

# **Dead Labor: Fetishizing Chattel Slavery at Contemporary Southern Plantation Tourism Sites**

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## **Abstract**

Plantation tourism is a major economic industry and element of the cultural landscape of the US South that has long minimized and occluded the legacy of chattel slavery from tourism experiences. By employing a Marxist analysis of contemporary plantation tourism, we advance understandings of the continued commodification of the enslaved through the lens of dead labor, both metaphorical and literal. We also examine the economic and social relations that make possible and sustain the contemporary plantation tourism industry and consider how the historic plantation and contemporary plantation tourism systems obfuscate the dead labor of millions of enslaved people. Drawing upon semi-structured interviews with owners of four major tourism plantation sites in Louisiana, we argue that the dead labor



of the enslaved is still an economically productive force that creates value in the contemporary landscape for plantation property owners, which must be critically considered in light of ongoing calls for socially just memory practices at tourism plantation sites.

## Keywords

Dead labor, memory work, Transatlantic slave trade, race, Black geographies

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## Introduction

Antebellum plantations functioned as large-scale agribusiness operations whose modes of production relied on forced enslaved labor. These plantations included vast fields of monoculture commodity crops (indigo, tobacco, sugar cane, cotton), farm equipment, animals, slave cabins, enslaved people, their overseers and enslavers, and the “Big House”—the master enslaver’s home. The entire plantation was only possible through the labors of enslaved people. After the American Civil War many of these places fell into disrepair and many more were abandoned. In their operation as functional plantations, the enslaved reanimated Marx’s concept of dead labor—the metaphor of labor embodied in the material objects of the plantation, synonymous with constant capital—to make the plantation possible as a profit-generating engine in the commodity crop economy. Drawing on contemporary scholars’ reworking of the dead labor concept, which goes beyond Marx’s metaphor to consider that even the actual death of laborers is profitable under capitalism (e.g., Mitchell, 2000; Tyner, 2019), we argue that what remains of a few Southern plantations has been transformed into tourist sites that obscure the deaths of thousands upon thousands of enslaved individuals. In doing so, the dead labor of the enslaved is being reanimated as a profit generating engine in the experience (event-based) economy (Schneider, 2012). As in its previous incarnation, this new plantation economy elides—or perhaps more exactly fetishizes—the enslaved, who often literally died or had their bodies and living capacities brutally depleted and destroyed in the process. In so doing, these tourist sites render the enslaved absent in the very spaces that they made conceivable.

Plantation tourism is a major economic industry and element of the cultural landscape of the US South that has long effaced the labors and lives of the enslaved from the tourism experience. Critical scholarship on chattel slavery from geography and other social sciences began in earnest in the late 1990s and 2000s, largely centered on studies and critiques of plantation sites operated as contemporary tourism operations (Adams, 1999; Alderman and Modlin, 2008; Bright and Butler, 2015; Butler, 2001; Buzinde and Santos, 2008; Hanna, 2016; McKittrick, 2011; Modlin, 2008; Modlin et al., 2018; Potter, 2016; Woods, 2017 [1998]). These well-aimed critiques of tourism operations at contemporary plantations and other sites that marginalize the history of chattel slavery have highlighted how sites uncritically narrativize Southern history in ways that have myriad material consequences for Black lives and Black bodies. Our research starts from and builds upon this scholarship, taking on the charge made by Small (2013: 419) that plantation tourism sites “...have not targeted or made much inroad into undermining the [white supremacist] ideological grip” of their past in their historic interpretations and inclusions of slavery.

It is this “ideological grip” that we seek to weaken. These tourist sites are *not* plantations, in that the only major built structure that remains at most of these sites is the Big House. If we think of antebellum plantations as being defined political economic entities (corpuses), then Big House plantation tourist sites—the master’s home separated from what made that home possible—are like severed heads in jars of formaldehyde. They are monstrosities, embalmed and reanimated dead labor employed to extricate surplus value from the long dead enslaved. They are zombie objects that, in a macabre dialectic

of the past with the present, extract surplus value from both the living and dead—a macabre dialectic in the sense that the labors of the dead are fused to the labors of the living in a bizarre project to transfigure sites of racial degradation and violence into an amusement space. By *amusement* space, we are intentionally drawing attention to the tendency of nearly all plantation tourism sites in the United States (U.S.). to encourage visitors to make mental connections to the wealthy white planters, their homes, gardens, and lifestyles as a kind of light-hearted entertainment, rather than inviting audiences to engage with plantations’ far more difficult, violent, and traumatic historical–geographies.

The dead labor of enslaved people presents a special case worthy of careful consideration because it haunts the contemporary process of accumulation in a particular way. Because the processes of alienation and commodity fetishism are racialized in the United States, white supremacist capitalism cannot relate to dead enslaved labor other than by being haunted by it (Horowitz, 2016), because any effort to incorporate explicit acknowledgements of slavery in plantation sites’ historical interpretation or tours would threaten their profit-generating potential.<sup>1</sup> Alienation, in Marx’s forwarding of four distinct types, includes the estrangement of human beings from their humanity as capitalists attempt to mold them into mere components—cogs—in the production process, and the estrangement of human beings from the products they produce as labor’s agency in the production process is constrained by the demands of capitalists. In both types of alienation, labor is yet another commodity that goes into the production process. No labor is more alienated than enslaved labor in that it is heavily surveyed and brutally coerced.

In the dialectic of the antebellum plantation and the present-day plantation tourist site, the racial alienation of labor in the past is projected into the plantation future, and in its wake reverberates past racial social relations—fetishization of the labors of the enslaved in both the past and the present. Black labor goes unacknowledged. This article considers the alienation of enslaved labor as distant in time yet with effects still manifest in the present. What follows in this paper is an inquiry into how value is derived from dead enslaved labor in its current form at ersatz reincarnations of the antebellum plantation proffered to tourists as an amusement commodity. The alienation of enslaved labor is but one of the processes associated with plantation tourism that obscures the more-than-economic value of once-enslaved individuals. This process contributes to the erasure of once-enslaved people while also occluding the process itself in ways that make it trying to effectively challenge both the process and its results.

