

Slavery Heritage in Online Promotion of Tourist Plantations and TripAdvisor Reviews: An Analysis

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to present the phenomenon of plantation tourism in the US South. Many antebellum plantations in southern states have become tourism products. Due to the fact that the economy of that region was based on the labour of the enslaved, this form of plantation tourism should be classified as dark tourism.

However, the narrative of slavery is not the only one presented at tourist plantations. Some of them choose to highlight other aspects of their heritage and history, such as the stories of past owners or the beauty of the property. An overview of the official websites of ten plantations from across the region shows dominant tendencies in the marketing of such objects.

Two plantations, Boone Hall Plantation in South Carolina and Whitney Plantation in Louisiana, are described in more detail. As the former advertises as “America’s most photographed plantation” and the latter is a museum of slavery, the contrast between them is stark.

Keywords: dark tourism, heritage, heritage interpretation

Introduction

Avenues lined with southern live oaks leading to grand mansions, hoop skirts, balls – this vision of the Antebellum South may seem appealing if one forgets that what made this lavish lifestyle possible was the labour of the enslaved. Many antebellum plantations are now tourist plantations open to visitors and the narratives they choose to highlight differ.

In their attempt to define heritage of atrocity, J. E. Tunbridge and G. J. Ashworth [1996, p. 94] first consider the term “atrocity” itself, listing different types of atrocities. However, the most basic meaning of the term they give at the very beginning is “deliberately inflicted human suffering¹ Slavery fits into this definition, which means slavery heritage can only be classified as heritage of atrocity.

F. Tilden [1977, p. 3] names historic houses and museums among the places where visitors are exposed to heritage and where they encounter different narratives about it. Southern plantations are historic places and an important part of American history. The way their owners choose to present the past of these sites is crucial. G. Dann and A. V. Seaton [2001] studied examples of slavery in world history and slavery-related sites which are now tourist attractions. They noted how southern plantations presented an idealised version of the past and how alike many of them were.

¹ All quotations retain original spelling.

The aim of this paper is to present an overview of plantation tourism in the American South and the approach to the heritage of slavery presented online. First, I analyse a list of “10 Notable Southern Plantation Tours” published on the website The Culture Trip [*10 Notable Southern Plantation Tours in the United States, Culture Trip*, 21 February 2019]. Then I present two specific plantations – Boone Hall Plantation in South Carolina and Whitney Plantation in Louisiana. The former, a working plantation open to visitors, is advertised as “America’s most photographed plantation”. It is also a popular wedding venue and has served as the setting for a number of films and TV shows. The latter is a historic plantation transformed into a museum devoted to slavery. Through multimodal analysis of the plantations’ official websites I present the narratives they choose to highlight and their approach to the heritage of slavery. It is also my aim to reflect upon the nature of the phenomenon of plantation tourism.

Official websites of tourist plantations offer a significant insight into which aspects of their heritage they choose to highlight and how they interpret their history. What is more, tourists often first come into contact with a place they are planning to visit through its official website, which means the website and its contents have bearing on how tourists imagine the site. This is why I chose to analyse official websites of all the plantations mentioned in this paper.

D. Alderman and E. Modlin [2008] analysed the visibility of the topic of slavery within online promotional texts. 20 websites of North Carolina historic plantations were analysed and the results obtained proved that, while slavery was not excluded, the way in which it was depicted was often stereotypical. It is an example of how official online marketing of tourist plantations deals with the heritage of slavery.

The choice of Boone Hall Plantation and Whitney Plantation for my study was motivated by the fact that the two present very different dominant narratives. While Boone Hall Plantation is mainly focused on cultivating the Antebellum Myth and Old South nostalgia, it does not omit slavery altogether. I aimed to determine how tourists react to the narrative on slavery presented among other narratives. Boone Hall Plantation is also an example of a plantation where authentic slave cabins have been preserved, which is not always the case – the cabins at Boone Hall Plantation, made of brick, have survived to the present day, whereas wooden slave cabins at many other plantations were destroyed and, in some cases, reconstructed. Therefore, Boone Hall is one of the places where visitors get to visit the very same place where the enslaved lived, and it was one of my aims to examine their reaction to it.

In contrast, Whitney Plantation is a museum devoted to slavery, and educating people on the subject is its main objective. This offers a very different perspective from that

presented at Boone Hall Plantation, and also gave me the possibility to examine how effective it is at achieving its aim.

Slavery heritage and nostalgia for the Old South

Slavery heritage is the heritage of all affected by it, whether or not they wish to acknowledge it. It is the heritage of black Americans who are victims of racism in any form. It is also the heritage of white Americans who benefit from white privilege – numerous assets which they have not earned, but which they are granted on the basis on their skin colour [McIntosh 2007, p. 377]. They may not want to acknowledge this privilege, some of them may not be fully aware of its existence, but it does not make it any less real.

Slavery heritage can only be classified as heritage of atrocity. There is no doubt that in this case one group inflicted extreme suffering upon another [Tunbridge, Ashworth 1996, p. 94]. To lessen or forget the ordeal of the enslaved would not only be an insult to their memory. It would also mean that nothing has changed since the antebellum era.

