Dynamics and dilemmas in narrating slavery: Louisiana Plantation Museums and the landscapes of narrative change

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Abstract

A recent resurgence in debates about the historical memory of slavery in the United States reflects the nation’s ongoing battle over its identity and ability to achieve racial justice. Debates concerning historical interpretation of the antebellum US are personal and emotional in nature, as different subjectivities identify with conflating historical accounts. In order to examine the dynamics and dilemmas that inform processes of narrative change, I researched three plantation museums in Louisiana’s River Road, a region that had seen changes to the classic Gone with the Wind interpretation of the antebellum South. The three plantation museums exemplify a spectrum of regimes of representation: 1) symbolic annihilation; 2) integrated regime; and 3) counter-narrative. I investigated the particular factors that inform each plantation museum’s narratives and the dynamics related to their narrative choices. I found that that proximity of a counter-narrative site to sites that do not include slavery can influence them to either revise their interpretation and incorporate slavery or further ingrain their whitewashed historical account. I concluded that white narration of slavery is necessary yet demands careful considerations.

**Key words:** plantation museums, white ignorance, counter-narrative, slavery, social memory, internal orientalism
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1. INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, there has been a resurgence in long-standing debates regarding the US relationship with its history of slavery and racial oppression within the US mainstream discourse. Since the early 2000s, the US had been experiencing a noticeable increase in popular interest in the topic of slavery as reflected in numerous movies, television series, books and exhibitions (Berlin, 2004). In recent years, the US American landscape itself saw an increase in monuments, museums and historical markers to bring issues of historical racial oppression to the forefront. High profile examples include the nation’s first federally-owned museum dedicated to African American history and culture as the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) opened in the nation’s capital in 2016. Two years prior, the Whitney Plantation, the first plantation museum dedicated entirely to those enslaved on its grounds, opened in Wallace, Louisiana and in 2018, the nation’s first lynching memorial, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, opened in Alabama with the adjacent Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration.

Alongside the high-profile museums and memorials, questions concerning whose heritage is commemorated in public spaces and how the nation should remember its past took to the streets. Since 2015, dozens of cities, towns, and communities began reviewing the place of Confederate monuments and iconography in their jurisdictions (Southern Poverty Law Center [SPLC], 2016). The debate concerning the heritage commemorated in public spaces intensified on August 12, 2017 in a rally dubbed “Unite the Right,” when a group of white nationalists in Charlottesville, Virginia protested the city’s desire to remove a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee (Stolberg & Rosenthal, 2017). The situation escalated when a white nationalist intentionally crashed his car into a pedestrian stream of counter protesters, killing Heather Heyer and injuring dozens more (Stolberg & Rosenthal, 2017).

The waves of protests in support of and in opposition to removing Confederate iconography exposes the sensitive nature of debates concerning historical commemoration. The emotional reactions to these monuments illustrate that rather than reflecting disagreements over historical accuracy or landscape aesthetic, the monuments carry a salient symbolic value that directly projects on issues of identity, belonging, and ways to make sense of the world. As a
knowledge project, history is inherently susceptible to contesting recollections of the past. Nonetheless, creating an inclusive narrative that can be agreed upon is imperative in cases where atrocities were committed by one social group against another. This kind of narrative is necessary as reconciliation “cannot occur without an accurate recollection of the past” (Banks, 2002, p. 907). While Confederate monuments gained traction in popular discourse for their symbolic representation of the challenges the US faces in addressing its past and achieving racial reconciliation, less attention, was given to the hundreds of plantation museums across the US South.

These plantation museums represent heritage sites that epitomize the landscape of enslavement. Their relatively confined nature allows for a close investigation of the dynamics and dilemmas associated with narrating a history that is hold competing interpretation among different demographics’ collective memories. This investigation includes an examination of factors that inform the narrative presented and dynamics that are created when the narrative changes. It also illuminates questions concerning how counter-narratives and master-narratives are told, by whom, and for whom.

1.1 Plantation Museums and the Difficulty in Narrating Slavery

There are over 375 plantation sites across the US that offer tours to visitors (Alderman, Butler, & Hanna, 2016). Defined by Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small (2002), these sites are:

based on physical structures that were originally used as part of plantation complexes during the period of slavery and which are now organized to provide exhibits and tours of Southern history, with an exclusive or extensive focus on the period of enslavement. (p. 9)

As heritage sites that center the antebellum plantation, these museums represent an important and pertinent avenue for taking on the difficult task of educating visitors about the history of enslavement. Due to their position as museums, these former plantation houses are considered the most trusted and reliable source of information for the public (Gallas & Perry, 2015). Furthermore, they play an important role in shaping visitors’ understanding of the southern US history, as well as the US as a whole (Eichstedt & Small, 2002).
Despite plantation museums’ apt position to provide an “accurate recollection of the past” and contribute to reconciliation efforts, researchers find them to “reaffirm long-standing patterns of social power and inequality” (Alderman & Modlin, 2008, p. 265). Their counterproductive activity influences “whose histories and identities are remembered and forgotten” (Alderman & Modlin, 2008, p. 265). Furthermore, plantation museums have been found to be harmful in their depiction of the period of enslavement to the extent that they are described by researchers as “ground zero in the South’s racial politics of heritage tourism and African-American alienation” (Bright, Alderman, & Butler, 2018, p. 1744).

The problematic nature of the narrative presented in plantation museums is clearly reflected in Eichstedt and Small’s (2002) study of plantation museums’ “regimes of representation” across the South. Between 1996-2001, Eichstedt and Small along with their graduate students visited 122 plantation-house museums across the southern US with a particular focus on Virginia, Georgia, and Louisiana. Their findings suggest the vast majority of these sites promote an image of the antebellum South as romantic and splendid, where white plantation owners and their families developed ideas of democracy and liberty while maintaining a high-standard of living due to their innovation and hard work (Eichstedt & Small, 2002). As demonstrated by the authors, approximately 83 percent of all sites visited have trivialized or altogether eliminated the lives of enslaved Africans and African Americans from their narratives, often while speaking at length about furniture and architecture. By omitting the exploited labor that enabled such splendor from the narrative, museums also avoid addressing the contradictions embedded in their depiction of plantation owners’ as enlightened cultural figures.

Epitomizing the conflating symbolic value of these estates is the increasingly popular trend of weddings at plantation sites (Southern Celebrations Magazine, 2016). Discussing her experience as an African American event planner who was asked to plan weddings at plantation venues, Jordan A. Maney refers to these estates as “grave-sites,” and questions couples’ ability "to laugh and celebrate on so many people's blood, and sweat, and suffering" (DeCourcey, 2017, para. 9). Maney’s story points to the daily challenges of living in a society that does not acknowledge the pain and trauma of the citizens it claims to represent. Additionally, the troubling political economy of these plantation museums is particularly evident in the employment of
many African Americans (often descendants of communities enslaved on these very estates, as seen in this research) who are working under white ownership and are contributing to this fantastical depiction of history.

This spectacular depiction of the antebellum South is problematic not only for the museums’ failure to provide factual information to their visitors, but also for its reproduction and reinforcement of wider racializing processes within US society (Alderman et al., 2016; Bright et al., 2018). These include ahistoricizing contemporary inequalities, reinforcing racial stereotypes, and celebrating a period that many African Americans associate with brutal oppression (Alderman & Modlin, 2008). Furthermore, this depiction actively limits African Americans’ citizenship through both failing to acknowledge their ancestors’ contributions to US history and by ignoring the African American tourist as a potential visitor to these heritage sites (Bright et al., 2018). In spite of all these concerns, plantation museums continue to adhere to a white-centric narrative. In order to understand why, we must first consider what makes talking about slavery so difficult.

1.2 Challenges to Addressing History

As reflected in the debate concerning Confederate monuments, the problem of unequal and harmful representation of the history of slavery in the US is not unique to plantation museums. Alderman et al. (2016) contends that an analysis of these museums must consider “wider understandings of how societies selectively remember (and forget) racialized violence and dispossession and the uneven power relationships and trauma that undergird slavery heritage” (p. 209). In addressing the inadequate ways in which US schools teach the nation’s history of slavery, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) report Teaching Hard History - American Slavery (2018) outlined the underlying difficulties that make the teaching of this history so challenging:

The central role that slavery played in the development of the United States is beyond dispute. And yet, we the people do not like to talk about slavery, or even think about it, much less teach it or learn it. The implications of doing so unnerve us. If the cornerstone of the Confederacy was slavery, then what does that say about those who revere the people who took up arms to keep African Americans in chains? If James Madison, the principal architect of the Constitution, could hold people in bondage his entire life, refusing to free a single soul even upon his death, then what does that say about our nation’s founders? About our nation itself? (p. 5)
The difficulty described by SPLC resonates with Charles Mills’ (2007) explanation for why whites have resisted a more honest reflection on the history of enslavement.

Mills explains that the projection of collective memory onto collective identity and our self-perceptions makes the teaching of an ugly past uncomfortable and even triggering. It challenges a foundational aspect of how we understand ourselves and make sense of the world. It also helps explain the great emotional investments that different subjectivities have in particular historical narratives. Therefore, for those who identify with these narratives, attempts to disturb hegemonic recollections of history are not merely issues concerning facts and accuracy, but instead can be perceived as a personal affront to people’s very sense of selves.

Ignoring or developing alternative historical interpretations can thus be attractive as it maintains a sense of innocence and moral superiority (Mills, 2007; Wekker, 2016). By rewriting the atrocities of racial oppression, white Americans can develop alternative explanations to the reality of racial inequality and continue to adhere to the American myth of individual responsibility and absence of structural discrimination and privilege (Omi & Winant, 2015; Rose, 2013). Nonetheless, overlooking uncomfortable history is an option largely reserved to those privileged by it as those who suffered are left to navigate the consequences of their historical oppression and thus cannot simply ignore it (May, 2015; Oluo, 2017; Rose, 2013). The focus on the white hegemonic ability and lack of will to address the history of slavery is not to suggest that African Americans share a unanimous desire to tell a history they many consider traumatic (Alderman, 2010). Instead, the focus on white Americans is due to their historical access to and authority over knowledge production (May, 2015; Mills, 2007)—two resources necessary for the ability to shape a historical narrative that corresponds to one’s worldview.

According to Mills (2007), knowledge production that intentionally produces ignorance that reaffirms the statues of those socially constructed as white is an example of “white ignorance.” This type of ignorance is different from “normal” ignorance that pertains to the general absence of knowledge (e.g., exact nation’s graduation rate, average temperature in the mesosphere, etc.). Unlike general ignorance, white ignorance is a lack of knowledge and/or false knowledge that is linked to white dominance and supremacy.
It is important to note that this type of ignorance is not a biological phenomenon, but one connected to social epistemology rising from whites’ constructed racialized status and domination (Mills, 2007). Due to this particular social epistemology’s connection to identity, white ignorance affects varying individuals differently as racial identity is only a single aspect of ones’ identity that also includes gender, class, ability status, and more (Mills, 2007). Therefore, the category “whites” here should not be understood as an essentialized monolith, but as the hegemonic representation of the racialized group. Moreover, due to the reproduction of white ignorance through social institutions (e.g., schools, media, etc.), people racialized as non-white can also be subjects of white ignorance (Mills, 2007).

The difficulty in tackling white ignorance extends beyond its manifestation within individual identity construction, as it is also embedded within the US American national identity and narrative. The US self-perception and global projection—as a nation founded in principles of justice, liberty, and equality, alongside its devotion to the myth of the American Dream—contrast sharply with the nation’s history of colonization, genocide, slavery, and racial segregation (Omi & Winant, 2015). Therefore, minorities’ efforts to revisit a past idolized by hegemonic narrative is an uphill battle that challenges not only individuals’ identity-foundations but also the nation’s.

This challenge is further complicated by what David R. Jansson refers to as internal orientalism of the American South. As Jansson (2007) argues, the hegemonic US managed to establish its positive self-image by othering the South as an imagined geography to which the nation’s historical burdens are relegated. This mechanism transformed racial oppression from a white American issue into a white Southern issue and worked to absolve white “America” while burdening the white South. Despite these challenges, the effort to achieve an honest historical account is crucial for a multiracial democracy that is currently failing to generate an inclusive narrative. A growing number of plantation museums have begun recognizing their problematic positions and are pressured to change their narratives.

1.3 Changing Hegemonic Narrative and the Plantation Museum

As established, the task of disturbing the US master narrative is difficult, but the cost of enabling valorizing narratives celebration and proliferation is detrimental. Therefore, identifying what factors are influential in driving progressive changes to narrative production and
representation can contribute to efforts for constructive transformation. This identification is especially relevant to the plantation museum, as it represents a site that has both the power to reinforce harmful racializing process and the potential to challenge them (Alderman et al., 2016). Therefore, plantation museums represent a prominent venue to explore what factors can transform their role from reproducing racial inequality to unsettling racial inequality. Moreover, identifying what factors influence change and what factors limit it, can inform other efforts to dismantle white ignorance and contribute to theorizing the dynamics associated with master narrative change.

As mentioned above, plantation museums are known for their valorizing approach to the history of slavery. However, research indicates that the southern landscape of commemoration is susceptible to change as an increasing number of plantations incorporate the history of enslavement into their narrative (Alderman et al., 2016; Alderman & Campbell, 2008). Therefore, plantation museums that are going through a transformation pose an ideal case study to investigate what factors are effective in driving changes. Likewise, plantation museums that resist change can shed light on what factors inhibit progressive transformation.

Nonetheless, in the plantation museums setting, complex questions of historical representation, power, identity, and citizenship are further complicated. This is due to the dynamic array of considerations which include: the plantation museum’s ownership structure; the need to please visitors in order to be profitable; the recognition of and ability to adapt to changing cultural norms, tourism trends, and local politics (Bright et al., 2018). Consequently, the plantation museum represents an environment that while relatively confined, is still informed by broader social processes. Therefore, it poses an ideal location to investigate the on-the-ground reality of narrative transformation in its natural setting. It allows for an assessment of the different factors influencing decisions to present a particular narrative, an identification of the challenges that hinder progressive changes, and an examination of the dynamic caused by presenting a particular narrative.

1.4 Research Questions

In order to better understand what factors catalyze changes to narratives and what factors hinder it, this research examines three plantation museums in Louisiana that embody a
spectrum of regimes of representations. Following Eichstedt and Small (2002) categorization, the first plantation, Houmas House, represents the master narrative of “symbolic annihilation” where slavery is trivialized and ignored in the face of a romantic and valorizing narrative of the “Old South.” The second, Whitney Plantation, represents a “counter narrative” as it was established with the direct intention to disturb the white-centric regime of representation and tell the story of the plantation from the enslaved people’s perspectives (Cummings, 2015). The third, Oak Alley, is a plantation museum that has recently transitioned from a well-established and popular regime of “symbolic annihilation” (Eichstedt & Small, 2002), into a regime of “segregated knowledge” (where slavery is discussed in a separate location from the main tour) (Hanna, 2016) to its 2018 iteration (as found in this research) an “integrated regime” that attempts to include the perspective of the enslaved in its main tour.

Each plantation decided to represent a different narrative despite the museums’ close geographical proximity to each other, their common visitor base, and deep familiarity with one another. This unique composition thus enables this research to ask:

- What external and internal factors influenced one plantation museum to change their regime of representation and not another?
- To what degree does geographical proximity to a counter-narrative influence the narratives presented in neighboring plantations?

In addition to understanding the factors that inform what narratives are told, each particular case also provides an opportunity to map the dynamics associated with the different regimes of representation presented in their unique plantation museum context. Therefore, this research will also explore:

- What is the reasoning provided not to incorporate the history of slavery in spite of pressure to do so? (Houmas House)
- How is the counter-narrative told? Who is carrying the burden of challenging the master-narrative and for whom? What are the challenges and opportunities brought by white ownership narrating the history of slavery? (Whitney Plantation)
- What are the limitations and opportunities when a plantation museum designed for one regime of representation transitions to another? (Oak Alley)
This research aims to shed light on the processes and dynamics of narrative change and illuminate the contemporary moment in the US racial politics as manifested in the Southern memory landscape.

1.5 Note on Language

It is imperative to recognize that while race is a social construction, in the US it is a potent social category that carries significant implications (West, 2017). Therefore, throughout the research I have noted the “race” of different actors as a category of social meaning not biology. Moreover, given the socially constructed and problematic nature of “race,” there is no perfect language to talk about it. Nonetheless, given the salient position of race in this research, I have chosen specific terms which have certain limitations in addressing the full complexity of the they categories they represent. As Beverly Daniel Tatum (2017) writes, “it is difficult to talk about what is essentially a flawed and problematic social construct without using language that is itself problematic. We have to be able to talk about it in order to change it” (p. 17).

I used both the terms “African American” and “black” to describe US Americans racialized as black. The term “African American” is problematic for is lack of inclusivity where many black Americans do not identify as “African American” as they might be immigrants from other nations or descendants of immigrants from other nations. While these “black Americans” do not share the same African American history, they might, however, be subjected to the same racializing process as African Americans. Similarly, when using the term “black” or “black American” there is a possibility of including those racialized as black, yet who do not identify with the history in question. In this study, however, I have used both terms often interchangeably. When referring to other racialized groups, I try to apply the terms used by the individuals in question to describe themselves. Additionally, I follow Tatum (2017) in applying the term “people of color” instead of “non-whites” given that albeit imperfect, “people of color” is inclusive where “non-whites” defines people based on what they are not (p. 15).

In relation to geography, I make multiple references to “the South” and “the North” while recognizing they are both imagined geographies (Jansson, 2010). When using quotation marks, I wish to emphasis the social meaning attributed to them as imagined spaces. Following Jansson (2010) the social meaning attributed to “the South” as an imagined geography is a place racialized
as white that represents social backwardness and intolerance. “The North,” on the other hand, represents a progressive and accepting space albeit also racialized as white. The same is meant in the term “America” when used in quotations. Here the US as an imagined geography is understood as being juxtaposed with “the South” (following Jansson, 2010, as explain below).

In addition, I have tried to remain consisted with the use of the word “enslaved” rather than “slave” where grammatically possible. This distinction is important out of recognition that there are no people who are slaves, but only people who are enslaved. Nonetheless, the word “enslaved” too fails to capture the humanity of those it claims to represent as it refers to only one aspect of their existence a limitation I have not resolved. When referring to the “masters-enslavers” I have used these two terms either together or separately as well as the terms “planters,” “sugar baron,” or “owners” depending on the context and the meaning I wished to emphasize.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Contextualizing the Plantation Museum

In order to understand the significance and meaning of the plantation museum, it is imperative to contextualize the plantation museum. The representation of the antebellum plantation as a site that showcases a prosperous and harmonious genteel civilization can be traced to the myth of the Lost Cause. The Lost Cause is a narrative that reframes the purpose of Southern secession from the Union and the cause of the Civil War. Against widely accepted historical consensus, the narrative claims that the South seceded to protect states’ rights, as oppose to a reaction to a federal threat to the institution of slavery. Under this rubric, the Civil War itself is understood as “The War of Northern Aggression,” highlighting the idea that the Union’s attack on the Confederacy was unwarranted and excessive (Coates, 2017b; Hoelscher, 2012).

The narrative gained its footing in the aftermath of the Civil War against the backdrop of economic ruin, Northern paternalism, and changing racial hierarchy. Once white people resumed their dominance in the South by overthrowing the Reconstruction government, the Lost Cause narrative begin proliferating in the form of Confederate monuments and statues, reclaiming the
landscape while reestablishing racial dominance via the Jim Crow segregation laws (American Historical Association [AHA], 2017; Southern Poverty Law Center [SPLC], 2016).

As Rahier and Hawkins (1999) suggest, “this ‘Lost Cause’ ideology created ties between an imagined history, a contrived regional identity, a sense of white racial pride, and a renewed denigration of blacks” (p. 206). Essential to this invention of Southern traditions and its manifestation of racial dominance were books, movies, monuments, and numerous preservation societies (Hoelscher, 2012; Rahier & Hawkins, 1999). The plantation museum, however, came to symbolize the Southern mythology within the national mainstream through the 1939 Hollywood blockbuster Gone with the Wind (Rahier & Hawkins, 1999).

The plantation museum phenomenon was also a result of the new economic circumstances. As explained by Dwyer, Butler, and Carter (2013), against the backdrop of “military occupation, exhausted ecosystems, exploitative labour strategies and vigorous international competition in commodity production, elements of the defunct planter class and urban boosters sought out new capital accumulation strategies beyond the traditional reliance on cash crops” (p. 4). The coinciding transition of the plantation from a production-based economic model to a service-based one, and the reaffirmation of white-domination in the South, therefore culminated “to form the moonlight-and-magnolias, Lost Cause mythology on display at so many plantation heritage sites” (Dwyer et al., 2013, p. 4). In addition, it presented a nostalgic, imaginative gateway to “simpler times” for white Northerners who wished to escape the industrial, capitalist system where they were embedded (Dwyer et al., 2013).

Central to the Gone with the Wind depiction of the antebellum plantation is the presentation of a history where all whites belonged to a genteel civility, lived in grand manors, and constantly wore their Sunday best. It symbolizes a lost order of harmonious white patriarchy where women preformed distinctive femininity and welcomed in tired strangers in the spirit of Southern Hospitality (Eichstedt & Small, 2002). Within this portrayal, the nature of slavery was benevolent with “idealized relations between the races” (Hoelscher, 2012, p. 47).

Popular portrayals of black people as helpless, childlike, and happy to serve or alternatively, lazy, dangerous, and stupid were used to perpetuate the ideas that slavery was benevolent and white domination was justified (Pilgrim, 2000). These representations are
reflected in countless racist caricatures—including the childlike “Sambo,” the lazy “Coon,” and the serving “Mammy”—which were popularized both during slavery and afterwards during the Jim Crow era. Common depictions include crazed eyes, unkempt hair, exaggerated features, and wide smiles, as well as excessive eating of watermelon, natural physical strength, and musical talents (Green, n.d.; Pilgrim, 2000).

Harmonious race relations and docile servants were some of the many myths composing the Old South, Lost Cause mythology. As pointed out by Eichstedt and Small (2002), while the historical antebellum plantation was structured to exhibit wealth, it was still functioning as a farmhouse, and not as the prime residency of the planter family. Moreover, it was far from representing the norm life style of white Southerners, as most whites were poor and unwelcomed in these estates as they were themselves marginalized by the wealthy planter class.

The revised depiction of the Old South came to be a source of great nostalgia to what Hoelscher (2012) calls “a white pillared past” (p. 46). The tours that began in Natchez, Mississippi, were dubbed then (and are still called) the “Natchez Pilgrimage,” reflecting the almost religious reverence and meaning this characterization of the Old South carries for their visitors (Rahier & Hawkins, 1999). Prior to the 1960s, many plantation homes produced this fantasy by not only having the classic “lady of the house” leading the tour in an antebellum style hoop skirt, but also black servants and performers to welcome, serve, and entertain the guests (Hoelscher, 2012).

The Civil Rights Movement, however, highlighted these depictions’ racist nature and fought to create other economic opportunities for African Americans in the South (Hoelscher, 2012). As racial stereotypes became less acceptable in these sites, representation was adjusted. Nonetheless, rather than challenge the whole narrative of the harmonious white pillared past, plantation museums simply began to erase African American from the narrative altogether, rendering African Americans invisible in the history of the plantation economy and society, and by extension, from the history of the South and the US as a whole (Rahier & Hawkins, 1999).

The success of the Civil Rights Movement in mainstreaming social norms that condemn celebrations of oppression coupled with white America’s refusal to revise its mythical representation of the past, generated a “new normal.” Within this historical abstraction, attempts to reintroduce African Americans into the historical narrative of the Old South are
taboo, as their presence alone is sufficient in revealing the racist underpinning of the so-called “genteel civilizations.” This situation is reflected by Eichstedt and Small (2002) and Miles (2015) whose accounts describe the discomfort generated when white guides and visitors who buy into the fantasy of experiencing the romantic bygone era recognize a black visitor in the room.

The absurdity rooted in the contemporary mythology is well articulated by African American comedians Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele in their Confederate Reenactors episode on popular sketch-comedy show Key & Peele. The skit begins with a white man dressed as a Confederate General giving an impassioned speech to his fellow “soldiers,” stating:

Men, as we lost the counterattack against the Union army, we must remember that even though we may die a glorious death on the battlefield, we do so to preserve our way of life - the Southern way of life! A way of life so pure and beautiful that no man nor government can take this away from us! (Atencio, 2018, 00:03).

At the sight of two African Americans (Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele) dressed in rags, the general begins to stutter and finally stops his speech and gets out of character. The two new visitors quickly make sure they are understood as fellow reenactors as they effectively impersonate the portrayal of the docile and “happy-go-lucky” slaves popular in white films, children cartons, and memorabilia. As they join the scene, the now out-of-character-General calls: “Look fellas, we are trying to have a nice, little Civil War reenactment here. We don’t want any trouble” (00:46). In character, Key answers: “So are we sir! We..we try to have REAL nice reenactment! We certainly don’ wanna cause any trouble here!”

Key and Peele commitment to the white-gazed depiction of slavery as a benevolent institution and the enslaved as carefree, unintelligent, and happy to serve, uncovers the absurdity underlying these portrayals. Meanwhile, the uneasiness generated by their participation in the reenactment pulls the rug under the whitewashed nostalgia to the “Southern way of life” so popular across the southern US. It exposes the fact that one cannot imagine slavery as benign without also cognizing black people as docile, even when actively trying to not imagine black people at all.