We turn next to discuss the strands of literature informing our analysis of the contemporary Southern plantation tourism industry and describe the methodology and sites included in this study. We then present our analysis and discuss the role of dead labor in plantation tourism. We conclude by examining the unresolved tension between the plantation’s roles as commercial and commemorative sites.

### **Selective Historical Memory of Chattel Slavery vs. Commemorative Justice**

While geographers have increasingly taken interest in studying how the US tends to (mis)remember or marginalize slavery relative to other historical themes (Alderman and Modlin, 2008; Alderman et al., 2016; Bright and Butler, 2015; Bright et al., 2018; Butler, 2001; Cook, 2016; Cook and

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<sup>1</sup> A reviewer of this manuscript raised the question of whether this was a true statement, using the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama, as a counter-example. While this was thought provoking, the Legacy Museum is not a *plantation* museum, the vast majority of which sprang out of a nostalgia for a *Gone with the Wind* South. Of course, this “South” is a myth—one that only exists by marginalizing and occluding the role of the enslaved on these plantations. To recognize enslaved dead labor is to endanger this myth, as we argue further in this paper. Conversely, the Legacy Museum is a Black-inspired counternarrative museum that covers injustices toward African Americans from 1619 to the present. Put simply, with no real exceptions (not even the newer Whitney Plantation on the River Road), plantation sites are white spaces while the Legacy Museum is a Black space.

Potter, 2018; Hanna, 2016;McKittrick, 2011; Modlin, 2008; Potter, 2016; Woods, 2017 [1998]), few geographers have engaged with Marxist analyses of plantations *as* contemporary tourism sites. Woods (2017 [1998]: 4) takes the plantation to be a political-economic regime or bloc that has taken many forms but is ever-resilient, and he notes that while “the plantation tradition has been relegated to the dustbin of history by some social theorists, it continues to survive among those who celebrate its brutal legacy.”

Complex interactions between race and geography are embodied in racialized power differentials (Gilmore, 2002), which comes to the fore when considering the politics and economies of plantation sites. As a supposed display of southern heritage, several dozen antebellum plantations have been converted into tourism sites throughout the South. Current owners of these sites offer services ranging from lodging (often as boutique “bed and breakfasts”), on-site weddings, restaurants, to the most common element: “Big House” tours. Scholars have shown that many plantation sites do not spend much time, money, or effort in engaging visitors in discussions of slavery (Alderman et al., 2016; Carter et al., 2014; Eichstedt and Small, 2002; Modlin, 2008; Modlin et al., 2011) or referencing enslavement in marketing materials (Alderman and Modlin, 2008; Bright and Butler, 2015; Butler, 2001). Furthermore, Bright et al. (2018) show that some plantations owners *prefer* whitewashed presentations of slavery and assume that their visitors also desire these types of presentations, which perfectly encapsulates the combination of what Connerton (2008) calls *forgetting as repressive erasure* (by owners) and *forgetting as humiliated silence* (by predominantly white visitors).

Eichstedt and Small (2002) found that most contemporary plantation tourism operations tend to promote a set of dominant narratives that disproportionately emphasize antebellum white enslavers’ history, material culture, and wealth along with architecture and landscaping. Slavery, if mentioned at all, is often relegated to optional, “a-la-carte” history tours outside or beyond the Big House (Small, 2013). Enslavement is also attenuated by tour guides using terms like “servant” or “worker” to refer to enslaved people (Modlin, 2008). Rapson (2020) metaphorically ties this distorted historical memory of slavery in the River Road region of Louisiana to the nearby sugar and petrochemical refinement industries, referring to the approach of some plantation tourism sites as engaging in “refined” memory-making. This omission of slavery from the plantation memoryscape effectively creates a mythical, romanticized version of history that selectively portrays Southern history as an *exclusively* opulent, capitalist, and white history (Bright et al., 2018; Hoelscher, 2003; Modlin, 2008).

In contrast to this selective historical memory of chattel slavery, plantation owners and managers have the choice to instead engage in what scholars have termed “commemorative justice” (Brasher et al., 2020; Cook, 2018) or “just representation” (Bright et al., 2021). Examples of plantation sites engaging in commemorative justice have been analyzed by Carter et al. (2014), Cook (2016), Cook and Potter (2018), and Hanna et al. (2018), who discuss examples of plantation sites in South Carolina and Louisiana that are doing more to integrate the history, culture, names, and identities of the enslaved into their spatial, performative, and textual narratives. Each site employs different approaches, engaging the system of chattel slavery in their historical interpretation to some extent—though nearly all are still run as for-profit enterprises. Next, we turn to a discussion of the political-economic theories that inform our analysis of dead labor in contemporary plantation landscapes.

### **Commodity Fetishism, Dead Labor, and the Productivity of Violence on the Plantation**

The application of Marxist analysis to the plantation<sup>2</sup> and chattel slavery has been a thread in critical historical scholarship since W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*. Du

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<sup>2</sup> Although we specifically studied the plantation and its associated contemporary tourism products in the socio-spatial context of the US South, we would also point out that comparative research of tourism operations at plantations and other sites of the exploitation of enslaved labor within the broader region encapsulated by the Transatlantic Slave Trade such as the Caribbean,

Bois (2013 [1935]) argued that the enslaved freed themselves (known as the “general strike thesis”) around the time of and during the Civil War through political, class-conscious acts of resistance, sabotage, and taking up arms for the Union through the United States Colored Troops. While Du Bois’s theories were largely rejected by the “establishment” (i.e., white-supremacist historians and other scholars during his own lifetime), the general strike thesis has been emphatically demonstrated to be not only plausible but the most likely of explanations for emancipation. While some scholars have not fully accepted the centrality of the enslaved in freeing themselves,<sup>3</sup> a surge of research in the late twentieth century demonstrated both the validity of the general strike thesis and the appropriateness of applying Marxist analysis and critiques of capitalism to the study of enslavement in the United States (e.g., Baptist, 2014; Beckert and Rockman, 2016; Berlin et al., 1993; Berry, 2017; Johnson, 2013; Woods, 2017 [1998]).

