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Physical Spaces in the Digital Age:
Legacies, Narratives, and Memory of Plantation History

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Abstract

In recent years, plantation tourism has become a prominent concern for many researchers, with studies being done on how plantations use these sites and the ways that they incorporate enslavement into their narratives as a historical site. The current research used a textual analysis approach to explore the themes and language that plantations use when discussing enslavement via the analysis of 16 plantations in nine states. There are three themes that are apparent in the plantations analyzed: the visibility of Enslaved history, the promotion or rejection of Lost Cause memory, and the use of plantations as event spaces. While many plantations have made efforts to emphasize Enslaved history and reject the Lost Cause, others have continued to promote the ideals of the Antebellum South. Additionally, the use of plantations as event venues presents complications in the way they utilize their sites and how this use can degrade plantation spaces.

Physical Spaces in the Digital Age:

Legacies, Narratives, and Memory of Plantation History

I remember the excitement I felt as an adolescent when learning about field trips to historical sites around Virginia. I absolutely loved history and wanted to learn as much as possible about where I lived so going to plantations, Civil War battlefields, and other museums regarding American history was the perfect way to gain this knowledge. I took a particular interest, however, in plantation museums due to the expansive history they seemed to offer in regards to everyday life. However, I couldn't help but think that something was missing from their history. Countless plantations I visited either disregarded the history of enslavement or would prioritize the heroism of the white family over the physical and emotional labor endured by Enslaved people.

Like me, many children in the public education system in the American South had the similar experience of going on a field trip to a plantation. From seeing women in hoop skirts drinking mint juleps to men showing a demonstration of how tools were made or land was cultivated, students *seemed* to get a pretty accurate portrayal of what plantation life was like nearly two centuries before they had toured the site. However, many of these sites have forgotten the lives of those who kept the plantations running: the Enslaved people who worked the land, took care of the family, and suffered abuse and neglect from their owners for hundreds of years. Over the last 20 years or so, however, there has been a movement across these plantations whose main focus was to reconcile with this misdeed and bring to light the lives of hundreds of Enslaved people through archives, artifacts, and oral histories of the descendants of these people. While these forgotten stories have been uncovered and revived by many larger plantations, issues

still remain in the way this information is portrayed by the plantation itself or how it is accessed by the public.

The culmination of my experience with plantation tourism as well as the vast literature regarding this topic has led to this thesis. In order to carry out this study, Critical Race Theory (CRT) is used to analyze how racism is a normalized structure within plantation tourism. While CRT normally pertains to legal studies, this framework is important as one of its tenets is the value of storytelling in helping one understand how Americans construct race as socially important. (Montes, J. & Butler, D., 2008) This study also utilizes discourse surrounding Lost Cause ideology to better understand how plantations portray their spaces to the public.

According to *The Inclusive Historian's Handbook*, the Lost Cause was a “historical ideology and a social movement created by ex-Confederates that characterized the Confederate experience and defined its value for new generations.” (Ihh, 2020) This has been perpetuated by many Southern historical sites by promoting its main tenants: enslavement was not the cause of the Civil War, the Confederate army lost due to vast United States resources rather than poor leadership or battlefield losses, and that “because slavery had been beneficial to black and white people alike, emancipation had been a grave mistake.” The memory surrounding the Lost Cause typically overshadows Enslaved history, making it an important topic of discussion in terms of how we discuss race and preserve or ignore Black history.

Using these frameworks, this thesis explores the themes and language that is used to depict information about Enslaved people on plantation websites and how these sites utilize their spaces in the modern day. I intend to seek out language that either emphasizes Enslaved history (i.e., discussion of Enslaved physical and emotional labor, promotion of these stories as vital) or romanticizes plantation life (i.e., notions of grandeur, promotion of serenity.) Within this, I

analyze the visibility of Enslaved history, how plantations either promote or reject Lost Cause memory, and the use of plantations as event spaces. I argue that while some plantations have made efforts to uncover and publicize Enslaved history, the general culture surrounding plantation tourism continues to promote the Lost Cause ideology, thus actively ignoring Black memory and perpetuating racist structures in American society.

Literature Review

In order to carry out this study, it is first important to understand the theoretical context of this type of research. I use Critical Race Theory and Lost Cause Memory as my two main theoretical frameworks. Both of these frameworks provide a lot of useful information on racial structures and the way that the dominant (white) society interacts with race. Additionally, I use the concepts of digital tourism and dark tourism to better understand the way that plantations utilize their information and present it to the public.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory emerged in the 1970s as many lawyers, scholars, and activists noticed that the advancements that were being made during the civil rights era the decade previously were starting to dissipate. In Chapter 1 of Richard Delgado's (2017) *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, he points out that there are five basic tenets of CRT: that racism is normal, not aberrational; that the system of white supremacy serves the dominant group both psychically and materially; that race is a product of social thought and relations, that the dominant society racializes different minority groups at different times, and that there is a unique voice of color in which different race groups may be able to communicate to white counterparts matters that white individuals are unlikely to know. For the purposes of this study, I mainly rely on the concept of the unique voice of color and how racism is difficult to mitigate because it is

not acknowledged. Firstly, the unique voice of color thesis promotes the importance of Black stories, which in turn helps in better understanding the truth of racist structures as many white individuals cannot see this on a daily basis. In terms of plantations, this voice has been silenced in the past and promoting these stories can help mitigate the racist ideologies surrounding plantation life and culture. Secondly, race is considered ordinary in American society, thus making it more difficult to address racism and mitigate it. This is vital to this research because if plantations are not discussing Enslaved history as part of their curriculums, they are inevitably contributing to this issue. By including this history, however, it provides a space for white individuals to face racism in terms of enslavement and normalize the discussion of racism at the interactional level.

In Patricia Price's 2010 article, "At the crossroads: Critical race theory and critical geographies of race," she discusses the idea of the strategic deployment of narrative, which focuses on the importance of how narratives are conveyed. In this section, she states that "Dominant groups tell stories that construct, naturalize, and reproduce the status quo, while subalterns tell counterstories that can serve as correctives or even frontal attacks on the world-view circulated by those in power." (Pg. 158) In terms of plantation memory, the dominant group would be the white family that owned the plantation and the subaltern would be the Enslaved people that were forced to build these grand structures and work the land, among other duties. This idea of the strategic deployment of narrative directly relates to how plantations may disregard Enslaved history to protect the white family from being condemned for racism. By doing so, however, they are only furthering racist ideologies surrounding plantations as spaces of peace and serenity. This concept also raises the importance of storytelling and how Black voices need to be emphasized in order to mitigate these ideologies. By including Enslaved memory,

plantations are able to move from a monument to the Antebellum South to a space where the “status quo” can be questioned and people are able to better the racist foundations of American society.

Lost Cause Memory

The ideology of Lost Cause Memory emerged directly after the Civil War via ladies memorial associations and men’s veterans groups in the American South as a way to vindicate the Confederacy against ridicule and accusations of treason by Northern states. In Christopher Graham’s (2020) “Lost Cause Myth,” he states that “In short, the Lost Cause could simultaneously revere an allegedly idyllic plantation life, condemn Abraham Lincoln, and rally southerners in contemporary American patriotism.” (Pg. 458) This raises an important point about how plantation memory can promote the Lost Cause. By ignoring the history of enslavement, these sites are able to remain seen as places of serenity where women in hoop skirts would drink mint juleps together on grand porches and raise families. More importantly, this says a lot about the language that is used when promoting the Lost Cause. This type of language typically emphasizes the serenity of plantation life by creating the scene of a peaceful plantation where nothing wrong could ever happen.

Additionally, Graham discusses how the Southern states maintained that slavery was not the main interest in secession and states that “While denying the centrality of slavery to secession, Lost Cause authors consistently described slavery as a benevolent institution in which white and Black southerners engaged in a reciprocal relationship that secured a domestic peace that abolitionists threatened.” (Pg. 458) This ideology directly ignores the tragic physical and emotional labor that was endured by Enslaved individuals to instead further promote the idyllic plantation setting. This can also be seen in the language that promoted this memory. Language

that considers enslavement as a “normal part of life” for people in this era promotes this ideology by making it seem like it is not an important topic of discussion because everyone (white plantation owners) was doing it.