Despite the horrors of slavery, the Old South might evoke nostalgia – a longing for a past more perfect than the present, a turn to the past for what the present lacks [Tannock 1995]. In this case it is a dream of a perfect, peaceful world of hoop skirts, magnolias, and sipping sweet tea on the porch, a world very different from the realities of the present, and a world which never really existed.

Plantation tourism

Plantation tourism could be defined as a form of tourism practiced in any part of the world where any kind of crop can be cultivated, and it is the practice of visiting either working or historic plantations. It can therefore be classified as cultural tourism, defined by

T. Silberberg [1995, pp. 361-365] as a type of tourism where the tourist is, at least partly, motivated by interest in areas of human activity such as history, art, science, the lifestyle of a given community or their heritage. Those who practise plantation tourism in the US South visit historical sites and learn about them, either during guided tours, through audio guides or by reading markers describing the plantation and the objects on display. However, in the case of plantation tourism in the US South, Central and South America and the Caribbean one more aspect needs to be taken into account. Antebellum plantations in southeastern USA and colonial plantations in Central and South America and the Caribbean were based on the labour of the enslaved and thus, while visiting them, tourists visit places connected with the heritage of slavery. Heritage tourism, defined by Y. Poria, R. Butler and D. Airey [2003, pp. 238-254] as visiting sites categorised as heritage or historic places, or where history is part of the experience and a motivation for the trip, is also a category that

plantation tourism falls into. While the motivations for visiting a tourist plantation may vary, each such visit is a visit to a historical site.

Acknowledging the horrors of slavery leads to the classification of plantation tourism as dark tourism. Dark tourism, as defined by P. E. Tarlow [2006, pp. 47-58], is the act of visiting places associated with death or suffering. However, P. Stone [2006, pp. 150-151] argues that not all dark tourism sites are equally dark, each of them can be placed on a spectrum of darkness according to a number of criteria: whether it is an actual site of death and suffering or one associated with them, the amount of time that has passed since those events occurred or how the history of the site is presented

In the case of antebellum plantations, their history is often presented in a romanticised way. The focus is on the owners' stories, their role in the US history and even on their daily lives, not on the fact that they owned human beings – and often treated them cruelly. In addition, tourists' motivations for visiting antebellum plantations vary. As the plantations present many narratives on their past, the tourists' interest may be in any of them – furniture, architecture, the Civil War or the owners' story. Slavery is just one of the options. What is more, over one hundred and fifty years have passed since the abolition of slavery. All of this would lead to the conclusion that plantation tourism should be placed at the lighter end of the dark tourism spectrum.

However, even though it may not always be acknowledged by their owners, antebellum plantations are sites of death and suffering. Slaves' lives were marked with constant pain – be it physical pain resulting from the cruelty of their masters and overseers or the harsh conditions they had to live and work in, exhaustion, or the pain of being separated from their loved ones. While it is true that slavery was abolished in 1865, it has had bearing on American society ever since. After the Civil War black Americans have still suffered from prejudice, which has its roots in the institution of slavery.

It is true that seeing a place of suffering is not always the motivation for visiting a tourist plantation. However, it is the scale of crimes committed there against so many combined with some tourists' ignorance and indifference which makes antebellum plantations tourist attractions of the darkest sort. The fact that places where so many people were treated so cruelly are now being used to present a romanticised version of the very era when this happened is, perhaps, the most horrifying. Glorifying the past and omitting its dark sides is dangerous, as it may lead to repeating past mistakes. This is why plantation tourism is the darkest form of dark tourism.

Heritage interpretations at tourist plantations vary. If slavery is mentioned, it is often in terms of hard work and sacrifice rather than suffering. It seems owners prefer to choose interpretations which would be more relatable for white tourists, hence the focus on the owners' perspective.

In April 2002 a study on the motivations of people who visit historic plantations was conducted at Laura Plantation in Louisiana by P. Carter and O. Dwyer. Its aim was to determine the visitors' interest in slavery as opposed to other narratives, such as the Civil War, furniture or architecture [Butler, Carter, Dwyer 2008]. The River Road Project, carried out in March 2013 by D. Alderman, D. Butler and S. Hanna, examined the interests of tourists visiting four plantation museums in Louisiana (Oak Alley Plantation, Laura Plantation, Houmas House and San Francisco Plantation), none of which is dedicated specifically to slavery. It was determined that the visitors' level of interest in different topics varied depending on which narratives were most highlighted at the plantation they visited [Alderman, Butler, Hanna 2015].

Methods

The methods used in this study are multimodal analysis and qualitative content analysis. Multimodal analysis, defined by S. Francesconi [2014], is a method which takes all the aspects of a website into account – textual and visual. Tourism websites typically contain not only text, but also photographs, other graphic items and videos, which are an inherent part of the presented narrative. It also needs to be acknowledged that all these aspects have cognitive and emotional effects on the user, and that texts published online are interactive. All the aspects (text, images, colours used) constitute a website, which is why such websites need to be analysed multimodally.