Recent economic historians Baptist (2014), Beckert and Rockman (2016), Johnson (2013), and Rosenthal (2018) have delineated the grafting of settler colonialism and American slavery upon capitalist accumulation. Baptist (2014) goes so far as to assert that slavery birthed American capitalism, while Harvey (2010: 305) notes that Marx’s *Capital, Vol. 1*, “dramatically reminds us of the originary violence and the fierce struggles that brought capitalism into being, an originary violence that the bourgeoisie subsequently sought to deny and forget, even as we live with its trace to this day.” At a microeconomic scale, Berry (2017) in *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh* details the varying value of enslaved persons from prenatal to postmortem, with the enslaved existing as animated commodities in an antebellum capitalist system. Important to our understanding of the literal value of the enslaved as dead labor, Berry (2017) spends a chapter explaining “Ghost Value,” the value that the corpses of the enslaved had as cadavers and in medical experiments at institutions such as Harvard, University of Virginia, and University of Pennsylvania. Most of these bodies were stolen in the night from slave cemeteries. In this way, the bodies of the enslaved were exploited not only in life but also in death, much as they continue to be exploited under contemporary plantation tourism.

For Berry (2017), the accounting of the commodity value of the enslaved from conception to death is a monetization of flesh and bones; however, the value of the enslaved exists well beyond their lived presence. In fact, the enslaved continue to produce value more than 150 years after the end of slavery in America. Marx (1992 [1867]: 165) notes that “the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with one another and with the human race. So, it is in the world of commodities with the products of men’s hands.” Put very simply, human labor is embodied in human wrought objects: i.e., our works—and by extension, ourselves—live on in things we make.

Marx (1992 [1867]) also observes that when commodities are made available on the market, the socially necessary human labor time that went into their production is hidden by the representation of the commodities’ exchange-value. This occlusion forms the basis of Marx’s (1992 [1867]: 165) theory of commodity fetishism: “the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labor within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material... relations arising out of this.” The social relationship between consumer and producer is masked, and in complex capitalist systems, impossible to know except through Marxist analysis that looks beyond the

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Central and South America, would be of great benefit to the scholarly community. Extant examples of this kind of comparative research can be found, for example, in a special issue of the journal *Slavery and Abolition* (Vol. 30, No. 2), which includes contributions examining the bicentennial of the abolition of the British Slave Trade and its effects in England, Ghana, Barbados, and Jamaica. Another excellent example of scholarship on the historical and literary connections between the US South and the Caribbean can be found in Adams et al. (2007).

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Genovese (1965) and Foner (1988). Although they engaged with Marxist critiques of slavery, both believed there were too many causal factors leading up to emancipation to give the general strike thesis full credence.

surface appearance of the commodity to articulate the social relations of production (see, for example, Hulme, 2017, who discusses a methodology for tracing commodity trails). Instead, consumers interact with commodities as an economic relationship between things (money exchanged for a commodity) rather than between people. Marx thus takes commodities to be metaphorically “dead labor” because they are materialized, concretized products of human labor—the socially necessary labor time that gives commodities an exchange-value.

Don Mitchell (Kirsch and Mitchell, 2004; Mitchell, 1996, 2000, 2003) has been at the forefront of theorizing the geographic applications of Marx’s concept of dead labor, building upon Marx’s theory of dead labor by proposing that geographers should consider it in “*less-than-metaphorical terms*” (Mitchell, 2000: 761, emphasis added). By directing scholars to consider how commodity production quite often involves labor that is maimed, assaulted, or even killed in the labor process, Mitchell (2000: 764) goes beyond Marx’s metaphor to argue that violence is integral to the production of surplus value under capitalism:

What we need to do... is see that violence of various sorts is a foundation of the economy. On the one hand, ‘globalization’ in all its guises from the slave trade to the US military’s well-known willingness to occupy whole countries to protect our vital interest in bananas, has always proceeded through and been built by violence against labor.

An obvious example of this can be seen in the violence and coercion of enslavement as foundational to the United States’ entire history.

Kirsch and Mitchell (2004) further explain that Marx rejected the notion that machinery in the factory itself is capable of producing commodities’ value. Instead, “the value contained in the machine—itsself transformed from previous intellectual, manual, and mechanical labours—is transferred, bit by bit, to the products and preserved in them for the market” (Kirsch and Mitchell 2004: 698–699). Applied to plantation tourism, it is not the material plantation (the Big House, the tables, chairs, cooking wares, etc.) that excretes back to its contemporary owners the value built into it by dead enslaved labor. Rather, being set in motion by workers operating the sites (the managers, staff, docents, etc.) the dead labor value concretized into the physical plantation itself is transferred into the tourism products being sold.

Finally, the work of Tyner and others (McKittrick, 2011; Springer, 2013; Tyner, 2014a, 2014b; Tyner and Inwood, 2014) on violence is quite instructive. Tyner and Inwood’s (2014: 774) dialectical approach to violence argues that violence is not a thing, but a political *process*. Tyner (2014a), using the empirical example of the Khmer Rouge-orchestrated genocide in Cambodia, argues that violence—in all its conceptual distinctions and dialectical relations (direct, structural, administrative, law-making, and law-preserving)—can be viewed as fundamental to primitive accumulation *and* the administrative governance of modern society. As Tyner (2014a: 76) succinctly states, “Violence does not simply happen; it is administered.” In Khmer Rouge-controlled Cambodia, those in power used violence to reduce laborers to their use-value as productive bodies, with unproductive bodies seen as surplus to be eliminated. Returning to the history of chattel slavery in light of these scholars’ work, under the then-dominant mode of production—first a time of primitive accumulation sustaining colonial control, and then early-American capitalism—white, male, landed elites overwhelmingly dominated the era’s power structure. These men justified, if not outright ignored, slavery’s inherent violence as a necessity: in their eyes, violence was a prerogative for the “dominant race” to administer upon racialized “heathens.” Violence in the form of enslaved dead labor not only sustained the capitalist political economy of the early United States but also continues to be a productive force to this day in the South’s plantation tourism industry.