In sophisticated ways, the skit also demonstrates the contemporary polarized debate between Heritage, Not Hate and Your Heritage Is My Slavery common in town hall meetings concerning Confederate monuments and school names (Hoelscher, 2012). It answers the call from those concerned that removing Confederate monuments equates “erasing history” with a
proposition to examine history with a more critical eye and add more details to it. This critical examination is taking place across the US, with movies, monuments, and museums (Berlin, 2004; Commander, 2018).

2.2 Plantation Narrative Research

Pressure to change is evident in plantation museums as a growing number begin applying a more critical eye to the history they present (Alderman et al., 2016). Central among the efforts to understand the dynamics leading to the trend in this research area of interest is the River Road Project. The project was carried out as a collaboration of six universities over three years, between 2012 and 2015, and focused on four plantations along Louisiana’s River Road, two of which are Oak Alley and the Houmas House. The following section will provide a review of the River Road Project’s finding, as well as other research that is relevant to this study.

2.2.1 Ownership Structure and the Narrator

In their seminal work, Eichstedt and Small (2002) marked the significance of ownership structure to the regime of representation employed by a given plantation museum. They suggest that unlike publicly funded heritage sites (managed at a city/county/state/federal level), privately owned plantations are not accountable to the public nor obligated to maintain a particularly high standard of historical accuracy. Additionally, owners that are not part of a foundation or a non-profit management structure are not obligated to consider other points of view. Against this backdrop, privately owned, for-profit plantation museums are least likely to incorporate the history of slavery into their narrative (Eichstedt & Small, 2002).

The discretion with which for-profit, private owners of plantation museums can operate is therefore significant. In their study Tourist plantation owners and slavery: a complex relationship, Bright et al. (2018) argues that plantation museum owners must be understood as “memorial entrepreneurs,” being “influential agents in the politics of remembering (and forgetting) the history of slavery” (p. 1745). After interviewing four unnamed plantation owners on Louisiana’s River Road, they suggest that within this framework the personal relationship and understanding owners have with the history of slavery factors into their estates’ regimes of representation.
Their study also indicates plantation museum owners are aware of the increasing pressure to incorporate the history of slavery into their narratives. This recognition of more critical perspectives creates an interesting dynamic. As owners of private, for-profit plantation museums secure an influential and independent position as “memorial entrepreneurs,” their rational for deciding to either accept criticism and change their narrative or to otherwise resist change, can reveal what factors inform a change to the local “politics of remembering.” In other words, this examination demands an understanding of where plantation owners are coming from philosophically and ideologically as influential “narrators,” “the producer of a narrative” (Rahier & Hawkins, 1999, p. 206).

In light of this previous research, my study sought to understands the constructivist reality of the Houmas House plantation owner, as the only for-profit plantation owner in this study. Given his relative independence in dictating the story told on his estate, understanding his perspective, rational, and ideology was imperative. Moreover, as a free memory agent, he may better reflect larger trends in American society, those unbound to regulative structures. Therefore, my research will aim to build upon the research conducted on plantation owners’ position as “memorial entrepreneurs.” Furthermore, this study will also aim to address gaps in the literature concerning white owners’ incorporation of slavery into their estates’ narratives.

The pressure to incorporate the history of slavery into the narrative leaves many complicated dynamics unaddressed. In particular, the racial disparity associated with plantation land ownership, and by extension, ownership over the means to tell the plantation story. This political economy means that white plantation owners are required to be the narrators of the history of slavery. While previous research suggests why white owners fail to incorporate the history of slavery into their estate, it does not shed light on what is the appropriate way for white owners to do so.

Popular categorizations of American Slavery as belonging to “African American History,” erases the historical role of the perpetrator, leaving only descendants of the enslaved visible, but not descendants of the enslavers. Reconceptualization the period as inherently belonging to American History, highlights the duty white Americans have in carrying the burden of telling and owning that history. Nonetheless, there are many concerns that arise when white people convey
the story of slavery. These include whether white people are the appropriate *narrators* of the story of slavery; the aesthetic and symbolic meaning of being a white plantation owner who resides in now predominantly African American areas and employs African Americans; and concerns regarding white owners’ potential *profit* from telling the story of enslavement, and by extension, from slavery itself.

These points illustrate the inherently problematic political economy underlying these estates. For example, one can be critical of white plantation museum owners for continuing to benefit from slavery as they profit from the romantic imagery of an estate made possible by those enslaved. Nonetheless, the same criticism can be the directed towards a white plantation owner who provides an honest, historically accurate account of the antebellum plantation. Moreover, it is important to examine with scrutiny white plantation owners’ position as narrators. The justified call for whites to carry the burden of anti-racist work or white-ignorance alleviation leaves many variables unknown. It is easy enough to imagine a white plantation owner taking on the task of educating about the veiled side of the planter class and exposing their role as enslavers. It might be uncomfortable, however, to envision white owners as the appropriate narrators of the story of African American survival, resilience, and endurance.

For these reasons, in addition to understanding the Houmas House owner’s perspective and rational as the “memorial entrepreneurs” (following Bright et al., 2018 conceptualization), I also aim to examine the dynamic created by white narration in the Whitney Plantation and Oak Alley. While both estates are now recognized as not-for-profit, they both have been established by white people and have vastly different understanding of their racialized positionality as narrating the story of slavery.

### 2.2.2 How to Narrate

Considering the sensitive nature of the history of slavery, even when memory agents are willing to narrate it, questions of *how* to go about telling it are critical. Alderman (2010) studied the African American politics of commemoration in Savannah, Georgia. His research demonstrates that efforts to commemorate histories complicated by facets of trauma, survival, and endurance necessitate a range of considerations. These include which facets to emphasize, what *commemorative surrogate* is appropriate to stand in the place of the gone history to
communicate the story, and the *textual politics* involved in choosing what words can best describe the story communicated (p. 91). Alderman (2010) shows that for African American memory agents, these questions can be further complicated due to the general politics where the project is situated. In the US context of ongoing white domination, this means access to resources needed for the commemorative project and consideration of white responses.

Other themes within the politics of commemoration is that of *symbolic excavation* and *artifact politics*. Alderman and Campbell (2008) explain the terms in the following way:

> The metaphor of excavation prompts us to realize that the unearthing of difficult and long suppressed (and repressed) historical narratives can only happen through memory work, the construction and representation of the past. This excavation calls for developing an “artifact politics” that involves active participation with the material traces of slavery as well as the appropriation and reinterpretation of artifacts previously associated with the white planter class. (p. 338)

Therefore, these are especially relevant within the context of plantation museums that undergo transition of regimes of representation as they face the need to attribute new meaning to the existing space and its objects and will thus be closely examined at Oak Alley.

### 2.2.3 Visitors

In their article *Who are they? Visitors to Louisiana’s River Road plantations*, Candace Forbes Bright and Perry Carter (2016) write:

> To facilitate the creation of a more in-depth understanding of the tourist plantation market, it is essential to recognize who the tourists are, what they are interested in, and how the relationship between visitor demographics and interests may potentially impact the future of plantation narratives offered to the traveling public (p. 262).

Indeed, visitors are those who fuel the demand for certain narratives, question the tour guides, and tip them. The clearest indication that tourist demand influences the decision to incorporate the history of slavery into the plantation’s narrative is provided by David L. Butler in Alderman et al. (2016). In describing the process of his research, Butler indicated that his initial research with the Laura Plantation showed that tourists are interested to learn more about the enslaved. Laura took the findings seriously and adjusted its narrative to expand upon slavery; furthermore, Butler presented the finding to the three other plantations in the *Plantation Parade* marketing partnership. This partnership between Laura, the Houmas House, Oak Alley, and San Francisco Plantations was established to increase visitations to all four sites. The other three plantations
agreed to similar studies to be conducted on their properties as they too were keen to know what interested their visitors (Alderman et al., 2016).

Two cluster studies conducted by Bright and Carter shed light on the demographics visiting the different plantations and their visitors’ interests in terms of the information given in each plantation. Their 2016 study examined all Plantation Parade museums, including the Houmas House and Oak Alley. Their 2018 paper utilized similar methodologies in three plantations, two of which are the Whitney Plantation and Oak Alley. Their findings suggest that visitors not only tend to go to the plantation that best meets their knowledge interests (Bright & Carter, 2016) but also those that reaffirms their existing world views (Bright & Carter, 2018). Key to the analysis conducted in this paper, are the demographics and interests of the visitors to Oak Alley, Whitney, and the Houmas House.

Bright and Carter (2018) study found that out of the three plantations museums, Whitney’s visitors are the youngest, have the highest income bracket, and are most interested in learning about the histories of the enslaved (also in comparison to Houmas House in the 2016 study). Houmas House visitors, on the other hand, have the lowest income, are least educated, and least interested in histories of the enslaved (also in comparison to the 2018 study of Oak Alley and Whitney). Oak Alley visitors were found in between Whitney and Houmas House in all four categories presented here. Nonetheless, distinctively, Oak Alley’s visitors were found to be only moderately interested in many different aspects of plantation history. Therefore, while their interest in slavery was lower than that of visitors to the Whitney Plantation or Laura Plantation, in comparison to other themes offered within Oak Alley (such as furniture, architecture and landscape), interest in slavery was relatively high (Bright & Carter, 2016). Therefore, it is apparent that the level of focus on slavery in each plantation’s narrative largely corresponds with the level of interests from its visitors.

An additional significant finding is the high average of female visitors (approximately 60 percent in all plantations surveyed) and the low number of African American visitors (less than one percent in Oak Alley) (Bright & Carter, 2018). While there is no exact number of African American visitors to the Houmas House, there is reason to believe the number is similar to that of Oak Alley as 2016 research concluded the visitors across the Plantation Parade partnership
“tend to be white” (p. 269). Whitney’s visitor demographics thus stands out with 14.1 percent of its visitors being African Americans (Bright & Carter, 2018). These findings are also supported by Dwyer et al. (2013) who found that African American visitors tend to prefer museums that acknowledge African American struggles and contributions.

A key finding from Butler, Carter, and Dwyer (2008) study of over 1,000 exist surveys of visitors to the Laura Plantation, is that international tourists are markedly more interested to learn about the enslaved. The fact that foreign visitors predominantly from Canada and Europe are more interested in the enslaved present an important part of the discussion presented in this research and will receive more nuanced attention.

Knowing both who is visiting plantation museums and what these visitors’ interests are, is key to this research as it can indicate whether a plantation museum caters to its base or whether the visitors themselves are the ones pushing for change. This proposition is especially significant when examining the dynamics on the River Road where plantations are in close proximity because research indicates that this positionality may lead to narrative proliferation (Alderman & Modlin, 2008). However, the proximity to a counter-narrative site may also operate as a form of “moral licensing.” By directing visitors interested in learning about the history of slavery to go elsewhere, Gone with the Wind plantation types can absolve themselves from the responsibility to tell the story of plantation slavery (Rahier & Hawkins, 1999).

Against this backdrop, it is crucial to understand the dynamic between the three plantations and map the ways they may influence one another. Several of the largest tourist companies offer double or combo plantation tours that expose visitors to two different plantations on the same day. While the Houmas House is not a part of such deal, Oak Alley receives many visitors who first attend Whitney. This composition raises a question concerning the potential role of the tourist. Could tourists’ previous exposure to Whitney’s counter-narrative be a part of what led Oak Alley to incorporate slavery into the Big House tour and allowed Houmas House not to? Or perhaps Oak Alley decision to change was fueled by the research they helped sponsor which indicated that visitors are interested to learn more about the enslaved? The survey results may also explain Houmas House’s rationale to maintain its narrative, as its visitors are not interested to hear about the enslaved in their visits.
Two additional studies are relevant to these questions. Alderman and Modlin (2016) research examined the participation of tourists during plantation tours among the Plantation Parade members and included interviews with visitors after the tours. Additionally, Carter (2016) studied the online reviews of visitors to Oak Alley and Laura as posted in October 2014, after Oak Alley installed six replica cabins of its long gone original slave cabins, but before they had changed the tour in Big House. Both studies indicate that tourists arrive at the plantations with preexisting ideas about the history presented and are not passive in receiving the information presented. Nonetheless, as discussed below, Alderman and Modlin (2016) also found that visitors rarely vocally indicate to guide whether they agree or disagree with the information presented.

Carter’s study also points to Oak Alley’s position as an establishment that leans more into an amusement site rather than an educational, heritage site. In addition, his account of the co-existing Gone with the Wind narrative type in the Big House tour (at the time of his study), and the newly constructed slave cabin replicas, paints a disturbing image of white nostalgia. Hanna (2016) conducted an analysis of Oak Alley Slavery at Oak Alley Exhibit also noted the spatial segregation generated from the exhibit setting where the rest of the property continue to celebrate a romanticized Old South mythology, creating two parallel interpretation that are incompatible.

Alderman and Modlin (2016) identified four groups of visitors, each as a distinct interpretive community. The first group consisted of people who did not want to hear about slavery, the second group was indifferent to hearing stories about the enslaved, the third was eager to hear more about the enslaved, and the fourth group wanted to hear more about the enslaved and race relations. Nonetheless, they also noted that many visitors do not utter their thoughts during the tour, making it harder for guides and by extension, the plantations’ staff, to know if visitors are interested to hear about the enslaved.

The ability to utter disagreement or interest is difficult during the tour as visitors may feel uncomfortable to bring up slavery while the guide is dressed in a period gown and pretends to be the belle of the house (Alderman & Modlin, 2016). Nonetheless, as Potter (2016) and Alderman and Modlin (2016) suggest, the participation of the tourist can inform the content of the tour as some guides adjust their narration according to the tourist demographics and the
questions visitors ask. Given that plantation museums advertise their sites and visitors tend to select the plantations that reaffirm their perspectives (Bright & Carter, 2018), it is unsurprising that not many people utter extreme disagreement with the tour.

These studies, however, were carried out before Whitney came to prominence, and before Oak Alley changed its narrative in the Big House, lost its period costumes, and added interpreters to the slavery exhibit. Therefore, to address the gap in the literature, in this research, I examine groups who visited the Whitney Plantation and then Oak Alley out of the postulation that tourists who visit two plantations that are so different in their regimes of representation may arrive with less preconceived ideas that those who chose to visit only one of the two.

2.2.4 Guides

Interviewing guides, Potter (2016) noted that different plantations have different guidelines as far as guides’ degree of independence in narrating the tour. Therefore, visitors of Oak Alley can expect a more cohesive narrative as guides follow a stricter script (Bright & Carter, 2016; Rahier & Hawkins, 1999), whereas visitors of the Houmas House can get a different tour depending on the guide, or even have a different tour with the same guide. In these sites, the interest of the guide is key to what narrative is told, and therefore, her relationship with the history can be as important as the owner’s.

In his study, Carter (2016) notes the “guides, as agents of heritage tourism interpretation, literally carry the narrative” (p. 242). As “narrative agents” the identity of the guide in the context of the history of the antebellum plantation is extremely important. As noted by Eichstedt and Small (2002) and Potter (2016) most planation guides are white, middle-aged women who commit to the Southern Belle character. Given the narratives presented in these museums, white women serve as a fitting agent to carry the narrative. Nonetheless, some sites also have African American guides who dress as the Southern Belle. Rahier and Hawkins (1999) characterized their function as they “naturalize” the problematic historical interpretation and their commitment to the valorizing narrative as the “ultimate victory of white supremacy.” (p. 211).

The uncomfortable and even offensive scenario described by Rahier and Hawkins (1999) points to two issues of concern. First, the political-economy present in plantation country and the way historical inequality feeds into contemporary inequality within the landscape and the
limited working opportunities available to African Americans. A manifestation of this dynamic is provided by Rapson (2018) who points to the rampant environmental racism that dominates the contemporary River Road landscape with its numerous oil refineries. She argues that it is the historical violence against the enslaved, and the continuous marginalization of their descendants that enables the current environmental racism experienced by the communities River Road communities.

Moreover, Rapson contends that the River Road plantation museums’ romantic narration works to blur the historical violence that occurred and thus neutralize the continuous violence as it ahistoricizes its origins. Indeed, while researchers argue that the narrative presented in these estates works to perpetuate racial inequalities, Rapson’s (2018) example illustrate the on-the-ground linkage between past and present inequalities on the same landscape as well as the ways in which the plantation narrative operates to decontextualize the relationship between past and present and thus enable continuous violence.

Rahier and Hawkins (1999) analysis of the black, Southern Belle illustrates that the identity of those who carry the narrative matter. This paper will argue that guides’ identities are not only significant when African Americans guides work in plantations that romanticize the Old South, but also when white guides narrate the history of slavery because the guides themselves become part of the narrative experience and not are merely vessels. Thus, their identities cannot be abstracted from the historical and social context of race relations in the US or the narrative they present. In addition, irrespective of identity, being a tour guide is inherently challenging for a number of other reasons. Guides must stay highly informed and prepared for a range of questions, accommodate different visitors’ needs (e.g. dehydration, children on the tour, non-English speakers), and be up on their feet for many hours.

In plantation museum settings, these challenges are added to a range of other complicated tasks as guides do not only carry the narrative, but also have to navigate the complicated dynamic inherent in telling controversial and emotionally loaded histories. Therefore, plantation museum guides poses as the “front line interpreters” (Rahier & Hawkins, 1999, p. 206) and represent a tier within the plantation museum who have tremendous knowledge of the dynamic associated with particular narrative. In sites that offer counter-
narratives, guides may be able to shed light on strategies to cope with telling difficult histories. These strategies include navigating the sensitive terrain of white defensiveness and/or guilt as well as black anger and/or trauma. As noted, these strategies may depend on the identity of the guide herself as well as the visiting group’s composition.

The demographic composition of the owners, guides, and visitors proved extremely relevant to this research. The white narration built into the plantation museum political-economy reveals that the pressure for greater incorporation of slavery into narrative leave out many complicated issues unaccounted for. Questions of how the stories of slavery should be told, by whom, and for whom denote a greater complexity embedded within the plantation’s memory politics which will be addressed in this research.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The chapter outlines the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that were used to analyze the data collected in this research. In particular it introduces theoretical framing that while I believe are highly relevant to the study of plantation museums, have been rarely applied in the literature.

3.1 Internal Orientalism

In order to understand the dynamics involved in telling the antebellum South history and what makes it complicated, it is imperative to understand how the “South,” as an imaginary geography with a unique historical burden, was constructed. In his article, *The Haunting of the South: American Geopolitical Identity and the Burden of Southern History* David. R Jansson (2007) argues that in order to legitimize its geopolitical position as the leader of the free world, the US had to construct its national identity as innocent, just, and democratic. This task was not easy given the US’ long history of racial exploitation, discrimination, and segregation. Therefore, the US utilized the mechanism of internal orientalism where it othered “the South” as an imagined space, though within the US, does not represents its essence. This process allowed the hegemonic US to displace and disavow its culpability in racial oppression and white supremacy, turning slavery, segregation, and discrimination into a localized anomaly rather than an integral part of the American story. In other words, the burdens of racism became “a Southern thing”
rather than an “American thing.”

Today “the South” is notoriously recognized as a site that is “haunted” by its history of racial oppression (Jansson, 2007; Miles, 2015). Less known is the fact that New York was the nation’s slavery capital for over 200 years, with 20 percent of colonial New Yorkers being enslaved Africans and 41 percent of colonial New York households owned enslaved people until 1827 (New York Historical Society [NYHS], n.d.).

Moreover, the construction of Southern slavery as occurring independently from the North, where it was eventually abolished, undermines the vast dependence and investment of Northern economies in slavery. Given the interconnectedness of Northern banking, finance, and insurance industries as well as textile, trade, and institutions of higher education, historians today find it hard to imagine American capitalism developing without slavery (Beckert & Rockman, 2016). In fact, the same can be said about the entire modern world, as colonization, the transatlantic slave trade, and the plantation economy fueled Europe’s rise and industrial revolution (Drayton, 2005; Grandin, 2014).

Beyond the historical decontextualization of the plantation from the entire economic mechanism that orchestrated it in the American North and Europe, the focus on the South also distracts attention from ongoing racial oppression that takes place in the North. One example is reflected in the arena of residential segregation. While the South is often scrutinized for this issue due to the legal position racial segregation held during the Jim Crow era, an analysis of 2010 census data shows that out of the 25 most segregated metropolitan areas in the US, only five are in the South (Logan & Stults, 2011). As Historian Thomas J. Sugrue argues:

It’s reassuring for Northerners to think that the country’s problems are rooted down South. But pointing our fingers at Dixie — and, by implication, reinforcing the myth of Northern innocence — comes at a cost. As federal troops and Supreme Court decisions forced social change in the states of the old Confederacy during the 20th century, injustices in the North were allowed to fester. That trend continues, as Northerners seek to absolve themselves of responsibility for their own sins by holding aloft an outdated and inaccurate caricature of a socially stunted South. (2015. para, 14).

Other than diverting attention away from the problems in the North and clearing white Northerners conscious, this displacement also racializes the “South” and “America” as white spaces while burdening the white South in detrimental ways (Jansson, 2010).
The relegation of all of white America’s ills to the white South does not stop at racism, but also includes xenophobia, intolerance, violence, and general backwardness (Jansson, 2007, 2010), along with obesity, poverty, and stupidity (Sugrue, 2015). Under this burden, some black Southerners struggle to define themselves as part of this geography while white Southerners feel ostracized and ridiculed, pushing some white Southerners to unapologetically embrace “Southern heritage” and reclaimed it as positive (Jansson, 2010).

In the context of this research, internal orientalism thus poses real questions concerning the mechanisms involved in turning the plantation museum into a site that celebrates the white Southern heritage. In addition, it highlights the need for scrutiny when analyzing the drivers that shape the pressure for change. As noted above, Europeans and Canadians were found to be most interested in the history of slavery (Butler et al., 2008) and it is wealthier and more educated people who visit Whitney (Bright & Carter, 2018).

Considering these findings through the lens of internal orientalism of the South, it is not surprising that these particular demographics are those who feel more comfortable and interested to learn about the burden of white Southern history. Are Europeans as equally interested to hear about the history of the transatlantic slave trade when visiting the ports of Liverpool, Bristol, or Bordeaux? Internal orientalism may suggest that by focusing on the horrors of the South, one can establish a sense of moral superiority, a form of disavowal by displacement of one’s own culpability (Lewis, 2013).

One study that is useful in contextualizing and illuminating these considerations is Arlie Russell Hochschild’s (2016) account of white, rural Louisiana. Her study, Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right sheds light on the sociological, cultural, emotional, and political factors that shape this contemporary moment and may help explain some of the trends observed in narrative changes.

3.2 Strangers in Their Own Land

Traveling to environmentally damaged rural Louisiana, Hochschild sought to understand what might bring working class white Americans to align themselves with the Tea Party which advocates for environmental deregulation and public spending cuts. As her study coincided with the 2016 elections and Donald J. Trump’s campaign, Hochschild found that it was a sense of
alienation from their own country and a promise of *emotional* self-interest that drove many white, rural Louisianans to support Trump’s promise to *Make America Great Again*.

By articulating the *deep story* of the subjects in her research, Hochschild outlines the two distinct times that informed the contemporary white, Southern epistemology, self-perception, and sense-making from their perspective. The first is the 1860s with the “War of Northern Aggression” that placed the South in ruins, shamed it, and assaulted its way of life. As mentioned above, this Lost Cause interpretation of the Civil War and the antebellum South resulted in the glorification of the *Old South*, as manifested in part by the plantation museum.

The second period Hochschild suggests is the 1960s and the struggle for civil rights. This period was perceived by the white South as yet another attack by the moralizing North for its way of life. On top of racial desegregation and affirmative action, traditional values seemed assaulted as women and LGBTQ people demanded more rights. Immigrants, non-Christians, and even the environment appeared to be “cutting in line” ahead of hardworking whites. Identity politics begun proliferating where conservative, working class Southerners felt under attack and like “strangers in their own land,” policed by a powerful political correctness regime, and scapegoated for every minorities’ problem while they themselves were struggling to make ends meet in a changing economy.

A key parallel Hochschild draws between these two-time frames is the lower-class whites’ alignment with the rich whites. She argues that in the 1800s, the now widely celebrated planter class had marginalized poor white people, taking the best land and leaving them unemployed in the face of enslaved, black labor. In order to abate their resistance, the planter class offered the allure of racial superiority to keep the poor from joining hands with the enslaved and rebel against the planter class. The same logic, Hochschild argues, operates today with the modern “planter class”: where the antebellum sugar barons pushed poor white people to the swampland, the contemporary oil barons poison that land. Nonetheless poor white people vote to deregulate wealthy white people’s rigs and lower their taxes, looking up to the barons with aspiration: if they only work hard enough, if no one would “cut in line,” they could live the American Dream and be rich too (Hochschild, 2016).

As mentioned above, Rapson (2018) argues that the historical racial violence that took
place on the plantation created the contemporary conditions that enable the current environmental violence against communities of color on the River Road. Nonetheless, she contends that the refinement of the history carried out by the plantation museums in the region facilitates the current oppression because it blurs the historical oppression upon which it depends. Hochschild shows how that legacy is mirrored by poor white communities. The poor white people’s admiration for the wealthy planter class did not only mean lack of solidarity for the enslaved, but also a lack of resistance to their own marginalization. The plantation museum sells an experience contemporary, struggling, local white residents can reminisce on with nostalgia to a period of lost glory. The oil barons promise a return to glory and a restoration of the honor taken away by the War of Northern Aggression and the 1960s that again humiliated the white South. Teaming up with marginalized communities necessitates an acknowledgment of one’s position as a victim of the powerful one admires. It is easier to side with the rich and blame minorities and the moralizing, elitist, North because it allows to maintain a feeling of superiority.