Culture Trip is a website devoted to cultural tourism, which states that its mission is “to inspire people to go beyond their cultural boundaries and experience what makes a place, its people and culture, special, unique and meaningful” [*Culture Trip, Facebook*, 18 August 2020]. I chose a list of “10 Notable Southern Plantation Tours” published on Culture Trip for this study, as it features plantations located in five different Southern states, thus providing an overview of plantation tourism in the region. I analysed the official websites of these ten plantations. The analysis was focused mainly on tracing any mentions of the heritage of slavery and the way it is presented to visitors. In addition to that, I pointed out how some of the plantations used the Antebellum Myth as part of their marketing strategy, for example by focusing on the beauty of the mansions and their gardens or trying to evoke nostalgia.

Official websites of Boone Hall Plantation and Whitney Plantation were analysed in more detail. I examined the types of tours and educational programmes offered and the language and phrases used. I also analysed, what pictures are featured on the websites, what colours and fonts are used. It was my aim to determine to what extent is the narrative of slavery present (as opposed to Old South nostalgia). I completed this analysis in March 2019. However, due to the fact that Whitney Plantation's website underwent some changes in June 2019, I analysed it again, thus obtaining a picture of how the plantation's online marketing

develops over time. I also analysed their official social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) – the frequency of posting and the type of content posted.

It needs to be noted that official websites are not the only sources of information tourists have access to. Everyone has a chance to speak their minds and share their impressions of the places they have visited. The narratives they present are different from each other and not always coherent with official promotional materials. Apart from recounting their experiences to their relatives and acquaintances, they can also share them online. As a result, tourists' expectations regarding the place they are to visit are based not only on professional materials but also on other, non-professional texts. Tourists are more likely to be influenced by other tourists than by the industry [Dann 2012].

TripAdvisor is a review website founded in 2000, which is more popular among tourists than other portals of that sort [*TripAdvisor Tops Travel Brand Awareness Index*, 13 May 2019]. I analysed reviews of Boone Hall Plantation and Whitney Plantation posted on TripAdvisor between 1 January 2019 and 8 March 2019 (in the case of Boone Hall Plantation), and 1 January 2019 and 11 March 2019 (for Whitney Plantation), thus collecting forty reviews of Boone Hall Plantation and fifty reviews of Whitney Plantation. Analysing them, I focused on chosen aspects: the beauty of the “big house” and grounds, tour guides and slavery for Boone Hall, adjectives used to describe the tour, visitor recommendation, slavery, beauty of the grounds and tour guides for Whitney Plantation. Those aspects were chosen based on the high frequency with which they appear in the reviews. The aim of this analysis was to see how tourists respond to heritage interpretations presented at those sites.

10 Notable Southern Plantation Tours

A list of “10 Notable Southern Plantation Tours in the United States” published on theculturetrip.com features Oak Alley Plantation in Louisiana, Belle Meade Plantation in Tennessee, Nottoway Plantation in Louisiana, Pebble Hill Plantation in Georgia, Andrew Jackson's Hermitage in Tennessee, Magnolia Plantation and Gardens in South Carolina, Destrehan Plantation and San Francisco Plantation in Louisiana, James Madison's Montpelier in Virginia and Evergreen Plantation in Tennessee. The list contains a brief description of each of the plantations, their history and the kind of tours that are offered there. In the below table the ten plantations are presented.

Table 1., Plantations featured in the list of “10 Notable Southern Plantation Tours in the United States”

Name	State	Description
Oak Alley Plantation	LA	“The Slavery Exhibit” is a part of what the visitors to the plantation have the chance to see, and it is acknowledged how much the plantation relied on the labour of enslaved men and women, and later

		sharecroppers. The “Oak Alley Slavery Database”, a list of those who were enslaved at the plantation, can also be found on the website.
Belle Meade Plantation	TN	A variety of tours is offered, including a tour of the mansion, tours focused on food or wine tasting and the “Journey to Jubilee” tour on which the visitors learn about slavery. The tour is said to be focused on the importance of the enslaved in the functioning of the plantation. The “People” subsection of the “History” section of the plantation’s official website offers information on the enslaved and some of them are mentioned by name. A programme on slavery for schools is available.
Nottoway Plantation & Resort	LA	Advertises itself as the “Largest Antebellum Mansion”. A variety of amenities and services can be found on the grounds, including two Honeymoon Suites, three bridal Dressing Saloons, an Onsite Hair and Nail Salon and tennis courts. The history of the plantation is described on its official website, but slavery is not mentioned. The descriptions of the tours do not mention slavery either.
Pebble Hill Plantation	GA	The “History” section of its official website only describes the history of the region after Reconstruction, and the first owner mentioned by name is Howard Melville Hanna who purchased the property in 1896. It is stated, however, that the main house was designed in 1851 and suffered damage in the Civil War and later. No information about the property’s antebellum history can be found on the website, neither is slavery mentioned.
Andrew Jackson’s Hermitage	TN	The section on slavery on its official website starts with an admission that slavery was the source of Jackson’s wealth. The user gets a chance to learn about slave quarters, the artefacts found there and the stories of some members of the enslaved community. A list of names of the enslaved is also available and their descendants are encouraged to contact the hermitage, should they wish to learn more about their ancestors. The Hermitage offers six different tours. On one of them, “The Hermitage by Wagon Tour”, the tourists can learn about the enslaved community, as they “enjoy the nostalgia of a carriage ride and the beauty of a once prosperous plantation”.
Magnolia Plantation & Gardens	SC	The tagline on its website says it is “Charleston’s Most Visited Plantation”. The user is welcomed by Drayton Hasty, the plantation’s owner and the member of the twelfth generation which has owned the plantation, in a video which is featured on the main page. The “History” section of the website is devoted solely to the history of the Drayton family although a picture of an enslaved person is included. The plantation does, however, offer a slavery-themed tour called “From Slavery to Freedom”, which has been available for over five years.
Destrehan Plantation	LA	The “Our History” section on their official website includes a separate subsection on the enslaved, “The Enslaved Registry” and a subsection on the 1811 slave revolt. While touring the plantation, tourists are shown around the “big house” by a historical interpreter but tours of the grounds and dependency buildings are only self-guided. Apart from tours, Destrehan Plantation also offers demonstrations, among them an “In-Depth Commentary on the Slave Revolt” on Mondays and Wednesdays and a demonstration of African American herbal remedies