Digital Tourism

As this research relies specifically on plantation websites, it is vital to understand digital tourism as an outlet for plantations to provide information. While little research has been done on plantations specifically in the digital space, this is an important topic as it provides a foundation for what digital tourism is and how different sites may utilize this to enhance the experiences of visitors. In their article “Presence and digital tourism,” Benyon and colleagues (2014) broadly define digital tourism as “... concerned with the use of digital technologies to enhance the tourist experience.” (Pg. 521) This may include as little as recommendations on a website from previous visitors or expansive content that includes what one may find at the site in person. Further, they state the importance of mixed reality, a way to augment reality to include more context as to what the space may have looked like at its height. This is especially useful on plantation websites, where there may be spaces that no longer exist such as the quarters of the Enslaved, textile shops, or other buildings that had not been preserved.

While historical sites have utilized websites as a way to find out more information about plantations for quite some time, digital tourism has become a more widely used method of visitation since the rise of the COVID 19 Pandemic. Because of this, Nadeem and colleagues (2021) researched how digital tourism has advanced and how it affects the way people learn via this method. In this article, they state that “The tourism industry needed a significant change to build a more substantial impact on potential tourists, and technological advancement is the tourism industry’s premium future.” (Pg. 2) This is especially prevalent at plantations, where

tourists rely on interactions with docents, detailed exhibits, and physical structures to learn about plantation history.

Dark Tourism

When researching plantations, it is important to understand the concept of dark tourism—the visitation of places that represent death, suffering, or the macabre. While research regarding dark tourism did not emerge until the 1990s, people have been visiting historical sites of suffering for centuries. In a review article by Rebecca Price, she states, “... published dark tourism studies have focused primarily on defining the concept and its scope, exploring the political nature of tourist experiences, analyzing tourist motivations and experiences, and exploring the influences of different stakeholders from a management perspective.” (Pg. 98) These different focuses depict how dark tourism infiltrates various parts of visiting plantations. When thinking about the plantation experience, these sites are spaces of suffering for Black individuals who were forced to labor. If these sites are ignoring Enslaved history, there is no way for tourists to experience this narrative, thus perpetuating ignorant and racist ideologies in American society.

In a book by Rice, Sharpley, and Stone (2019), they dedicate a chapter to enslavement called “Museums, Memorials and Plantation Houses in the Black Atlantic: Slavery and the Development of Dark Tourism,” where they analyze how the history of slavery has dominated by white memory at plantations and museums. In this, the authors mention the importance of Enslaved history as a way to subvert racist ideologies of peace on plantations. A particular plantation that he takes interest in, The Wye Plantation in Maryland, shows how the emphasis of Black memory changes the way the plantation is seen, stating that it “is such a lieux de memoire [site of memory] where the official family/Southern historical frame is contested by a dissident

memory which haunts the buildings and that transforms them from the idyllic to the horrific.” (Pg. 230) This is important to dark tourism because plantations have idealized the Antebellum South for a long time and the emphasis of Enslaved history can change this. He also mentions how the active display of artifacts and histories surrounding the Enslaved shifts these sites from sites of serenity to a place to reflect on the atrocities that the Enslaved faced, stating that “Full disclosure is often painful, but is surely preferable to the saccharine narratives that are too often told.” (Pg. 246) This is a necessary step that plantations need to take in order to reject the Lost Cause version of plantations and center Black stories as part of the narrative of plantation life.

Background: Plantation Tourism

Plantation tourism is a popular way to learn about the history of the American South by visiting these sites and interacting with guides that take you through the buildings and tell you stories about the people who lived there over 100 years ago. This type of tourism emerged in the 1960s and 70s “as a reaction to the civil rights movement and coinciding with a peak in interest about history around the bicentennial of the American Revolution.” (Ihh, 2021) Many of these sites served as a step into the past where women in hoop skirts drinking mint juleps would interact with guests and invite them to learn about what the Antebellum South was like.

However, this history rarely, if ever, included any mention of Enslaved history, rather focusing on preserving the Lost Cause and the lavish lifestyles of plantation owners.

Beginning in the 1980s, plantations slowly started to incorporate Enslaved narratives into the interpretation of plantation life. While doing so, however, this narrative was often segregated from the dominant narrative of the white plantation owner, an effort to allow “... visitors to think of the institution as ancillary to the true narrative—that of the plantation owners.” (Ihh, 2021) Because many of these tours remained optional — and separated from main tours —

plantations were able to push aside this history to promote the “true” narrative of the peace and serenity of plantation life. Even if enslavement was mentioned during main tours, Enslaved people typically remained nameless and were only involved when it fit into the story of the white family.

In the mid-2010s, many plantations began reinterpreting the way they discuss enslavement, with sites such as James Madison’s Montpelier and George Washington’s Mount Vernon, both in Virginia, creating groundbreaking exhibits that provided a more comprehensive history of enslavement. (Ihh, 2021) Additionally, plantations such as Whitney Plantation in Louisiana began centering Enslaved narratives, focusing specifically on enslavement rather than the dominant white memory. While many plantations have followed suit in reimagining the way they tell their history, there is still much more that needs to be done. It is vital to understand that plantations are sites of trauma as “Too often, we ignore the immense pain of these places in favor of a generalized interpretation that may acknowledge that life was hard, but not that it was traumatic.” (Ihh, 2021) These are sites of abuse and neglect that continue to bring pain to descendants of the Enslaved community, so it is important to understand the way plantations utilize their spaces and display their history.

Method

In order to carry out this study, plantation websites will be utilized to understand what information is available online. Because of the COVID-19 Pandemic, this research has to be done via online resources. However, this type of research remains important because of the increase in digital tourism. Additionally, this study utilizes the information that each plantation provides about Enslaved history and their use of the space as an event venue.

Analysis Procedure

This study utilizes a textual analysis approach to understand how these plantations interact with Enslaved history. According to The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods, a textual analysis is a “methodology that involves understanding language, symbols, and/or pictures present in texts to gain information regarding how people make sense of and communicate life and life experiences.” (Allen, M., 2019) This approach is vital because this research focuses on the images and language that each plantation uses to either promote or reject the Lost Cause ideology, discuss enslavement, and use their spaces as event spaces. This approach will also help in understanding how these plantations contribute to the structural racism that exists in plantation tourism because these messages are often understood as “influenced by and reflective of larger social structures.” (Allen, M., 2019)

Additionally, there are three terms that are important to define. The first is the emphasis of Black history. This refers to the active efforts to foreground Black memory and portray narratives surrounding this history as vital to understanding the comprehensive history of a site. Language that achieves this emphasis is that which offers a complete narrative that includes every aspect of Enslaved life, not only the parts that fit into the dominant story. Secondly, the promotion of the Lost Cause refers to language that prioritizes the idealization of plantation life and promotes the peace and serenity of the space. Lastly, the rejection of the Lost Cause refers to language that understands this history of the plantation as a site of suffering for Enslaved people and provides a comprehensive narrative that discusses these tragedies.

Plantation Selection Process

Before choosing the plantations that will be analyzed, a selection criteria consisting of three criteria was created in order to find plantations that met the confines of this study. The first of this criteria is that the plantation must have an active website. Because this study relies on

how plantations have shifted their stories into the digital age, this signifier is vital to be able to analyze the plantation. The second distinction that was made was that the plantation website must have a virtual tour or extensive information about offered tours. This ensures that the plantation being analyzed will present information that may be provided on tours rather than only having general information about the location or what is offered. This is important to note because one of the main focuses of this chapter is to explore how plantations interact with enslavement and present this information to the public.

The third criteria in place is that the plantation must be marketed to the public in some way. This distinction ensures that the plantation is accessible to the public in some way, whether physically or digitally. Additionally, it was important to find plantations that discussed enslavement due to the nature of this study. This distinction is not part of the selection criteria because even when plantations do not discuss enslavement, it says something about how this plantation ignores Enslaved history. After creating this criteria, 16 plantations across nine states were chosen for analysis. In **Table 1** below, the plantations chosen as well as more information regarding their importance to this thesis is noted.

Table 1

Plantations for Analysis

Plantation Name	State	Selection Criteria	Enslaved History	Promotes Lost Cause	Event Spaces
The Oaks Plantation	AL	yes	no	yes	yes
Arlington Historic Home	AL	yes	no	yes	yes
Lakeport Plantation	AR	yes	yes	no	no
Pebble Hill Plantation	GA	yes	yes	yes	yes

Laura Plantation	LA	yes	yes	no	no
St. Joseph Plantation	LA	yes	yes	mixed*	yes
Belmont Plantation	MS	yes	yes	yes	yes
Lansdowne Plantation	MS	yes	no	yes	yes
Poplar Grove Plantation	NC	yes	yes	mixed*	yes
Somerset Place	NC	yes	yes	no	no
Boone Hall Plantation	SC	yes	yes	mixed*	yes
Hopsewee Plantation	SC	yes	yes	mixed*	yes
Belle Meade Historic Site	TN	yes	yes	yes	yes
Davies Manor	TN	yes	yes	mixed*	yes
Belle Grove Plantation	VA	yes	yes	mixed*	yes
Shirley Plantation	VA	yes	yes	no	no

Note: This table depicts the plantations that will be used for analysis.