Drawing from Hochschild’s work, the current pressure to remove Confederate monuments and change narratives in plantation museums is like adding salt to injury. Not only did the North destroy the antebellum southern way of life, but now the liberals and the minorities will not even let white Southerners cherish that history. Trump’s campaign, however, promised a return to a time when things were great, before all the different groups began demanding their rights, when the white workers were “part of a powerful, like minded majority, released from politically correct rules of feeling” (p. 228). Against the backdrop of internal orientalism that alienates many white Southerners and white ignorance that erases the oppression of minorities, the contemporary political moment facilitates an unapologetic celebration of what minorities and/or white Northerners may find offensive or inferior.

The pressure to change the white-centric valorizing narratives, therefore, may have the opposite effect in some circumstances. While some plantation museums may adopt a new regime of representation that acknowledges the problematic nature of the Gone with the Wind narrative, others may feel a sense of legitimacy to pushback against this trend. Visitors’ choice to expose themselves to either a valorizing plantation or a plantation that addresses slavery is also
in line with the increasingly polarized media landscape (Hochschild, 2016). Perhaps just like individuals can choose between Fox News or MSNBC, visitors can decide which version of antebellum history suit them better.

### 3.3 White Ignorance

The ability to perceive minorities as “cutting in line” brings us back to Mills’ (2007) articulation of white ignorance and the political and epistemological mechanisms integral to its existence. As mentioned above, white ignorance is not a derivative of a biological whiteness, as whiteness itself is not a biological condition but rather a social construction. Therefore, white epistemologies of ignorance refers to socially orchestrated production of knowledge and the social reality of its cognition (Mills, 2007).

To produce knowledge, one must have an intellectual authority and power, two factors that tend to be connected (May, 2015). Therefore, those who have power can decide what counts as “knowledge” and perhaps more importantly, who qualifies as a subject of knowledge versus an object of knowledge (Osamu, 2006). The power embedded in the commend over cognition cannot be undermined. One example provided by Mills (2007) is the European colonizers’ ability to not only miscognize the existing civilizations in the Americas as “savages,” but also to not cognize them at all as reflected in the notion of vast, “empty” lands (p. 27). Needless to say, the ontology brought by such conceptualization allowed Europeans to justify mass land conquest and genocide.

As noted, the physical ability for epistemic ignorance is not reserved for white people (e.g. Hutu ability to cognize Tutsi as sub-humans). Nonetheless, the power to institute hegemonic systems of knowledge production and legitimize authority for it has been historically reserved to whites due to the nexus of knowledge and power (May, 2015; Mills, 2007; Osamu, 2006). The hegemonic institutionalization of white knowledge thus embeds certain types of ignorance within it that is unique to whiteness. For example, the erasure or undermining of historical atrocities committed by whites and the contributions of others attributed to what is then considered white achievements (Mills, 2007).

The sanitation of history books and collective memory from unpleasant events has multiple consequences. As mentioned above, the US’ ability to displace its historical sins enabled
“America” to construct its geopolitical identity as the legitimate leader of “the free world” (Jansson, 2007). While utilizing different mechanisms, the European Union operated similarly in addressing its own history and affirmed its geopolitical identity as having “superior moral authority” and role in global politics (El-Tayeb, 2008, p. 655).

3.4 Positionality

In addition to geopolitical identity, individual identity is also formed based on belonging to a certain collective identity and the collective memories upon which it is founded (Mills, 2007). This situation illustrates the feedback loop of identity and epistemology—identity, and where our identity is socially situated, informs the type of knowledge we obtain (May, 2015). The way in which our identity informs our epistemology is often a product of the relational nature of our identity what those of others (Hoagland, 2007). This relational construction of identity and the way it informs the ways we understand the world is reflected in the remarks of French political theorist Montesquieu in 1748 who noted, “It is impossible for us to suppose these creatures [enslaved Africans] to be men; because allowing them to be men, a suspicion would follow that we ourselves are not Christians” (cited in Loewen, 2011, para. 12). Understanding himself and his group as Christians, meant that he could not cognize the enslaved as people.

The second point concerns the way our identities are positioned in relation to systems of power in ways that inform the kind of information we have access to (Collins, 2015). Here the hegemonic production of knowledge means that ignorance is built into the system; white ignorance can thus occur unintentionally and takes active effort to avoid (May, 2015). Moreover, we are all socially positioned differently in relation to knowledge, meaning that two people can witness the same things and reach completely different conclusions. Linda Martín Alcoff (2007) gives the example of how different demographics’ experience with the police leads them to obtain different conclusion about the nature of police-civilian interactions. Because people of color experiences with the police are often negative, they find accounts of police mistreatment generally credible. White people, who tend to have better treatment from the police, however, are more skeptical of accounts of police mistreatment and tend to believe the victims are at fault.

Where we are situated epistemically is therefore a factor of how different facets of our identity are located in relation to power (May, 2015). This means that intersections of gender,
class, race, ability, sexuality, religion, and other facets of identity, inform how we cognize the world. Those privileged by the systems in place tend not to see how the system benefits them while oppressing others. Those oppressed by the system have no choice but to see both how it privileges other and oppresses them as they must navigate a world designed for the dominant polity (Bailey, 2007). A popular example is the way women must know much more about men and the way men perceive them and think to navigate a world dominated by men. This includes consideration of what clothes to wear, what tone of voice to use and what path to take from getting from one point to another. Men, on the other hand, can know nearly nothing about the women-experience and still navigate the world successfully.

In the white Southerners “deep story” described by Hochschild (2016), we note how ignorance is embedded within social and personal narratives. Adhering to the American myth of equal opportunity and individual responsibility for one’s circumstance erases the profound ways in which othered demographics have been systematically disadvantaged for the benefit of whites. With this narrative in mind, affirmative action and demands for equal opportunity are perceived as “cutting in line.” Ignorance of the actual circumstances of history thus allows people to perceive those fighting for equality as acting unfairly and allow whites to position themselves as the victims. This rhetorical mechanism is referred to by Thomas Ross (1990) as Black Abstraction and White Innocence.

3.5 Black Abstraction and White Innocence

Ross (1990) illustrates through the reasoning provided in racial court cases from before, during, and after de-jure racial segregation that key to establishing white innocence is the abstraction of the black experience. This abstraction can occur in multiple ways, including ahistoricising inequality, relegating to individual responsibility rather than structural circumstances, and universalizing the white experience.

An example given by Ross is The Civil Rights Cases of 1883 that rolled back many rights given to black people during Reconstruction. The Courts’ majority concluded the special protection given to black people places them as unfair “special favorites of the law” (as cited in Ross, 1990, p. 13). This logic, Ross demonstrates, relies on fundamental decontextualization within which civil rights were given to emancipated black people in the South. Under this
reframing, not only were white people no longer responsible for the reason why black needed a special set of legal rights in the first place, but now they were recognized as a victim on an unfair legislation that favors blacks.

The case reflects the power embedded in reconstructing a narrative that abstract the black experience and repositions whites people as victims. This rhetorical device is relevant to a study that concerns the practical decontextualization of contemporary inequalities by abstracting the black experience in the antebellum plantation. It is also necessary for efforts to understand resistance to attempts to change the white-centric narrative.

3.6 White Fragility

The ongoing protection of whites’ sense of innocence and positive self-perception in the United States also results in what Robin DiAngelo (2011) refers to as white fragility. This condition manifest in hypersensitivity to any form of racial stress, including the proposition that white people benefit from white privilege or that white people’s actions/words/behavior can be racist. Being deeply offended by accusations of racism also works to weaponized white hurt reverse situations where white people are perpetrators to establish victimhood (DiAngelo, 2011). This framework is useful in both understanding the logic behind the resistance to change in the context of the Houmas House and the response to white fragility in Oak Alley and Whitney where content that suggests white culpability and/or benefit from slavery can trigger white fragility among some visitors. Examining guides’ strategies to manage white fragility and ensure a constructive experience in can thus inform greater social efforts to appropriately address manifestation of white fragility and thus enable important conversations that are otherwise hindered by white fragility.

4. METHODS

The objectives of my research were to map the dynamic of narrative change in plantation museums and to better understand the challenges and opportunities different regimes of representation carry within their structural contexts. It thus aims to both identify different factors that inform decisions to change or maintain narratives of historical interpretation and provide necessary nuance concerning the on-the-ground reality of telling difficult history or avoiding it.
Moreover, I was intrigued by the previous research that suggests plantation museums that incorporate the history of slavery into their narratives may have a “proliferating effect” on other plantation museums nearby (Alderman & Modlin, 2008). As a tourist who visited the River Road plantation region in April 2017, I heard similar assertions that the Whitney Plantation had opened with the purpose of challenging the local memory landscape (Cummings, 2015) and had stimulated other plantations in the region to incorporate slavery into their narrative.

In particular, I was interested to learn about plantations that shared visitors with Whitney through tourist companies’ “double plantation tours” or “combo tours” packages. As these tours exposed visitors to Whitney’s narrative that centers the enslaved experience before visiting a plantation that may refer to those in bondage a “servants,” or not refer to them at all.

Therefore, I have picked the Oak Alley Planation because not only did it share visitors with Whitney through a few companies’ dual plantation tours, but it had also undergone dramatic changes to its narrative—from well-established symbolic annihilation regime of representation (Eichstedt & Small, 2002; Rahier & Hawkins, 1999) to segregated knowledge in 2013 (Hanna, 2016), and since 2018 to a regime of relative incorporation. Therefore, by studying both Whitney and Oak Alley, I hoped to get a better understanding of the trend of incorporating slavery into plantation museums narratives—was it Whitney that influenced Oak Alley’s decision to change, or was Whitney itself part of a wider trend?

Nonetheless, this sample alone would have provided only a partial view into the dynamic reality of the “River Road Plantation Country” as not all plantations decide to incorporate slavery into their narratives. Therefore, I sought to include a plantation that despite the growing pressure to incorporate slavery into the narrative (Bright et al., 2018), maintains its Gone with the Wind narrative type. I hoped by examining such a case would enable me to gauge the proliferating effect’s effectiveness and its limitations: why do some plantations incorporate the history of slavery while others do not?

Among the plantations that maintain a white-centric narrative, the Houmas House stood out as the only one that completely ignores slavery in its narrative. Moreover, Houmas House is one of the four plantations that belong to the Plantation Parade marketing partnership. Unlike
the other three plantations in the partnership (which includes Oak Alley) the Houmas House is the only one that does not mention the enslaved in the joint promotional material at all.

Altogether, I had a sample of three plantation museums that while in close geographic proximity, represented a range of historical interpretation of the same landscape. These represented: Whitney—a plantation that opened with the direct intention to provide a counter-narrative as it explored the antebellum plantation from the enslaved perspective. Oak Alley—a well-established plantation that transitioned from symbolic annihilation to a regime of relative incorporation, and the Houmas House that while aware of the narrative changes around it, is maintaining a regime of symbolic annihilation. I contacted the three places by email and obtained their permission to conduct my study.

Given the three sites different settings, I have developed a research design that considered each case’s unique circumstances and my research priorities within it. Therefore, I will begin outlining my methodological choices by presenting data collection methods I used across all three before turning to outline my case-specific choices.

4.1 Content Analysis

In order to establish which cases to center this research on, I have conducted content analysis of their online material which included the plantations’ websites and promotional videos on YouTube.com. This analysis allowed me to better understand each plantation’s main narrative and the ways it promotes itself to the public.

4.2 Participant Observation

Joining tours was a crucial part of this research as it enabled me to authentically access the narrative told on the estate as well as to note features crucial to the narrative overall, including guides’ tones, intonations, and body language. In addition, given visitors potential role as drivers of narrative change (Alderman & Modlin, 2016), I wanted to view the narration in its natural setting where I could observe how tourist react to certain narratives, what questions they ask, and how the guide responds and manages the task of telling or avoiding difficult histories. This process also allowed me to witness different dynamics brought by different tourist-guides given the history in question, visitors, and guides’ identities (pertaining to nationality, race,
gender, and age) can potentially play a role in the dynamic. Particular interest was paid to strategies taken by guides to overcome challenges unique to the narrative told, for example manifestation of white fragility.

4.3 Interviews

In all three sites, I conducted semi-structured interviews with staff. While these interviews had slightly different roles in each area (as will be explain below) the overall goal was to hear about the experience and reasoning of the actors involved in telling and shaping the narrative from their perspective. Therefore, I asked questions that pertained to the actors’ personal appeal and mission in their work, as well as their challenges and strategies in overcoming them. In addition, these interviews were carried as a measure of triangulation as I recognized participant observation limitations in terms of the limited exposure it offers and the method’s susceptibility to misinterpretation of data.

4.4 Case Specific Methods

4.4.1 Houmas House

Given the Houmas House’s embodiment of the classic symbolic annihilation regime of representation and the ample amount of research conducted on this regime type, I was not interested in carrying out an extensive analysis of the narrative it offers as much as I was interested to understand why it had continued to adhere to its narrative while other plantations in close proximity decided to incorporate the story of slavery. Nonetheless, I participated in two house tours, the first on July 10th, 2018 and the second on July 26th, 2018 and reviewed the Houmas House’s online content, including its website, YouTube.com promotional material, and visitors’ reviews on TripAdvisor.com as well as Houmas House’s responses to them.

Given the Houmas House position as a private, for-profit plantation museum, the owner of the plantation holds a much more independent and influential position in terms of deciding what story is told on his estate (Eichstedt & Small, 2002). Following the articulation of Bright et al. (2018) that plantation owners should be seen as “memorial entrepreneurs,” who are “influential agents in the politics of remembering (and forgetting) the history of slavery” (p. 1745), I was mostly interested to understand the owner’s reasoning behind the decision to avoid
slavery in the estate interpretation. Therefore, I conducted a three-hour semi-structured interview with the owner of the Houmas House on the estate on July 26th, 2018. The interview was conducted and recorded with his consent. Nonetheless, for ethical reasons I have decided to obscure the identity of the owner in question by assigning him with a pseudonym.

4.4.2 Oak Alley

Given Oak Alley’s recent and dramatic changes in narrative and landscape, I wanted to utilize my participant observation not only to observes how guides and visitors navigate the new narrative, but also to analyze the content of the narrative itself. I therefore joined three tours of the Big House and three talks given at the Slavery at Oak Alley exhibit which takes place at a separate site on the property. These tours were joined on July 13th, July 20th, and July 22nd, 2018.

Key to this data collection strategy was the tour with Gray Line. With the consent Gray Line’s Head of Operation, I joined three groups who visited the plantation. Twice via the company’s Double Plantation Tour where I joined a group that had first visited Whitney and then Oak Alley, and one tour that was only to Oak Alley. I made the decision to visit Oak Alley this way in order to observe whether the nature of visitors’ reactions change when they are exposed to both narratives rather than one. Also, by speaking with visitors who agreed to be interviewed, I could ask what they thought and felt after seeing both narratives. Moreover, by joining the largest tourist company I hoped to get a better understanding of the overall narrative tourists are exposed to (as company guides also narrate the landscape and history of the region on the bus). Lastly, I was guided by an assumption that visitors who want to see two plantations rather than one, may have arrived at the tour with less concrete ideas about the narrative told than those who chose to see one particular plantation. This way I hoped to collect data from a sample of visitors who are not particularly attached to a certain narrative prior to the visit. Below I will comment further on the visitors from whom data were collected.

In addition to participant observation, I conducted semi-structured interviews with six staff members at Oak Alley. Given Oak Alley’s position as a foundation, I sought to interview a few senior staff members about the decision to change the plantation’s narrative rather than one main figure. Therefore, I interviewed the curator, a senior interpreter, and the interpreter coordinator. In addition to understanding the decision-making process, I interviewed three junior
staff to hear their perspectives on telling the new narrative on the ground. I therefore interviewed an interpreter in the Big House and the two interpreters of the *Slavery at Oak Alley* exhibit. All interviews were coordinated in advance and took place on July 25th, 2018. The interviews were recorded with the interviewees’ consent and pseudonyms were assigned to obscure their identities.

All in all, Oak Alley provides an interesting case study of the dynamics that occur when narratives change. Unlike the Whitney Plantation where visitors arrive knowing that they will be exposed to the history of slavery, Oak Alley’s well-established position and business model relied on the imagery of the romantic *Old South*. Therefore, Oak Alley’s case allowed for an investigation of the factors that led to the decision to change the narrative and the new dynamics created by the narrative change in a setting that was not originally designed for it.

**4.4.3 The Whitney Plantation**

Given Whitney’s relatively high-profile position as the *only* plantation museum that is dedicated entirely to the enslaved (as of 2018), there is already a considerable amount of information available concerning the reasoning and mission behind the Plantation’s establishment. Therefore, my main interest in the Whitney was to understand the on-the-ground reality of telling a counter-narrative. In particular, I aimed to investigate the dynamics created after plantation museums decide to take up the challenge to disturb the master-narrative, as the pressure to change the dominant historical interpretation leave questions of how to do so unaccounted for. Therefore, I aimed to use Whitney as a case study to ask how is the story of slavery told? How does Whitney go about finding the physical surrogates to tell the story of slavery, what aspect of slavery does it communicate, and who is physically carrying the burden of challenging the white-washed historical interpretation?

In addition, I was interested to understand the political economy of Whitney as a site owned by a white man. Is Whitney making a profit out of the story of slavery? What then makes it different from the Houmas House? Are the local communities who identify as descendants of the enslaved appreciate the way their histories are told? Were they consulted? In order to answer these questions, my data collection methods in Whitney involved six participant observation tours, two of which were though Gray Line’s *Double Plantation Tours* with Oak Alley on July 13th
and July 20\textsuperscript{th} 2018 and one Double Plantation Tour with Laura Plantation on July 24\textsuperscript{th} 2018 to get an idea of whether the nature of questions asked by visitors who first see Whitney and then Oak Alley are similar or not to questions asked by visitors who see Whitney and Laura. I also joined a single Gray Line plantation tour on July 16\textsuperscript{th}, 2018 and two independently on July 26\textsuperscript{th} and 27\textsuperscript{th}, 2018. Unlike Oak Alley which has limited number of set narrations, Whitney has multiple guides who narrate differently. Therefore, while I have analyzed the Oak Alley tours with greater precision, in Whitey I have characterized the tour broadly.

The reasoning behind joining double and single tours was also to get an idea of who visits the plantation and to observe whether the crowd that decided to visit Whitney alone is different from those who are interested in being exposed to the more traditional narrative too. Moreover, given that the tour offered at Whitney is based on the guide leading the tour, I needed to visit a few times as the narrative changed depending on the guide. By participating in the tour with different guides, I could also observe the different dynamics created by the given guide-group composition as pertaining to the intersections of race, gender, and age. Altogether I have participated in six tours at Whitney and interviewed nine staff members. Two of whom are senior staff, six guide tours, and one who works at the reception. Moreover, out of the nine, four are African American residents of St. James Parish and identify the history told at Whitney as the history of their own community, and four are white.

A key aspect of data collection at Whitney was that the interviews conducted with staff were in part group interviews. This method brought to light the fact that different guides had different experiences based on their own intersectional identities. The group setting thus allowed guides to compare experiences and strategies to cope with the demanding job and challenges they face. Seven of the interviews were conducted and recorded with the interviewees consent on July 26\textsuperscript{th} and 27\textsuperscript{th}, 2018. One additional personal interview was documented via note taking due to poor setting on July 24\textsuperscript{th}, 2018 and one interview with Whitney’s Director of Operations was conducted via telephone and recorded on September 18\textsuperscript{th}, 2018 to follow up on developments that occurred since the collecting data on July 2018. All interviewees were given pseudonyms to obscure their identities.
4.5 Visitors

As mentioned above, during the tours at Oak Alley and the Whitney Plantation I conducted a few semi-structured interviews with visitors. These interviews were conducted after obtaining consent and were documented by notetaking given the setting which was suboptimal for recording. In total, I have interviewed 15 visitors representing a highly diverse sample in terms of race, gender, age and country of origin as I recognized the limitations of observation alone. Through interviews, I aimed to hear from visitors how they felt and what they thought about the narrative to which we were exposed and why they decided to see a given plantation. Given the limited sample, I have also examined visitors’ online accounts on the popular platform TripAdvisor.com. In particular, I wanted to see reactions of visitors who experienced both Whitney and Oak Alley before Oak Alley changed its narrative.

The interviews were highly informal and primarily took place during transit from one location to another on the Gray Line bus during the tours described above. Given the limitations associated with the data collected from visitors, I have utilized it more in the process of informing and formulating the research collection methodologies in other areas of this study. Nonetheless, where data collected from interviews is of better quality, I have also utilized it in the analysis itself and provided greater detail of the data’s nature. The next two subchapters outline several other sources for supplementary data collected.

4.6 Tourism Professionals

I have conducted a semi-structured interview with New Orleans’ Gray Line Director of Operation in order to contextualize the plantation tourism in the region. The aim of the interview was thus to understand the nature of the plantation as a tourist attraction site and the magnitude of the plantation tourism industry in relation to other tourist attractions. Moreover, as a director of the largest company in New Orleans, I hoped to learn whether he has observed a trend of narrative changes and his views are on narrative trends from his professional standpoint and experience. The interview was conducted on July 5th, 2018 and documented via notetaking with the consent of the interviewee. In addition to the formal interview with Gray Line’s Director of Operation, I include in my analysis commentary made by Gray Line tour guides during the tours I have joined as a participant observer (detailed above). In specific, these observations pertain
to: contextualizing the overall narratives New Orleans tourist are exposed to and explaining the changes in historical narratives the region sees.

4.7 New Orleans Memory Agents

While I recognized that certain individuals can act and physically alter the landscape of commemoration (such as John Cummings decision to open the Whitney), I believe that it is crucial to include the wider social and political setting within which decisions take place. Therefore, I sought to include the actors who pushed for more inclusive history for years before high profile changes took place as their work enabled these changes yet is often undermined and uncredited. Therefore, I have conducted interviews with actors I believe to be influential in the local memory politics.

These include: a curator at Le Musée de F.P.C. (Free People of Color Museum) on July 18th, 2018 and a featured artist of New Orleans Museum of Art’s (NOMA) exhibition: Changing Course: Reflections on New Orleans Histories on July 31st, 2018. Also, I have interviewed an archivist at the Amisted Research Center on July 28th, 2018 as well as a lead researcher who is also a founder of the New Orleans Arts and Culture Coalition and the educational program Amistad on the Go! On July 30th, 2018. Moreover, I conducted an interview with a founder of the Hidden Histories Tour and Publishing Company on July 30th, 2018 as well as visited seven more historical sites and tours to better understand the how and by whom to whom the history of New Orleans is told. While some of the data collected is included in the analysis, most of it was utilized in informing other data collection methodologies.

4.8 Final Remarks on Methodology

While I have worked to better understand the wider context of the plantation tours and their changing narratives, the main focus of this research concerns the three sites in question, with their specific set of circumstances, challenges, and opportunities. I therefore prioritized data collected in these sites while utilizing data collected in other locations as aiding for the particular objectives of: identifying different factors that inform decisions to change or maintain narratives of historical interpretation and providing necessary nuance concerning the on-the-ground reality of telling difficult histories or avoiding them.

With the exception of interviews with visitors which were recorded via notetaking, as well
as any other interview where note-taking is explicitly stated, all other interviews were transcribed and coded for thematic analysis. In order to secure the privacy of the informants, pseudonyms were given, and transcriptions stored on a secured device.

5. DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF THE THREE PLANTATIONS

The following three section will provide the outline for each respective plantation and analysis of the dynamics and dilemmas involved with each narration. I will begin with the Houmas House, continue with the Whitney, and finish with Oak Alley. The separate sections will be followed with a comparative chapter and a conclusion.

5.1 The Houmas House - Step Back in Time to the Mythical South

Given the Houmas House’s position as maintaining a symbolic annihilation regime of representation despite staff’s awareness of calls for change, it provides an excellent avenue to examine the factors that make its narrative agents resistant to change. By extension, this investigation can inform what drivers for change are effective in one site and what limits them in another.

Due to the Houmas House ownership structure—it is owned and operated as a private, for-profit enterprise—the most appropriate way to examine these factors is to interview the owner or “memory agent” shaping the Houmas House narrative and investigate his reasoning for maintaining its current regime of representation. Therefore, after providing a broad characterization of the Houmas House, the section will provide an analysis of the reasoning provided by the owner, Benjamin Cole (pseudo name). Lastly, it will conclude by providing an analytical description of the Houmas House tour in order to examine how the owner’s positionality as a narrator translates into the knowledge produced in the tour itself.

5.1.1 Overview

The Houmas House Plantation and Gardens (Houmas House) is located in Ascension Parish on the River Road between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Houmas House opened for visitors in 2003 after extensive renovations under the private ownership of Cole, a wealthy, white, New Orleans businessman and architecture enthusiast. In addition to offering tours of the
plantation’s Big House and its extensive gardens, the estate has a bar, three restaurants, a café, a wine cellar, bed and breakfast cottages, an art gallery, and a gift shop. The plantation also holds events including weddings and concerts and serves as a filming location for TV shows, commercials and even high-profile movies including *Hush, Hush Sweet Charlotte* (1964) and *The Green Book* (2018).

While ownership over the estate has changed many times since its initial expropriation from the native Houma nation in the early 1700s (Scarborough, 2003), the contemporary plantation museum draws most of its inspiration from its 1800s owner-planter John Burnside. Burnside, who was one of the wealthiest men in the country, owned more plantation-land than any other planter in the state and built a sugar empire that surpassed sugar production of any other planter (Menn, 1999; Scarborough, 2003).

In the introductory video *The Sugar Palace* (2011) screened for plantation visitors (which can also be found on YouTube.com), Burnside is presented as the owner who turned the mansion into a luxurious site with lavish decor and extravagant parties. His portrayal as a “Sugar Prince” directly informs the contemporary establishment representation as a “Sugar Palace,” as evident in Houmas House’s YouTube videos and website. Additionally, the contemporary establishment and its owner are depicted as representing an organic lineage from previous house owners, with a particular emphasis on Burnside.