		or historical carpentry on Fridays. The plantation also offers an education programme where slavery is mentioned.
San Francisco Plantation	LA	The tagline on its main page is “A Legacy of Wealth and Elegance. A History of Slavery and Sacrifice”. The tour offered by the plantation is not described in the “Tours” section of its official website. However, the “Slavery” subsection of the “History” section begins with the statement that the history of the enslaved community is not only included in the tour, but also a vital part of it. Slave inventories are available on the website, and the information provided includes the slaves’ names, ages, areas of work and the names and ages of their children.
James Madison’s Montpelier	VA	An exhibition on slavery, called “The Mere Distinction of Colour” was opened on 4 June, 2017. The exhibition covers the reasons why slavery was a part of American economy, portrays some enslaved individuals, includes slaves’ dwellings and covers the impact the legacy of slavery continues to have on the USA. The plantation also offers group tours and school programmes, some of which include, or focus on, the subject of slavery and the challenges faced by freedmen and women after the Civil War.
Evergreen Plantation	LA	The tour of the estate covers the main house, the grounds and slave quarters. Slavery is mentioned along with other narratives, such as the owners’ history and agriculture. In “The Slave Community” section the hardships of the enslaved people’s lives are described, as is work on a sugarcane plantation. A virtual tour is also available on the website. While the twenty-two slave cabins are shown more than once, and their importance is underlined, the whole plantation complex is called “one of the greatest treasures along the Mississippi” and the tour ends with the statement that “[a]s the sun sets over Evergreen Plantation, its survival is assured”.

Source: own research based on <https://www.oakalleyplantation.com/> [19 February 2019], <https://bellemeadeplantation.com/> [19 February 2019], <https://www.nottoway.com/> [19 February 2019], <http://www.pebblehill.com/> [19 February 2019], <https://thehermitage.com/> [19 February 2019], <http://www.magnoliaplantation.com/> [19 February 2019], <http://www.destrehanplantation.org/> [19 February 2019], <http://www.sanfranciscoplantation.org/> [19 February 2019], <https://www.montpelier.org/> [19 February, 2019], <https://www.evergreenplantation.org/> [19 February 2019].

America’s Most Photographed Plantation – Boone Hall Plantation

Boone Hall Plantation in South Carolina is a former cotton and pecan plantation which remains a working farm. It is most famous for its Avenue of Oaks. The plantation, first opened to the public in 1956, is also a popular wedding venue. It is also famous for having been the set for “The Notebook” (2004), and a number of other films and TV shows [IMDb: Filming Location Matching "Boone Hall Plantation - 1235 Long Point Road, Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, USA" (Sorted by Popularity Ascending), 14 March 2019].



Fig. 1. The Avenue of Oaks

Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/boonehallplantation/photos/a.10150767834082990/10150767834092990/?type=1&theater>.

The background of Boone Hall Plantation's official website, boonehallplantation.com, is a sepia-toned image of the Avenue of Oaks. The header of the website resembles an old piece of paper, and the letters BH written in an ornamental font are an important part of the design. The tagline of the website says "America's most photographed plantation... come see why" and only the Avenue of Oaks is described on the main page. In the "About Us" section the history of Boone Hall as a tourist attraction is described and it is stated that the owners "continue to make improvements to the plantation so that our visitors can experience what plantation life was like" [*About Us: Boone Hall Plantation & Gardens*, 17 March 2019]. It is also acknowledged that Boone Hall, is one of the oldest working farms in America. It is therefore clear that the owners of Boone Hall Plantation choose to present a nostalgic, romanticised version of its past.

In the "Special Events" section nine events are described: Lowcountry Strawberry Festival, Stars and Guitars, The Boone Hall Pumpkin Patch, Boone Hall Fright Nights, Scottish Games and Highland Gathering, Uncorked – The Ultimate Christmas Holiday Event, Wine Under the Oaks, Christmas at Boone Hall Plantation and Lowcountry Oyster Festival [*Special Events: Boone Hall Plantation & Gardens*, 17 March 2019]. Lowcountry Strawberry Festival and The Boone Hall Pumpkin Patch are events during which crops grown at Boone Hall are gathered. Boone Hall Fright Nights, held in September and October, are Halloween-themed events. Stars and Guitars is a country music festival held on July 4th. Two events are Christmas-themed. All of these events are aimed at providing entertainment.