* These plantations, while they have made efforts to reject the Lost Cause, still use their spaces for events

Alabama. The Oaks Plantation in Montgomery, AL and Arlington Historic Home and Gardens in Birmingham, AL were chosen as sites for analysis.. Both of these sites were chosen because they mainly market themselves as event venues rather than a historic educational site. This will provide context for how plantations use their sites as events spaces.

Arkansas. Lakeport Plantation in Lake Village, Arkansas was chosen as it was one of the only plantations in Arkansas that has information on Enslaved history. While the plantation only opened six years before the end of the Civil War, their website provides important information on

the lives of those who were enslaved in and around this area. The historians associated with this website also make an effort to discuss the difficulty of having knowledge about the Enslaved persons that lived at this plantation.

Georgia. Pebble Hill Plantation in Thomasville, Georgia was chosen as a site for analysis. This plantation provides interesting information about the lives of Enslaved people and how the family that owned the plantation interacted with the Enslaved. Pebble Hill Plantation is used as an event space as well, which will provide insight into how this plantation interacts with enslavement and the Lost Cause ideology.

Louisiana. In Louisiana, Laura Plantation and St. Joseph Plantation, both located in Vacherie, Louisiana were chosen. Both of these plantations' websites provide extensive information on not only the history of slavery in Louisiana, but also the Enslaved people that lived at each of these plantations. One of the key factors in Laura Plantation's choice was its effort to center black voices and include as much information as possible on their website through an interactive map, gallery talks, and tour information.

Mississippi. Belmont Plantation in Greenville, Mississippi and Lansdowne Plantation in Natchez, MS were chosen for analysis. While Belmont Plantation offers only the number of Enslaved people on these grounds, the lack of information provided also depicts the political geography of Mississippi and how plantations in this area interact with discussions surrounding enslavement. Additionally, this plantation uses its space for events. Lansdowne Plantation, on the other hand, is mainly seen as an event venue and prides itself on its decor and landscapes.

North Carolina. In North Carolina, Poplar Grove Plantation in Wilmington, NC and Somerset Place near Creswell, NC were chosen for this study. Both of these plantations have history surrounding the Enslaved communities that lived at each plantation in the 18th and 19th

centuries. However, each plantation uses different language to discuss enslavement, which will provide more information on the political geography of North Carolina. Additionally, Poplar Grove utilizes its space for certain events and has, in recent years, changed the way it uses its space, which provides important information on how plantations go about changing the use of their spaces.

South Carolina. Hopsewee Plantation in Georgetown, SC and Boone Hall Plantation in Mt. Pleasant, SC were chosen for analysis. Like the plantations in North Carolina, each of these plantations holds a different stance when discussing enslavement and the white family that lived there. At the time of plantation selection, Hopsewee Plantation had a page on their website called “Slavery and Rice”; however, at the time of analysis, this page was no longer available. On the other hand, both of these plantations offer tours regarding Gullah Culture, a culture that was adapted by Enslaved Africans at both of these sites. Both of these plantations also provide spaces for events.

Tennessee. In Tennessee, Belle Meade Historic Site in Nashville, Tennessee and Davies Manor in Bartlett, Tennessee were chosen for this study. Both of these plantations provide an extensive history of those who were enslaved at each plantation. Like those in North Carolina and South Carolina, each plantation presents its history in different ways. Davies Manor provides an extensive history of the Enslaved people at its plantation and discusses the transfer of Enslaved people between family members, which is something that is not discussed often in the Enslaved history section of many plantation websites.

Virginia. In Virginia, Belle Grove Plantation just outside of Middletown, Virginia and Shirley Plantation in Charles City, Virginia were chosen. Both of these plantations provide a solid amount of history regarding Enslaved people while also providing external resources that

provide more information about these communities. An interesting note about Shirley Plantation is that along with a section surrounding Enslaved history, they also have sections on Indentured Servants and the Indigenous communities that lived on or near the land. Belle Grove Plantation also provides any information they find on Enslaved individuals they discover lived there during the enslavement era.

Instruments

After choosing the plantations, a list of questions was created to keep in mind while analyzing each site. Examples of these questions include “Is the plantation emphasizing stories of the Enslaved?” or “Is there language during the tour and/or in the virtual exhibits that evangelize or glorify the white family or promote them as heroes?” These questions are important to keep in mind while analyzing these plantations as they give insight into certain themes that are present across these plantations. The full list of questions can be found in **Appendix A**. Additionally, a compilation of questions was created in order to better understand why these plantations use their land as a space for public events. These questions explore not only what types of events are allowed to be hosted at these sites, but also why these plantations offer their spaces as event spaces. Examples of the questions used are “what types of events are allowed at this site?” and “does the plantation discuss why they offer their space as an event venue?” The full list of questions for this analysis can be found in **Appendix B**.

Chapter 1: The Importance of Enslaved Narratives and Rejecting the Lost Cause

Along with the pandemic came the closing of many plantations, public grounds, and museums, among other tourist destinations. International shutdown guidelines essentially forced physical spaces into the digital age. This has proven to be difficult for many historical sites, with some not being able to remain open without the financial support of tourists and locals alike. (Kenney, N., 2021) Both of these issues have culminated in plantation museums having to increase visibility by updating and maximizing their presences online. However, while many plantations include virtual tours and updated information, some have still remained in the stone age of information in regards to their space. The varying information that is presented at these plantations provides an interesting foundation for how these plantations interact with Lost Cause ideologies and emphasize Black voices. The use of plantations as event spaces and how plantations promote this use on their website is also of interest. These types of events often distract from Enslaved memory in order to prioritize the grandeur and serenity of these sites.

Under normal circumstances, the representation of plantations through their websites is vital to understand as these online resources are often the first thing potential visitors will use to get a better sense of the site they are visiting. During a time when the idea of visiting a high traffic location causes anxiety for many individuals, however, these websites can serve as the tourist experience. Using 16 plantations websites, this chapter explores the language and images that plantations use to promote their spaces in the digital space. Within this, there are three themes that are present across these plantations that will be analyzed: the visibility of Enslaved history, the promotion or rejection of Lost Cause memory, and the use of plantations as event spaces. These themes provide important context for how these plantations either perpetuate or try to mitigate racist structures that exist within plantation tourism.

Analysis

While researching, there were three themes that were present across these sites. The first theme was the visibility of Enslaved history at each plantation. Generally, these plantations were divided into two groups: plantations that had very little information about Enslaved people and plantations that actively emphasized and centered Black history. The second theme that was present was the position that plantations take when discussing their histories. This theme was also divided into two groups: plantations that seem to promote Lost Cause memory and plantations that reject Lost Cause memory through efforts to recenter Black voices. The third theme is the use of plantations as event venues. This theme explores not only how the plantations use their spaces for events, but also plantation wedding culture and the degradation of these spaces through this utilization.

Theme 1: Visibility of Enslaved History

In a time where the emphasis of Black voices is vital in order to mitigate racist structures in American society, it is important to understand how Enslaved history is being foregrounded at plantations. The inclusion of Enslaved narratives re-establishes the humanity of Enslaved individuals and provides important narratives on the institution of enslavement. The following discusses how plantations either disregard or emphasize Enslaved history and how this affects the way people think about enslavement.

Disregard of Enslaved History. While researching plantations, an interesting finding was the lack of plantations that discuss Enslaved history in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida and Mississippi. This is interesting because the plantations in these states generally did not have much information on Enslaved people, if any at all. As discussed earlier, one of the reasons for this is the closing of multiple plantations due to the pandemic. The other reason, however, is the

general disregard of the importance of Enslaved history at these sites. Many of the plantations in these states do not have nearly as much information as others that were chosen. This common theme across the plantations that were analyzed provides a lot of information on the ways society interacts with Black history in general. Due to the general disregard for Black history in America, a lot of archival research regarding Enslaved stories has not been uncovered or researched nearly as much as the history of white plantation owners. This is most commonly seen in the way that plantations record Enslaved history and present this information to the public.