In terms of modern-day plantation tourism sites, Carter et al. (2011) use Marx’s concept of fetishism to describe how contemporary plantation tourism hides the social relations between slaves who

built the plantations and tourists who today consume these spaces for amusement. Carter et al.'s efforts to "defetishize" the plantation employ a Critical Race Theory-driven narrative/counter narrative method to deconstruct plantation tourist sites' master narratives. Our argument in this paper complements prior studies of the plantation by expanding a Marxist explication of how the dialectic of dead enslaved labor (in both metaphoric and literal senses) and present-day living labor are enrolled in reanimating the plantation, particularly the Big House, as means of production in profit generation for tourism operators (capitalists in the experience sector of the economy). Most sites that we have studied are not trying to hide the fact that the enslaved are now dead (after more than a century, even the plantation owners are long-dead); this is seen particularly among the predominantly white owners and tour guides who work as the public "face" of the operation. But the crucial point that they *do* attempt to hide is that the now-dead enslaved workers were in fact killed through the *brutal practices* of slavery; the now-dead enslaved peoples were killed in the production of the very plantations that are currently being reanimated for entertainment (or at best, "edutainment") purposes by present-day workers, who are themselves being exploited as waged-workers.

### **Black Marxism**

Building upon these Marxist perspectives, Black Marxist thought has argued that Marxist theory, in its foundations as a Eurocentric worldview, is very partial and incomplete in its application to the legacy of slavery and racism in the United States (Robinson, 2000). By emphasizing how heavily influential race and racism have been to political-economic development, Robinson (2000) highlights the Eurocentrism found in Marx's historical materialist analysis of capitalism. Through the concept of racial capitalism, Robinson (2000) finds the dominant, modern political-economic system to be wholly dependent upon the violence of slavery, genocide, and imperialism. This should, ostensibly, lead to "Historical materialism [taking] note of the historical conditions of blacks as a part of the working class. One cannot conceive of the proletariat as a 'universal class' or submerge black oppression in a bogus universality" (Wilson, 2000: 2).

Similarly, Omi and Winant (2015: 139, emphasis original) find that the US is despotic, rather than a true democracy: "By *despotism* we refer to a familiar series of state practices: deprivation of life, liberty, or land; dispossession, violence, confinement, coerced labor, exclusion, and denial of rights or due process." Davis (2005), drawing upon Du Bois (2013 [1935]) in her explanation of abolition democracy, argues that the US cannot truly be considered democratic when the vestiges of slavery, namely the prison-industrial-complex, capital punishment, and torture are still key features of its racist reality. Davis (2005) highlights that, beginning in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, enslaved Black peoples could face the penalty of death for up to 70 offenses. She goes on to observe that: "slavery as an institution...managed to become a receptacle for all those forms of punishment that were considered to be barbaric by the developing democracy... With the abolition of slavery this clearly racialized form of punishment became de-racialized and persists today under the guise of color-blind justice" (Davis, 2005: 36–37). Informed by Davis (2005), Omi and Winant (2015), Robinson (2000), Wilson (2000), among many others, we argue through the remainder of this paper that a dialectic of dead labor (metaphorical and literal) and the memory of dead labor are instruments of racial (anti-Black) capitalism where exploited tour guides reanimate the past labor of now-dead enslaved workers for the benefit of the capitalist/owner of the tourism operation.

### **Fieldwork Methodology and Site Descriptions**

Our analysis is based upon qualitative research of contemporary plantation tourism, conducted as part of the Race, Ethnicity, and Social Equity in Tourism (RESET) Initiative team along the River Road in Louisiana. Approximately seventy miles long, River Road is a corridor from Baton Rouge to New Orleans along the banks of the Mississippi River where sugarcane plantations once held thousands of enslaved people. Today, River Road is a tourism destination with approximately forty restored

plantations, nineteen of which are open to the public for tours. Approximately twenty-five other plantations have been converted into private homes, bed-and-breakfasts, and, in the case of Nottoway Plantation, a full-scale resort.

Our work extends upon Bright et al.'s (2018) analysis of interviews with four River Road plantation owners/operators conducted in 2013. While Bright et al. (2018) assessed owners' perceptions of and approach to slavery, the analysis presented herein focuses on owners' economic motivations, discussions of profitability, and considerations of the plantation as a tourist site that intersects economic incentives and the history of slavery. According to Bright et al. (2018: 1746), "...owners are responsible for negotiating the inclusion and specific treatment of slavery in docent narratives, exhibits, and the spatial layout of grounds and preserved structures."

Of these plantations, three are privately owned [Plantations A, B, and C] and one is a not-for-profit structure held by a corporation [Plantation D]. To maintain confidentiality, plantations and their respective owners will not be identified and gender-neutral pronouns will be used in reference to the owners. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, cleaned for accuracy and clarity (including the removal of hesitations and other oral idiosyncrasies), and analyzed manually using NVivo qualitative analysis software. We used middle-range coding—a mix of bottom-up codes that emerge from data and top-down codes from the literature and instruments (Urquhart, 2013)—to identify themes related to our research questions. In this process, we first used a deductive approach to identify data related to financial operations or economic decisions.

Rather than follow Small's methodology (2009), we have sought to obtain in-depth and nuanced responses from owners and managers about their practices.<sup>4</sup> The four interviews, while technically a small sample, were nonetheless greatly detailed and in-depth (interview length ranged from 1.5 to almost 3.5 hours, for a total of more than 10-hours of interview material). The interviews were also semi-structured to ensure that all participants answered a similar range of questions but had the freedom to elaborate as needed (Dunn, 2010). Furthermore, the selected sites represent the most-toured of the nineteen tour-offering plantations along River Road, which is the plantation region with the highest numbers of visitors within the American South.