Fig. 2. Slave cabins at Boone Hall Plantation

Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/boonehallplantation/photos/a.235699572989/10157375562727990/?type=3&theater>.

The “Tours/admission” section is devoted to describing the seven different tours which are offered at Boone Hall Plantation: “Exploring the Gullah Culture”, House Tours, Plantation Tractor Tour, Black History in America Exhibit, Slave History Presentation, Garden Tour, Butterfly Pavilion, and the plantation claims its offer is not only entertaining, but also educational [*Tours/Admission: Boone Hall Plantation & Gardens*, 17 March 2019].

“Exploring the Gullah Culture” is a live presentation on Gullah culture, which takes place at The Gullah Theater, which is located near the slave cabins. This event is unique, as no other plantation in the region offers any presentation on the culture of the enslaved. House Tours, given by guides in historical dress, aim to introduce the visitors to the plantation’s history and its past owners and show the inside of the house, which was designed so as to “recreate an atmosphere that would have surrounded a Coastal Carolina planter’s family and his guests”. Plantation Tractor Tour is a tractor ride around the property, focused on Boone Hall’s past and present as a farm. Black History in America Exhibit is a “critically acclaimed exhibit” located in nine slave cabins. Some of the cabins are devoted to daily lives of the enslaved, their work, families and religion, some focus on the Civil Rights movement and people who were part of it, and the last cabin is devoted to the Gullah culture. The exhibit features life-sized figures, audio and visual recordings, pictures, historical relics and biographical information. The Slave History Presentation takes place at the cabins and covers living conditions and lifestyles of the enslaved at Boone Hall. Historic relics are also shown. Garden Tour is a self-guided tour of the gardens on the front lawn and Butterfly Pavilion is an exhibit where visitors get to see different species of butterflies.



Fig. 3. The Gullah presentation

Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/boonehallplantation/photos/a.235699572989/10157203336377990/?type=3&theater>.

The plantation claims to be offering twelve educational programmes [Education Programs: Boone Hall Plantation & Gardens, 17 March 2019]. However, only seven are described on the website, and the other five are not mentioned anywhere. Out of the seven programmes three are year-round and four are seasonal. The year-round programmes are “Exploring The Past”, “Cash Crops on a Plantation” and “Discovering Nature”. “Exploring The Past” is a tour of the plantation’s grounds, which involves visiting “some of the buildings” (it is not specified which) and deseeding cotton [*Exploring The Past: Boone Hall Plantation & Gardens*, 17 March 2019]. “Cash Crops On A Plantation” is a programme about the early economic history of plantations in South Carolina, the whole nation’s economy and the development of farm practices. Students are also promised they will “experience what it was like to own and operate a large plantation through hands-on activities such as rice throwing and indigo dying” [*Cash Crops On A Plantation*, 17 March 2019]. “Discovering Nature” is a wagon ride around the plantation where students learn about the agricultural crops grown there [*Discovering Nature: Boone Hall Plantation & Gardens*, 17 March 2019].



Fig. 4. Halloween decorations at Boone Hall Plantation,

Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/boonehallplantation/photos/a.235699572989/10156890473352990/?type=3&theater>,

<https://www.facebook.com/boonehallplantation/photos/a.235699572989/10156863396142990/?type=3&theater>.

The four seasonal programmes offered at the plantation are “Beyond the Big House”, “Bees and Strawberries”, “Pickin’ in the Strawberry Patch” and “Pickin’ in the Pumpkin Patch” [*Education Programs: Boone Hall Plantation & Gardens*, 17 March 2019]. “Beyond the Big House”, offered from March to October, is a programme dedicated to teaching schoolchildren about slavery. They get to visit the slave cabins and learn about the work and life of the enslaved. Gullah culture is also included in this programme, as are activities through which the students should learn about “the role of slavery in the success of a plantation” [*Education Programs: Boone Hall Plantation & Gardens*, 19 March 2019]. The other three seasonal trips are focused on Boone Hall Plantation as a working farm, the crops grown there and the animals kept. This educational offer is mainly focused on teaching children about owning a plantation and nature. Only one programme mentions slavery at all, and it seems to be from owners’ perspective.

Five galleries are available in the “Galleries” section of the website: “Grounds and Nature”, “Education”, “Butterfly Garden”, “Gullah” and “Gin House” [*Grounds & Nature: Boone Hall Plantation & Gardens*, 19 March 2019]. The “Grounds and Nature” gallery contains nine photos, including one of the slave cabins and one of a cotton field. The seventeen pictures in the “Education” gallery document field trips offered by the plantation. Two of them feature guides in historical dress and one is a group photo taken in front of a slave cabin. The “Gullah” gallery contains three pictures, all of which show the live presentation.



Fig. 5. Sweetgrass basket exhibition in one of the slave cabins

Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/boonehallplantation/photos/a.10151980848422990/10157166622882990/?type=3&theater>.