The Oaks Plantation, Arlington Historic Home, and Lansdowne Plantation all completely disregard enslavement. None of these plantations discuss Enslaved history in any way, rather focusing on the white families that lived at these plantations or the architecture of the home. Lansdowne, a plantation that was built as a wedding present for the original owners, has been preserved by the family for more than 160 years “... in order to maintain the original look and feel that is remarkably historically accurate.” This historical accuracy does not include Enslaved narratives, however, thus making this an inaccurate portrayal of plantation life. Similarly, Arlington Historic Home discusses the different families that lived in the home throughout the years. Additionally, the plantation website mentions the beginning of the plantation as a museum, stating “Private citizens, appreciating Arlington’s rich history, raised monies that the City of Birmingham matched, enabling City acquisition of Arlington in 1952 as a house museum reflecting Birmingham’s early heritage.” This heritage, however, does not seem to include Black memory. The Oaks Plantation, on the other hand, does not include any history at all of either the white family or the Enslaved people that lived at this plantation.

Belmont Plantation provides little to no information on Enslaved people outside of the number that a new owner has brought with him, stating that “Worthington was apparently more of a planter than a doctor, as evidenced by his eighty slaves and the hundreds of acres which surrounded Belmont.” Outside of this evidence, however, the plantation website does not offer any other information. This lack of information on Enslaved people explicitly depicts how this site does not find Enslaved history an important part of their history as a plantation. By not including this history, this site perpetuates the normalization of racist ideologies surrounding enslavement. As referenced by Delgado (2017), the ordinary structure of racism is perpetuated by systems disregarding BIPOC narratives. This also brings up an important point about the naturalization tenet of colorblind racism. Plantations are able to explain away this lack of information by stating that slavery was a natural occurrence that does not need to be discussed.

Hopsewee Plantation in South Carolina’s website had a page entitled “Slavery and Rice” that discussed the agricultural aspects of enslavement at this site. However, at the time of analysis, this page is no longer available. This shows that this site does not ensure that the information on the website is accessible for online visitors. It is also important to note that this plantation does not offer much information regarding their history— white or Enslaved— on their website. This relates directly to Price’s (2010) concept of the strategic deployment of narrative because plantation websites may be able to get away with not updating their page by stating there was a problem with the website itself, thus making it seem like they cannot do anything about it. However, these tactics may be easily seen through by virtual visitors and cause more issues for the plantation.

Efforts to Center Black History. Other plantations, however, have made efforts to emphasize Enslaved history. From archival research to archeology efforts to uncover more

information, seven of the plantations researched provide important information on not only the lives of the Enslaved, but also the processes in uncovering these details. This representation of Black history is a direct counter to those plantations which did not take much interest in this history. Even if these plantations do not have a lot of information on the Enslaved people who labored at these sites, some made it a point to mention the difficulties in uncovering this information. Lakeport Plantation in Arkansas, particularly, points out that one of the only ways we can access information on Enslaved people is through purchase records and other documents regarding ownership of Enslaved people, stating that “It is far more usual for information about a plantation’s slave population to be discovered in a generalized way among various tax and census records ...” This point is important as it depicts the difficulties that exist for plantations when doing research on Enslaved people. However, it should also be noted that other plantations may use this as an excuse for not having any information of Enslaved people.

Along with this information, Lakeport has a section entitled “Those Who Labored”, which discusses not only the ownership of Enslaved people by Lycurgus Johnson, a second generation plantation owner, but also the poor living conditions of these people, stating that “The living accommodations for plantation slaves seemed generally to have varied from terrible to very poor.” This statement discusses an aspect of enslavement that is not generally discussed by many plantations. While others have tried to glorify the white family by making it seem like Enslaved people were treated rather well by their owners, Lakeport seems to understand that this is not true and that Enslaved people were treated horribly by plantation owners.

Laura Plantation in Louisiana has made extensive efforts to center black voices, they also include as much information as possible through various outlets such as gallery talks, stories of 16 Enslaved people that lived at this plantation, and other documentation recording the presence

of Enslaved people. **Figure 1** below shows a copy of the bill of sale for a man named Aaron. Information such as this is vital because it shows actual records of Enslaved people that lived at this plantation. This kind of inclusion is also important as it helps in depicting the person outside of how they relate to the white family. Outside of this, the website mentions that the plantation historians are doing more archival and archaeological research daily, stating that “this most important aspect of the plantation's history is ongoing.” This active research depicts the plantation’s efforts to uncover as much information about Enslaved people as possible in order to relay this information to the public.

Bill of Sale: 22 July 1820

Aaron (age 20)

\$800.00

Louis Compton to Anne Prudhomme, Widow Duparc

Summary: Aaron, a 20 year old negro man, was purchased in Savannah, Georgia by Louis Compton. Mary Wall, a widow, sold Aaron to Compton for \$500 in May 1820. Aaron arrived in New Orleans on the schooner “Experiment” at the end of June. Aaron was described as 5 feet 8 inches tall, black, and “a cooper by trade.” Philippe “Flagy” Duparc acted as an agent for his mother.

Philippe Pedesclaux Vol 16, Act 1349

Courtesy of Dale N. Atkins, Clerk of Civil District Court, Parish of Orleans



Figure 1: *Bill of sale for Aaron, an Enslaved man at Laura Plantation.*

St. Joseph Plantation provides a lot of information on the laws surrounding enslavement from 1718-1857. While Louisiana was under Spanish rule, Enslaved people were able to own property and purchase their freedom under *coartación*, a law that allowed “slaves to obtain a sum equal to their market value and to petition the court for their freedom.” This obligated owners to accept this petition as long as the Enslaved person was not disorderly. After the Louisiana purchase, however, it became harder and harder for Enslaved people to be freed. This ended in 1857, in which the legislature prohibited emancipation completely. While no personal narratives

are offered on the website, they do note one of the many labors of Enslaved people, stating that “St. Joesph Plantation was built around 1830 by the Scioneaux family using slave labor.” This awareness and openness about the forced labor of Enslaved people is an important step in foregrounding these voices and a foundation in the emphasis of Black memory.

Somerset Place boasts itself as a “representative state historic site [that offers] a comprehensive and realistic view of 19th-century life on a large North Carolina plantation.” While this is a high claim to live up to, this plantation has made tremendous efforts in incorporating Enslaved history into the general history of the site instead of separating these histories. While it is undetermined whether this incorporated history is preferred by other researchers, this kind of history helps in normalizing the inclusion of Enslaved history. This goal to provide a more comprehensive view of history is furthered when they state, “... the Division of State Historic Sites and Properties has acquired the reconstructed Overseer's House and reconstructed representative one-room and four-room homes where Enslaved families once lived, along with the plantation hospital.” This reconstruction is vital because it provides more accurate portrayals of what the plantation looked like during the enslavement era.

Boone Hall Plantation presents tours on Gullah culture, a culture that was adapted by the Enslaved people that worked at these plantations. The inclusion of this culture as regularly available tours depicts the plantation's efforts to recenter and emphasize Black voices. One of the most interesting points that Boone Hall makes when discussing this tour is that “True descendants of the Gullah people present the history of this culture through storytelling, song, and dance that is at times educational, at times entertaining, and at times...very moving and emotional.” This kind of experience is vital because it not only presents an accurate representation of this culture, but it also features the voices of descendents of those who were

enslaved. This alone shows the importance Boone Hall finds in the oral histories shared by these descendants, and thus emphasizing this story as an integral part of their history. **Figure 2** below depicts the Gullah Culture exhibit that Boone Hall offers.



Figure 2: *Boone Hall Plantation's Gullah Culture Exhibit.*

At Davies Manor in Tennessee, the plantation has taken on the project of uncovering more information on the Enslaved people that lived at this site, stating that, “In 2009, Davies Manor Association staffers and volunteers began a series of research initiatives focused on uncovering historical narratives about the men, women, and children enslaved by the Davies family.” Not only has this site made efforts to gain this knowledge through records such as bills of sale and correspondence between the Davies family, they have also reconnected with descendants of those who were Enslaved. While they note that there has not been a discovery of records from the Enslaved people themselves, their efforts in uncovering this history should not go unnoticed. Additionally, this plantation provides a lot of information on the transfer of Enslaved people between family members, stating that “In 1794, fearing death from illness,

44-year-old Zachariah established a trust that named an inheritance plan to his children for the above-mentioned (enslaved) people, as well as those people’s future offspring.” This information is vital because it provides more insight on the culture of enslavement during this time.