As noted in Bright et al. (2018: 1748), analysis of these data makes an important scholarly contribution based on the uniqueness of the "depth and honesty of discussions held with plantation owners," touted as a "testament to the long-term working relationship" that the RESET team had with selected plantations. This deep rapport allowed plantation owners to "speak freely to reveal...how they make sense [of] past ideological and political positions, as well as management approaches" (Bright et al. 2018: 1748). These data were then re-coded inductively, allowing two larger themes to emerge related to 1) deriving surplus value and 2) contestation between representing dead labor and capitalist imperatives. Data were independently analyzed by two researchers and compared for inter-rater reliability. Together, our analysis supports the assertion that contemporary plantation owners use the value of their sites—including the dead labor value of enslaved populations embedded into the physical structures—primarily for capitalist accumulation rather than reparative justice.

## **Interview Findings**

### ***The Deriving of Surplus Value***

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<sup>4</sup> The data we draw upon here was part of a multi-year project researching plantation tourism throughout three states in the US South. Not only did this research examine a total of seventeen plantations, our research team observed and mapped the spatial narratives on 170 tours, interviewed 109 plantation tour guides, conducted 604 interviews with visitors, and conducted 1,785 surveys. Other publications from our research team have studied more generalizable findings from these larger sample sizes.



In interviews, plantation owners did not discuss “success” in terms of educational value, social responsibility, or altruism of their sites, but largely in terms of economic profitability. The owners extensively discussed ticket prices, monthly visitor totals and trends, and non-tour efforts to increase profitability including weddings, sorority gatherings, and on-site products and services sold through gift shops and restaurants. One owner referred to the site as a “country club that happens to give tours to a historic house” and frequently cited their food services and party offerings. Two of the sites, including the aforementioned site, have restaurants, and all four have gift shops.

At Plantation A, the owner stated, “weddings will always be my cash cow.” As the following quotes throughout the interview with Plantation A’s owner indicate, weddings are an important part of the income model for many Southern plantations and play a prominent role in shaping sites’ spatial organization.

[If] somebody wants to do a wedding here at night at some point, then we can [have] the food service here, and in another room of the house. ... You could consider this [for] weddings at night, private dinners at night. ... Brides and their bridal party will stand in front of it [the Big House], and get married at the top of the stairs. And the bride will walk through the garden. [Plantation A]

You’ve got to figure... your average wedding is 250 people, you charge them \$150, \$160 a person. So, you’re getting a little over \$40,000 on a Saturday night, and your costs are maybe about \$1,000. And, you know... it will always be. I can’t—if I could find something that was better than weddings, I’d do it. The cottages, if I’m successful with pulling them off as luxurious cottages, and people pay \$400 a night, that will be better than the weddings... The cottages I can do every night. Figure with twenty cottages at \$400 a night, I’m getting \$8,000 a night, times seven nights. They do very well, they can pay for themselves in two years. [Plantation A]

Although other owners also discussed weddings, they did not place nearly as much emphasis on them. Like Plantation A, the other plantations rent on-site, multi-purpose spaces for weddings, parties, festivals, and concerts. As expected, all owners appeared to be open to any income opportunities from their sites so long as they see the income opportunity as profitable and not endangering other revenue streams. Owners discussed historic preservation grants they have sought for restoration work, and most of the sites we studied have also made money as film sets.

When I came here, we did not do parties, weddings, or anything. We didn’t have this pavilion. So, since I’ve been here, you know, we’ve got all of that stuff. We’ve got all the—all the brochures for that, the prices... everything for the party... We have a building in the plot that... is also a soundstage, so a lot of times we rent it out. They had a couple of TV shows... [Plantation B]

### ***Contestation between Actually Representing Dead Labor and Capitalist Imperatives***

Most plantation owners’ inattentiveness or complete lack of awareness of the contributions of enslaved persons at their sites became apparent in their discussions of the sites’ marketing and branding as an “escape” and the manner and (in)frequency with which slavery came up, both prompted and unprompted, throughout the interviews. The four River Road plantations analyzed here stand in contrast to the more recently opened Whitney Plantation, also in the River Road region (Cook, 2016), or McLeod Plantation in Charleston, South Carolina (Halifax, 2018), both of which operate as counter-narrative sites

with their explicit purpose to commemorate and teach about slavery.<sup>5</sup> Upper management at all four research sites also disclosed in interviews that their staffs had recently or were currently undertaking discussions about how to do more to market themselves as highly manicured tourist attractions (rather than as educational/historic places):

I want people to walk on the property and forget that their brother is dying of cancer, I want them to forget that they lost their job last week. I want them to forget whatever is negative, and walk on this property, and be happy... the way they would like to feel. And that's the whole idea of their experience, and while they're walking through, they're going to see beautiful things along the way, hopefully nothing negative. [Plantation A]

Every month you get to eat something good. Right now: make sure everybody smells the orange blossoms and the grapefruit blossoms. That's part of the experience. [Plantation B]

As part of these plantations' escape fantasies, they frequently marginalize or occlude slavery at key points of intervention where it could appropriately be discussed. As these issues are addressed in Bright et al. (2018) and align with Modlin's (2008) assessment of a variety of myths in operation at plantation tourism sites, they will only be outlined here. The fantasies and myths seen most frequently at these four sites include the tropes of: "African-Americans are the visitors driving the inclusion of slavery"; "Slaves were not treated that badly"; "Slaves were treated poorly, but not as poorly as other places"; or "We need to stop focusing on this history of slavery, we are past that."