This depiction is seen in the website’s *History* page where the Houmas House is introduced as the contemporary owner, Cole’s, private residence. This placement both links the contemporary estate to its past reincarnations while qualifying Cole’s ownership as a continuation of the historical line of owners. This justification is particularly evident in the final paragraph of the page: while Cole allows tours to the public, “The Houmas remains his private residence, as it was for its previous owners for over 240 years” (Houmas House, 2019a. para, 11). Moreover, in the introductory video, Cole is referred to as a “21st century Irishman” and Burnside as “his 19th century Irish predecessor,” thus creating an artificial temporal bridge to legitimize Cole’s position as the narrator of the property’s story.

The linkage between the past and the present enables the Houmas House to sell itself as a place where one can access a romantic time when a wealthy and extravagant “Sugar Prince”
like Burnside lived there. Therefore, it offers visitors the ability to “experience the life of a wealthy Sugar Baron in the 1800s” (Houmas House, 2019e. para, 1) as one can stay in cottages that belong to a “bygone era” (Houmas House, 2019b. para, 2) and “dine like a Sugar Baron” (Houmas House, 2019c. para, 5).

Figure 1: The Houmas House’s ‘Big House’ (photo by author)

To understand why Burnside is an attractive figure to base the Houmas House experience on, one must consider the spatial and temporal significance the experience the Houmas House offers. While Louisiana is currently the poorest state in the South, which is the poorest region in the US (Fontenot, Semega, & Kollar, 2018), before the Civil War Louisiana was the second wealthiest state in the nation with the highest concentration of billionaires (Eichstedt & Small, 2002). Where the “War of Northern Aggression” left the South in ruins and shame (Hochschild, 2016), the Houmas House offers its visitors a place that allows them to step back in time to a period where the region was prosperous and respected.

Moreover, the depiction of Burnside on the website as a poor Irish immigrant turned billionaire directly draws on the popular mythology of the American Dream. The idea that anyone
can become rich in the US as long as they work hard operates to maintain a sense of individual responsibility to one’s position rather than reveal the true mechanisms of structural inequality (Omi & Winant, 2015). In the context of the white South, this mythology also echoes a long legacy of admiration for the rich who “made it.” This admiration, Hochschild (2016) argues, worked to abate resentment to the planter class that marginalized the poor whites in the antebellum days and continues to work this way today as lower class whites support millionaires-made-politicians and pro-rich policies. The introductory video’s narrator reads the following edited excerpt from Burnside’s obituary:

The deceased was born in Ireland and came to this country as a mere boy with $1.25 in his pocket; he found employment with Andrew Beirne, who made Mr. Burnside a partner with his son, Colonel Oliver Beirne. At the time of his death, Mr. Burnside owned 10 of the most valuable plantations in Louisiana (Sillery, 2011, 11:15).

While emphasizing Burnside’s position as a “self-made millionaire,” the video abruptly stops listing the accomplishments presented in Mr. Burnside’s 1881 obituary. The full document (found on the genealogy website the USGenWeb Project) continues to read: “His entire property is valued upwards of $5,000,000. At the breaking out of the war he had 2,200 slaves” (Monroe Watchman, 1881. para, 1). Today, historians estimate that Burnside enslaved nearly 1,000 men, women, and children who labored in his cane fields and mansions, making him one of the largest slaveholders in US history (Scarborough, 2003).

Another illustration of the selective representation taken by the contemporary establishment is the decision to quote the London Times’ correspondent Sir William Howard Russell who visited the estate in 1861. The narrator in the video reads Russell’s astonished account of the vast land owned by Burnside, but stops short of including Russell’s equally astonished impression concerning the brutality of slavery and the planter class active position as enslavers (Russell, 1863).

Against this backdrop, it’s worth considering whether African American visitors respond to the Estate’s proposition to “imagine life in the opulence of the mid-1800s when Sugar was King, and Houmas House was the Sugar Palace” (Houmas House, 2019d. para, 3) in the same way as white visitors might. This selective branding embedded in the Houmas House narrative is a reflection of what Bright et al. (2018) regard as an active limitation of African American
citizenship. Not only are the contributions of African Americans expunged from the narrative of celebrated glory, but they are also disregarded in their position as potential tourists.

Moreover, the suggestion that the mid-1800s represented an era of limitless wealth ignores plantation owners historical position as social and economic outliers in a period and geography where most whites were poor and themselves marginalized (Eichstedt & Small, 2002; Hochschild, 2016). In this light, the adherence to a fantastical and valorized depiction of the antebellum South as a marketing strategy directed towards white tourists can be understood as what Ewa A. Adamkiewicz (2016) refers to as “the commodification of White Plantation Nostalgia” (p.13).

This imaginary translates into the mansion’s guided tours that are mostly led by white women dressed in extravagant hoop skirts pretending to be “the ladies of the house” as they point out period furniture and share cheeky antebellum gossip. The tour thus also reflects a gendered historical interpretation, reproducing the idea of a genteel time with clear gendered roles defined by intersections of race and class (Eichstedt & Small, 2002; Hoelscher, 2012). Utilizing Eichstedt and Small (2002) plantation museums’ categorization, the Houmas House can be seen as the embodiment of the “symbolic annihilation” regime of representation as it erases slavery from its narrative altogether or mentions the enslaved only in the context of listing them as part of the grand property owned by the planters.

Interestingly, Houmas House does draw from the native Houma people. The introductory video states that the planation “still honors the name of the first inhabitants of the land, their spirit mingles with the many families who have made the Houmas House their own” (Sillery, 2011, 13:00) and even features a reenactment of a Houma village for which it hired a Houma film professional as a consultant. While there is no meaningful discussion of the Houma and their history on the land, among the House’s displays are multiple decorative pieces featuring Native Americans as beautiful, noble, and connected to the earth. These depictions also create a strong contrast with the ornaments and images depicting Africans. Unlike Native Americans or white people, African figures are mostly featured as holders for another ornament, musicians, laborers, and/or depictions of racial stereotypes that are widely recognized today as racist.
Figure 2 (left): A statue depicting a classic "noble savage" imagery of a Houma woman next to a painting featuring an African American woman picking cotton (photo by author)

Figure 3 (right): Classic “Picaninny” portrayal of African American children which is widely recognized as racist (Pilgrim, 2012) (photo by author)

In light of the extensive research conducted in relation to whitewashing narratives in plantation museum (see: Adamkiewicz, 2016; Alderman & Modlin, 2008; Butler, 2001; Eichstedt & Small, 2002; Hoelscher, 2012; Rahier & Hawkins, 1999), this research analysis of Houmas House will avoid repetition and instead focus on the reasoning behind this regime of representation. It will also investigate the reasoning behind the particular depiction of black and native bodies on the property. This analysis is based on a three-hour semi-structured interview with the Houmas House owner, Mr. Benjamin Cole and through his online responses to visitors who left public reviews on a travel review site: TripAdvisor.com.

5.1.2 “A Place of Beauty” — Interview with the Narrator

The interview with Cole reveals that he is well aware of the pressure to change the regime of representation produced on his estate. Despite this awareness, however, he is unapologetic
about the narrative his plantation manufactures and promotes. In fact, when it comes to slavery, he hopes “that when people come here, they don’t even think of the word” and believes that he has “been pretty successful at that.” His reasoning for why he avoids slavery is straightforward: The Houmas House is “a place of beauty” where people come to enjoy the gardens and architecture (Interview A, 2018).

Within this conceptualization, the Estate’s history is unfortunate, yet irrelevant. Cole therefore absolves himself from responsibility to address slavery by pointing out that “any other historic house built before 1860 was built by slaves. In the North and the South. Why should I have an obligation?” (Interview A, 2018). Had Cole’s museum focused solely on the beauty of the estate and gardens and ignored altogether the history of the plantation, this argument may have been somewhat satisfying. However, the Houmas House heavily relies on the nostalgic imagery of the Old South and the planter class. Therefore, alternative reasoning might be more revealing.

5.1.3 The Universal and the Particular: Two Separate Stories

A fundamental logic driving Cole’s reasoning appears to be the idea that the wealth celebrated on the Estate and the role of enslaved people who generated that wealth “are two separate stories.” Cole’s conception that enslaved people and enslavers are unrelated is also reflected in a response Cole wrote on February 3, 2018 in the online TripAdvisor platform to a visitor who criticized the omission of the enslaved from the narrative:

There are many stories we can focus on, and the stories of slavery seem to be told by Whitney Plantation, Oak Alley Plantation, Laura Plantation and San Francisco Plantation very well. We do not all need to tell the same story.

In addition to denying the relationality embedded in the position of the enslaver and the enslaved, Cole also provides the reasoning behind the common omission of the enslaved from plantations’ narratives or the imbalanced provision of humanizing details (where masters are presented as people with agency, families, and aspirations while enslaved people are rarely even mentioned by name) (Eichstedt & Small, 2002).

According to the rational Cole offers, the enslaved men, women, and children and their individual stories are not understood as unique in the same way their enslavers’ stories are: while masters are understood as unique individuals with unique stories, the enslaved are understood as a monolith with a single story across time and space. Within this conceptualization,
humanizing details about the enslaved are redundant because their experiences are universalized.

The logic used to attribute unique circumstances and individuality to whites while denying it from people of color is not unusual in White America. This form of racial bias is evident in media coverage pertaining to crime (Entman & Gross, 2008), police shootings (Dukes & Gaither, 2017), mass shootings (Duxbury, Frizzell, & Lindsay, 2018), poverty (Dixon, 2017), and other areas.

These racialized conceptualizations of individuality also allow Cole to distance himself from personal responsibility to tell the story of slavery. Referring to enslaved people, Cole notes that because his “family never owned them” and because he was “never was one” he does not think he is the “appropriate person to tell the story” (Interview A, 2018). This line of reasoning is a prime example of the weaponization of individuality prevalent in white epistemology. The idea that one does not stand to benefit from oppression unless personally involved works to deny facts of white privilege and structural discrimination (DiAngelo, 2011; Lacy, 2010).

In theory, having no personal connection to this history should also disqualify Cole from telling the history of the rich planters he claims to tell. This logical conundrum, however, is clarified when Cole adds that he thinks that slavery is not “a white person’s story to tell” (Interview A, 2018). Cole here criticizes other white plantation owners who incorporate slavery into their tours’ narratives. The concern regarding the ways in which white plantation museum owners approach narrating the history of American slavery and whether they stand to make profit from it, is important and raises many valid questions. Nonetheless, Cole’s concerns seem to stem from a different place, a place that fails to acknowledge that white Americans are as implicated in this history as black Americans are. The denial of relationality between the masters and the enslaved people turns the history of slavery into one more aspect of life that has nothing to do with the story of his estate, as Cole says in a matter-of-fact tone, “I don’t like bowling either. I wouldn’t tell the story of bowling here” (Interview A, 2018).

5.1.4 What Story Matters

The ability to understand the history of slavery as irrelevant to one’s life as bowling implies a substantial lack of understanding of the significance of slavery. In fact, other than recognizing “that being owned can’t be a nice thing,” Cole seems to be highly skeptical of the
severity and significance of slavery (Interview A, 2018. For one, he does “not see a lot of difference between slavery and employees” which leads him to believe that if he personally does not see the merit of beating his own workers, neither would a plantation owner. In both cases, the workers “wouldn’t be able to work the next week” which does not make smart business (Interview A, 2018). This frame of thinking also denies acknowledgment of enslaved people’s resistance to their subjugation, people who are content with their “employment” do not need violence and terror to keep them submissive.

For Cole, however, not only was slavery not as bad as people pressuring for narrative change would like to believe, but others had it worse:

I mean, my family came here in the 1840s as Irishmen [sic]. We came during the sweet [sic] potato famine. We weren’t owned by anybody. Our ancestors worked for pennies an hour and when we got sick, we died and they threw us in the grave. If we had come and we were slaves, we would have had a doctor. Cause every plantation would’ve had a doctor. Cause you didn’t want to lose your investment in your slaves. And they tried to save your life. I’m not trying to compare life as an Irish immigrant or life as an African immigrant. I don’t want to compare, but neither story is very good. (Interview A, 2018)

In addition to the hardship of the Irish, compared to African immigrants Cole adds that he recently learned that the Norwegian enslaved the English, and wonders whether Africans were better off being enslaved in America than staying in Africa. He additionally suggests that even some of his friends who work in the corporate world feel like slaves:

Corporations tell you what to do – how to do it – people don’t get much free time. I’ve never worked for a corporation so I don’t know that feeling. But I’ve had friends of mine who have worked for major corporations and they wonder which is worse. (Interview A, 2018)

While there is no denying that slavery occurred elsewhere in history and continues to occur today, Cole seems to selectively ignore some basic differences between employment and chattel, race-based slavery. Among these differences are the fact that people were owned by others based on a characteristic that they cannot change, can hardly disguise, and is inherited (Wood, 2003). They were legally separated from their families and sold apart, banned from learning to read and write, legally raped and beaten, punished for attempting escape, and bred like animals to generate more slaves to be sold and worked off for the profit of their owners.

This ability to reframe slavery as merely unpleasant, yet an almost legitimate type of employment, demands a great deal of decontextualization of the black experience. Another
example is seen in the way Cole understands the new narrative offered by Oak Alley which he criticizes for being “a tear jerk story” (Interview A, 2018). Prior to January 2018, the Oak Alley narrative walked visitors through the Romans’ dining room as a tour guide in a hoop-skirt described their lavish dinners and the important people who attended them. This is documented not only in the literature concerning Oak Alley, but also in guests’ videos that can be found on YouTube.com such as the video by suzqs (2012). As the video shows, in the previous narrative the guide would point out interesting historical furniture. One of which was a ceiling fan she described as being operated by “a young servant boy” who would pull the rope attached to it to provide breeze for the guests and remove the flies interrupting their dinner (suzqs, 2012, 02:30).

In the new narrative (as will be elaborated upon in the Oak Alley chapter), a guide in khakis and a polo shirt informs the visitors that the Romans’ fancy dinners happened through the labor of enslaved people, including an enslaved child who would pull the ceiling rope all night to operate the fan. Cole, however, is “not sure what statement that makes,” as he is skeptical of the significance of the anecdote. As he explains, “sitting there on a bench, and pulling a rope every now and then, if that’s the worst you can say about slavery, that ain’t too bad, I think Chinese people had it worse” (Interview A, 2018). Cole’s ability to consider the act of pulling a rope as not devastating requires him to abstract the context in which a child can be sold away from his family and violently forced to make other people’s comfort and desires the sole purpose of his life without recognition and compensation.

By decontextualizing the black experience and seeing it as a separate story that occurs in parallel to white people’s lived experience, Cole creates an interesting ontological manipulation. This framing allows him to generate false equivalents where they do not exist. This includes understanding the factual history of slavery in political terms, where Whitney is “far left” on the “whole story of slavery” while he is “in the middle” and not quite “the far right.” He asserts that if John Cummings, (who Cole respects and describes as being “very good friends with”) does not tell the story of the sugar barons in Whitney Plantation, he does not feel an obligation to tell the story of slavery in the Houmas House (Interview A, 2018).

In addition, Cole equates the removal of Confederate Generals monuments with a hypothetical removal of a Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. monument and even ensures that the gift
shop has a “both sides” balance with books such as *The South Was Right!*, and biographies of David Duke and Nathan Bedford Forrest, next to books featuring slave narratives. In other words, accounts of white supremacy and accounts of experiencing it or opposing it represent a ‘balance of perspectives.’

### 5.1.5 What is Knowledge?

Reading the reasoning provided by Cole may suggest that he is ignorant of the historical evidence that tells us more about the nature of slavery. Cole, however, is aware of the research, he just seems to refuse to believe it. For example, he contends that the little shackles with bells presented at Oak Alley could not have been made to police enslaved children movement as Oak Alley research suggests because they are too beautiful for that purpose. He notes:

> You put expensive shackles and bells on their ankles. A great artisan created the design on those bells. I don’t know the reason for it, but it surely wasn’t so the slave master would hear the children getting too close to the house. (Interview A, 2018)

Unlike the history he shared in his museum, knowledge of enslavement requires a personal experience to be credible. He adds:

> It is not easy for me to tell the story of slavery here, because what is the truth? I cannot judge the truth when it comes to slavery. I can’t. I can’t believe the story at Oak Alley and I can’t believe the story at Whitney. (Interview A, 2018)

Hearing Cole, one may think that slavery represents history’s unopened black box, an era in time from which no credible knowledge can be obtained; as if there are zero personal accounts, narratives, diaries, and studies that tell the history of slavery. Within this framing, plantations that do decide to present the history of slavery, are doing a disservice for their visitors as that are bound to provide false information.

Of particular concern for Cole, are Hollywood films on slavery such as *Django Unchained* (2012) and *12 Years a Slave* (2013) that expose more Americans than ever before to a violent and immoral institution. “For me to tell the story of slavery, I would have to have some knowledge, some experience, and I’m not going to take a Hollywood movie to tell me what the facts are” (Interview A, 2018). Nonetheless, when asked about his own narrative’s similarity to *Gone with the Wind* Cole responds, “Well, I don’t know if plantation life as Houmas house was far different than *Gone with the Wind* as it pertains with how the wealthy people lived” (Interview A, 2018).
As mentioned, Cole is well aware of the ample research and material available on slavery beyond movies. In fact, he personally chooses books to be sold in the museum’s gift shop which includes Solomon Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave* and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Nonetheless, he acknowledges the books with dismissal: “All of those books are of the view that slavery was rape, murder. Rape and beatings.” When later pointing to the book section in the gift shop he clarified, “It’s all slavery stories. From the African American perspective. And when I say African American perspective, it is probably a totally wrong view. It’s all stories about John Cummings’ [owner of Whitney Plantation] view of slavery” (Interview A, 2018). In other words, for Cole the African American perspective on slavery is in itself not credible, meaning that even books written by those who endured slavery personally do not meet Cole’s standard of credibility.

The uneven standard of factual information and personal positionality required to satisfy Cole is especially curious in light of his pride in telling what he perceived as the story of the Houma people. When asked what denies him, as a white man, the right to tell “African American history” and yet allows him to talk about the Houma, Cole’s answer is simple:

> We have beautiful artwork of Europeans who created the Mycin porcelain, the limoge. We have beautiful artifacts. It’s physically there. It’s documented. It’s when America being discovered [sic]. Being discovered by LaSalle, and he stayed here with the Indians. It’s just facts I can repeat and it is facts. Where am I going to get the facts on slavery? (Interview A, 2018)

To be clear, Cole appears to believe that while there are no credible facts about slavery, the artwork Europeans made based on the sketches French explorers drew of the Houma during the two weeks they hosted them, qualifies him to tell what he perceives to be the Houma story.

In order to tell this story, classic noble savage imagery that depicts the Houma in ancient Greek style and features decorate the mansion. Other than this decorative placement, the Houmas are not mentioned anywhere other than the introductory video. Cole did hire a Houma consultant and actors to do a reenactment of the Houma village that is featured briefly in the video. Nonetheless, all the accounts about the Houma at the Plantation are based on French explorers’ perceptions and narrations are even told in a French accent. Moreover, Cole asserts, “We don’t go into how the Indians got screwed,” but let viewers make up their own minds based on the price they were paid for the land (Interview A, 2018).
In spite of not having a single account from a Houma perspective, Cole believes that the Houmas House tells the Houma Nation’s story. In fact, he notes that Houma people, who sadly “became so acclimated with the Europeans when they came here, they really don’t have their own culture anymore” come to his estate to learn their own history:

They come here and they’ll go, “Why do you tell the story about the Houmas Indians here?” Where’s a better place then well in Houmas. This is where your tribe was for 700 years that we know of prior to selling the land. And they moved their tribe to Houma [city in south Louisiana] because all the Indians moved to that city. “Oh, we didn’t know that. We thought that in 1720, we started our” – They don’t know their history. (Interview A, 2018)

Despite Cole’s assertions concerning the Houma, the United Houma Nation represents a vibrant community that continues to fight for federal recognition of its historical position and connection to the land (Creppel, 2018).

Indeed, Cole seems to be unable to imagine himself telling the story of African American slavery because he is not black and because there seem to be no credible information about the period from an enslaved perspective, even in books he bought for the gift shop. However, he asserts that “it’s easy for me to tell the story of the Houmas Indians” and even to educate the Houma on their own history because he has the artwork Europeans artists created based on their imagination of the Houmas (Interview A, 2018).

Cole’s curating and narrating decisions and reasoning exemplify a long-standing white epistemic legacy that dictated what knowledge is. In addition to reflecting who qualifies as a subject of knowledge and who as an object (Osamu, 2006), this epistemic framework also willfully ignores or undermines any knowledge that does not fit with its ontology (Mills, 2007; Wekker, 2016). Against the epistemic backdrop that contends that slavery was probably not too bad, and that information that says otherwise is not credible, a question arises: why then is the Houmas House under pressure to change its narrative?

5.1.6 King Context

The question of why people care to discuss slavery now is something that baffles Cole. According to Cole, there seems to be a general, unwarranted oversensitivity that leads people to be offended from just about anything nowadays, including his factual representation of the Old South. One example he volunteers is an art collection he purchased when he first bought the Houmas House:
I bought a really nice collection of African American art work which is all in my office today. And it's [by] some of the finest African American artists in America. And there aren't many well-known African American artists. But I've got some of the highlights. And I dispersed them through the house 'cause I thought that was the appropriate thing to do. And oh my god, I got beat up. (Interview A, 2018)

When saying he “got beat up,” Cole refers to complaints he received, where “people would come in and say, “they would never have had an African American artist in the plantation.”” While Cole says he is unsure whether it is “appropriate to have African American Art in a plantation” or not based on these claims, he removed the paintings following a request by a party planner who organized an event for a bank which has African directors on its board. Cole proceeded telling how at the party the president of the bank, who was an African man, wished to see the paintings and asked Cole whether someone asked him to remove the painting prior to the party. The bank president assured Cole that there is nothing offensive about them and encouraged him to hang them up in his own study as a compromise (Interview A, 2018).

It remains unclear why Africans would be offended, like Cole suggests, from the potential historical inaccuracy rooted in displaying work of black artists in a plantation home that perhaps did not feature black artists in its active days. It is clear, however, why African American visitors would be offended by the painting themselves within the context of the estate. The paintings, which include illustrations of black children eating large slices of watermelon with unattended hair, and black men and women picking cotton, may hold no significant meaning for Africans who, unlike African Americans, have not been subjected to these images and the meaning they hold.

African Americans, however, could easily recognize that these images as offensive. A visit to the online platform of the Ferris State University’s (n.d.) Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia provides an immediate classification of these images as the sambo and the coon stereotypes. Nonetheless, Cole presents himself as the innocent victim who was asked to remove the collection to his private study despite his good intentions. Ross (1990) calls the mechanism of black abstraction “rhetorical magic” (p. 3) because it has the ability to neutralize the offence, and even reverse the role of the victim and perpetrator.

His emphasis on the fact that the artists of the art pieces many consider offensive are African American and that it was an African man who assured him the paintings are acceptable
echoed Rahier and Hawkins (1999) assertion that plantation museums make use of African Americans as narrative neutralizers. Needless to say, in abstraction, there is no problem with depictions of anybody picking cotton, eating watermelons, or having whatever type of hair. In the context of enslavement and decades of stereotypical depictions aimed at legitimizing domination, however, multiple paintings of African Americans picking cotton in an office of a plantation owner who refuses to acknowledge their contributions and celebrates the lives of their enslavers, is reasonably offensive.

Besides weaponizing the identity of the artists, Cole attributes neutralizing powers to the aesthetics of the art and its cost. Numerous times throughout the interview, Cole brought up the monetary value of a certain contested item as well as its beauty to counter the claims that delegitimize it as offensive. These features enabled Cole to be completely “colorblind” when it came to the items he displays. This was made clear when he justified his desire to place New Orleans’ removed Confederate monuments on his estate, assuring that despite their highly contested meaning, he merely sees them as “nothing more than beautiful works of art” (Interview A, 2018). It is unclear in what cases art can be understood by Cole as inappropriate despite its cost and beauty. Is the fact that he has numerous paintings of Confederate soldiers and battles, but none of the Union, a sign that art depicting the Civil War from the Union’s perspective is not expensive-enough, or pretty enough? Or is it disrespectful to display paintings depicting the Union positively given the hardship brought on the South due to the War of Northern Aggression?

Cole shares another story with me to exemplify what he sees as needless oversensitivity. He describes an African American couple who came by his office to complain about a guide who vocalized support for Trump during a House tour, where the guide also suggested that Burnside was a “good slave owner.” At his office, the couple saw a coin bank created in the image of a black figure as well as Cole’s extensive African American art collection. They left deeply offended and wrote negative feedback online. He concludes the story with, in his view, a sad realization that “whatever you say today can be twisted. I don’t know, it’s just unfortunate” (Interview A, 2018).
While it is clear that Cole is not interested in offending anyone, he is also not interested in unpacking the reasons behind someone’s offence. Instead, he makes the case that he is trapped in a situation best described as ‘damned if you do, damned if you don’t’ and believes that “there are different standards going on.” During the interview, he asked me to judge whether different statues and paintings around the house are offensive or not. Pointing to a small marble statue of an African American boy dressed in old overalls, Cole complains:

Whitney can have African American statues, and they are okay? Oh, they are beloved and they are honored. But you have an African American statue at Houmas House? By the same artist. And that is offensive. Hello. I don’t understand it. (Interview A, 2018)

Cole not only refuses to acknowledge the different contexts within which these statues are displayed, but also suspects people have motives to be offended. He suggests that African Americans are indoctrinated to be offended, and that some are offended without even knowing why. In relation to the removal of Confederate monuments in New Orleans, Cole explains:

It’s been too long. No African American today experienced slavery. They don’t know it any differently. It’s somebody has taught them to be offended today. I don’t think there were – African American kids that I was friends with in my classes, they were offended by us. Now, there is an offence. (Interview A, 2018)

In trying to understand how this unreasonable offence came about, Cole believes that “whatever happened throughout the Civil Rights Movement has caused this rift.” He believes before the civil rights struggle, however, racial relations were quite harmonious:

If you go back to the 1910s to the 1940s, people lived side-by-side there were problems. In New Orleans especially, there were many blacks who were married to whites from that generation. It’s whatever happened in the Civil Rights Movement in the 50s and 60s that caused this hatred. (Interview A, 2018)

It is hard to understand Cole’s conclusion that the Civil Rights Movement is responsible for the discomfort he senses without considering his revisionist conceptualization of Jim Crow Louisiana. If slavery was not too bad, and neither was the era of racial segregation, why are African Americans so upset? And if they did not say anything before Civil Rights, why are they saying so now?