Lastly, Belle Grove Plantation and Shirley Plantation in Virginia both provide extensive histories on the Enslaved families that labored at these sites. Belle Grove has a section on the website that discusses the current research efforts that the plantation historians are making in order to uncover more about the Enslaved people at the site. They also note the challenges in finding this information, stating that “One challenge in doing this research is that the Hites’ records, as was typical of enslavers, only listed the enslaved by first name.” This honesty is important because it shows that the plantation takes this kind of research seriously and actually wants to learn more about the Enslaved rather than doing it only because it is expected. At Shirley Plantation, the historians have also made efforts to uncover more information about the Enslaved people who labored at this plantation. This website utilizes both the archival research that the plantation itself has done and external sources such as the Enslaved Ancestor File provided by Charles City. Outside of this, the plantation also has a page for descendants of those who were enslaved to connect with the site and tell their stories as they want them to be told. Both of these efforts show the importance of this history to the plantation and their desire to center Black narratives. **Table 2** below depicts each plantation and what cultures and narratives they portray.

Table 2

Plantations that Emphasize Enslaved History

Plantation	Cultures and Narratives Discussed
Lakeport Plantation	General duties, names of Enslaved

Laura Plantation	16 personal narratives of Enslaved
St. Joseph Plantation	Pre-purchase Louisiana, General demographics
Somerset Place	Incorporated history of Enslaved duties and White families
Boone Hall Plantation	Gullah culture
Davies Manor	Stories of descendants,
Belle Grove Plantation	General demographics, Records, 15 personal narratives of Enslaved
Shirley Plantation	224 records of Enslaved

Note: The above depicts the narratives, cultures, and information discussed by each plantation.

Theme 2: Promoting or Rejecting Lost Cause Memory

When discussing Lost Cause memory, it is important to understand how the idealization of plantation life and romanticization of the Antebellum South affects the way society understands enslavement. After the Civil War, many advocates of this ideology took to making monuments to Confederate generals and important places to the Confederacy. In a blog post by Jason Kelly on his website, he states “Over the late 20th- and early 21st-century, the plantations of the south reproduced the myths of the "Lost Cause," targeting tourists who were infatuated with the stories told by films such as *Gone with the Wind*.” Thus, plantations became a kind of monument to the Lost Cause. Due to the focus on how plantations present their histories over the last 20 years, one may think that this promotion would be less common across plantation tourist sites. However, there are some plantations that continue to promote this monumentalization to the Lost Cause. This following focuses on how plantations either promote or reject the Lost Cause ideology.

Promoting Lost Cause Memory. While many plantations are making active efforts to emphasize Black history, others continue to romanticize and glorify plantation culture and the

antebellum south. Not only does this idealization actively decenter Enslaved stories, it perpetuates the idea that racism is a normal structure in American society. Throughout this research, there were three plantations that used language that promotes the lost cause ideology, effectively altering the way visitors to both the website and plantation itself learn about enslavement and think about the racist structures that exist in our society.

At Pebble Hill Plantation, there were several instances where the language used to describe the plantation perpetuates the memory of the lost cause and normalizes racist ideologies. “A sense of calm is felt from the moment one enters the main gates.” This language promotes the ideology of the serenity of plantations and the antebellum south. Another instance of this is in the history section of their website. On this page, they state, “With its relaxed order and sense of timelessness, Pebble Hill puts everyone immediately at ease and invites closer inspection of the plantation and its former occupants.” Specifically, the phrases “sense of timelessness” and “immediately at ease” evoke emotions akin to the Lost Cause and explicitly ignores the emotional and physical labor endured by Enslaved people at this plantation.

There are multiple instances on Hopsewee Plantation’s website that romanticize and glorify plantation culture. The first statement that promotes this memory is, “Step back into a serene spot in history.” This description of the plantation does not take into account the atrocities Enslaved people faced during the enslavement, instead opting for descriptions of the beauty of the location. Another instance of this is “The golden vista of the North Santee River, set off by the cool green of ages-old trees and soft grays of the Spanish moss adorning them, set the stage for quiet reflection.” The flowery language used overshadows any valuable information about Enslaved people and promotes this ideology. This promotion is only furthered when they state, “With its natural beauty, gracious hospitality and state-of-the-art entertainment amenities,

Hopsewee is the ideal setting to turn your dream for your special day into a reality.” The idea of “gracious hospitality” promotes the Lost Cause ideology because it romanticizes plantation culture, effectively ignoring Enslaved memory. While there is not much information outside of this statement, it is important to understand that this use directly affects the way we think about plantations.

Belle Meade Historic Site describes its site as a “sanctuary of southern hospitality.” This quote again promotes the ideology surrounding Lost Cause memory through the glorification of plantation life. Another instance of this promotion is the following statement: “From the complimentary wine tastings to our on-site shopping loved by the locals, Belle Meade provides many activities for guests to be immersed in Tennessee history and hospitality.” This language also suggests that this site does not focus on its history or any of the struggles Enslaved people faced on this plantation, rather prioritizing the enjoyment of current guests. Lastly, the promotion of Lost Cause memory is found when they state that they are “Celebrating 200 years of history, legendary hospitality, and the dedication to preserve our heritage for future generations.” It is important to note that this preservation does not seem to include the preservation of Enslaved history as the use of this space distracts from the history of the Enslaved that is presented in other areas of the plantation.

The Oaks Plantation, as noted earlier, completely disregards Enslaved history, instead opting to promote the serenity and beauty that the Lost Cause prioritizes. While describing the area, they state, “The long drive is lined with beautiful moss covered oak trees that welcome you with Southern hospitality.” This kind of language is meant to evoke feelings of desire to return to a simpler time. This is only furthered when they ask visitors to “Take a walk through the sprawling house to the plantation grounds and experience true old Southern charm.” This idea of

Southern charm is consistent with the Lost Cause as it promotes the Antebellum South over a more comprehensive view of history.

Belmont Plantation bolsters itself as “perhaps one of the grandest locations in the entire south for any type of event, party, or family reunion!” This language promotes the grandeur of plantation homes, making events hosted here seem like a fairytale experience. This promotes the Lost Cause ideology in that it completely ignores the atrocities that Enslaved people faced during the enslavement era in order to promote a sense of peace and serenity. Lastly, Belle Grove Plantation, while it has made efforts to emphasize Enslaved voices, still promotes Lost Cause memory in terms of how they offer their site for wedding events. At the top of the “Wedding Rentals” page on their website, they state: “Built for gracious entertaining and family life by Isaac Hite, Jr. and his wife, Nelly Madison Hite, between 1794 and 1797, Belle Grove is a National Historic Landmark and a center for Virginia history and cultural heritage.” This evokes the sense of following a tradition by hosting an event here and emphasizes the romanticization of the Antebellum South.

Rejecting Lost Cause Memory. There are plantations, however, that have made efforts to reject this memory through the active emphasis of Black voices. These plantations not only have made advancements in their archeological and archival research surrounding Enslaved history, but have also condemned the way the white plantation owners treated Enslaved people. There were three plantations specifically that center this history through tours and projects to preserve Enslaved spaces, thus rejecting the Lost Cause ideology.

At Laura Plantation, the historians have been committed to uncovering Enslaved history for several years, stating that “For more than 20 years, Laura Plantation has been at the forefront of presenting the stories of enslaved people in Creole Louisiana.” This commitment has

highlighted how this memory is vital to understanding plantation history and the culture surrounding the antebellum south. This plantation's efforts to recenter Black narratives directly rejects the ideology of the Lost Cause because it finds more importance in understanding tragedies faced by Enslaved individuals than the glorification of the white family and romanticization of plantation life.

Poplar Grove Plantation has done extensive research on Gullah culture and has teamed up with The Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission (GGCHCC) to "initiate meaningful dialogue that builds upon the values of respect, empathy, cultural diversity, multiple perspectives, and democratic principles..." This effort explicitly rejects Lost Cause ideology because the plantation is making the active choice to portray its history to include Enslaved narratives and better understand how plantation culture affects the way society views structural racism. This point is emphasized further with the following statement: "... it is our desire to shine light on the generations of Enslaved peoples at Scotts Hill whose legacies are especially relevant today." This awareness of how their educational materials affect the way tourists learn about enslavement also depicts their effort to leave behind the glorification of plantation life and instead teach a more inclusive and full history of its site.

Lastly, Boone Hall Plantation has made tremendous efforts to decenter the Lost Cause ideology and promote a more inclusive learning experience for its visitors. As discussed earlier, Boone Hall is home to the "Exploring the Gullah Culture" exhibit. The description of this presentation discusses the importance of how history is presented and the difference in their approach to discussing Enslaved history. This kind of approach is vital to dismantling Lost Cause memory and emphasizing Black history as an important area in plantation memory. This emphasis of this history is furthered in the "Black History of America" section on their website,

where they state that they know they have a “responsibility to present the history of slavery in an accurate and educational manner each day in a way that pays honor and respect to that history and the progress of Black Americans.” The acknowledgement is vital to dismantling Lost Cause structures in plantation tourism and engaging with a more comprehensive view of the enslavement era.