Among this particular group of plantation site owners, the inclusion of slavery in a site's spatial narrative was clearly secondary to economic considerations. Owners are first concerned with business operations and revenue; thus, any "permissible" inclusion of slavery cannot be determined to have a negative impact on revenue. For example, in discussing how Plantation C tried to distinguish itself from other nearby plantations, its owner said, "[Visitors] would get a better understanding of the evolution of architecture, the different architectures, the lifestyle when it was a plantation, and...when they were sugar cane plantations, run with slave labor, and all that, too" [Plantation C].

Later in the interview, Plantation C's owner returned to ideas of interpreting slavery at his site:

We didn't want to address the issue of slavery. Because that's a minefield to get into. It's tough enough to try to do what we're doing, ... but I was very struck as we started talking to some professional people—people in the history department at Tulane, and other people—the African American community felt like this was not being done right. So, we said, well, we want to hear so we can educate ourselves, and then—not that we're necessarily going to do everything that you might suggest, because there's some people who are very... kind of activist attitude... We want people to understand something about what life was like, what kind of a community, because plantations were—they were all self-sufficient communities [Plantation C]

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<sup>5</sup> In the River Road region, only Laura Plantation and Whitney Plantation actively teach about slavery as part of their main tours, rather than as a side attraction or "a-la-carte" add-on tour. Despite their ostensibly laudable goals, both still fall within the ranks of other tourist-centered plantations that capitalize on the enslaved labor that built the site, even if, for example, Whitney Plantation's owner says he will never be able to recoup the millions of his own money spent to make the site operational. Even at newer sites that present more accurate historical narratives, economics cannot be divorced from the equation: all three sites operate gift shops or bookstores, and McLeod Plantation in Charleston rents out its facilities for weddings, a factor that played heavily in at least one tour guide's resignation in their first year of operation. For more on the difficult task contemporary laborers (tour guides) face at plantation tourism sites, see Potter (2016) and Cook and Potter (2018).

Although the owners all recognized that there *are* points where educational interventions about the importance of slavery could occur within their overall curation of the plantation experience, they discussed the development and structure of the narrative of their tours as a factor in tourists' satisfaction with the site rather than out of a concern for accurately teaching history. For these owners and managers, tourists are the consumers of the experiences that their sites provide. We would also add that tourists, dialectically, are also the producers: it is through their active consumption (the valorization of capital) that they facilitate the sites' reanimation of past enslaved dead labor, for if there were no tourists at a site, there would be no productive activities taking place and no surplus accumulated. Their satisfaction leads to return visits, good reviews, and ultimately more consumers. Important, here, is that tourists-as-producers believe they are merely engaged with consuming the tour, the Big House, and perhaps various products on display—the metaphorical dead labor. This is where the literal dead labor of the enslaved is hidden from view for nearly all tourists, and as we found in our research, many guides intentionally downplay the role of the enslaved, their lives and deaths, on tours, in line with tourists' expectations.



**Figure 1.** Laura Plantation, one of 19 plantations in the River Road region of Louisiana open to the public as tourism destinations. Photo: Matthew Cook, 2014.

Where teachable moments and spaces exist in which these four sites could inform visitors about the historical violence of the plantation, these are instead subordinate to narratives that emphasize elegance, gentility, and wealth of the original white owners. Plantation D, for instance, describes their storytelling techniques for bringing visitors closer to original owners and family members, but the site does not allot the same emphasis within the tour to narratives of the enslaved:

We try to take the visitor into a situation, just a one-time situation, in which you're gonna see how this person, say [an original owner/family member], will react. ... We have to

bring you into [her] world to understand why she would do something. And the closer we get you into [her] world is the more you understand about the culture and about what it means to live on this place... So storytelling technique is actually essential in interpreting culture and history. Can't do it by explaining it to people. Dates and things like that are not important. [Plantation D]

In a similar fashion, Plantation B's owner describes how they think of their site less as a museum than as an amusement site:

I'd put mine about eighty-five percent on the entertainment. Now, they're gonna learn more here than they will any other place, because the stories are based around historical fact. OK, so they will learn about the roles of women. They will learn about how slaves were treated. They learn about what happened in a certain year here. *But we're not interested in facts... because it's a historical drama that you're putting on.* [Plantation B, emphasis added]

### **Capitalizing Dead Labor: A Marxist Reading of Plantation Tourism**

Dwyer et al. (2013: 427) note that plantation tourism began as early as the period of Southern Reconstruction and was closely tied to efforts to reduce the South's reliance on agriculture as its economic base. And as Adams (1999: 166) argues, "Today, the plantation has become a focal point not simply of national curiosity but of national nostalgia. Nostalgia is far from an inert force—it plays a powerful role in shaping visions of present and future." Remnants of antebellum plantations along River Road have been purchased and restored and transformed into tourist sites over time by wealthy, private individuals and for-profit companies, most of whom lack historical connections to original families and owners. Extending Kirsch and Mitchell's (2004) use of Marx's metaphor of the factory-as-commodity of dead labor that comes to life through new commodity production, we argue that modern-day capitalists (including the owners we interviewed) continue to extract value from refurbished plantation landscapes and structures that are the original products of dead labor in the metaphorical sense—as are all material products derived from human labor. But, bearing in mind the call to consider dead labor beyond its metaphorical origins, plantations—factories in the field—are also the product of literal, violently killed, dead labor: the labor of the enslaved women, men, and children who were brutally forced to construct and maintain plantation landscapes and produce their commodities.

The literal dead labor still contained within plantation sites is reanimated and made productive once again through contemporary owners and workers who use the symbolic value of the plantation to sell a mythical Southern experience, which in turn is used to sell mint juleps and plantation-themed weddings. Experience economy capitalists (or entire for-profit companies in some cases) purchase Big Houses and the remaining land that surrounds them, and invest substantial amounts of financial capital into converting, restoring, or building anew the facilities and landscapes needed to attract consumers seeking a "real southern" experience. For example, Plantation A's owner mentioned in their interview that they sometimes wish they had not studied art history in their private school education because it increased the "need to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on paintings." In Marx's (1992 [1867]) terminology, this money poured into the property's restoration, upkeep, and expansion (often at great expense, as most owners are keen to be as close as possible to the perception of architectural accuracy) becomes part of the constant capital of the operation. Despite the addition of this new constant capital, we argue that it does little to diffuse the dead enslaved labor that is embedded at the heart of the entire tourism landscape established in the name of curating happy moods and painfully partial histories for visitors.