The “Event Hosting” section is divided into two subsections: “Weddings” and “Cooperate Events” [*Event Hosting: Boone Hall Plantation & Gardens*, 19 March 2019]. The page on weddings is titled “The Perfect Moment... The Perfect Place” and starts with a description of the Avenue of Oaks and its beauty [*Weddings: Boone Hall Plantation & Gardens*, 19 March 2019]. While the plantation offers a variety of wedding venues, The Cotton Dock is said to be the most popular one. It is described as a beautiful structure in a picturesque setting “amongst over three centuries of history, beauty, and grace” [*Weddings: Boone Hall Plantation & Gardens*, 19 March 2019]. It is stated that the guest list there has included politicians, celebrities and businesses. The structure is also known as “the Belle of the Hall”. A slideshow of wedding and romantic pictures taken at Boone Hall is available on YouTube [*The Perfect Moment – The Perfect Place – Boone Hall Plantation – YouTube*, 19 March 2019]. While most of them feature the Avenue of Oaks, the gardens or the “big house”, two pictures were taken at slave cabins. Out of the two, one shows a crowd consisting of the bride and groom, bridesmaids and groomsmen gathered in front of a cabin or looking out of its windows, grinning. The other shows a smiling bride in a cabin window. The slideshow is titled “The Perfect Moment – The Perfect Place”.



Fig. 6. A wedding photoshoot at Boone Hall Plantation

Source: https://www.boonehallplantation.com/photo_gallery/weddings/#gallery-1.

Apart from weddings, Boone Hall also offers the hosting of corporate events. The page dedicated to this is titled “The Perfect Place For... Remarkable Memories To Unfold” and the text on the page starts with the words “the beauty, history, and grace of Boone Hall Plantation symbolises southern heritage at its finest” [*Corporate Events: Boone Hall Plantation & Gardens*, 19 March 2019]. Again, the Cotton Dock is the first venue option mentioned, but not the only one available. It is clear that events are a big part of Boone Hall’s offer and the beauty of the plantation is highlighted so as to attract potential clients.

The plantation has active Twitter and Instagram accounts and a Facebook page. The Facebook page and the Twitter account are connected – all the posts from the plantation’s Facebook page are shared to Twitter. They are updated regularly (20 posts in January 2019, 21 posts in February, two posts in March – as of 8 March). 91,837 people like the plantation’s Facebook page, 90,486 people follow it. The Twitter account, followed by 2,301 people, contains 2,531 tweets. The Facebook page contains photos from events which take place at the plantation, as well as numerous pictures of the Avenue of Oaks. The plantation also organises contests where tickets can be won and uses a few hashtags regularly (#SoothingSunday, #FlashbackFriday).

The plantation’s Instagram account, @boonehallplantation, contains 59 posts and is followed by 7,861 people [*Boone Hall Plantation Instagram*, 14 March 2019]. The first three

pictures were posted on 26 April 2013. The first picture after that was posted on 19 February 2016, and that is when the account started to be updated more regularly, with 29 posts in 2016, 14 in 2017 and 10 in 2018. In 2019 (as of 8 March) three posts were posted, two of them on 27 January.

A separate Instagram account focused on Boone Hall's wedding business, @boonehallweddings, is more active than the plantation's main account, with 440 posts and 8,523 followers [*Boone Hall Weddings & Events Instagram*, 14 March 2019]. The first two posts were added on 30 July 2014 and the account has been updated regularly since then. While most of the pictures on this account feature the Avenue of Oaks or the Cotton Dock and sometimes the "big house", six of them show brides or couples in cotton fields (four pictures of brides, two of couples).



Fig. 7. Christmas decorations in the "big house"

Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/boonehallplantation/photos/a.235699572989/10156941457777990/?type=3&theater>.

The plantation has been reviewed 3,595 times on TripAdvisor (as of 14 March 2019) [*Boone Hall Plantation, Mount Pleasant – Trip Advisor*, 14 March 2019]. 3,461 of these reviews are in English.

Forty reviews of Boone Hall Plantation were added between 1 January and 8 March 2019. All of them are in English. Some of the reviewers expressed disappointment in the fact that the house tour covers only three rooms, and "and there is nothing grand about them" [GHSchmidt, 9 June 2019]. The house also gets more favourable reviews, however, and the beauty of the grounds and especially of the Avenue of Oaks is praised by many. The tour guides are mostly described as knowledgeable, friendly and funny, although some reviewers complain that they were trying too hard to be amusing. When the way slavery is presented at the plantation is mentioned in the reviews, it is mostly praised for its educational benefits. The visitors admit that they learned a lot from the exhibition in the slave cabins, some also

describe it as sombre and done in an appropriate way. The live presentation of Gullah Geechee culture is mentioned more often than slavery-related topics and the opinions on it are unanimously enthusiastic.

Two of the reviews deserve particular attention:

Eight original brick slave cabins are still there, and the details give you a glimpse into the harsh realities of slave life. We got a free dolphin show in the river that borders the plantation while visiting the dock complex. BTW, the cafe has great ice cream. [boltonguy518, 9 June 2019]

and

We were lucky enough to see the one woman show about the Gullah culture. She was fantastic! Several of us had goose bumps and tears. The home was beautifully decorated for Christmas as well, which was a bonus! [erinbeez84, 9 June 2019]

Summing up, the reviews show that visitors to Boone Hall mainly expect beauty and grandeur. Some of them acknowledge slavery-related topics as part of the experience, and are satisfied with what they get.