Theme 3: Plantations as Event Spaces

With racial equality becoming a more prominent topic in academia over the last 20 or so years, it is important to understand how plantations are changing the way they offer their site to the public whether through tours or as event spaces. While we have seen a massive overhaul of the way many plantations incorporate information about Enslaved people and spaces that existed on their plantation, a mostly overlooked area has been how plantation sites continue to use their space to host events for weddings, reunions, and other social gatherings. This is a problem given the current climate because these events often ignore the history of the land and disrespects Enslaved memory. However, this issue remains unseen by many southern individuals due to it being overshadowed by the idealized antebellum south and plantation culture as a whole. This idealization is explicitly promoted by plantations in the way that they offer their spaces as event venues.

While researching, there was a significant amount of plantations that, while they may be making efforts to emphasize Enslaved narratives, continue to rent their sites to the public for private and public events. This chapter seeks to explore how current owners of the plantation preserve or ignore spaces on plantations and how they go about offering their space to the public as an event venue. Within this, plantation wedding culture will be a main focus as this kind of event has been widely criticized by many scholars. This section also discusses the destruction of

Enslaved spaces through these events and how these sites that have profound meaning for the black community are forgotten due to the use of these spaces.

Plantations as Event Spaces. Throughout this research, one of the most interesting findings is the amount of plantations that use their sites as a venue for the public to use for various events. Even more interesting is the way these plantations market themselves to the public for these rental opportunities. Throughout many of the plantations that were analyzed, plantation life is romanticized in order to make these spaces appealing to guests. This section of analysis explores the language that plantations use when marketing themselves as event spaces and how this language affects the way we acknowledge plantations as historical sites.

The Oaks Plantation has presented itself in a way to be inviting to guests. The Oaks displays a common theme of the refurbishing of plantation spaces to fit modern needs, stating that “The Oaks Plantation is a spectacular venue that magically blends history with modern facilities.” While it is unclear what kinds of modern facilities have been included, this brings up an important point about how plantations, when used as event spaces, often update, or even change entirely, certain spaces to include more modern amenities. This provides an array of issues, which will be discussed later in this analysis. At Arlington Historic Home and gardens, a similar framework to The Oaks Plantation is seen. This venue has opted to present itself more as an event space than a historical site, with only a brief history available for digital visitors. This site has taken being an event venue a step further, however, in that it offers various events to the public through the year, such as “summer lunches”, or other dining events for Valentine’s Day and Mother’s Day. While there is no presence of Lost Cause language on their website, it is still a vital note that this site has no mention of enslavement, effectively ignoring an entire side of history.

Pebble Hill Plantation, unlike the two previously discussed plantations, offers its space as both a historic site and event venue. From wedding events to corporate parties, Pebble Hill has made itself a popular venue to the public in various ways. This plantation also provides several locations for events, stating that you can “Book your special event on the historic Main Grounds, Uno Hill Barn, Sugar Hill Barn or Piney Grove Church.” While it remains unclear if the barns are original structures, it should be known that Piney Grove Church was not built until 1936 after the plantation was inherited by a wealthy heiress.

Similarly to Pebble Hill Plantation, Belmont Plantation offers both historic tours and spaces for events. Belmont offers space for up to 500 guests, stating that there is “over 3,000 square feet of screen porches with idyllic views of the surrounding countryside for a truly picturesque gathering...” This specifically speaks to the emphasis of the beauty of plantations when being offered as event venues. At Lansdowne Plantation, they pride themselves in having been a site of gatherings for years, stating “Throughout its history, Lansdowne has been the site of family weddings, birthdays, receptions, cocktail parties, and holiday dinners.” This pride is an interesting point as it says a lot about how the plantation prioritizes its space as a venue. This is only furthered by the historical context that the website provides, with an emphasis on decor rather than the people who lived here—enslaved or free. Another important note about this plantation is that it has been renovated a space originally built in 1853 into a bed and breakfast for guests to stay in. This point will be further discussed later in this analysis.

Boone Hall Plantation also offers its space for historical tours and events. However, the use of this site as a plantation is of particular interest due to the way it describes the space. Boone Hall emphasizes its beauty by stating “The famous Avenue Of Oaks is a ¾ mile of 270 year old giant live oaks draped with Spanish moss that is one of the most breathtaking wonders of nature

anywhere in the world.” This sense of grandeur is present at many plantations that use their sites for events. Another important note about how this plantation offers its space is the prioritization of memories surrounding weddings instead of Enslaved memory. This is evident in the following quote from the plantation website: “A rustic building whose walls if they could talk would speak proudly of a guest list over the years which has included Presidents and prominent politicians, celebrities, businesses, families and friends old and new.” This description completely ignores Enslaved memory as it romanticizes the history of the plantation. The metaphors of walls speaking fondly of what they have seen over the years explicitly ignores the emotional and physical labor endured by Enslaved people.

Hopsewee Plantation uses its space for multiple purposes as well. Unlike other plantations that were analyzed, Hopsewee only seems to offer its space to the public for weddings. This plantation bolsters itself as the perfect scene for a plantation wedding, stating that “In addition to indoor seating in the cottage lounge and dining room, outdoor settings include a scenic river-front vista with Spanish-moss draped Live Oaks for ceremonies, dancing, and socializing.” The combination of places on the plantation for wedding guests to enjoy says a lot about how Hopsewee prioritizes its space. When offering so many areas to the public for events, it is important to understand how this affects the space.

Belle Meade Historic Site in Tennessee provides a lot of interesting insight into plantations as event spaces as well. Not only does this plantation offer historic tours and venues for event rentals, but it is also an active winery. The use of this space raises issues with preservation, which will be discussed in the Degradation of Plantation Spaces section of this theme. Similarly to Hopsewee, Belle Meade uses multiple spaces for events, stating that “Belle Meade has a variety of elegant indoor and outdoor spaces to accommodate up to 200 guests and

is conveniently located seven miles from downtown Nashville.” When thinking about the use of the space, it is evident that this plantation prioritizes the space for events.

Davies Manor also utilizes the space as both a historic touring site and event venue. With several different spaces to host events, Davies Manor has made various efforts to make these spaces more appealing to guests. On top of these renovated areas, the plantation built a new facility on the outskirts of the property called Hillwood, a “modern facility ideal for weddings, receptions, social and business gatherings for up to 400 people.” As will be discussed later in this analysis, this raises questions surrounding how the plantation preserves and ignores certain spaces at the site. Belle Grove Plantation has also been known to offer its space as both a historic site and venue. This site uses language that makes one feel like they are engaging in an age-old tradition by hosting an event at this site, stating that “For generations Belle Grove has been the site of countless celebrations! Join the tradition by holding your wedding or special event at Belle Grove Plantation.” This tradition effectively ignores the history of the space and prioritizes the White dominant memory over Black/subordinate memory. **Table 3** below depicts the plantations that utilize their spaces for events and what events are offered by each site.

When thinking of these plantations as event spaces, it is important to understand that this utilization of the space often promotes Lost Cause ideology, effectively disregarding Enslaved memory. Additionally, the use of plantations for celebratory events directly ignores the site as a place of suffering. Among the plantations analyzed, the only plantation that is making efforts to change the way they use their space is Poplar Grove Plantation in North Carolina. Among these efforts is the expansion of exhibits to discuss their history, including “... an expanded Gullah Geechee Heritage exhibit space in the Agricultural Building.” A particularly interesting point within this is the expansion of the Gullah Geechee Heritage exhibit, an effort to better

acknowledge the culture of Enslaved people at this site. Another interesting note about this site is that as of 2021, the plantation no longer offers its site as a wedding venue. While rentals for other events still seem to be available, this effort should not go unnoticed.

Table 3

Use of Plantations as Event Spaces

Plantation	Events Offered
The Oaks Plantation	Weddings, Private events, Corporate events
Arlington Historic Home and Gardens	Plantation-hosted holiday events, Weddings
Pebble Hill Plantation	Weddings, Private events, Corporate events
Belmont Plantation	Weddings, Private events
Poplar Grove Plantation	Outdoor private events
Boone Hall Plantation	Plantation-hosted events, Weddings
Hopsewee Plantation	Tea service, Weddings
Belle Meade Historic Site	Weddings, Private events, Corporate events
Davies Manor	Weddings, Private events, Corporate events
Belle Grove Plantation	Weddings, Private events, Corporate events

Note: the above table depicts what events are included in facility rentals for each plantation.