5.1.7 “They’ve Got to Stop Talking About It”

It is with an alternative framing of history that Cole finds the answer for the contemporary tension he feels. If there were no problems before African Americans started talking about having
a problem, the solution is easy: “They’ve got to stop talking about it.” Cole is convinced that “as soon as people stop talking about slavery, stop talking about civil rights, everything is going to be fine” (Interview A, 2018). This idea that the problems themselves are a result of bringing the problems up, is a repeating theme. In particular, he is concerned with calling people “racist,” “xenophobe,” and “homophobe” and sees opening the Whitney or taking down Confederate monuments as useless, “divisive battles” that create problems where there were none.

This ability to equate silence with harmony is one stemming from Cole’s positionality. The tendency of people privileged by systems of oppression not to cognize the systems at play is well documented (Collins & Bilge, 2016; May, 2015; Romero, 2018). The fact that everyone is situated differently in relation to power means that we all have different access to knowledge. Therefore, there is little merit in scrutinizing those positioned in privilege for being ignorant to what they cannot access. What is worthy of scrutiny, however, is the dismissal of knowledge accessed by those who are epistemically positioned to articulate injustice.

It does not require more than a quick search online, a visit to the library, or potentially a neighbor’s door to find out that for millions of Louisiana’s residents of color, the era of racial segregation was not harmonious and that being quiet and polite was for many the only way to stay safe. Nonetheless, Cole refuses to do this work and refuses to believe those who say otherwise. Instead he argues that people are taught to be offended without even knowing why. Within this ontology, being called a racist or a xenophobe is perceived as worse than actually saying or doing something hateful. This is also reflected in Cole’s understanding of these labels as political insults, stating “I don’t think calling someone a liberal is nearly as offensive as calling someone a racist, a xenophobe, a homophobe” meaning that these labels are understood as curse words rather than accusations of bigotry (Interview A, 2018). This epistemic framing leads to a fallacious logic: If what I said to you was not offensive, yet you have offended me by calling me a racist for it, I am the victim of this encounter.

This role reversal is also described by DiAngelo (2011) in her articulation of white fragility where whites get away with saying or doing racist things because after being called out for it they become the real victims, not the person they have offended. This manifestation of fragility can also be seen in Hochschild’s (2016) account of rural white Louisiana when she describes a growing
sense of being *strangers in their own land*, unable to speak their minds without being accused of some form of bigotry. Cole describes this feeling in reference to Whitney’s five-star online reviews as he suspects people refrain from expressing their actual opinions due to a fear of being called ‘racist.’ Similarly, he believes Trump supporters represent a sort of persecuted group for their opinions:

> It became obvious, people were scared to death. It was like in the days of Hitler and Europe. You’re afraid, but in an opposite way. No one was afraid to say they were for Hillary. Everyone was scared to death that they were for Trump and it became real obvious. (Interview A, 2018)

Being historically sheltered from any form of racial stress, the Civil Rights Movement and the demographic diversification places many whites in an unfamiliar and uncomfortable territory where they are being called out for things that they had not been scrutinized for beforehand. In interviews conducted at the Amistad Research Center of African American History, both an archivist and research coordinator recognized this development. The Civil Rights Movement amplified African American voices in a way that made white people more aware of their words and actions. Nowadays, this ability is magnified with social media, which can hold people accountable through the mechanism of public shaming (Interview Q, July 2018; Interview R, 2018).

Considering how marginalized groups must carefully consider the dominant gaze before carrying out any task (e.g. women who are not interested in a sexual encounter calculating how to be friendly without being misunderstood as sexually inviting; black men considering whether wearing a hoodie would make them look threatening; black women reflecting on their tone so as not to be perceived as “angry”), the prospect of people who previously acted with no accountability to others make conscious efforts not to be hurtful is welcome. Whether this new thoughtfulness causes discomfort to whites who are not used to considering the responses of people of color to their actions seems like a low price to pay given the discomfort their lack of consideration caused others before.

For that reason, the researchers at Amistad did not necessarily see the reason for white people’s unease as an issue: if it was not a sense of morality that drove individuals to be more thoughtful, than a fear of shame of being called racist will do for now. This mechanism, however, means that once the fear of shame goes away, the accumulated resentment can flood a country.
This sense of permission is carefully described by Hochschild (2016) in her account of the white response to Trump who eliminated the shame and fear associated with being unapologetically bigoted. Her finding is further supported by a study that found that hate crimes increased by a staggering 226 percent in counties where Trump held his campaign rallies (Feinberg, Branton, & Martinez-Ebers, 2019).

Nonetheless, Cole’s account resonated with Hochschild (2016) and Jansson (2010) who describe a sense of ridicule and pressure from northern, liberal elites that is at times uncalled-for and hypocritical. It generates a form of defensiveness that can be aggressive and unwelcoming yet at the same time, not entirely unwarranted. For this reason, it is important to think of the Houmas House and Cole’s position in a broader context. This consideration is not only because Cole’s influential position as a memory agent and a narrator implies that his own ignorance is reproduced and consumed by others, but also because people decide to consume the Houmas House narrative in spite of having other options.

5.1.8 “We Came Out Ahead”

Echoing Hochschild’s (2016) findings, Cole described the 1960s as a period of unhinged proliferation of identity politics. Given that he contends that the claims made by the different identity groups are baseless, the only viable explanations for their claims is the motive to take over power and resources, or in Hochschild’s words, “to cut in line” ahead of the hard-working Americans (p. 137). Consequently, an interesting parallel is created between the way Cole seems to understand history and the way he appears to understand the purpose of telling history.

As mentioned above, Cole believes there is no relational connection between the plantation owners (with their wealth) and the enslaved as they are “two separate stories.” Nonetheless, he sees the telling of the history of slavery as one that cannot happen separately from generating white guilt and advocacy for resource redistribution. To Cole, minorities seek increased welfare and liberals provide the political platform for them. Against the epistemic backdrop that suggests that slavery was not so bad for African Americans, political power appears as the only explanation as to why they, and white liberals, keep bringing it up at all. For this reason, Cole can confidently point to the collection of books he has about slavery in his gift shop.
and say, “there must be 70 or 80 books specifically on slavery and I think every one of them would be about how horrible the white man was to the slave,” and then adding, “I would assume that. Can’t say I’ve read them” (Interview A, 2018).

With this conceptualization in mind, there are only a few reasons why a white plantation museum owner would decide to tell the history of slavery. One is a personal and unnecessary sense of guilt, equipped with the need to make other whites feel guilty. A second reason is for the sake of achieving a liberal social status and a sense of moral superiority, often in relation to Northerners. In both cases, the liberal politics cannot be separated from the cause. A third reason is a brilliant, yet morally questionable tapping into a new niche market of the “very liberal whites and very liberal blacks” who exhibit the desire to learn about the horrors of slavery for the aforementioned reasons (Interview A, 2018).

The idea that slavery cannot be silenced into oblivion, that it has important repercussions for today, and lessons to learn from, have not seemed to crossed Cole’s mind. Additionally, neither has the idea that an interest in the history of enslavement can occur irrespectively of white guilt or social status, but by and for African Americans who wish to know their history and cherish and commemorate their ancestors’ endurance and perseverance.

This white-centric perspective fails to acknowledge the existence of another point of view and presents historical interpretation as a zero-sum game. Coupled with an increased sense of white victimization and political correctness regime, the Houmas House’s unapologetic approach becomes a sort of white fortress. In a sense, it does not represent a nostalgia for a bygone time when sugar was king as much as it represents a longing for a time when one could be nostalgic for the antebellum days without being called a racist for it.
This framework of understanding paints a picture of Northern hypocrisy, liberal elitism, and minorities’ over-sensitivity. Against this backdrop, Cole refuses to feel guilty or feel like he is a bad person for not feeling guilty. He believes that “no one except a very liberal American is interested in seeing slavery,” and that while the North was implicated in slavery and is still very racially segregated, the pressure and stereotype (e.g. “if you’re a Southerner, you must be racist”) is solely on the white South (Interview A, 2018). After feeling trapped by trying to satisfy everyone, he recognizes that while “you can’t please everybody, you can hopefully please yourself” (Interview A, 2018). He also senses that his visitor-base feels the same.

While Cole is very wealthy, his concerns strongly resonate with Hochschild’s (2016) findings from her story of rural, lower income white Louisianans who identify with the Tea Party:

Liberals were asking them to feel compassion for the downtrodden in the back of the line, the “slaves” of society. They didn’t want to; they felt the downtrodden themselves and wanted to only to look “up” to the elite. What was wrong with aspiring high? That was the bigger virtue, they thought. Liberals were asking them to direct their indignation at the ill-gotten gains of the overly rich, the “planters”; the right wanted to aim their indignation down at the poor slackers, some of whom were jumping the line. (p. 219)

As mentioned above, the Houmas House visitors are the oldest and least educated among the plantations studied in this research (Bright & Carter, 2016, 2018). In addition, the Houmas House visitors are least interested to learn about enslaved people (Bright & Carter, 2016), a finding Cole
refers to by saying his plantation “came out ahead” of the other plantations whose visitors showed more interest. In either case, he believes there is even less interest than the research found due to their survey framing.

While the study did not ask for political affiliation, Cole noted that he “predicted Trump’s win by that much just from the discussion in my Turtle Bar.” Moreover, throughout the interview Cole suggested numerous times that his visitor base is more conservative because “the logic of a conservative is not that I want to go to a place that tells the story of killing and raping” (Interview A, 2018). Other demographic remarks he made about the Houmas House visitors include his belief that African American do not visit as much because “they follow football or basketball, it takes up a huge percentage of your income” unlike “the people who visit the South [which] are more garden people, they are older [white?] people and [they] spend [their] money in different ways.” When addressing the concerns raised from his attempts to relocate the removed Confederate Generals statues to his plantation, he noted, “They are beautiful works of art, that is all they are” and adds with sarcasm that “people [who] feel that those monuments were haunting them would never come. People that like the monuments will come here” (Interview A, 2018).

From the online reviews, it appears that the vast majority of his visitors love the Houmas House with 95 percent marking it as either “excellent” or “very good” on TripAdvisor as of March 20, 2019. There are, however a few negative reviews. Every once in a while, someone will complain about the images and the omission of slavery. This upsets Cole particularly as he cares deeply about his estate. He states:

They’ll say it was a beautiful place, and everything was great, and the food was wonderful, but they ignored slavery. I don’t advertise that I’m about slavery. The comments are so few I finally be able to erase them out of my mind. (Interview A, 2018)

As established, Cole feels perfectly fine about not discussing slavery, so the best way to get rid of these reviews is to make sure people have the right expectations. Not only does he not advertise slavery (in contrast to all the other plantations in the Plantation Parade partnership) but he even considered writing in the pamphlets, “we do not tell the story of slavery.” Moreover, he contemplated dropping the word “plantation” from the Estate’s name altogether but worried it will upset the other side - Confederate enthusiasts who would blame him for shying away from
southern heritage (Interview A, 2018). In the past Cole took the time to personally answer the few people who gave the Houmas House bad reviews for omitting slavery and reminding them of the other plantations they can visit if that is what interests them. Today, however, a huge three-panel display board featuring the Whitney Plantation is placed outside the gift shop. The board, accompanied with two of “the Children of Whitney” sculptures, poses an invitation to visit “the other side of plantation life.”

This display is in a sense an easy fix. While Cole strongly believes that the establishment of the Whitney forced a shift in the conversation on the River Road and influenced other plantations to incorporate slavery, when it comes to the Houmas House, he is not concerned. In fact, unlike other plantation museums who do incorporate slavery and therefore have to compete with Whitney, he “absolutely [does] not consider Whitney a competitor of” his because he knows the Houmas House “never, ever got the population that wanted to see slavery” (Interview A, 2018). It is simply not a part of the business.

If anything, for the Houmas House visitor base, the Whitney may represents further evidence that the older, white, Southern conservative is under attack, a feeling Hochschild (2016) describes as increasingly powerful among some southern white demographics. Witnessing the beloved plantation museum turning from one of the icons of the lost cause to a tool aimed at dismantling it might too contribute to a growing sense of becoming a stranger in one’s own land. Drawing from Hochschild’s work, one can conceptualize the Whitney as a part of the second assault on the white South. The first attack was when the North destroyed the plantation in the 1860s. The second assault was in the 1960s, when the North and its liberal allies began ruining the museums established in the lost plantation’s honor.

While Whitney potentially influenced other plantations in the region to incorporate slavery into their narratives, it may have had the opposite effect on the Houmas House. Not only does the Whitney’s counter interpretation work to reinforce a sense of victimization, but it also seems to provide the moral licensing to ignore the topic of slavery altogether at the Houmas House, as it allows Cole to direct those interested in slavery elsewhere. This idea is also presented in Rahier and Hawkins (1999) case from 1996. They demonstrate how official Louisiana State tourism brochures were able to maintain the romantic image of the plantations they promoted
by simply directing tourists interested in African Americans’ perspectives to visit the River Road African American Museum.

In this polarized time in the US, when one can follow the news they wish to hear and befriend only the like-minded on social media, so too can one choose which history to hear. If there are other people like Cole, who believe any discussion of slavery is unnecessary and divisive, there seem to be fewer plantation museums for them to visit on the River Road. Cole’s Houmas House provides a fortress that does not cave into the winds of change and instead holds on tight to *Gone with the Wind*.

In this way, not only is the Houmas House selling the image of being frozen in the *White Pillared Past* (Hoelscher, 2012), but in many ways it is also stuck in contemporary time. In its resistance to adhere to changing cultural norms and factual standards, Cole caters to niche of visitors who perhaps like himself reminisce of a simpler time without political correctness and a sense guilt, a desire to *make America great again*, before they felt like *strangers in their own land*.

5.2 The Whitney Plantation - “Freedom - Education - Family - Pass It On”

As a counter-narrative site that commemorates the history of slavery, the Whitney Plantation stands as an avenue to investigate who is doing the labor of challenging the master narrative on the ground and what strategies these memory agents develop to do so in terms of navigating the complicated terrain of white fragility and/or guilt and black trauma and/or anger. These questions are closely related to the commemorative choices that are taken to communicate a sensitive history. These include what symbolic excavation projects are undertaken, with what textual interpretation, and through what surrogation.

Moreover, given the overwhelming white ownership of plantation museums, Whitney, as a site owned by a white man, allows to explore the tension between the need for white people to carry the burden of challenging white ignorance and the appropriateness of their position as the *narrators* of this history. In addition, white narration and master-narrative disruption may center white people as potential visitors (as they represent the demographic most unaware of the master-narrative’s fallacies). This situation leads to the question: who is Whitney narrated for? To answer theses question, the next section will begin with a broad contextualization and
characterization of the Whitney Plantation before providing an outline of the tour itself which includes a description of Whitney’s narrative and surrogative choices. It will then continue to the analysis aimed at answering the questions above based on interviews with Whitney’s staff, observations from the tours, and input from other memory agents interviewed in New Orleans.

5.2.1 “Righting the Wrongs” - The First Plantation Museum about the Enslaved

The Whitney Plantation made national headlines when it opened in 2014 and came to be known as “the first slavery museum in America” (Amsden, 2015; Rosenfeld, 2015; Welch, 2015). While there are debates over that title, it is safe to say it is the first (and potentially only) plantation museum dedicated entirely to the enslaved as of 2018. The neglected plantation was originally purchased by John Cummings, a wealthy, white lawyer from New Orleans who bought the estate to diversify his real-estate portfolio (Commander, 2018). Cummings received the estate with an eight-volume study of the property. The study was conducted by Formosa, a Rayon Company that planned to set a factory on the land and was faced with local opposition. In an attempt to abate aimed resistance, Formosa conducted research on the property with the aim of establishing token historical preservation of Creole culture (Amsden, 2015). At last, the company neglected its plans and sold the property with its research to Cummings.

What Cummings learned about the property’s history made him reflect on the omission of slavery from his own education (Cummings, 2015) and the great disconnect between white and black Americans’ understanding of the significance of slavery. He explained this discrepancy in a short documentary about the plantation:

We live under the tremendous weight of slavery now and it isn’t ‘black history’ we are talking about, this is our national history. It’s my history, it’s your history. People had been lynched, slaves, you went to the army and …. you had to sit in the back of the bus. We needed federal legislation to get you into a school to get an education. All of these things. So when you see Robert E. Lee on a column eighty feet tall, the man who wanted to retain slavery - it offends you. You got two sides, and blacks are screaming prejudice to the white side and the white side is looking and saying ‘why don’t they get over it? Why can’t they get over it?’ and the blacks don’t understand that the whites don’t know what the ‘it’ is – what IT is. (Rosenfeld, 2015, 00:01)

He therefore decided to extend his own personal journey “to define the ‘it’” (Rosenfeld, 2015, 00:55) to other white people and honor enslaved people who suffered and built the US by transforming the old plantation into a museum dedicated to the enslaved (Cummings, 2015).
Aside from referring to the history of slavery as “national history” which qualifies Cummings to tell this history, he also attributes a special sense of responsibility to his position as a white man in telling the history of African American enslavement:

What people have to realize is that it was a bunch of people like me who started this mess, and they started slavery and they dealt in slaves, and so why would it be a surprise if some white kid came along as a cheerleader and was trying to do something that would correct what his ancestors did? (Rosenfeld, 2015, 04:57)

This position addresses critiques, such as from Cummings’ friend Benjamin Cole of the Houmas House who believes neither of them or any other white man is “the appropriate person to tell the story” of slavery.

Cummings is not telling the story alone. In order to provide research-based facts, Cummings hired Dr. Ibrahima Seck, a Senegalese historian who specializes in the historical links between Louisiana and West Africa, to be the Whitney’s Director of Research. Cummings then invested over 8.5 million dollars to transform the property (Commander, 2018), filling in what was lost to history with artwork commissioned to African American artists, memorials, and intact slave cabins that were transported from nearby plantations as well as an historical Baptist church founded by formerly enslaved people.

Aside from criticism of Whitney’s white ownership, the plantation had also been criticized for intentionally generating white-guilt. This view was clearly expressed by Cole who argued that the Whitney is not telling more positive stories pertaining to master-slave relations because “that’s not the story that makes you feel guilty.” It is evident that the Whitney staff is aware of this criticism. For example, in a short video about the museum, Dr. Seck preemptively clarified the purpose of Whitney as he said:

People need to understand what happened on these plantations. It is not just a way of putting the guilt on someone. No, we don’t need that. We need to understand today, why we have so many problems in America. Why so many people are in jail. Why so much poverty? Black people being shot and killed like game. All that was rooted in slavery and if you don’t understand the source of the problem, how can you solve it? (Rosenfeld, 2015, 04:27)

Dr. Seck also wishes to enable people to trace beloved cultural victories to Africa and the plantation and have a place to honor those who endured and contributed without recognition.

While guilt is not mentioned in Whitney’s mission statement, the idea of eradicating white ignorance appears to be central. Cummings, however, articulates the desire to alleviate this
ignorance not from a place of moral superiority, but rather from a place of personal experience as someone who has been subjected to white ignorance. This positioning made him aware of the need for an active effort to tackle it. He says:

I thought that I personally would no longer be satisfied living in ignorance and also, that I would try my best to present the facts of slavery to all of the people I can find so that everyone would understand how strong the deck was stacked against the Africans here. (Rosenfeld, 2015, 05:24)

This reflexive and expansive process resonates with former New Orleans mayor Mitch Landrieu’s account of his decision to remove the Confederate monuments from the City (Landrieu, 2018). It also resonates with the three white guides who work at Whitney, as they each indicated that they decided to work at Whitney after visiting the plantation museum as tourists.

Nevertheless, despite the intentionality, an adherence to antiracist theory, and philosophical discussions of historical ownership of narrative, complexities associated with Cummings’ positionality lingers. For example, in his appearance in a Brooklyn Historical Society (BHS) conversation in New York, Cummings articulated why the Whitney decided to use sculptures featuring enslaved children (described below) as the main surrogates of the enslaved on the plantation. He explained that the decision was strategic to tackle potential defensiveness from white people. In particular, he followed the suggestion that even slavery apologists would have to see the evils of slavery if they will be confronted with the image of the children who bore it. He was concerned that images of adult, black men might not foster that emotional recognition.

This explanation, along with Cummings’ reasoning as to why he opened the museum in the first place, points to a set of opportunities and challenges associated with Cummings’ positionality. As a white man who wants to take responsibility and carry some of the burden to alleviate white ignorance, Cummings efforts are commendable. Nonetheless, it’s still important to examine and trouble the narrative he chooses to tell, which is primarily the story of black contributions, survival, and endurance.

5.2.2 “The Other Side of Plantation Life”—The Whitney Tour

The Whitney Plantation attracts more visitors than it can support and is working to expand its operation as both renovative and commemorative work on the plantation continues. Unlike the mainstream plantation museums that center the story around the Big House,
Whitney’s tours take place outside and last one and a half hours. Given Louisiana’s hot and humid summers, umbrellas are provided, and visitors are encouraged to bring plenty of water. The experience begins at the entry hall where the register and gift shop are located. The gift shop consists mostly of books pertaining to slavery, African American history and literature, but also has some jewelry and crafts from Africa. All the imported items in the shop are Fair Trade certified.

In addition to the shop, the entry hall has a large exhibition space with informational boards pertaining to a range of topics. These include the transatlantic and domestic slave trades, slave revolts, French regulations of slavery, enslaved cultures and traditions, the Civil War, and life after emancipation. Whitney’s scope goes beyond the history specific to its geography—it aims to contextualize the Plantation in a broad, global history. Before the tour begins outside the hall, guests receive their entrance tickets in the form of a lanyard with a card that features an enslaved child’s sculpture with a name and a small excerpt from a slave narrative. The card is for guests to keep (see Figure 6 below).

Figure 6: Lanyard given to guests at beginning of Whitney Plantation tour (right: front, left: back)
The tour begins at the Antioch (originally named Anti-Yoke) Baptist church. The church, built in 1868, was donated to the property by its congregation in the nearby town of Paulina when they built a new structure. It is at the church that visitors learn that the children sculptures depicted on their lanyard-cards (known as “The Children of Whitney”) represent formerly enslaved individuals who were interviewed by the Workers Progress Administration (WPA).

While the interviewees were elderly when the interviews took place in the late 1930s, they experienced slavery as young children and their narratives pertain to their childhoods. For this reason, visitors are told the sculptures depict them as children (a reason noticeably different than that given by Cummings, as described above). At this point, visitors are encouraged to find the sculpture of the child they received on their lanyard-card before moving on. This appears to create a sense of personal connection with the depicted child and many visitors take pictures with the children within the sacred atmosphere in the church. As surrogates to fill the void left to history, the sculptures of children are therefore very effective.

Figure 7: Two of “The Children of the Whitney” made by Ohio-based artist Woodrow Nash (photo by author)
Following the church is The Wall of Honor, which a few of the guides interviewed referred to as the place that “set the tone” for the experience. There, the names of all those who were enslaved on the property are engraved onto granite slabs along with their designated roles and age as was found in the plantation’s original documents. While biographical information on the lives of the people listed is limited, guides explain as much as they can based on the available information. This includes drawing attention to the different names that reflect the generations of enslaved individuals in terms of those born into slavery and those who survived the Middle Passage. Also, by providing the meaning of African names, guides humanize the enslaved through recontextualizing them as people, named by their loved ones. This framing also emphasizes the violence embedded in the provision of French names and English names to enslaved people by enslavers.

The tour continues into a memorial hall named after historian Allées Gwendolyn Midlo, whose research recorded 107,000 names of people enslaved in Louisiana. Along with pictures and quotes from slave narratives, the names are engraved across 18 walls in reflective granite, meaning that visitors see their own reflection when they read the names and stories. On the way to the next stop, the Field of Angels, the guides drew visitors’ attention to the large bells scattered throughout the property. They explain that while the original purpose of the bells was to communicate and notify enslaved people when they must be at a certain location or carry out a certain task, today the guests are invited to ring them in honor of enslaved people. This rearticulating of an object historically associated with violence into an honoring instrument epitomizes the repurposing of the entire plantation. Depending on the guide and the group, either all or very few visitors ring the bell.

The Field of Angels Memorial honors the 2,200 enslaved children who died in the parish and whose details of death are engraved in granite along with enslaved children’s narratives, most of whom are referred to as “little slave” in the records. In the center of the Memorial is an African maternal angel kneeling down with her wings spread as she holds a baby. Here, some of the guides might encourage visitors to find a child that shares their birthday. Unlike the other memorials, the walls are low, and visitors must kneel down to a child’s height in order to read. This setting too creates a sense of emotional connection. Some guides explain the current,
disproportionally higher rates of maternal and infant mortality among African American women in Louisiana and explain the studies that connect these rates to the biological legacy of slavery.