Whitney Plantation – a museum devoted to slavery

Whitney Plantation in Louisiana is a former indigo and sugar cane plantation. It has been owned by the Cummings family of New Orleans since 1999 [Ownership of the Whitney, 16 March 2019]. Parts of Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* were filmed at the plantation [Buncombe 2015, 1 March 2019]. The museum was opened on 7 December, 2014 [Amsden 2015, 16 March 2019].

The plantation's official website: whitneyplantation.com, underwent some changes in June 2019. In its previous version, the user was welcomed on the main page by a slideshow of photos taken at the property which showed the "big house", the church, slave quarters and memorials [Whitney Plantation, 17 March 2019]. The photos were captioned with quotes about how eye-opening the plantation experience was. The website was divided into eight main sections: "Home", "Education", "Photo Gallery", "Visit", "News", "Tickets", "Group Tours" and "Contact".



Fig. 8. Slave cabins at Whitney Plantation

Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/whitneyplantation/photos/a.343964799069934/369985303134550/?type=3&theater>.

The “Education” section of the website consisted of four subsections: “Field Trips”, “Lesson Plans”, “Learn” and “Additional Resources”. In March 2019 the “Field Trips” subsection was inaccessible. The “Lesson Plans” subsection offered materials covering different aspects of the lives and history of the enslaved [*Education. Whitney Plantation*, 18 March 2019]. The materials not only presented various aspects of the lives of the enslaved but also aimed to draw the students’ attention to the links between the past and the present. In the “Learn” subsection the history of the plantation’s past owners and the enslaved population of Louisiana were described. A description of all the historic buildings and memorials at the plantation and an interactive map of the property were also available.

The “Visit” section provided basic information about the museum’s hours of operation, admission prices, parking and transport options and an FAQ [*Visit. Whitney Plantation*, 18 March 2019]. The “News” section contained various mentions of the museum in the media. The “Photo Gallery” section was a slideshow of pictures taken at the property, most of which showed the slave quarters, various memorials and statues. Pictures of the “big house” were also featured [*Photo Gallery. Whitney Plantation*, 18 March 2019].



Fig. 9. The Antioch Baptist Church at Whitney Plantation

Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/whitneyplantation/photos/a.866560076810401/947564948709913/?type=3&theater>.

In its new version the website is divided into six main sections: “Home”, “Tours”, “Education”, “Photo Gallery”, “Media” and “Contact” [*Whitney Plantation. Guided Tours of Whitney Plantation Museum*, 13 June 2019]. The website is available in eight languages: English, simplified Chinese, Dutch, French, German, Italian, Japanese and Spanish.

On the homepage information such as the duration of the tour and admission prices is provided. As the plantation was awarded the TripAdvisor 2018 Certificate of Excellence, it is also displayed on its homepage. In addition to this the page features positive TripAdvisor reviews of the plantation.

The “Tours” section is divided into three subsections – “Whitney Plantation Tour”, “School & University Groups” and “Large Adult & Family Groups”. The tour offered by the plantation has not changed [*Whitney Plantation Tour. Whitney Plantation*, 13 June 2019]. In the “School & University Groups” subsection it is stated that the plantation offers field trips on the subject of slavery in Louisiana [*School/University Groups. Whitney Plantation*, 13 June 2019]. The description of trip is not unlike that of the standard tour. Educators are warned that slavery is a “mature subject” and encouraged to do some research on what the plantation has to offer before deciding to visit it with their students.

The “Education” section is divided into four subsections – “Slavery”, “Ownership”, “Historic Buildings” and “Additional Resources” [*Louisiana History. Whitney Plantation*, 13 June 2019]. The previous version of the website also contained all the information and links featured in these sections. In the “Photo Gallery” section six pictures are available – two of the “big house”, two of slave cabins and two of memorials [*Photo Gallery. Whitney Plantation*, 13 June 2019].

The “Media” section consists of three subsections: “News”, “Filming and photography requests”, “Interview & media requests”. The “Filming and photography requests” section contains information on the plantation’s photography policy [*Photography Policy. Whitney Plantation*, 13 June 2019]. Wedding and engagement photography is not permitted on the grounds. Both versions of the website make it clear that the main goal is to educate about slavery. The design is simple and the site is not romanticised.

The plantation has active Twitter and Instagram accounts and a Facebook page. The Facebook page is liked by 16,691 people [*Whitney Plantation, Facebook*, 18 March 2019]. The page is updated regularly. The Twitter account, with 91 tweets, is followed by 1,445 people and updated less frequently than the Facebook page [*Whitney Plantation, Twitter*, 18 March 2019].

The plantation’s Instagram account is connected with the Facebook page. It contains 476 posts (as of 12 March 2019) and is followed by 6,865 people [*Whitney Plantation, Instagram*, 18 March 2019]. The first post was published on 13 December, 2013 and the account has been active since then. Some posts are educational, a few are political and others show the property, guided tours and events. On Valentine’s Day 2019 an engagement picture of a couple who “wanted to take their engagement photos at a place that honored their ancestors” was published. Thirty-one posts were published between 1 January 2019 and 12 March 2019 – 13 in January, 15 in February, three in March.



Fig. 10. An engagement picture taken at Whitney Plantation

Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/whitneyplantation/photos/a.866560076810401/1571879266278475/?type=3&theater>.