Plantation Wedding Culture. One of the most common uses of plantations as event spaces is for weddings. Within this, there has been an influx of people, no matter social status, who decide to have their weddings at a plantation. This is problematic for many reasons. The first is that this culture often overshadows Enslaved memory, with plantations opting to prioritize

the memories of wedding guests instead. The second is that these kinds of large events often degrade plantation spaces, with sometimes hundreds of guests attending these ceremonies and possibly ruining structures or grounds in the process. Lastly, this type of event disregards the history of suffering by Enslaved individuals, rather focusing on the creation of fond memories related to the site. As noticed in studies regarding dark tourism, this prioritization of the idyllic plantation life does not leave space for darker parts of their history, thus not being able to present the site as a place to reflect on racism's foundations in American society.

The Oaks Plantation has participated in the culture by prioritizing its space as a wedding venue above all else, from “... dressing rooms for brides and grooms large enough to accommodate the entire wedding party,” to accommodations for up to “200 people inside and many more for outside events.” **Figure 3** below depicts a photograph from the plantation's website where a wedding dress hanging from a doorway can be seen in the plantation home. This use of the space can only be seen as disrespectful to the history of the plantation as the owners have made so many renovations to the the structures and landscapes, creating a disconnection from the heritage of the descendants of those who lived at this site. Arlington Historic Home and Gardens has veered away from using its structures to host weddings, stating that they instead “provide a beautiful venue for your outdoor wedding.” They also have taken an interest in prioritizing the memories of current guests and invite them to create these memories in a “beautiful atmosphere.” This reflects on dark tourism and how, by promoting serenity instead of reflecting on the memory of Enslaved individuals who lived here two centuries ago.



Figure 3: *Picture of wedding dress featured in The Oaks Plantation’s photo gallery.*

Pebble Hill Plantation provides various venues for wedding events, stating that they provide “romantic and beautiful settings for weddings, receptions, luncheons, brunches, and dinners.” This portrays the pervasiveness of plantation wedding culture and how sites may prioritize and renovate certain spaces to accommodate guests. Additionally, the plantation invites you to “... create the perfect atmosphere for your occasion” because “... the beauty of the setting is yours!” This type of language influences guests to have a wedding at this site without much concern for how it may affect the memory of Enslaved history. **Figure 4** below depicts the Uno Hill Barn, a featured space for wedding events, and the renovations that have been made to the structure to better accommodate guests. Not only does this show how plantations may make drastic changes to their sites in order to be more appealing to guests, it portrays how plantation wedding culture changes the way plantations are seen.



Figure 4: *Picture from Pebble Hill Plantation’s website of a wedding event at the Uno Hill Barn.*

A common theme at the Belmont Plantation is the ideal of a “fairy-tale” wedding, stating that “Whether its inside the mansion or outside in the gardens, Belmont provides a fairy-tale backdrop for your fairy-tale wedding...” This ideal, however, completely disregards the entire memory of enslavement in order to influence people to want to host their wedding events at this site. Additionally, wedding parties have the option to stay in the main home, as the website states, “With 8 bedroom and bathroom suites, we even include accommodations for your wedding party for a charming overnight stay inside the historic walls of the plantation big house before or after the big day.” This only emphasizes the desire to experience Antebellum culture and the grandeur of large plantation homes. **Figure 5** below depicts one of the dressing rooms for the wedding party. These kinds of images show how plantations prioritize their spaces for weddings and promote their sites as the perfect place to host these types of events.



Figure 5: *Image from Belmont Plantation's website of the interior of the home.*

Similarly to the previous plantations, Lansdowne Plantation has perpetuated plantation wedding culture by promoting the beauty of the space and how perfect it is for wedding events, stating that “Lansdowne has a beautiful front portico with deep galleries and a large staircase that makes the perfect backdrop for a ceremony.” This idea of the perfect place to host a wedding event creates issues for how the plantation represents its space. By prioritizing its space for weddings, Lansdowne actively overshadows the history of enslavement and changes the way the plantation is seen by the public. Boone Hall Plantation also bolsters itself as an amazing backdrop for weddings, stating that “This legendary structure sets the stage for celebrating some of life’s most special moments...and launching new beginnings of every kind.” This type of language promotes the grandeur of plantation homes that makes one feel like their wedding will be larger than life when being hosted here. **Figure 6** below portrays one of the reception spaces available for rental for wedding events. This shows how the grandiosity of these spaces often overshadows any type of emphasis of enslavement the plantation may offer.



Figure 6: *Photograph from Boone Hall Plantation’s website depicting one of the reception spaces offered.*

Hopsewee Plantation has made significant efforts to ensure that one’s plantation wedding is the “ideal setting to turn your dream for your special day into a reality.” The pervasiveness of plantation wedding culture has infiltrated the way people view this plantation. Instead of using plantation spaces to discuss the history of the site, this plantation has prioritized creating spaces for events that will make the site feel like the perfect space for a wedding. Davies Manor also does this through the way they have updated and built new structures to make weddings here more appealing to potential guests. Within the 37-acre plantation there are three spaces that are available for wedding parties: “... from our vine-covered gazebo, a wooded cathedral on the front meadow, or the front lawn of the c. 1831 log home.” On top of this, Hillwood, a “... modern facility ideal for weddings, receptions, social and business gatherings for up to 400 people,” depicts how the plantation has created a separate space for wedding events. This raises

questions about whether the plantation may be trying to move away from plantation wedding culture or trying to make their venue more popular by offering a new space for weddings. As shown in **Figure 7** below, these wedding events are meant to be magical moments that mix history with modern times. However, it is important to note that this often overshadows any sort of history that the plantation may discuss.



Figure 7: *Picture from Hopsewee Plantations website of a wedding hosted at the site.*

As noted previously, Belle Grove Plantation has emphasized its history as a site of countless events hosted by the plantation owners for over two centuries, with weddings of family members of the original owner being highlighted on their website. Not only does this glorify the plantation wedding culture by suggesting that holding a wedding at this venue is a time-honored tradition, it completely ignores the space as a site of suffering for Enslaved people who lived at this plantation and worked these events in the early days of its history. Additionally, this site has made it a point to renovate spaces in order to better accommodate guests, stating that “The 1918 bank barn has been renovated to be the Beverley B. Shoemaker Welcome Center and it includes a seasonal event space for up to 150 for a ceremony or standing reception or up to 120 for a

seated reception.” These renovations effectively change the way that the plantation is seen as a historical site. **Figure 8** portrays a photograph of a wedding that was hosted at the plantation.

This picture is meant to evoke feelings of serenity and make potential guests desire to have their wedding at a beautiful location with an amazing venue. This evocation, however, does not take into account how this site was a place of suffering for Enslaved individuals



Figure 8: *Picture of a wedding ceremony on Belle Grove Plantation’s website.*

While the use of plantations as the “perfect place” for a wedding event, it is important to note that some plantations have made extensive efforts to move away from the plantation wedding culture. For example, Poplar Grove Plantation has decided to no longer rent out the site for weddings in an effort to recommit itself to “... its mission of conservation, education, and preservation ...” While the site still offers other events, it is important to note that this is a move in the right direction as far as deconstructing plantation wedding culture in an effort to preserve its history as an Enslaved space. Additionally, this offers a reflection of how plantation wedding culture inherently changes the way these spaces are seen and how these spaces should not be prioritizing the memories of current guests over the history of the site as a place of suffering.

Degradation of Plantation Spaces. One of the biggest issues with using plantations as event spaces is the way that these plantations either preserve or ignore these areas. While researching, an interesting theme that became clear among many plantations was the prioritization of the space as an event venue rather than historic site. By doing so, this use explicitly ignores Enslaved memory and the history of the plantation itself. Many of these plantations have even taken steps to change original structures or add new buildings to make these sites more picturesque for these events. This is problematic because it is directly affecting the history of these spaces, effectively degrading the space.

At The Oaks Plantation, the lack of interest in preserving areas of plantations is evident. Not only does this plantation completely ignore discussing enslavement as a whole, they seem to have very little regard for the history of the plantation itself, with only a short blurb about the original owner and the plantation's use as a landing strip in World War II. While this plantation was described as a "1780-acre diversified and innovative plantation," there is no material offered on the website to learn more about why it is described this way. The lack of information surrounding this plantation's history in itself shows that this plantation does not seem to care about preserving the space as a historical site, rather opting to be purely an event venue. Outside of this issue, the plantation has turned interior spaces into not only areas to gather during an event, but also dressing rooms for wedding parties to utilize.