Plantation tourist site owners invest this capital to financially profit, we argue, from the exploitation of contemporary workers' labor, who in turn, work to reanimate the dead labor of the

enslaved. As Owner A indicated, they could turn a profit of approximately \$39,000 on the cost of \$1,000 that primarily pays the living labor and other costs of keeping the site open for a day. Although the larger RESET research project did not focus as much on contemporary labor conditions, the team did interview at least half of all guides working at each of our research sites during the data-collection period (see Potter 2016 for more on the methodology and analysis of these interviews).<sup>6</sup>

As we outlined above, for plantation tourist sites, it is not the physical remains of the plantation itself that accrues back to its contemporary owners the value built into it by dead enslaved labor, rather is a dialectic between plantation past and plantation tourist site present—that is, living labor reanimating dead labor, from which surplus value derives. This is true for all capitalist profit-making ventures. However, again, as money changes hands and profits accumulate, the discrete transference of value comes from dead *enslaved* labor to contemporary plantation owners in a process that relies on removing most or all recognition of the enslaved laborers that built the plantation. We argue that this dialectic is intentionally shrouded because owners assume that their plantation-as-tourist-experience model would fail under a more unsettling narrative. For the many tourists who are in search of an experience of a romanticized past, the obscuring of the enslaved—the theft of wages, maiming, injuring, punishment, torture, and death—is of little concern, for they do not come to these sites seeking the enslaved. From the tour guides’ perspectives, they undergo alienation in the classical Marxist sense of being pressed into this labor (though this is true for nearly everyone under capitalism), separated from their ability to direct their own actions and from themselves as humans (Marx 1959 [1844]).

However, while Marx (1959 [1844]: 32, emphasis original) shows that the consequences of alienation, “the fact that man is estranged from the product of his labor, from his life activity, from his species-being, is the *estrangement of man from man*,” we would add that nowhere does Marx say explicitly that this estrangement of human from other humans need be proximate in time *or* geography. Furthermore, almost all contemporary tour guides working at Southern plantation sites are white. Although these workers are exploited and alienated in their contemporary labor, they nonetheless benefit from what Du Bois (2013 [1935]) called the psychological wages of whiteness, which has long been a barrier to class-solidarity with people of color in the US. Thus, tour guides and other white laborers working for plantation tourism sites are doubly alienated from the dead enslaved labor of African and African-descended peoples.

Bright et al. (2018) argue that many of the owners of River Road plantations propagate the same myths presented by Modlin (2008) regarding the inclusion of slavery, including the deflection myth that slavery either did not happen at the site or that slavery was somehow different or “better” at their site. Deflection of slavery, a common (mis)representational tactic, can be interpreted as an outcome of commodity fetishism at plantations and as part of dominant trends throughout the US to avoid difficult discussion and engagement with slavery, racism and White supremacy and their lingering and persistent effects. One clear example of deflection among the River Road plantations can be seen in the reasons provided by the owner of Plantation C as to why they did not incorporate slavery at their site until very recently:

So, our thing was that we kept hearing that we’re not doing anything about that [discussing slavery]. You know, so I said well, I didn’t want to... steal somebody else’s thunder... I mean, if Evergreen [a nearby River Road plantation in Edgard, Louisiana] has the most fantastic collection of cabins in their slave quarter—I mean they’ve got a

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<sup>6</sup> The majority of guides were female with a mean age of 37. Nearly all of those interviewed indicated that they worked in their current position out of economic necessity; as Potter (2016) noted in her analysis, many docents during the summer months were younger high school and college students, while others were recent college graduates who had not yet gained employment in their degree field.

wonderful slave quarter... probably the best remaining collection of slave quarter buildings in the country. ... If people want to learn about that aspect of it, go down there, because I don't have it here... [It] was all torn down... by the 1930s.

Drawing again upon Black Marxism and racial capitalism, slavery is essential to understanding racism and other present conditions in the US, but many remain oblivious of this history or willfully resist believing that such an immoral system was essential to the creation of the nation. Many others accept that slavery happened but believe that it was an aberration, rather than fundamental to American life. Considering Jansson's (2010) application of "internal orientalism" in the US to treat the "South as Other," much of the American public tends to consign slavery exclusively to Southern states without a consideration of slavery's history in the



**Figure 2.** Reconstructed slave cabins at Oak Alley Plantation, Vacherie, Louisiana. Photo by Matthew Cook, 2014.

North prior to the Civil War and the enormous financial benefits reaped from slavery by many Northern banks, business, and individuals. In other words, many Americans are simply unwilling to confront the truth or are woefully miseducated about slavery. Beyond these elements of omission (or in Connerton's, 2008, terms: *forgetting as humiliated silence*), however, is the "sin of commission" (*forgetting as repressive erasure*) that contemporary plantation owners commit by purchasing the products of dead labor—plantation land and "Big House" mansions—and valorizing their investment through commodity forms of tourism and its trappings via the exploitation of current laborers, who are alienated from their own labor while simultaneously disregarding or downplaying the role of the enslaved in the making of the plantation. When discussing the absence of slavery from their tours, the owner of Plantation A stated:

Slavery is a difficult situation. We used to talk about slavery, too—but a minor statement. We have no slave houses [that remain standing] ... I don't feel that just because this is a

plantation house, you have to educate people on the slavery laws. That's just my personal opinion. Slavery is not an important issue to me. [Plantation A]

Likewise, the owner of Plantation B frames their site as a representation of regional culture rather than as a site of bondage:

[The] whole basis of why I think we're so successful is that we took those stories and my background of knowing what life was like here, and my understanding of trying to look at it from the outside in... We said: this is not a plantation. It's not—it's not a house. It's not a family. It is the culture of Louisiana. And we have insider's look into what it was like. [Plantation B]

Just as plantations were built using enslaved labor and maintained by wealth accrued from their labor, modern plantation tourist sites are still a product of this labor. In this sense, plantations have “profited from erasing a Black sense of place” (McKittrick, 2011, 949), largely removing references to the history of enslaved people from the plantation while continuing to profit financially by reanimating the structures and landscapes they built.