The tour then continues to the slave quarters. Out of the seven cabins, two are original to the plantation (the remaining two out of the original twenty-two), and five were brought from another plantation. Guides here also explain that enslaved people had their own kitchen gardens as food provisions were often insufficient. A couple of “Whitney’s Children” sculptures are situated on the cabin balcony and many visitors walk inside the cabin which gives guests the opportunity to reflect on the minimal and confined living conditions. Some guides also take this opportunity to address popular misconceptions of slavery in Louisiana as exceptional and “better” due to the French Code Noir (or the Black Code). While tourism companies often highlight how the code mandated more humane treatment of the enslaved, the Whitney guides also assert that it was often not regulated given the close ties between state authorities and rich planters. Furthermore, tourism companies neglect to mention the more brutal side of the Black Code, including laws that detailed the punishments for self-emancipation, such as mutilation and branding.

Along the pathways are large, metal sugarcane juice kettles that were used to boil down the cane juice. While these items are commonly used as decorations in other plantations where they are kept pristine, often with water and lilies inside them (as is the case in the Houmas House), at Whitney they stand apart as rusty, exposed to the elements. Nearby is also a small patch of sugar cane where guides explain the physically excruciating and dangerous work in the sugar fields and processing facilities on the plantation. There they explain that once an enslaved person was sent to work in the cane fields, on average he or she did not survive for more than seven years. Guides base this assertion on insurance estimations as policies insuring the enslaved “property” would not account for death and/or injury for beyond that timeframe.
The following stop is a holding cell typical of what was used to auction enslaved people. The iron cage is not original to the property and depending on the guide, it receives a slightly different interpretation. Some guides explain how many people would be crammed into a single cell and paint a vivid image of the auction, where white buyers would examine the people sold like cattle. Other guides point out that these structures were used after the *de jure* end of slavery when black unemployment was criminalized, and unemployed black men would be taken in jails like these and brought to a white property owner who needed the labor. Many visitors step in and take a moment inside which seems to enhance a personal connection as people can *feel* the confinement and imagine the hardship those who passed through the same physical space have felt, especially in light of the vivid description provided by the guide. Commonly, guides use this space to make the connection to the contemporary regime of mass incarceration explaining the origins of the criminalization of black unemployment. Some guides also encourage visitors to watch the Ava DuVernay’s documentary *13th* (2016) which details the genealogy of the disproportional imprisonment of African Americans to the Thirteenth Amendment, which ended slavery for citizens not incarcerated.

The next stop is a blacksmith shop named after Robin, an enslaved blacksmith who worked there for forty years. Most guides also point out that a famous scene from the Hollywood 2012 film *Django Unchained* was filmed there. The tour then continues to the detached kitchen which is the oldest in Louisiana. Here, guides mention the tedious, mentally stressful, and
dangerous work of the cook and other “house slaves” while addressing common misconceptions about their perceived ‘privileged position’ compared to field slaves. From there visitors are walked into the Big House, although unlike other plantations that center on the architectural structure, at Whitney visitors enter it from the back, from where the enslaved people entered.

The Big House tour begins on the ground floor in the dining room and continues upstairs to the bedroom and balcony. The bedroom belonged to the last master-enslaver, Marie Azélie Haydel and is home to the last sculpture of a girl named Anna. Here visitors learn about Anna who was Haydel’s personal slave who was raped and then impregnated by Haydel’s brother. Depending on the guide, it is either there, next to Wall of Honor, or outside the Big House before the tour concludes, that visitors learn that prominent figures such as civil-right activist and educator Sybil Haydel, who married the first black mayor of New Orleans, Ernest N. Morial and their son, Marc Morial who too became mayor of New Orleans are descendants of Anna. Guides use this space to also reflect, and encourage visitors to reflect, on the various legacies of slavery and the ways in which it continues to inform inequalities in the US today. Some guides even encourage visitors to be more politically active and vote, noting a sense of urgency alluding to Trump’s administration and political climate without mentioning it by name.

There is an additional self-guided, silent exhibition that’s comprised of a graphic memorial to the 1811 German Coast Uprising that is not included in the tour. The memorial features sixty-three ceramic heads placed on polls in remembrance of the largest slave revolt in US history and the punishment their leaders suffered. After they were beheaded, their masters placed their heads on polls to terrorize and deter others from rebelling within their plantation and along the road to New Orleans. The exhibition used to be part of the tour, but criticism from both the community, who found it hurtful, and visitors, who found the visualization too graphic, led to its relegation as optional. Visitors who come independently can thus chose to visit this exhibition on their own. Visitors who come as part of a tourist company are on a tighter time schedule and tend to rush back to their bus to New Orleans.

At the end of the tour, the groups are led back to the Welcoming Center where they are invited to add their own note to a wall that operates as an open guest book. Reflections, impressions, suggestions, and thoughts are displayed. Being reintroduced to the opening
exhibition in the Welcome Center at the end of the tour reflects that Whitney does not only attempt to contextualize the Plantation in a wide history, but also to situate it in the present. Often visitors stay behind and ask the guides which book they recommend to continue their education. The last sign visitors see upon exiting the plantation features four capitalized lines that reads: “FREEDOM - EDUCATION - FAMILY - PASS IT ON.”

It is evident that many visitors are touched by Whitney’s content as the tour utilizes many instruments for emotional connection to the history it presents. From the physical experience of entering slave cabins and the holding cell to connecting with enslaved children via the personal lanyard card and the invitation to find an enslaved infant’s name with whom one shares a birth date. Nonetheless, Delgado and Stefancic (2011) warn that empathy alone cannot overcome ingrained racial narratives. They suggest strategies that rely heavily on empathy miscalculate its potency as they argue that “empathy is in shorter supply than we think” and add:

Most people in their daily lives do not come into contact with many persons of radically different race or social station. We converse with, and read materials written by, persons in our own cultures. Yet in some sense, we are all our stock of narratives—the terms, preconceptions, scripts, and understandings that we use to make sense of the world. They constitute who we are, the basis on which we judge new narratives... The idea that a better, fairer script can readily substitute for the older, prejudiced one is attractive, but falsified by history. Change comes slowly. (p. 29)

While the Whitney partly attends these concerns by supplementing its empathy generating strategies with informative material, it is important to pay attention to the overreaching emotional experience Whtiey fosters. In particular, the focus on pain, sadness and trauma may contribute to the ongoing flattening of African American history. Needless to say, the history of slavery is traumatic and painful, yet the lack of emphasis on endurance, resistance and bravery is noticeable and potentially problematic.

To better understand the factors informing the Whitney experience, I conducted semi-structured interviews with nine staff members in addition to the six participant observation tours. Four of the nine are white, of which one is a senior staff member and three are guides. Five black staff members were also interviewed, four of whom are from the local community and identify as descendants of those enslaved on the River Road plantations. One of whom is a receptionist, one a senior staff member, and two are guides. Some interviews were conducted individually,
and some were in a group setting where guides compared their experiences, shedding light on the group’s different reactions and the different strategies that guides use to cope with the difficult history they communicate. Interviews were also conducted with other “memory agents” in New Orleans, which sheds light on an evolving set of themes pertaining to the dynamics associated with the Whitney’s narrative.

5.2.3 “Y’all People Going to Tell My History”—Slavery and White Narration

As established above, one of the most glaring conundrums associated with the Whitney is Cummings’ position as a white, wealthy man who wishes to narrate a history borne by African Americans. On one hand, Cummings represents a necessary acknowledgment that the burden of experiencing racism is heavy enough for people of color and that people of color should not also be tasked with carrying the burden of fighting against racism. In this case, challenging a narrative that perpetuates racial inequalities as the one presented in the common plantation museum. On the other hand, is Cummings the most appropriate person to tell this counter-narrative?

It might be useful to think of these questions as they manifest on the ground. The physical labor of challenging dominant narratives, like the work taking place at the Whitney, is extremely demanding. Guides are not only required to tell a difficult history; they must cope with various people’s responses, emotions, physical needs; and to be on their feet, outside, in Louisiana’s intense sun and rain for one and half hours, three times a day. In theory, it might be more appropriate for whites to carry these burdens as they stand to benefit from the status-quo of the master-narrative. In reality, Cliff (pseudonym), an African American Whitney receptionist says African American visitors are disappointed to learn that a white tour guide will be guiding them through the plantation, describing their reaction of disbelief, saying “Y’all people going to tell me my history?” (Interview B, 2018).

Tom and Leah (pseudonyms), two young, white guides are well aware of this tension. While they relate their personal drive to work at the Whitney as a sense of responsibility stemming from their position as white Americans, they also acknowledge that their identities require a careful approach to the way they narrate this history. Leah is a graduate student who is basing her master’s research on her work at Whitney studying visitors’ perceptions of her
whiteness as a guide leading tours on African American slavery. She is therefore hyper aware of her whiteness that sometimes she attributes more meaning to it than the visitors. She notes:

I project a lot more than I actually know. Halfway through the tour a black person will start joking with me and start asking me questions and I’ll kind of realize, oh you didn’t start the tour hating me. I projected onto you that you did. (Interview C, 2018)

Nonetheless, her recognition of the space she is taking led her to develop thoughtful strategies to ensure that she narrates the story appropriately. One of these strategies is an announcement she makes at the beginning of the tour:

If you only remember one thing from my tour today, it is going to be the next thing I’m about to say. And that is, ‘That Senegambians were exploited for their brilliance more so than their work.’ And I see white people get interested and I see black people soften. Like, ‘You’re not going to just talk about how white people mistreated my ancestors.’ (Interview C, 2018)

Participating in Leah’s tour, it is evident that her research-based claims that Senegambians were targeted for their architectural skills and farming knowledge from a geography that resembles that of Louisiana, fascinated the visitors. It represents a refreshing deviation from the misleading and harmful common narrative that attributed Africans no quality but physical strength.

Tom, who is a white Ph.D. student researching Louisiana in the Civil War, has a slightly different approach. As someone who grew up in southern, rural Mississippi and participated in Confederate reenactments as a child, he sees a sense of personal responsibility that he conveys to his group:

The things black people say to me are, “I can’t believe you’re a white guy talking about this history.” Which is fair game, right? Because I’m the only white guy that works here and I don’t think a lot of people, regardless of their color, expect white people, especially white men talking about this history that was perpetuated in large part mostly by white men. My standard answer is, ‘It is up to the generation of the sons to repudiate the sins of the fathers.’ (Interview D, 2018)

While seeing this sense of responsibility, Tom is also able to understand the psycho-social mechanisms that drive so many white people, like his own family, to have intense emotional attachment to the whitewashed version of history (Interview B, 2018). He is reflective of his personal journey in overcoming white ignorance and is able to reach out to people without judgement. Both him and Leah are well-versed in the history they tell and are cognizant of the tensions associated with the task they wish to perform as white guides.

Cliff believes that black visitors, in spite of their initial disappointment of the white guides, appreciate their tours due to the respect with which the guides narrate the tour. He commends
Beth (pseudonym), a white tour guide in her 60s who says, “Gives the best tours out here, because she got that knowledge and she captures her people” (Interview B, 2018). From both his personal experience as an African American from the community who considers this history as his own, and from his position as a receptionist who hears both praise and complaints, Cliff ensures that it’s not a question of black and white, but respect for the history and the mission (Interview B, 2018).

In the group interview, Cliff informed Tom that he believes black visitors test white guides at the beginning of the tour by asking a question they already know the answer to (Interview B, 2018). This may have been the case in Leah’s tour, where an African American man in his 60s asked her whether the planter family members were “good owners.” After Leah respectfully explained the fallacy rooted in the question itself, the man and his family seemed pleased. From that moment onward, Leah received many complicated questions from the group who was curious to learn from her expertise and deeply interested in the tour. It was clear that the man had great knowledge of the subject matter as he was very open and shared information and even stories from his personal lived experience with Leah and the group.

For Beth, the older white guide, the decision to work at Whitney was obvious once she visited—she “could not simply move on” with her life (Interview E, 2018). For her family and former colleagues, however, her decision to “work for that Cummings” was far from obvious (Interview E, 2018). As a local, she is aware of the bad reputation the Whitney has among many white people who disapprove of the counter interpretation of the beloved plantation. While she pays a personal price with friends who cut ties with her, as well as her family who pretends she does not work there (Interview E, 2018), Beth’s knowledge of the antagonist white position seems to make her well-equipped to deal with potential defensiveness and turn it into more constructive sentiments. As an example, she tells her group at the beginning of the that “this tour is not holding a mirror, but opening a window.” Like all the guides interviewed, she pays close attention to the composition and energy of the group, carefully adjusting her narration (Interview E, 2018). With one group, Beth shared her personal concern that contemporary racial dynamics have begun to resemble those that she grew up with in racially segregated Louisiana. As the group responded affirmatively, she encouraged everyone to engage politically and ensure the
nation does not return to those dark days. With another group, composed mostly of older white visitors, she focused on the wrongs of the past and emphasized the power we all have today to make a better future. Beth confirmed that the decision to leave politics out stemmed from the group’s energy (Interview E, 2018). Nonetheless, with both groups, Beth concluded with positive reinforcement, fueling a sense of purpose and emphasizing the visitors’ agency.

5.2.4 “When It’s About You”

Rebecca (pseudonym), is the oldest African American guide working at the Whitney and like Beth, she too senses disapproval from her community for her decision to work there (Interview H, 2018). Being from the local community, Rebecca begins her tours by describing to visitors that the history they are about to hear is personal for her, and in the interview, she shares that her social circle feels the same (Interview H, 2018). In fact, she notes that they dislike the idea of an outsider (Cummings) purchasing land in the middle of the community to present its history to an influx of complete strangers (Interview H, 2018). Unlike African Americans from the North who visit to reconnect with distant roots, white people who seek to learn the history their high school teachers did not tell them, or even other guides who can leave the Whitney behind when they come back home at the end of the day, Rebecca cannot compartmentalize her private and professional life into two separate boxes (Interview H, 2018).

The painful nature of this personal trauma is not far removed spatially nor temporally where some of the descendants of the enslaved still lived in the very same slave cabins on the same plantation properties until the 1970s, and in some cases until the early 2000s. After emancipation, many formerly enslaved found themselves charged for “room and board” on the plantation. Being sharecroppers and paid only in plantation-store tokens meant that their “employment” had begun with debt and that saving for a life outside the plantation was practically impossible. Compounded with decades of racial segregation and terror, slavery simply does not feel far away enough to justify a museum tour about it.

As Cliff noted, “A lot of people are scared of history,” and added that they “don’t want to interact with this history. This history they want to forget about” (Interview F, 2018). He is empathetic to their reasoning and understands why they would rather not have a giant painful reminder in the middle of their community. Nonetheless, he is passionate about the power of
education and believes that once people will learn more about the mission of Whitney as an educational center, they will give their full support (Interview F, 2018).

The interviews with local Whitney staff, however, reveal that this history being too painful for the community is only a part of the problem. To even get to that point, Cummings had to first bridge an abyss of distrust between powerful outsiders and the community. As Naomi (pseudonym), one of the senior staff members who is from the community, explains:

Initially, the community was not on board to have another plantation tour smack in the middle of the community. Most plantation tours in this area are geared toward the grandness of the house, the various period, how the house adjusted to these periods, overlooking enslavement on the properties. And this is primarily a black community. They have fought for most 10 plus years behind this property. They wanted to open up a Rayon Plant. So they were not pleased in the beginning hearing this. (Interview D, 2018)

Tammy (pseudonym), is a young guide who like Naomi, begun working at Whitney out of a desire to learn more about her community. She too describes the difficulty inherited in gaining the trust of a community that is used to plantations that romanticize the Old South:

I think a lot of individuals, they don’t like the idea because they don’t really understand the concept of the idea. I think that just adding another plantation in general that just opens up a lot of wounds for certain individuals. And a lot of them don’t understand that telling that story of the enslaved is not making fun of them. It’s just empowering the stories, giving them back the story they deserve, rather than focus be on the owners. But in general, a lot of them originally thought that this would be almost making fun of how the slaves were during that time period. Something that wasn’t to honor them in a sense. A lot of them don’t really like to touch the subject one, and two, if you don’t want to touch a subject, you’re not going to take enough time to learn what it is actually doing, what it is actually about. (Interview G, 2018)

To overcome the mistrust, Naomi notes that Cummings had personally gone door-to-door and explained the purpose of the museum and that most people are now on board, appreciating and supporting the mission of furthering education (Interview D, 2018). She herself begun working as a guide at the Whitney when it opened out of her curiosity to learn about her own community and history. It was only later that she came to see Whitney as something bigger than her own thirst for knowledge, something that can contribute to a national conversation (Interview D, 2018).

While Naomi, Cliff, Rebecca and Tammy describe a growing partnership between the community and Whitney, it is clear that more efforts are necessary. Cliff describes the challenges embedded in the very aesthetics associated with Whitney’s setting. Referring to his community,
he says, “Everybody is looking at the obvious. Well this is a plantation, white-owned, and y’all blacks working” (Interview F, 2018). He describes how he continuously explains the Museum’s mission to his circle. Rebecca, however, has a slightly different approach handling this criticism which she notes is also occasionally brought up by African American visitors who are displeased to hear about the white ownership. Recalling a group that brought up the issue that week, Rebecca mentions how she always reminds people there are very wealthy black people in the parish who “could have purchased this plantation if they wanted to, they could have done and turned it into anything” and have decided not to (Interview H, 2018). She is therefore unsure why people bash Cummings for deciding to do something useful with the property while so many other white property holders around who owned sugarcane fields “have never put anything back into the community” (Interview H, 2018).

Kylee, a black guide in her early 30s who was born in Senegal, reframes the issue in a broader context of marginalization. She directs attention towards “how are the systems [of] hierarchy and power still keeping black people out. Even in the system of owning our own historical narratives” (Interview H, 2018). In this context, Kylee notes, the question we must ask is, “How many black folks have accumulated enough wealth that they could invest in here?” (Interview H, 2018). This framing is crucial because it both exposes the relationship between ownership of resources and ownership of narratives. Nonetheless, it still does not address the question of responsibility. Should black people who have the money be tasked with spending it to challenge the white narrative?

Leah, who is conscientiousness about both her own and the owner’s whiteness, does not have any conclusive answers but instead “a lot of question marks.” She does, however:

like to point out that a white millionaire put 11 million dollars into creating this and it is turned into a not-for-profit. What would we have white millionaires do? That. In the best world, best case scenario, white millionaires are creating museums, schools, hospitals. Giving away their money to combat white supremacy. (Interview C, 2018)

One could argue, however, that Cummings could have also put his money into already existing projects led by people of color. On the other hand, doing that would have neglected his rather revolutionary idea of rearticulating the plantation museum and creating something new. Perhaps above all, Cummings’ positionality as a white man stresses the importance of solidarity and the recognition that if whites are not a part of the solution, they continue to be a part of the problem.
While this conundrum illustrates the muddied area between the need for white anti-racist responsibility to correct the white narrative and the need for black ownership over the narrative, it also exposes concerns regarding who is the intended audience of this narrative? Tammy touches on this subject when she remarks on the disproportionate number of European and Northern visitors who “are more willing to hear or to understand” this history not only compared to the local black community, but also the local white community. She speculates, “It is more difficult when it is about you” rather than when it is “something that may be privy to you, but not directly to you” (Interview G, 2018).

5.2.5 The Past Isn’t Dead

When Butler et al. (2008) found that foreigners (primarily from Canada and Europe) represent the group most interested to learn about enslaved people on plantations (even more the African American visitors), they were surprised. They speculated that these results can be:

attributed to the idea that foreign born were not socially indoctrinated within the United States and thus do not have to carry the burden or baggage of American and southern history. This means that any shame, guilt, resentment, or other feelings that may be felt by black or white Americans because of the history of enslavement is generally not attributed to the foreign born. They look upon the history of the U.S. South, and in particular that of the plantation economy, with a largely guilt-free gaze. Thus their level of interest, as suggested here, is that of a neutral observer of a foreign history, not as a participant multiple generations removed. (p. 300)

Tammy offers a similar interpretation to her observation, that Europeans are the “ones to get more outwardly emotional” and show interest (Interview G, 2018). She suggests that while they perceive this history as “far removed,” in the South, to quote William Faulkner in *Requiem for a Nun*, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” (Faulkner, 1994, p. 535). Unlike Europeans or Northerners, white Southerners find it much harder to talk about plantation slavery. Tammy describes white Southerners’ reaction to the tour:

They tend to stone up. It’s awkward. They won’t say a word. Most of them, if they have something to say, it’s to counteract most of their peers. People they know that they agree [with] and they say what they have to say there. Here, while they are listening, they kind of stone up and are looking – they know they can’t combat or say anything. They have no proof to say what I’m saying is a lie or wrong. I think it’s just harder for them to acknowledge it, because once you acknowledge it, a lot of the things we are talking about in society – you have to admit some of things they are talking about are wrong as well. (Interview G, 2018)
While not giving an easy pass to white Southerners, Tammy believes that part of what makes it easier for white Northerners to engage in these conversations is that they do not have as much to lose from having them:

Because up North, they are a lot more separated from black people actually. It’s not due on purpose, it’s more about education quality. You see down here everyone has a lower quality of life. That’s why you find more bickering down here because everybody here kind of struggles. Up there, the separation happens a little further. So their kids aren’t going to school with other kids so it’s easier to acknowledge what happens when you’re not directly with these people, when you’re sitting in their classrooms every day. When you’re not living the same life. (Interview G, 2018)

Interestingly, Tammy, a young African American woman who works as a guide at a plantation that educates visitors about slavery, provides an insight that strongly resonates with Cole, a wealthy, old white man who owns a plantation that would avoid mentioning slavery to it visitors at all costs.

Both Cole and Tammy acknowledge the problematic dynamic that drives Northerners to be interested in this history. In addition, they both recognize the difficulties people who are not as removed from this history may have in confronting it. As Cole notes, he does not think there is a “lower income white or black person [who] is interested in” visiting a place like Whitney. Tom, the white guide who grew up with deep reverence to the Confederacy, believes that what drives many in his home community in rural, white Mississippi to idealize the white pillared past is their contemporary struggle:

There are so many people in America that think that America is the greatest country in the face of the earth because they need to believe that. Their identity is so built into it, because if America wasn’t the greatest country in the world, then why do they live on less than 30,000 dollars a year. So people tend to rationalize the problems that they have into thinking other people have it worst and America is the best. And there is a lot of people in the South, myself included, that grew up with very little money and looking to this American ideal of perfection is this really psychologically cherished idea. And if people who have nothing else give that up, they have nothing. I think that is why, especially conservatives in the rural areas, are so attached to ideas and the confederacy is an example of that. The Confederacy is part of American history and part of this idea – the second American revolution some people call it – that we’re standing up for our rights and our freedoms and this is part of what makes America great that we can fight a war and then we get to put up a monument up about it. And if you take that down, you’re basically saying that America is not the wonderful country that I think it is. (Interview B, 2018)

Considering Hochschild (2016) account in conjunction with Tammy’s and Tom’s, why would poor, white people who do not feel like they have gained anything from oppressing anyone want to visit the Whitney? Why would a black person who still faces aspects of that trauma want a
constant reminder of how horrible it was?

If neither low-income white or black Southerners are keen to visit the Whitney, who and what is Whitney for? The idea that white Northerners and Europeans who never owned up to their own historical complicity in racial oppression are exhibiting more interest is troublesome, and a key example of Jansson’s (2007, 2010) articulation of internal orientalism. The ability to focus on historical burdens in the Plantation Country, without a meaningful discussion of the international, elaborate context within which the plantation and enslavement existed, can further push white Southerners into toxic defensiveness and contribute to the North’s (and by extension, “America’s” who “the North” embodies) and Europe’s displacement of responsibility and therefore any need to confront racial inequality.

While both Cole and Tammy may see these problems, they reach strikingly different conclusions. For Cole, if the North and Europe are not interested in taking responsibility and confronting the past, neither should he. For Tammy, recognizing the problematic Northern displacement of culpability, and the reasons why Southerners find it hard to engage in this conversation is crucial. Nonetheless, unlike Cole, she uses this knowledge as a means of understanding where people are coming from. The idea of having no responsibility to tell history, or to avoid facts to create a preferred reality, is a privilege she does not have: if she will not tell her community’s history, Tammy explains, it will be left to the other plantations who will distort it (Interview G, 2018).

5.2.6 Counter-narrative of a Counter-Narrative

In addition to the idea that Whitney may be contributing to the discourse of internal orientalism by re-emphasizing the Southern burden of history and thus absolving “America” as a whole from confronting its past, some African American activists, scholars, and curators expressed concern over Whitney’s popularization of slavery. Their concerns resonated with Rahier and Hawkins (1999) finding that the Gone with the Wind depiction of the antebellum plantation drew a polar-opposite counter-narrative. Therefore, visitors now either hear about the romantic tale of the Old South or about the black Holocaust.

For Dr. Anastacia Scott, an African American education specialist at the Amistad Research Center in New Orleans, the narrative of slavery and black trauma, as offered in part by the
Whitney, is overwhelming and lacks much necessary nuance. Namely, the rich black history a city like New Orleans should be celebrating is overshadowed by people’s fascination with horror stories. While there are many small, African American museums scattered throughout the City that tell the stories of their communities, culture, struggles, and achievements, the big money, that is still held by whites, goes to the museums that focus on slavery (Interview R, 2018).