Pebble Hill Plantation is evidently proud of the renovations they have made, with an entire section on their website that talks about the venues they offer. The Uno Hill Barn, in particular, has been refurbished with heating and cooling, as well as a catering kitchen and updated bathrooms. As mentioned earlier, it is unknown whether the barns are original structures; however, these updates to modernize the space to better accommodate guests is an

important piece of information. These updates to original structures to be more appealing to visitors directly affects the preservation of the space. By making these changes, the plantation has made it clear they would rather prioritize their space as an event venue than preserve the spaces as historical sites. This directly degrades these areas by opening them up to high volumes of guests that could potentially ruin aspects of these structures.

Hopsewee Plantation has also made various renovations and changes to the original site in order to make the site more appealing to those who may want to host an event here, stating that “The newest jewel on this gracious property is the River Oak Cottage. Named one of the state’s top tearooms, its English tea service is flavored with Hopsewee’s southern charm along with a delectable assortment of sweet and savory treats.” This depicts the prioritization of creating spaces for events rather than possibly using those funds to further preservation projects that can emphasize Enslaved narratives, thus degrading the space as a historical site. There is also the concern of the degradation of the physical spaces on the plantation as these new structures physically alter the space and potentially overlap with spaces where Enslaved people may have lived or worked.

On top of being an active winery, Belle Meade Historic site has made renovations to the site to make it more presentable to guests, stating that their “... Boxwood Garden, renovated in 2020, showcases the natural beauty and timeless elegance of our site. Lush landscaping, natural stone paths, and carved limestone seating create the perfect setting for a truly memorable event.” While some of these accents may be true to the original landscape of the plantation, the manual labor necessary to keep up with this kind of environment speaks to how the plantation prioritizes their space for present day visitors. The upkeep required to make this plantation feel like a serene and beautiful space can create issues in terms of the degradation of the space. By doing so, the

plantations risk damage from landscaping efforts or continued use of certain spaces for events. Belle Grove Plantation, while having made efforts to emphasize Enslaved history, still struggles to offer its space in ways that effectively counteract these efforts. At the bottom of their “Wedding Rentals” page, they state, “Thank you for your support! Your Wedding or Special Event Rental provides needed support for Belle Grove's exhibits, educational, research, and historic preservation efforts.” This effort to preserve the space is counterintuitive because weddings and events degrade the space as a historical site.

While many plantations still use their sites as event spaces and risk damages to the structures and landscapes by hosting events and can degrade plantation spaces as rich historical sites, some plantations have taken notice of this and made efforts to change the way they use their space. Poplar Grove Plantation made the decision to return to their original mission of preserving the space and providing an accurate history of their site. As mentioned previously, even though this plantation still offers other events, the plantation has made various changes such as a “... new ticket office, extended tours, enhanced school programs, ... a return to the original use of the lower level of the Manor House as well as a return to the original function of the Carriage House.” These efforts depict an attempt to rectify their injustices against Enslaved narratives and change the way plantations are seen by the general public.

Conclusion

When thinking of plantations as historical sites, it is vital to understand that the ways plantations present their histories to the public and preserve their spaces in different ways. The intersections of Critical Race Theory and the Lost Cause Ideology provide important information on how, if not done in a way that emphasizes Black voices, the representation of a plantation’s history can perpetuate structural racism and the idealized Antebellum South. While some

plantations have made efforts to foreground Enslaved narratives, many plantations continue to promote the Lost Cause ideology and evoke desires to return to a simpler time. This is most commonly seen in three ways: the visibility of Enslaved history, the promotion or rejection of Lost Cause memory, and the use of plantations as event spaces.

Firstly, the visibility of Enslaved history was divided into two categories: plantations that disregard Enslaved history and plantations that emphasize Enslaved history. Generally, the plantations that tend to disregard Enslaved history either have no information of Enslaved presence or very little information such as the amount of Enslaved people that lived on the plantation. These plantations may play part in the perpetuation and continuation of racist structures that exist in American Society. Plantations that emphasize Enslaved history, however, have made extensive efforts to uncover and publicize the narratives of those who were enslaved by white plantation owners. Not only have some of these plantations done extensive archaeological and historical projects to discover more about the Enslaved people who lived at these sites, some make it a priority to contact descendants of the Enslaved to gain access to personal stories that have been passed down through the generations.

The second theme that occurred was the promotion or rejection of Lost Cause memory. The plantations that tend to promote Lost Cause memory use language that evokes a desire to live as lavishly as the white plantation owners did. This is evidenced by language such as a “sense of timelessness” or “step back into a serene spot in history,” which effectively changes the way that the plantation is seen. Plantations that reject Lost Cause memory, however, have broken away from the norm of using this language, instead opting to be honest about their history with enslavement by providing learning opportunities for visitors, both online and virtual, to better understand the institution of enslavement and its effects on modern day societal structures. These

plantations also reject the Lost Cause by actively centering Black voices and the narratives of Enslaved people.

Lastly, the use of plantations as event space provides a lot of information on how plantations choose to use their spaces. Even with the research on dark tourism that has shown that this utilization can distract from the importance of Enslaved narratives, many plantations continue to use their spaces for events such as weddings, private events, public gatherings, and corporate parties. This research also brings up interesting points surrounding plantation wedding culture and its pervasiveness in plantation tourism. These kinds of events often overshadow Enslaved memory due to plantations prioritizing the memories and experiences of current guests. Additionally, the use of these plantations as event venues can symbolically or physically degrade spaces, whether by choosing to ignore parts of its history in order to promote the sense of Southern charm that the dominant culture has maintained as true or by making renovations to original structures as well as building new spaces to accommodate more guests and make the space seem more appealing for hosting events. However, the efforts of plantations that have started moving towards reconciliation by limiting the events they offer, or getting rid of event rentals completely, cannot go unnoticed. While Poplar Grove may not be ahead of the curve, it is important to note that their efforts to decenter the normative structure of racism and exclusion in order to create more spaces for Enslaved narratives shows that it can be done and is currently being done by other plantations.

Implications of Current Study and Future Research Opportunities

While this study provides a lot of information on how plantations interact with their histories in the digital age, there are certain implications that hindered the research in some way. Firstly, the original goal of this thesis was to visit six plantations across three states and provide

an in-depth analysis of the way each plantation discusses enslavement and incorporates Enslaved narratives into their tours. However, the COVID-19 Pandemic was still a major concern at the time I intended to visit these sites, resulting in a shift in the way these plantations were to be analyzed. While this method proved fruitful, visiting plantations in person can provide a whole different experience for guests. In addition to being able to see the actual spaces and reflect on the context of the area, in-person tours can provide visitors with the ability to ask the docents questions in real time, resulting in sometimes receiving more information on the Enslaved than their website ever could. In the future, research may take a deeper look at in-person plantation tours and how these three themes hold up to their online representations. This may help in understanding the accuracy of the website against how they represent themselves when guests visit in person.

Secondly, there were issues in retrieving plantations to be analyzed as some of the original sites had shut down or no longer had working pages that discussed enslavement or their histories in general. This was a common theme even across plantations that were analyzed, with some having pages with useful information at one point in the research process that no longer worked at others. While there is no way to ensure that a plantation's website remains accessible, this says a lot about how the plantation may fail to keep the website updated, thus not representing any new work the site may be doing. Future research could explore the websites that do not have much information on the Enslaved or ones that no longer had working page links to analyze if these plantations have changed the way they present their history. Lastly, time played a key part in the brevity of certain topics. Due to having to alter the way this project had to be done, a year's worth of work was done in half the time. While this is admittedly a mistake on the researcher's part, this provides essential feedback for future research. With more time, research

could be expanded upon greatly through more plantations for analysis and conducting research on the specific themes themselves.

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Appendix A

1. Does the plantation have options for virtual tours or extensive tour information?
2. Do these tours include information from docents or general information?
3. What is the plantation doing to offer information to people during the pandemic?
4. What information about enslavement is available on the plantation website?
5. How is the plantation handling information regarding enslavement?
 - a. Do they emphasize personal stories of enslaved people?
 - b. Are the original owners of the plantation evangelized?
6. Is there language during the tour and/or in the exhibits that promote a heroic perspective?
7. Is the history of the plantation romanticized?
8. Do the docents use language such as “their lives weren’t so bad,” “enslaved people were treated well,” etc.?

Appendix B

1. What types of events are allowed at the site?
2. Does the plantation have any sort of statement about why they offer the space as an event venue?
3. Does the plantation offer any events/space for families of enslaved people who lived on the plantation during the enslavement era?
4. Is the plantation using the property solely for events?
 - a. How is this affecting the memory of enslaved people?