Whitney Plantation has been reviewed 1,246 times on TripAdvisor (as of 15 March 2019) [*Whitney Plantation (Wallace)* – TripAdvisor, 18 March 2019]. 1,192 of these reviews are in English. Fifty reviews of the plantation were added between 1 January and 11 March 2019. All of them are in English. The plantation tour is mainly described as “sobering”, “moving”, “educational” and “powerful” and a “must visit”. One of the reviewers pointed out that the experience is “not for the faint of heart” [MissDiva715, 9 June 2019]. Most reviewers recommend the experience and stress the importance of presenting the history of slavery as it was, instead of glossing over the horrors of the institution. A few of them also reflect on the consequences of slavery – one of them states “I honor the slaves and stand with people of color as we fight for their equality” [992dianal, 9 June 2019] thus acknowledging that the institution of slavery has had lasting consequences. In a few reviews the authors also stated that despite having had a certain amount of knowledge about slavery prior to visiting the plantation, they still found the visit educational. When the beauty of the grounds or the “big house” is mentioned, it is always set in contrast with the horrors of slavery and the living conditions the enslaved had to endure. The tour guides are praised for their knowledge, passion and the interesting way in which they present the story.

Only one of the fifty reviews is almost exclusively negative. The reviewer starts with complaining about the tour being “unnecessarily preachy” [Asia B, 9 June 2019] and claims that “this tour should be advertised as a museum of slavery rather than a plantation tour”. They also claim that they were made to “feel like a criminal for being white”.

The reviews show that most tourists respond to the narrative they are presented with. Many of them describe the experience in a deeply emotional way but they also value the educational aspects of the tour. However, some find it overwhelming and inappropriate and prefer a more conventional tour.

Conclusion

As shown above, heritage interpretations at antebellum plantations vary. Some plantations deny their heritage of atrocity altogether, some commemorate those who were held in bondage. TripAdvisor reviews of Boone Hall Plantation and Whitney Plantation prove that visitors are not indifferent to these interpretations.

The list of “10 Notable Southern Plantation Tours” was meant to provide an overview of plantation tourism in the American South. Out of the ten plantations on the lists, eight offer weddings, events and sometimes photoshoots – James Madison’s Montpelier and Evergreen Plantation are the only exceptions. Nottoway Plantation Resort is the only plantation on the list which does not mention slavery on its official website. This proves that most plantation owners decide to present a romanticised version of the past.

Boone Hall Plantation's official marketing is focused on promoting the beauty of the place. Naming it "America's most photographed plantation" on the official website makes it clear that the focus is on the more pleasant and easier to market aspects. The wedding and event business is also centred around Boone Hall Plantation as a beautiful place which has hosted many VIP events. Nostalgia is another important part of the plantation's official image, which is evident in the website's layout and the fact that tour guides wear period costumes – as if they were to transport the tourists to the "good old days" before the Civil War.

Boone Hall's offer is focused on entertainment rather than education, with events like pumpkin picking and Fright Nights. Some edutainment is also offered and Boone Hall teaches about its role as a working farm. In this aspect, too, continuity is acknowledged. At the same time, it is true that Boone Hall Plantation acknowledges slavery as a part of its heritage. However, visiting slave cabins is optional and the story is presented in an optimistic light. The Gullah presentation is a unique event where something created by the enslaved is presented by their descendants. The analysis of TripAdvisor reviews shows that tourists mainly praise Boone Hall for its beauty and for how photogenic it is. While some acknowledge its past, and it evokes some discomfort in them, it does not seem to be a significant part of their experience.

Whitney Plantation presents its heritage with an aim to educate people on the history of slavery and the suffering of the enslaved. The guides do not wear period costumes, nor is there any café with ice cream on site. While the only tour available starts with slave cabins and involves visiting numerous memorials, the story of the plantation's antebellum-time owners is also included in the narrative. The focus on enslaved children makes it clear that the aim is to provoke compassion. Whitney intends to send a clear message – and most visitor accounts are evidence that it is successful in doing so. Even though some visitors notice the beauty of the grounds or the "big house", they are not indifferent to the horrors of slavery. The plantation mostly inspires reflection in the visitors, and even though some are displeased by the fact that so little attention is paid to the owners, they are in the minority.

TripAdvisor reviews of both plantations show that visitors respond to the dominant narratives they are presented with. It is significant that one person who described Whitney Plantation as a museum of slavery, not a tourist plantation. This shows that a focus on slavery is not what tourist plantations are associated with. Most of the analysed examples prove that it is not surprising – the narrative of the enslaved is hardly ever a dominant one.

In keeping with the first of F. Tilden's principles, that interpretation should relate to visitors, many tourist plantations choose to focus on white visitors, and trying to make them feel comfortable by presenting a romanticised version of the past. It should, however, be noted that, judging by the above examples, this seems to be changing. While the owners'

narrative is still the dominant one at most of the analysed plantations, more and more attention is being paid to the enslaved communities. F. Tilden's fourth principle is that the aim of interpretation should be provocation, not instruction. Undoubtedly all interpretations provoke some kind of reaction, although it may not always be in keeping with the creator's intentions. Some plantations also offer activities designed specifically for children and teenagers.

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