Dr. Scott therefore created The New Orleans Art and Culture Coalition where many museums and organizations join forces and tell a different story in the City’s tricentennial anniversary which coincided with the time of this research in 2018. One of the museums that is trying to tell a different story, is Le Musée de F.P.C., also known as the Free People of Color Museum. While the story told at the Musée is far from being a simple, happy account of the many free people of color who lived in the City throughout its history, the Musée celebrates their achievements and contributions to the City. It’s curator Kim Coleman, an African American woman, is also concerned with what she sees as a fetishization of slavery. She is worried that museums who emphasize terrorizing atrocities would overshadow museums like that of the Free People of Color whose stories are less provocative but just as important (Interview S, 2018).

When I brought these concerns back to Naomi, Rebecca, and Kylee, they all seemed to genuinely understand their fellow New Orleans peers’ worries. They agreed that some people are drawn to the horrors and that there are many other stories that must be told. They liked the idea of using their platform to amplify these stories and asked me to inquire with those who brought up these concerns whether they would be interested to communicate and cooperate.

It is important to note, however, that some of New Orleans memory agents stress the distinction between Louisiana’s free people of color and enslaved people, emphasizing the need for two separate stories. This distinction exposes the problem with placing the burden of telling a well-rounded story on places like Whitey. It is only in the context of limited resources and active suppression of African American historical narratives that museums must face dilemmas like which part of history to tell. While there is no harm in addressing these circumstances by organizing and coordinating, it is also important to remember that placing the responsibility of righting these institutional circumstances on Whitney still leave the root cause of unbalanced narration unattended. It is partly due to this reason, Curator Coleman explains, that the opening
of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. is so revolutionary. For the first time in its history, the US has a museum that has both the physical space and resources to tell a complicated, multifaceted history without compromising significant opportunity costs (Interview S, 2018).

5.2.7 “A Place of Healing”

Whitney may be perceived for some as a place that highlights the black trauma at the expense of black endurance and achievement, whereas to others it is seen as a place that emphasizes white guilt. For Kylee, a guide who was born in Senegal, however, the Whitney is a place where she can channel her frustrations with ignorance about Africa into something productive. She says:

I spent a lot of time making connections between racial health disparities. Basically, I was raised on the continent of Africa and I traveled around the world a lot. And it became very apparent to me that people do not recognize the contributions Africa or society and culture to modern statehood. And it’s easy to move through the world aware of that. And I have a lot of passion for those connections. And this job offered me an opportunity to actually channel those passions in a constructive way. Before this, I think I would have a lot of frustration because I could see people could not make the connections I was making between social position, societal access to wealth and equity, and health and construction of race and whiteness and the power dynamics that come not just from white supremacy, but white-centric state building. I guess I came here first because it was an opportunity to contribute to an important mission. (Interview H, 2018)

Kylee describes that working at the Whitney with people who care about these issues and interacting with visitors who care to learn about difficult histories allows her to alleviate this ignorance one group at a time and keep herself sane (Interview H, 2018).

As mentioned above, Naomi, who is from the community, began her work at the Whitney as a way to fulfill her own curiosity to learn about her history. Now, however, Naomi sees the Whitney as a place to initiate a crucial process of acknowledging the injustice that can foster healing and the building of a just future (Interview D, 2018). She notes that having these conversations herself made her a better person and a better mother, and she seeks and appreciates the humanity in others more thoughtfully (Interview D, 2018). For Tammy, the idea of leaving her community’s history to the flattened narratives of other plantation museums who romanticize enslavement is unbearable; she sees the Whitney as an opportunity to set the record straight and pay respect where it is due (Interview G, 2018). For Leah, Tom, and Beth - who
recognize the damage of white ignorance - leaving the work of correcting whitewashed narrative to be carried by African Americans is unacceptable (Interview C, July 2018; Interview D, July 2018; Interview E, 2018).

Rebecca, who grew up hearing oral history of slavery, had experienced Jim Crow’s Louisiana, and continues to live in daily fear that her tall, black son will be hurt because others may perceive him as threatening, sees the Whitney as “a place of healing.” It’s where she “can reconcile [her] feelings about this whole subject” (Interview H, 2018). She believes that the knowledge itself can empower visitors to bring it back to their own communities and “fight against racism” in any arena they feel inclined to (Interview H, 2018). If Whitney represents a different space for different people, for Rebecca, it’s where people can face difficult issues and start repairing them.

Due to the different positionalities guides bring with them, each tour has a unique imprint. In conversation with Whitney’s Director of Operations, however, this situation seems to have been unintentional as the tours are meant to be more uniform (Interview J, September 2018). The Whitney’s management concern pertains to the ‘Whitney experience’ as being consistent. Nonetheless, the ability of the guides to provide the same factual information while keeping their own voice when physically walking visitors through this history, resolves part of the questions of narration and ownership over the story.

Attempting to create a universal narrative risks miss-fitting certain guides’ positionality and missing-out on their important inputs. In other words, while the Whitney experience is not uniform, neither is the way the history of slavery relates to different people and places today. By enabling multiple and multifaceted narratives, across generations, genders, races and geographies, the Whitney demonstrates that the history of American slavery does not exclusively belong to one group, and yet, it belongs to different people differently. As Naomi suggests, “It is everybody’s story.” The problem she sees is that “people just don’t know how to approach the subject” (Interview D, 2018). Whitney provides a space where people can listen and learn how this narrative is a part of them, and how they can shape its future.

5.2.8 Different Body, Different Interaction

It is evident through the interviews that the people who work at Whitney do so out of
some sense of purpose, and that the “burden” challenging hegemonic narrative is one they feel passionate carrying. Nonetheless, as mentioned above, the work at the Whitney is not only physically demanding, but also emotionally and psychologically challenging. Guides routinely confront issues ranging from attending to a dehydrated visitor to managing the potential disapproval of their social circles. Perhaps most taxing however, is the reactions they receive from visitors. It is hard to differentiate what elements of the tour triggers visitors’ reactions. Nonetheless, the group interviews reveal that it is not only the sensitive content of the tour, but also the identity of who shares it that can lead to particular responses.

Due to the busy schedule of tours, guides seem to have limited opportunities to actually talk to each other, learn from each other’s experiences, and support one another. Conducting interviews in the group setting revealed the extent to which different guides meet different reactions. It also enabled guides to see what issues are common and which strategies can be used to tackle them. Responding to Rebecca’s suggestion that “if you’re in a certain age group and you didn’t understand what slavery was about by now, you’re not going to get it,” Kylee noted:

I think our bodies and how we look directly influence the sort of resistance we get from different people. Ms. Beth [white women in her 60s, pseudonym] will get different types of resistance. You’ll get different types of resistance. I think I look very young. And I don’t get people questioning me the same way I experience when I was shadowing your tour. I remember there was this one Eastern European white man who kept saying to Rebecca [pseudonym], “Slavery happened everywhere, how did this happen?” And at one point I was literally getting him and Rebecca and instinctively I could perceive the degree to which being instructed by a woman of color closer to his age group was almost intolerable for him. And it’s interesting to think about people in different ages. I never would have made a statement about what you just said (Interview H, 2018).

As Kylee suggests, the identities of the guides—made up in part through the intersections of race, age, and gender—in conjunction with the narrative they present and the identities of the visitors seem to suggest a pattern that informs the nature of the interactions and types of questions asked.

Rebecca, who is the only elder African American woman guide, seems to have her knowledge questioned much more than others (Interview H, 2018). Additionally, her factual presentation is misinterpreted as personal opinions which leads her to be mindful of her tone and wording (Interview H, 2018). The incident described by Kylee echoed strongly with the tour I joined with Gray Line where the only white man in the group (a European tourist) was strongly
displeased with Rebecca. While he was completely quiet during the tour, on the bus he expressed how upset he was with how Rebecca “poisoned the tour” with the way she was “filled with hate and anger.” He was particularly irritated about her suggestion that the contemporary state of mass incarceration is connected to the history of slavery.

While this emotional display took place after the tour, the way the Gray Line guide managed the meltdown revealed the structural limitations in addressing emotional manifestation such as white defensiveness and black anger. Noticing the growing discomfort among other passengers, the guide who was a woman of color herself, had to console the man. When he raised the point that there were white, European slaves too, the guide did not explain the historical differences between race-based chattel slavery and other historical forms of enslavement, nor did she explain how the discriminatory legacies of slavery continue to endure in the US in many ways. Instead, she validated his concerns and noted that Americans often forget that white Europeans were also enslaved, which seem to have appeased him. This problematic strategy of balancing oppression was mentioned in a conversation with Gray Line’s Director of Operations, when I asked how their guides cope with the sensitive nature of New Orleans’ history.

Being a popular, commercial tourism company, Gray Line guides must ensure that visitors enjoy their vacations. Therefore, the director suggested that when Gray Line guides encounter a painful story that can generate defensiveness, they should try to “downplay the negative,” mention that the story is more complicated than a binary good guys/bad guys and emphasize there is no demographic that has a monopoly on pain (Interview I, 2018). While he did not provide any clear-cut examples, the repeated tropes on the Company’s tours included it was better to be a slave in Louisiana than elsewhere and that free people of color owned slaves too. This seemed to serve as an effective “balancing” function.

The Whitney, unlike Gray Line, is a non-profit whose mission prioritizes social responsibility over visitors’ emotional comfort. The Whitney’s Director of Operations spoke candidly about the need to provide guides with more tools to handle aggressive displays of anger and/or fragility, but also acknowledged that discomfort is part of the process in confronting a history that is not balanced (Interview J, September 2018). While the Whitney aims to generate
an experience that fosters constructive sentiments, the staff recognizes its ability is not limitless and that some guests are not going to experience a constructive transformation. If necessary, the management instructs guides to reach out and have a superior join the group. The director suggests management can “see if we need to remove that person from the tour,” and also adding, “[we] have done that in the past” (Interview J, September 2018).

5.2.9 A Labor of Love is Still Labor

More often than not, tours go smoothly as many guides referred to people who visit Whitney as belonging to a largely “self-selecting group” who know what they are getting into. Yet, the need to accommodate people’s skepticism, expectations, and emotions is mentally draining. For example, a few guides cited some African American visitors’ need for validation that the trauma their ancestors endured was real and horrific. Rebecca suggests that it is at the Whitney that they “want to know more about the suffering. They want to know about the things that happened to them personally, the injustices, and how families were split apart, and they will come up with things that we don’t have proof [of]” (Interview K, 2018). These injustices often include ideas of where a “lynching tree” might be located or inquiries about specific forms of terror that involve explicit sexual violence.

Aside from having to repeat a painful history three times a day, even on days when one’s spirit is down, having to handle people’s ready-made ideas is difficult. As Kylee contends,

People come here with all of their hopes, dreams, and aspirations for anything and everything they thought about racial justice in America. And so you’re already the subject of someone else’s pre-conceived understandings of what is racism – people are coming to you with whatever the narrative of what they believe the narrative of white-black to be. So they automatically are ready for something and when you do or don’t fulfill that, you know they project onto you. (Interview H, 2018)

Some examples of visitors’ self-projections can be manifested in almost comical ways. For example, the way an older white man told Tom at the end of his tour that while “it was a good tour. I didn’t agree with all of your socialist conclusions, but it’s important to remember our history” (Interview D, 2018). Another example is that white visitors seem to only ask the white guides about material aspects related to the Big House, such as its architecture and style (Interview E, July 2018; Interview D, 2018).

More problematic projections take place when they concern not only the guide, but the
group as a whole. Therefore, while Whitney’s mission is not about fostering white guilt or black anger, Rebecca believes that sometimes people bring these feelings with them into the museum. She suggests that:

Sometimes they come here already prepared and so they are on the defense already and so that makes it uncomfortable when your group might be mostly black and some whites, and it’s kinda like they are trying to fight their battles here and it makes everybody uncomfortable. Certainly makes me uncomfortable because that’s not my thing. (Interview K, 2018)

Upon recognizing this dynamic, she might have to pause the tour and remind people that Whitney is not about blame and shame—she encourages people to figure out these emotions back at their own “kitchen table.” A similar strategy was mentioned by Tammy who cited the need to explicitly tell visitors that:

None of us were actually there. I wasn’t there to endure it and nor were you there to inflict it. So the moral of it is to understand what happened in the past and to take that and cultivate the information how you want and make sure we don’t make the same mistakes again. (Interview G, 2018)

Moreover, Naomi believes that when it comes to slavery, people immediately expect “a discussion about who is to blame.” This tendency, she postulates, is why so many people “step away” from having a meaningful discussion about it (Interview D, 2018). This analysis can be applied to the case of Benjamin Cole, the owner of the Houmas House. As described above, Cole clearly articulated his reluctance to discuss slavery on his Estate or even read books about it as he believes them all to describe “how horrible the white man was to the slave” and that plantation museums today incorporate slavery either out of a sense of guilt or as a way to foster guilt in others (Interview A, 2018). For the Whitney staff, however, the Plantation signifies a platform that enables reflecting on this history without the counterproductive sentiments that are usually impeding the conversation.

While different guides have different reactions from different visitors, it is evident that they all arm themselves with an incredible amount of information. It appears that when it comes to slavery, many white Americans (who are still the majority of visitors) are also curious to know where guides receive their information from. Therefore, guides are prepared to tackle skepticism and often tell visitors exactly how they know the things they tell. Guides choose their words carefully, they avoid answering any question they do not know the answer to, and they leave out information that they cannot fully corroborate (Interview H, 2018).
In its fifth year, the Whitney continues to grow. The increasing volume of visitors compounded with the length of the tour brought to light a new issue – feeding the guests. Ever mindful about the context and mission, the Director of Operations notes “we would have healthy ingredients. We would use it as a way to educate people about the history of the cuisine here on the plantation and also in Africa” (Interview J, September 2018). In addition, Whitney created lesson plans that are available online and welcomes school trips and African American family reunions. As mentioned above, it held an exhibition of oral history based on the local communities’ histories of life after emancipation and is going through renovations of more parts of the property to increase its capacity and expand the narration. As the Whitney Plantation continues to evolve and bring to light narratives that others maintain buried, neighboring plantations undergo their own process of excavation.

5.3 The Oak Alley Plantation - “History and Romance, Regret and Rebirth, Tragedy and Triumph”

The Oak Alley Plantation, located in St. James Parish, opened its gates to visitors in 1972 when the Oak Alley Foundation was formed to manage the estate as a non-profit. Located an hour’s drive away from New Orleans, the image of the plantation’s Greek-Revival mansion with its iconic alley of live oak trees is one often depicted across New Orleans’s tourist information centers, brochures, and websites. Referred to as a “must have” destination by the Director of Operations of the largest tourist company operating in New Orleans (Interview I, 2018), the plantation holds a substantial position as a narrator of the region’s history with approximately 230,000 visitors frequenting it every year, making it the most visited of the River Road plantations (Hanna, 2016).

While researchers widely recognized Oak Alley as reproducing the “symbolic annihilation” / “Gone with the Wind” regime of representation (Eichstedt & Small, 2002; Hanna, 2016; Rahier & Hawkins, 1999; Rapson, 2018), Oak Alley had made an active effort to change its course in recent years. Therefore, it represents a fitting case study to examine the factors leading to narrative change and the complexities involved in transition. Prior to examining these issues, the following sections will provide a brief introduction to Oak Alley and establish its regime transformation.
The introduction and analysis generated to answer these questions is based on semi-structured interviews and participant observation in several of the tours that Oak Alley offers. The interviews were conducted with three senior Oak Alley staff members (all of which are white women in their 30s and 40s) and three with junior staff (one white woman in her 30s, a Latino American man in his 20s, and a Latina American woman in her 20s). Two of the junior staff are site interpreters of the Slavery at Oak Alley exhibit and one is a site interpreter of the Big House. The tours joined for participant observation include four to the Big House, two of which were with tourist groups who visited the Whitney Plantation beforehand, and two where Oak Alley was the only plantation visited. The additional tours on site included two Slavery Exhibit Conversation Series (by two different interpreters), as well as the Civil War Tent and the Sugarcane Exhibit and Theatre.

5.3.1 “Come Enjoy Her Beauty and Dream of Her Rich Past!”

Prior to 2013, the plantation experience focused entirely on the mythical imagery of the Old South. This experience was centered on the Big House tour, led by hoop-skirted docents who told a romantic tale of the owners of the estate - Jacques and Celina Roman. Guests were invited to imagine themselves in the days of the genteel civilization, and admire the furniture, architecture and power the Romans acquired as well as empathize with the tragedies they experienced (namely: disease, death, the Civil War, and abolition of slavery) (Rapson, 2018).

Along with the problematic narrative presented within the tours at the Plantation, researchers have noted additional problems with Oak Alley’s presentation to the public. Oak Alley’s bar, restaurant, bed and breakfast cottages, gift shop and wedding venue are all components that bolster the construction of Oak Alley as a romantic getaway based in the aesthetic of the White Pillared Past and commodification of white nostalgia (Adamkiewicz, 2016). Until 2013, in terms of its regime of representation, Oak Alley was not significantly different than the Houmas House regime as studied for this research.

5.3.2 Regime Change - Slavery at Oak Alley Exhibit

In 2013 Oak Alley opened its “Slavery at Oak Alley” exhibit with six newly-built replicas of the original slave cabins that were once a part of the property. The project represents what
Alderman and Campbell (2008) refer to as *symbolic excavation*. The term was created to provide greater nuance to the idea that slavery can be simply “incorporated” into a narrative that had formerly actively erased it. They write:

> Slave histories are not simply joined with existing historical narratives as the word incorporation implies. The identities and contributions of the enslaved may very well need to be reconstructed from the ground up because of long-standing patterns of neglect and marginalization. (p. 342)

Therefore, Oak Alley’s slavery exhibit does not only rely on the changing of or addition to the physical space and artifacts, but also on archaeological excavations, reinterpretation or the landscape and artifacts and archival research.

The six slave cabins comprising the exhibit are situated along the pathway - leading from the back of the Big House to the leisure area which features the café, bar, restaurant etc. - and operate as small exhibition spaces. Four of the six cabins enable visitors to peek inside and glimpse what an inhabited cabin may have looked like, which display items such as articles of clothing and minor furnishings. These exhibition cabins include signage that explain the differences of the living standards that enslaved individuals had according to their status (e.g., house slaves had slightly better material conditions than field slaves), the poor medical treatment enslaved individuals received, punishments their enslavers’ inflicted upon them, the chores they had to undertake to sustain themselves (e.g., cooking and gardening), specialized skills of the enslaved (e.g., agronomy, blacksmithing, construction, seamstress), and the particularities of gendered work, as well as life after emancipation and the challenges it involved.

The two remaining cabins allow visitors to step inside and gain a closer look at different items, some of which were found in the sites’ archeological excavation. These include shackles, agricultural tools, and inventory lists documenting the enslaved as property. Notable is one of the cabin’s interior wall, where the one hundred and ninety-eight names of the individuals enslaved on the property are inscribed with the dedication: “a respectful recognition of the people [emphasis in original] on whose backs this plantation was built. For most of them, a name is all that remains of their story.” In a video released on July 3rd 2013, Oak Alley’s director of research and interpretation explained the reasoning behind the decision to add “Slavery at Oak Alley” with its six replica cabins:
The decision to rebuild was actually not an easy decision to make, but we knew that one display or building wasn’t not going to be sufficient. We needed to balance the strong physical presence of the iconic big house and trees and we also wanted to convey a sense of human activity and life. And so, we built accurate structures and positioned them where the original quarters stood. With reconstruction buildings, the visitor thus a visual sense of Oak Alley’s original landscape and the multiple buildings give us a place to discuss the enslaved community in greater detail. This allows us to focus on the specifics of the people that lived here. (oakalleyplantation, 2013, 1:12)

The erasure of the enslaved from Oak Alley’s landscape and narrative necessitated the need for the creation of a surrogate to tell the story of the enslaved that is powerful enough to “balance” the Big House. Within this rubric, the Big House can be understood as the surrogate telling the story of the master-family. Alongside the potentially problematic nature of constructing new cabins to communicate the story of those gone, the frame of mind that relegates the story of the enslaved to the specific space of their dwelling is troublesome.

Figure 9: The famous alley of live oaks leading to the Greek Revival mention.

Oak Alley scenic beauty provides a location for annual photography contests (photo by author)

Coupled with the continuous adherence to symbolic annihilation within the Big House tour and the overall aesthetic of the estate, researchers drew attention to the segregated nature of the Slavery at Oak Alley exhibit. In specific, “Oak Alley’s continuing commitment to showcase romance and beauty makes it difficult for visitors to fully connect with the harsh working conditions of a sugar plantation and the dehumanizing nature of slavery as an institution” (Hanna, 2016, p. 232). Noting the physical proximity of the exhibit to the leisure area, Rapson
(2018) adds that Oak Alley is “ultimately compartmentalizing slave memory, resulting in a site apparently uncontaminated by troubling moral questions” (p. 10).

### 5.3.3 Historical Excavation-Based Incorporation

In 2017 site interpreters were added to the exhibit (as well as to other locations on the grounds) for the “Conversation Series.” According to the plantation’s website, the “Conversation Series was launched as a way of enriching the visitor experience and addressing visitors’ needs as they confront difficult history in the ‘Slavery at Oak Alley’ exhibit.” (Oak Alley Plantation, 2019a. para, 3). While the conversation series and site interpreters provided more weight to the self-guided exhibit, the central tour in the Big House continued operating within the same frame of a symbolically annihilating, segregated narrative until 2018, when that narrative also changed.

As of January 2018, the tour at the Big House is led by guides wearing khaki pants and polo shirts. While Celina and Jacques still take center stage, the romantic stories about their relationship and culture are no longer a part of the narrative. Instead, they share the spotlight with Mayanna and Detterville, two individuals enslaved by the Roman family as domestic servants. The narrative thus takes visitors throughout the house, where the guide informs visitors that the lives of the Romans and the enslaved “though entwined, were very different experiences” (Big House Tour, 2018).

This transition can be said to showcase a deeper commitment to what Alderman and Campbell (2008) refer to as *artifact politics* as the tour now “involves active participation with the material traces of slavery as well as the appropriation and reinterpretation of artifacts previously associated with the white planter class” (p. 338). Beforehand, the Big House was functioning as a white space as both its structure and the artifacts within it were used as surrogates for the master family. As of 2018, due to the reinterpretation of the structure and its artifacts, the Big House is understood as a space possible by the men, women and children enslaved there, one that cannot be understood without them.

### 5.3.4 Both Romantic and Traumatic?

Before addressing the new narrative, it’s important to note that Oak Alley is still promoted online as a romantic getaway to the antebellum time both in the Foundation’s website and in of
the Oak Alley Plantation Restaurant & Inn (OARI) which represent the commercial and “independent” side of the property. Overnight stays invite guests to “enjoy a tranquil evening strolling the stately grounds and imagining what it was like to live here in the 1800’s” (Oak Alley Plantation Restaurant & Inn, 2019b. para, 2). The OARI website also assures those interested in booking the site for events (including weddings) that “Oak Alley Plantation tastefully blends the advantages of modern day services with the ambiance of a bygone era” (Oak Alley Plantation Restaurant & Inn, 2019a. para, 1). In the Foundation’s website, the Plantation is presented as “a spot where traditions from around the world can freely harmonize with golden days of past elegance” (Oak Alley Plantation, 2019b. para, 1).

In addition to these romantic provisions, the Foundation’s website features the Oak Alley Slavery Database with is based on the 2011 research on which the Slavery at Oak Alley exhibit is founded. The webpage explains that the database,

> brings to light attributes of personhood including names, origins and relationships, and presents them simultaneously with the marks of slavery that dehumanized--such as appraised value. Together, it is our aim to offer a resource for students and researchers, and enable them to better understand the people of one specific sugar plantation (Oak Alley Foundation, 2019, para. 4).

The change to the Big House tour resolved some of the problems associated with the segregated, dual nature of having romanticism in one area of the Plantation and trauma another. Reviewing the websites, however, it is apparent that Oak Alley is maintaining aspects of that parallel interpretation.

Oak Alley’s senior staff assures that the commercial end of the premise is operating independently from the Oak Alley Foundation. Nonetheless, there is virtually no sign to indicate to visitors that the café, restaurants, cottages and bar belong to a separate entity. Moreover, while the Oak Alley Foundation and the Oak Alley Planation Restaurant & Inn have two separate websites, they share the same design and aesthetic, as well as links directing internet visitors to one another, thus requiring an active effort to distinguish the two. Moreover, as seen above, the Foundation too continues to relay on Romantic imagery, especially as pertaining to event booking on the property.

The interconnectedness of the two entities is also reflected in the personnel where key board members belong to the same family owning the commercial portion of the property. These
commercial ties reflect Oak Alley’s continuous dependency on the romantic imagery of the antebellum South to sell and promote their services and pose concerns regarding the Foundation’s ability to provide just representation to the “workers whose labor made plantation’s life in its luxuries possible” (oakalleyplantation, 2012, 1:53).

Figure 10: Slavery at Oak Alley exhibit featuring six replica cabins. Located along the path between the back of the Big House and the leisure area. The shading trees were added to the property long after emancipation (photo by author)

5.3.5 Dynamics and Dilemmas in Transition: Competing hypotheses of changing narratives

Unlike the newly established Whitney Plantation, Oak Alley had a well-known reputation and a large repeat-visitor base that grew to love the plantation in its previous format. Therefore, given Oak Alley’s influential and well-founded position, its narrative transitions are nothing less than dramatic. Within this context, Oak Alley provides a unique case study to try and understand the following questions: what brought about changes to its narrative, what are the challenges unique to well-established plantations that wish to alter their regime of representations, what are potential limitations of the newly generated narrative, and what are the opportunities ahead?

Prior to examining the dynamics, limitations and opportunities created by Oak Alley’s transition, it is imperative to understand why did Oak Alley change in the first place. The decision
to stop reproducing a narrative so embedded in its image can potentially shed light on the factors that are influential in driving narrative change. Researchers tied narrative changes to increase in African American tourism (Hoelscher, 2012) and greater interest from the general public (Bright et al., 2018), as well as new recommendation on historical interpretation for the National Parks Service which may have proliferated to other historical interpretation sites (Miles, 2015).