The commodities purchased at plantations—starting with Big House tours, but also including everything from overnight stays in on-site cottages to the sodas and snacks purchased in the gift shops—conceal the necessary labor congealed in the commodity being consumed. In the case of Big House tours and the few sites that still have historically preserved slave cabins, enslaved human bodies carried out the necessary labor time required to build and maintain these structures (to say little about the wholesale reshaping of these landscapes). Despite the belief among most plantation owners and operators that their decisions to offer tourism products come from good intentions, they nonetheless profit from the dead labor of the enslaved. Many of the River Road plantation owners mentioned in interviews that appreciation for historic preservation, art, and architecture drove them to purchase, restore, and adapt their sites for tourism, but as we have highlighted in our analysis, capital accumulation was a clear factor, too. One owner said:

I realized if [a building] is beautiful, it's worth more... by putting a new façade on the building, you can get 40 percent more rent than if it had an ugly façade. ... Biltmore is what I am copying. That's my model. ...the house is the anchor, and then, all kinds of other structures and buildings to entertain people and to grasp money from it. [Plantation A]

Another owner clearly indicated that despite taking years to raise money for repairs and to build up the tourism operation, in the end what mattered was the business' success:

In [the early 1990s], my brother [took on a management role], and he was willing to listen to us in the trenches. ...with him being more supportive of running it business-like, instead of just saying “you can't have anything” ...we grew the business nicely. [Plantation C]

Finally, it is worth noting that some River Road plantation tourist sites do not make an economic profit from the dead labor of slaves in explicitly financial terms, yet that does not remove the value of their dead labor in other ways. In the interview with the manager at Plantation D, which is corporate-owned as a not-for-profit foundation, it became apparent that the combined revenues from the sites' tours, weddings, and yearly community festivals are not enough to make a profit and cover the cost of maintaining a historic house museum or tourism operation. This raises the question: why allow the site to continue operating? It turns out that the site's value to the company comes from public relations and social capital. As the manager put it, “I think that [the corporation] has come around to the fact that, okay, it has become a community asset. It's part of us doing business.” They went on to explain that at

one point in the 1970s, the company obtained two plantation homes as part of land accumulation projects along the Mississippi River, but could not find an interested buyer in the more derelict of the two sites—therefore they bulldozed it. This led to substantial uproar among local people and historic preservationists, so the corporation maintained and operated the remaining plantation site at a financial loss until finally closing the site at the end of 2021. Nonetheless, the company long reaped the benefits of dead labor through the social capital of improved public relations and community goodwill.

### **Conclusion: Slaves to Capital**

To be utterly alienated from one's works is to be a slave, and the antebellum plantation was a creation of such alienated labor. The reanimated remains of the plantation are products of a dialectic of long dead labor and present day alienated labor. They both perform as means of production in past and current systems of capitalist accumulation. One produced commodity crops; the other produces commodified amusement experiences.

This paper deliberates on how capitalist necromancers use the conflation of the Big House with the plantation to exploit dead enslaved labor. This focus on the master enslaver's home conveniently obscures most of the work and living spaces of the enslaved and in doing so obscures much of their labors. The consumption of Southern US history—largely as a tourism experience devoid of social relations past and present—prolongs and exacerbates personal and institutional forms of racism that are often unacknowledged and unaddressed in the current despotic US racial regime. Commodity fetishism and alienation are key components of plantation tourist sites' financial successes. Because current plantation tourist site owners and operators can sell tourist experiences to consumers without having to address the dead labor that haunts the plantation, they reap a profit by exploiting both living and dead labor and continue to promote one-sided, white narratives of Southern history.

Building on the important work of geographers and other social scientists, we have employed Marxist concepts here to open new avenues for research that questions and rethinks tourism at plantation tourist sites and other spaces that benefit and profit from dead, enslaved labor. Trying to change these white spaces—plantation tourist sites—into Black spaces *is* financially risky. The operation risks losing white patrons and not being able to replace them with Black patrons because of plantations' negative associations. However, if owners and operators of plantation tourism sites by and large continue to profit from dead labor, this raises serious questions about how reaping these profits should also warrant a degree of social responsibility in the presentation of history at these sites. As Chatterjee and Ahmed (2019: 381, emphasis added) have asserted:

*Unraveling exploitation is life-altering.* ...it demonstrates the systemic basis of class inequality, white supremacy, and patriarchy within capitalism. It therefore creates possibilities for political praxis that goes beyond altruism and charity, and instead pushes for systemic transformation through wealth redistribution, land reforms, social welfare programs, and affirmative actions.

If, indeed, as Woods (2017 [1998], 4) argued—that the plantation tradition of exploitation of Black bodies in the name of profit “continues to survive among those who celebrate its brutal legacy”—then there will always be the potential for the plantation to operate as profit-driven sites of capitalist accumulation so long as the sites exist. Since it is never possible to divorce the economic from the social, for plantation tourist sites to truly operate as sites of commemorative, restorative justice, they cannot operate simultaneously as sites of capitalist accumulation and sites of forgetting as repressive erasure and as humiliated silence. This is challenging, to be sure, but as Woods (2017 [1998], 2) argued: “In order to construct societies based on social and economic justice, a new form of consciousness must emerge.” This means that no matter how hard scholars try to convince plantation owners and managers to begin to engage in commemorative justice by better incorporating the history, narratives, and



perspectives of the enslaved on their tours, these sites nonetheless will continue to profit from dead enslaved labor until they are willing to completely abandon this business model.

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