_id=45, accessed June 20, 2015).


6. He chastises others white nationalists to “stop” their vitriol against white women in interracial relationships because these women “can be saved.” Most frustrating and troubling is Roof’s historical assessment that “if it was all it [sic] true, it would make it so much easier for me to accept our current situation.” He accepts that “if” true, this history would help him accept contemporary realities, but he refutes documented facts. Roof’s emphasis on the conditional (if) brings together his racial and gendered identity.


12. Ibid., 4.


15. Ibid., 4.
20. For other versions of this discussion see Towns’ and Williams’ contributions in this issue.
22. Tiya Miles, *Tales from the Haunted South: Dark Tourism and Memories of Slavery from the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 78, 115–19. Miles documents how “ghost tourism” is one place where stories of enslaved people can be front and center. Miles notes that these stories are often invented, built on reproducing trauma to black female bodies and filled with distortions on African-based spiritual practice, particularly Voodoo.
25. In the poem “Knowledge,” also in *Thrall*, Trethewey explores what it is like for one’s father to contemplate his “cross bred child.”.
28. Ibid., 6.
31. See David Blight’s *Race and Reunion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001). He argues that literature has been used to reinvent the U.S. South. Through tragic, yet plucky plantation heroines like Scarlett O’Hara in *Gone with the Wind* and other romances of Southern courage during the Civil War, literature has been used to create an emotional space of identification with Southerners. Readers come to admire and respect these characters for their courage in confronting oppressive, greedy, and crafty Northerners. This sympathetic reading of the South, Blight contends, has meant that Southern whites have reframed a war about slavery as a racist economic system into one about state’s rights and white courage. The erasure of the economic and racial rationale for enslavement creates the space for white Southern nobility that has had an enduring life, chapter 7.
34. Miles, *Tales from the Haunted South*, argues that ghost stories are a history making method. Ghost stories are ‘unsuccessful repression’ that “call to mind historical knowledge that we feel compelled to face. They also contain the threat of that knowledge by marking it as unbelievable,” 15.


37. While there are critiques of Holocaust Studies, I am most captivated by the notion of the “hinge generation” rather than a debate on the entire course of study.


40. Frantz Fanon’s work, particularly *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skins, White Masks* discusses trauma and the colonial project in various ways. Fanon’s work should be central in work on trauma and the African diaspora. Space limitations prevent me from engaging with it here.

41. Many academics dismiss Joy DeGruy’s “post traumatic slave syndrome,” which is the “residual impacts of generations of slavery and opens up the discussion of how the black community can use the strengths we have gained in the past to heal in the present,” http://joydegruy.com/resources-2/post-traumatic-slave-syndrome/ (accessed June 20, 2016). Although controversial, epigenetics, or the supposition that genetic material changes with trauma, seems to be a new articulation of post traumatic slave syndrome. “Scientists commonly compare the epigenetic function to an on/off switch for a person’s DNA. According to this analogy, if your genome includes inheritable asthma, the epigenome determines if the asthma is ‘on’ or not. The study of epigenetics has demonstrated that certain kinds of stresses—such as famine, war, or pollution—may flip the on/off switch in a way that lasts for multiple generations” (from http://oregonhumanities.org/magazine/start-summer-2014/before-you-know-it/749/; accessed June 20, 2016). The daily brutality inflicted on black bodies makes me consider the idea of the hinge and what generational trauma might mean in black communities. I draw the line at the idea that such trauma is encoded in one’s DNA and thus transferred genetically.

42. See Brazil and Colombia and the black movements within those countries, particularly Keisha-Khan Y. Perry’s *Black Women Against the Land Grab: The Fight for Racial Justice in Brazil* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

43. I like thinking about how the past is layered and bleeds through each representation. In a later panel, one scholar at the Association for the Study of Worldwide African Diaspora (ASWAD) conference (11/15) mentioned “to palimpsest.” In other words, using palimpsest as a verb. That’s not what I want to do. I invoke a more traditional understanding of its usage here.

44. For instance, Adams discusses Oak Alley as specifically giving tourists a *Gone with the Wind*–style experience, Mint Juleps; while the Whitney Museum is geared toward African Americans with its emphasis on enslaved lives. I find the Whitney’s brand/layer of truth/narrative an obvious ploy to African American consumers. It was a shallow experience with a few “shocking” moments deployed to seem like more. While that was my experience, I have heard from many who find the experience profound.

45. James Loewen, *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* (New York: New Press/W.W. Norton, 1999). Loewen argues that every historical site tells two stories—one of the historical event it commemorates and one of the era in which it is erected. “To understand a historic site we need to know when its interpretation—what the guides show and tell—was established. Why was this story told then? What audience was it aimed at? How would the story differ if we were telling it today? Or in another fifty years? Too often our
historic sites relate inaccurate and misleading history owing to the ideological demands of the time and the purpose of their erection or preservation.” 36.


50. Scholars from Edward Baptist to Paul Finkelman have argued for changes in vocabulary to reframe our understandings of the past. Baptist has called for labor camps instead of plantations in *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*. Finkelman maintains that instead of the “Compromise of 1850, we should call that agreement the “Appeasement of 1850,” http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/proposal-change-vocabulary-we-use-when-talking-about-civil-war-180956547/ (accessed June 24, 2016).

51. One ASWAD audience member, Sandra Richards, shared that it was rare for antebellum families to have strangers on their walls. She speculated that these might be light-skinned black family members. When Richards asked me how I knew the portraits are of white women, I responded with, “that’s what I was told.” Actually, no one specified their race. It was my assumption and I would argue the assumption of the docents, property managers, and of the tour itself. Richards’ question nonetheless raises an interesting point for consideration. It is provocative to think about Richards’ assertion in the final bedroom with Mammy’s image across from the portrait of a white woman. Richards has also written about heritage tourism; see, “Space, Water, Memory: Slavery and Beaufort, South Carolina,” *Cultural Dynamics* 21, no. 3 (2009): 255–82.

52. DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 60. Part of the counternarrative that whites invoke is their own sense of victimhood by any challenge to the narratives they have been told or are telling (64).

53. Daguerreotypes were expensive and a marker of a family’s wealth. Black women were often photographed with their white charges. Rarely are black women photographed by themselves, but the image labeled, “Mammy of Magnolia Plantation” shows a woman by herself on the lawn.

54. Miles, *Tales from the Haunted South*, 107.

55. Grewal defines consumer nationalism as the commodification and consumption of various markers and ideologies of the state. In essence, belonging is based on consuming and participation in the market rather than traditional rights and responsibilities. For example, in the post-9/11 United States, patriotism manifested based on what one buys—flags, flag pins, t-shirts—as well as embracing notions of a singular “American” (U.S.) identity. She attributes this manifestation of citizenship to the neoliberal project in which markets have primacy, there is a retreat from the commons, privatization, weak unions, and delimited state power.

56. In my experience, plantations owned by the National Park Service go to great lengths to provide a nuanced story. For example, the Kingston Plantation in Florida, once owned by Anna Jai Kingsley, a former slave-cum-slave owner, emphasizes in its self-guided tour that no matter race, slave owning was appalling. Self-guided tour taken June 18, 2016.

About the Author

Tanya Shields is an Associate Professor of Women’s and Gender Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is the author of Bodies and Bones: Feminist Rehearsal and Imagining Caribbean Belonging (2014) and editor of The Legacy of Eric Williams: Into the Postcolonial Moment (2015). Dr. Shields is currently at work on her second monograph, “Gendered Labor: Race, Place and Power on Female-Owned Plantations,” a comparative study of women who owned plantations in the Caribbean and U.S. South.