Memory agents in New Orleans interviewed for this research suggested various other theories concerning the increased interest in critical perspectives of history and African American perspectives in particular. These include the election and re-election of President Barack Obama, the ways in which hurricane Katrina uncovered deep racial inequalities in the city of New Orleans and the need to understand them, as well as a new sense of urgency to hold onto heritage the hurricane threaten to wash away.

Two visitors shared different ideas during interviews. One man from Florida who defined himself as half Native American and Half African American suggested that there is a generational shift in attitudes on race. As an educator who works with children, he suggested that integration and the celebration of African American culture and contributions in popular media may feed into increasing interest in African American history and its mainstreaming. An African American woman from California, however, suggested that high profile race related incidences such as police shootings of unarmed black men and women, as well as their subsequent protests make people want to understand racial issues in the US better.

Given that almost all visitors to the River Road plantations pass through New Orleans, the efforts to shift the city’s outlook on regional history may also have influenced the interpretations in the proximate plantation museums. These efforts are reflected in exhibitions such as the 2015 Historic New Orleans Collection "Purchased Lives" exhibit (dedicated to New Orleans’ domestic slave market) and the 2017 high-profile removal of Confederate monuments. In 2018, the city celebrated its Tricentennial year, elected its first woman to serve as New Orleans mayor, African American LaToya Cantrell, and placed six new historical markers that tell the city’s history of slavery. 2018 also saw the New Orleans Museum of Art exhibition Changing Course – reflections of New Orleans Histories, which invites guest to critically reflect on the city’s history from
different perspectives. Notably, the city also established a Racial Reconciliation Committee (New Orleans Tricentennial, 2018).

One explanation for why Oak Alley changed was brought up by several actors in the industry. In interviews with tourism professionals in Gray Line as well as staff of neighboring plantations, the opening of the Whitney plantation was portrayed as groundbreaking. Benjamin Cole of the Houmas House speculated that “the only reason Oak Alley is doing it [incorporating slavery into the narrative] is because Whitney is close and they are getting so many of Whitney’s customers who go there first” (Interview A, 2018). This view was supported by several members of Whitney staff who noted that after seeing Whitney, visitors who came to Oak Alley were asking more questions, pushing the guides to elaborate on slavery or challenging euphemisms like “servants.” Whitney’s Director of Operations even noted that one of the touring companies had to change the order of the plantation visited, as visitors who first visited Whitney, responded badly to their subsequent experience at Oak Alley that had erased and romanticized the painful and powerful story of slavery as presented at the Whitney.

In addition to narrative proliferation, the literature suggests that Oak Alley may have changed its narrative based on visitors’ interest surveys. Alderman et al. (2016) describe Oak Alley’s interest and cooperation with researchers to understand what compels their visitors’ interest. As discussed above, Oak Alley’s visitors were found to have a moderate level of interest in the enslaved which was lower compared to a level of interest in the enslaved in other plantations such as Whitney and Laura (Bright & Carter, 2016, 2018).

Nonetheless, Oak Alley’s visitors’ level of interests were found to be moderate across many aspects of the plantation museum (e.g., history, landscape, origin of owners, furnishings, enslaved). Therefore, visitors’ level of interest in information about slavery was in fact relatively high compared to their interests in information about other aspects of plantation history (Bright & Carter, 2016, 2018). This finding potentially indicated to Oak Alley that their visitors will be happy to hear more about the enslaved than they previously thought.

An additional hypothesis concerning the reasoning behind the change is generational shift within the Oak Alley Foundation. This theory was offered by a close friend of the family leading the Oak Alley’s Foundation board who will remain unnamed. The family friend and fellow River
Road plantation owner argued that if it was not for the new generation of leadership’s Northern connections and need to maintain positive reputation among liberal circles, the transition would not have occurred, especially as the older, retiring generation opposed the transition.

Nonetheless, in interviews with Oak Alley’s Curator, Interpretation Coordinator and Day Manager (all white women in their 40s), none of these reasons are mentioned. Instead, it is suggested that it was an unwarranted awakening where the Foundation realized that they are not sharing factual information with the visitors. Lisa (pseudonym), the Day Manager who had been working at Oak Alley for close to twenty years noted that the pre-transition Oak Alley “was more for entertainment purposes” and characterizes it as following:

We did talk about the original family and everything, but we did not have the documentation to back up what we were saying and a lot of what we were saying was lore. Which made for great entertainment. We wore the big pretty dresses which people but weren’t accurate. They were basically eye candy. (Interview L, 2018)

Sheila (pseudonym), who was hired in 2011 as Oak Alley curator describes the need to transition from an entertainment site to a research-based institution as one based on “duty” for the visitors. Sheila notes, “we have quite a few people who come here every year and people trust cultural institutions to tell the truth. So we should be telling the truth” (Interview M, 2018). Rose (pseudonym), the museum’s Interpretation Coordinator, shared a similar account that attributed the grand changes to a sudden realization that everything they have been telling thousands of guests throughout the decades had no factual basis.

Leading the effort to create a fact-based experience, Sheila the curator sought to “start from the beginning. Assume nothing. Try to uncover as much as you can” (Interview M, 2018). This ongoing effort resulted in the Slavery at Oak Alley Exhibition, an online Slavery at Oak Alley Database, additional site interpretations outside the Big House, and the change to the Big House narration itself. It also meant losing the hoop-skirts that Sheila describes as “imaginary costumes that were never accurate” and limiting the space on the property where weddings can take place (Interview M, 2018).

Based on Oak Alley’s senior staff, the timing of the transition stemmed from nothing other than an organic and independent awakening within the Foundation. The Interpretation Coordinator, for example, characterized the decision to re-think the whole narrative as “a very
innocent moment” that happened when the staff realized the narrative is not fact-based (Interview N, 2018). Not only is the geographically proximate Whitney (which was under final stages of renovation/construction in 2011 when Oak Alley began its research) not recognized as having any influence, but the national interest in slavery is understood as a coinciding trend. Sheila explains,

the thing that was really remarkable of around at the same time there is a larger movement across the US that there is this re-interest in slavery, this interest in racial dynamics, how did we get here, what things have not been solved, what has not been resolved? Everyone likes to think that everything is okay. That’s human nature. But how did we get from point A to point B. How did we get from plantation slavery to Ferguson, to Baltimore? How did that happen? So there was a lot of visitor demand for ‘hey, we want to hear more about this’ and ‘we want to hear more about this.’ And so it was reassuring cause you are working on things internally and you’re not ready to share them. But at the same time the public is asking so it is a great underscore of we are going in the right direction, this is the right thing to do. So it helps when you have any sort of hesitation about making such a dramatic change. (Interview M, 2018)

The transition into fact-based narration that includes the history of slavery is therefore understood as an act that enabled Oak Alley to challenge the wider racializing process and historicize contemporary racial inequalities. Nonetheless, the portrayal of the decision to change as rooted in a newfound respect for the visitors and history, works to deny Oak Alley’s role in engraining these racializing processes and contributing to ongoing racial inequalities. It is also telling of Oak Alley’s epistemically white positionality. The protests in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 against the killing of Michael Brown, an 18-year old unarmed African American, by a white policeman perhaps drew whites’ attention to the fact that social justice in contemporary America is still divided among a racial line. However, this is not news, but a lived reality for African Americans across the US, who are also aware of the fact that the antebellum planation life was not mint juleps and magnolias in the breeze.

5.3.6 “Why Pretend When You Have These True Stories and This Real History?” – The New Oak Alley

The new Big House tour, which began in January 2018, represents a dramatic shift from the previous narration. Unlike Whitney, the tour is scripted and uniform and can therefore sound somewhat robotic. The romanticism and fascination with furniture has been removed, and two “new” characters were introduced: Mayanna, a woman enslaved by the Romans as a seamstress
and house servant, and Detterville, a man enslaved by Jacques Roman as his personal servant. As explained by the curator, “the goal is to demonstrate through a very human lens every aspect of plantation life.” She explains the decision to focus on individuals as a way “to illustrate larger life around the plantation” (Interview M, 2018).

Clarifying the main agenda behind the new Big House narrative Rose, the Interpretation Coordinator explains:

we want people to realize that while the plantation had some really grand structures and was built with the direction of these very powerful families. It was also heavily influenced by the enslaved community, and that while enslaved community and these owners of the enslaved people were very intertwined with a very close working relationship. Their lives were extremely and very separated and they had very different experiences and perspectives in the same environment. They really want people to be able to look at both sides of the coin. (Interview N, 2018)

The theme of “both sides” come across strongly throughout the tour. In the welcoming room, guests learn about Jacque Roman’s wealth and vision for a plantation mansion, but also that he used slaves as a collateral to receive a loan “to bring his vision to life.” Visitors are told about how the Romans chose the “fashionable Greek revival style and the impressive columns that we enjoyed outside and adds southern influences such as the deep galleries” but also how it was the skilled enslaved who were forced to build it (Big House Tour, 2018).

This narration style follows almost every room in the house. Guests learn that “an evening in the dining room may mean something very different if you’re the one enjoying the breeze, or you’re the one making the breeze happen.” In the second floor, where several items from the archaeological excavations are presented, visitors are shown what the guides refer to as a centerpiece that embodies the “two very different sides of plantation life.” These items are Celina and Jacques’ copper wedding invitation, described as an “announcement for a happy event” and a rattle shackle that “with its noise made a very different announcement: the arrival of an enslaved person who legally was not allowed to marry” (Big House Tour, 2018).

The new narrative thus holds a refreshing artifact politics for re-interpreting objects and places that were previously interpreted solely through the masters’ perspective (Alderman & Campbell, 2008). Distinctively, Oak Alley does not eliminate the previous interpretation, but adds another one to it. In addition to “balancing” the Big House and its objects with both perspectives, the tour humanizes the enslaved with focus on the individuals Detterville and Mayanna. While
historical information about the individuals is limited, the narration relies on common sense in describing how stressful certain situations they had to face must have been.

For example, the guide suggests that Jacques’ deteriorating health must have been mentally taxing for Detterville who could have been sold away from his family on the Plantation with Jacques death. Mayanna is re-contextualized as a mother and a woman with both agency and will. Being tasked with meticulously serving high profile guests such as governors and judges, Mayanna is described as not only worried for her own safety, but also for her son who was tasked with constantly providing a steady breeze for the dinner guests through consistently pulling a rope attached to a ceiling fan with enough force to deter the flies but not too strong to blow out the candles. She is also described as being an asset within her community for her ability to gather information from the planter’s house and his guests and pass it on to protect her community and those in neighboring plantations.

The re-contextualization and humanization of the enslaved translates into the problematizing of the previously-celebrated planters’ characters who are now also understood as enslavers. Nonetheless, this point is not greatly emphasized throughout the tour which uses more passive language in describing the relationality imbedded in their positions. Instead, the tour focuses on showing that despite sharing a space, the enslaved and the planters experience it vastly differently. This appears as a missed opportunity as the only other place visitors may have a chance to reflect on the Romans active position as enslavers is at the slavery at Oak Alley exhibit which most visitors do not attend. There, a sign showcases revealing and troubling quotes from the Romans’ letters and one of the two interpreter illuminates the Romans’ positions as enslavers. At the Big House tour, to which all the visitors attend, however, it is only at the end where the guide quotes Celina’s words: “we will always be the masters” that visitors are confronted the Romans’ brutal position and mindset it required (Big House Tour, 2018).

This telling quote from a letter that Celina wrote to her son is somewhat eroded once the guide perfunctorily adds, “now you and I know that Celina’s prediction will be proven untrue.” This statement is followed by a description of how the plantation went under following Jacques death, where “people like Mayanna and Detterville found themselves being negotiated with things like the furniture.” Before transitioning into an explanation of the modern usage of the
house and its renovations, the guide says, “it all came to a complete end with the Civil War and the end of plantation slavery” (Big House Tour, 2018). While “it” means the working of Oak Alley as an active plantation, the context within which it is said suggests that the horrors of slavery also came to an end, thus ahistoricising the legacies that persisted and continued long after de jure end slavery.

The tour concludes with a dramatic declaration as the guide states: “Now it’s time to get your camera ready, as I present to you: the oaks!” as the second-floor balcony’s doors open and reveal the iconic alley of live oaks (Big House Tour, 2018). After the initial excitement calms, and everyone gets a chance to take pictures, visitors return to the ground level from which they can continue independently. There visitors can purchase a mint julep and visit the American Sugarcane League (ASCL) sponsored Sugarcane Exhibit and Theatre (which one junior guide described as “propaganda”) and learn how important sugar is for the local economy, alongside that “it’s natural, it’s healthy, it’s good!” Adjacent to this exhibit is the Civil War Tent where visitors can learn from a re-enactor dressed as a confederate soldier that the Civil War, like the Revolutionary War, was based on fair taxation. Behind the Big House, one can visit the Slavery at Oak Alley Exhibit and join one of the five Conversation Series offered on site or visit the exhibit independently. Alternatively, visitors can ignore the exhibit and stroll through it on the way to the café, bar, restaurant, inn and gift shop.

While these sites aid in what Rose, the Interpretation Coordinator, refers to as the effort to broaden the popular connotation with the term “plantation” by “deemphasizing the mansion and reemphasizing the entire plantation” (Interview N, 2018), Oak Alley cannot be said to provide a counter-narrative. Coupled with the continuous reliance on romantic imagery and language in both the websites of the Foundation and the Oak Alley Restaurant and Inn’s as well as the commercial facet of the property and wedding venue, Oak Alley’s relationship with its troubled history is problematic. Nonetheless, the Foundation’s curator maintains that, “we really don’t feel any pressure to uphold any romanticized anything” and that the conundrum between horror and beauty is one inherited in the plantation. She notes:

it is a powerful place. It is powerful for many reasons. One, it is stunning. Two, it holds a very troubled history that is indicative of a larger country’s history. Those two coincide. That is the paradox of a plantation. The fact that these gorgeous houses and stunning landscapes were
created because people were held as property. People were bought and sold as property. That is why you have all the beauty. (Interview M, 2018)

At Whitney this “paradox” is known, though it is interpreted quite differently. The amount of wealth possessed, the acres owned, and size of the house built, Kylee explained to the visitors, are all a reflection of the amount of people exploited. Beauty and grandeur are indicators of brutality and pain. At Oak Alley, however, it appears that the main effort is to provide a ‘balanced,’ “full interpretation from all perspectives” as Rose notes, where the enslaved are recognized as “what [sic] has made this entire experience possible today,” and that experience is meant to be enjoyed (Interview N, 2018).

This theme is evident in the Slavery at Oak Alley interpretation offered by Linda (pseudonym), one of the two site interpreters. Linda, a white woman in her early 30s, reminds guests at the end of her talk that “today is here for us to enjoy. It’s beautiful, it’s picturesque, it’s gorgeous. The food is fantastic and all of it is the gift from everybody who lived on this property” (Slavery at Oak Alley A, 2018). Furthermore, during the interview, Linda noted how she responds to visitors who are hesitant to enjoy Oak Alley after learning about its history:

> to still enjoy the day just remember the history that is here and that it is okay to enjoy the day because some people come in and they see people taking pictures for bridal shoots, they see pictures of people doing high school photos they see weddings going on and they wanna know, ‘Is this okay?’ and I say ‘well, absolutely, as long as you do it right.’ (Interview O, 2018)

The answer to why someone would still be encouraged to enjoy the Plantation is embedded within Oak Alley’s political economy. How someone would “do it right,” however, depends of the guide’s positionality.

5.3.7 Slavery at Oak Alley Exhibit: “A Giant Game of Jenga”

To understand how Oak Alley maintains a narrative that allows visitors to both learn about the plantation’s brutal history and enjoy a mint julep under the Spanish moss, it is imperative to consider both Oak Alley’s visitors base and the positionality of the guides. As established above, the visitors and their interests are important for plantations when they construct and change their narratives (Alderman et al., 2016). Moreover, guides have great control over the presented narrative, especially when they can script it themselves (albeit with the help and/or approval of their superiors) (Potter, 2016) as is the case in the Conversation Series at the Slavery at Oak Alley Exhibit.
The task of sharing sensitive history and potentially challenging previous perceptions that guests either held dear or find traumatic is difficult and it demands creativity, empathy, thoughtfulness. Therefore, upon changing its narrative, Oak Alley sought special training for the guides. Rose, the Interpretation Coordinator, describes the preparation guides received as a “specific training for interpreting difficult history” (Interview N, 2018). Given Oak Alley’s traditional visitor base, who may still come with expectations to experience “The Grande Dame of the Great River Road” (as it is still advertised in the planation’s website, promotional videos, and pamphlets circulating in New Orleans tourism centers), addressing slavery may be surprising to guests who did not seek it out.

Both Linda and Max (pseudonym), who is the second interpreter of the Slavery at Oak Alley Exhibit, compare their task to that of a guide at the Whitney Plantation. Max notes that “guests that go to, for example, Whitney plantation know that they are going there to learn the story of slavery so that is what they expect” (Interview P, 2018). At Oak Alley, however, where the changes to the narrative are recent and rarely advertised, people come to see the trees, or hear about the white pillared past. Linda and Max must consider visitors who did not plan to hear about slavery and have to have a narrative that fits both adults and children. This visitor-base makes interpreters’ jobs at Oak Alley especially complicated, as Linda describes her work as “a really difficult game of Jenga” where:

You got a bunch of blocks that are stacked up and if you push the wrong one at the wrong time... well, if you push the right one, you get to make the tower taller, if push the wrong one, the whole thing is gonna come down and the game is over. (Interview O, 2018)

While Linda describes the ability to generate real opportunity to foster understanding, she is also alert of a situation where people refuse to take in any information and simply “shut down.” Nonetheless, this difficult setting also poses special opportunities to break the echo-chambers many of the “self-selecting” visitors of the Houmas House and the Whitney have.

The problem, however, is that many of the guides who are required to carry out this task, have themselves needed to confront the reinterpretation of their beloved Oak Alley. Rose notes that the training did not only prepare guides to cope with their new task, but also “really helped people be able to come to terms with the changes.” She describes the transition and the training:

The first thing they teach you essentially is how can you interpret difficult history if you yourself don’t know how you feel about it. And for lack of better terminology, it was basically
a counseling session, where you had to deal with you first before you can help other people deal with it. That was a very positive thing (Interview N, 2018).

As established, the process of acknowledging that a history one identifies with and cherishes is fictitious is both difficult and necessary.

The fact that Oak Alley’s guides were given the opportunity to do so themselves seems to be crucial for their ability to successfully expand their own journey to others. Nonetheless, as established above, the identity of the “memorial entrepreneur” (Bright et al., 2018, p. 1745) and guides themselves as the “narrative agents” who “literally carry the narrative” (Carter, 2016, p. 242) is important. As discussed in the Whitney Plantation chapter, the white narration of slavery can be appropriate, though it demands awareness of itself and its relation to the history narrated. In a setting that both upholds romantic imagery and insists on “both sides,” where both the guides and the visitors need to un-learn and re-learn past perspectives, the place from which guides are coming from has a tremendous impact of the narrative.

5.3.8 Guides’ History Informs Their Interpretation of History: Positionality at Oak Alley

The 20-minute on-site interpretations of slavery at Oak Alley takes place next to the outdoor exhibit in a semi-circular benched area five times a day. Linda and Max provide vastly different interpretations given their relationship with this history. Potter (2016) suggests that guide-dependent narration makes the analysis of regimes of representations or conclusive findings on plantation narrative challenging. How can researchers characterize a site when narrative changes are dependent on the guide, or even when the same guide provides multiple interpretations to different tours?

As established in the previous chapter, the Whitney Plantation, albeit unintentionally, shows that guides can maintain their individual positionality without deviating from a common, grounded understanding of a plantation’s history. In fact, that acknowledgement of individual positionality seems crucial for their ability to successfully carry the narrative. Moreover, individual narration does not absolve the plantation museum from the need to set particular guidelines, or more importantly, establish the main messages intended for the visitors. Max and Linda, for example, constructed their narrative in collaboration with the Foundation’s curator. Therefore, while recognizing that a narrative can be particular to each guide, it should still be
considered as a product of the plantation in question and understood as its official narrative.

With that in mind, Max and Linda’s relationship with the history they present, coupled with Oak Alley’s political economy and visitor-base, illuminates a range of limitations and opportunities. Linda, who is a charismatic and experienced in informal education teaching, grew up in a household with scholars of the local plantation history. She has fond childhood memories of the plantation museums and even had her wedding in one. Max, who identifies as Latino, and whose mother grew up in a former slave cabin, is a Public History graduate student and applied for the job at Oak Alley only after he became convinced that the plantation is truly working toward reforming its white-washed narrative and was eager to contribute to that effort.

According to Max, Oak Alley is a place where people can understand why Confederate monuments are being taken down, while for Linda, on the other hand, taking them down means “erasing history” (Interview O, 2018). Max cannot understand how people can get married on a plantation, where “people were enslaved, abused, separated from families, were severely beaten, people died of exhaustion from the things they had to do for those Big House and those trees to exist” (Interview P, 2018). Linda, however, got married on a plantation, and firmly believes that if one acknowledges this history and respects it, there is almost a moral need to enjoy the beautiful fruits of suffering endured to achieve it.

5.3.9 One Site, Different Interpretations - Linda

Linda’s narrative currently evolves around demystifying the popular idea that being a “house slave” was easier than being a “field slave.” She had created this interpretation after a process of trial and error. Her first interpretation concerned the enslaved family and included descriptions of how children “would be ripped apart kicking and screaming” from their parents in the middle of the night, “with no warning and no goodbyes.” She also elaborated on “childhood, and what’s it’s like for a parent to witness their child getting beat for the first time when the child is between 7 to 10 years old. How does child feel about that? [This] shifted the dynamic between not knowing who they are and knowing that they are a slave” (Interview O, 2018).

Linda found that this narrative pushed the wrong block in the delicate Jenga game. She noted that “people would often leave [and] walk off the tour. They would be upset, they would
be crying. They didn’t want to listen to it.” Once she realized that “for a lot of people that was just too much,” she changed her tour into its current version that she notes is “much more popular.” Now that she had found the formula for a successful interpretation, Linda answers one common grievance guides in Oak Alley, as well as guides of the companies bussing tourists there have with the new narrative: “sad guests don’t tip.” To that assertion Linda answers:

You are doing it wrong - the history is sad, but it doesn’t mean you just throw sad story after sad story after sad story. I start off with basic and then I talk about inspiration or happy or something that is just at least is neutral and then you hit with the hard stuff and then you bring back up and then you go with the hard stuff and you always end at a better note – to still enjoy the day just remember the history that is here and that it is okay to enjoy the day. (Interview O, 2018)

Linda’s new narrative is therefore more interactive than upsetting. This broad appeal could be seen as a strategy of dealing with the diversity of groups that visit the plantation. Though Linda largely does not meet great resistance to the narratives presented, as people who are unwilling to hear about slavery “simply [do] not go through the exhibit,” she does need to consider foreign tourists with limited information about American history as well as speaking to children as many families visit Oak Alley (Interview O, 2018). Within the framework, Linda attempts tackling a common misconception about slavery in the following way:

Have y’all ever heard that the House slave had one of the easier jobs on the plantation? It makes sense. They are not in the hot sun, they are not doing heavy lifting. The heat index today is astronomical. Amelia would be outside, Thomas would be at the craftsman station that was extremely hot. And Hyacinth, well, he is a house slave, so he would not be out in the hot sun, so it must be easier. You’re going to find out whether that is really the case though. Is Hyacinth’s job any easier? (Slavery at Oak Alley A, 2018)

Viewing the visited group, there is no doubt that the circle is engaged with Linda as she continuously relates questions back to visitors. In order to establish how difficult was Hyacinth the house slave’s job, Linda asks each visitor whether they ate breakfast that morning. After completing a circle of a now amused crowd, she quickly asks, “Lunch? Dinner? Do you snack? Do you eat on the weekends? Weekdays? Family meals? Holiday meals? Have you ever eaten before the sun was up? Do y’all eat after the sun is set?” She concludes this round of questioning by stating:

We’re people. We’re social. Jacque and Celina Roman are also social, and they also eat multiple times a day every day of the week. What then is Hyacinth’s schedule? It’s a Monday through Monday and Monday and Monday. It is sunrise to sunset. It is before the house is up and after the house has gone to bed. Because by the time the first person thinks about waking
By relating the visitors to the planters and our shared needs, the visitors get a sense of the scope of the work Hyacinth carried. Nonetheless, it also generates an unnecessary sense of empathy with the masters and their needs. She explains, “sometimes we wake up in the middle of the night and we want a glass of water. We need to go to the bathroom. We need to have something to eat” without troubling the idea that these activities and needs require the enslavement of another person.

In other parts of the interpretation, Linda applies this method of relatability towards the enslaved as she tells the group:

I don't care if you nod or shake your head or raise your hand or not, you have all messed up while cooking. You have all set up the smoke alarm at least once. Sometimes twice for the same meal and sometimes without smoke. How many of y'all have ever prepared fresh fish? How many have shredded a chicken? What do you always miss when you’re dealing with fresh fish or fresh chicken. She is going to glare at you because you tried to kill her with a fish bone. We’re people, we make mistakes. We miss seeds, stems, eggshells, bones, cartilage, it happens. (Slavery at Oak Alley A, 2018)

While visitors giggled in admission of their clumsiness and nodded at the universality of it, Linda introduces another point key to her narration, that “punishment wasn’t earned, punishment was given.” Relating oneself to these common situations and then being confronted with the price enslaved paid for such nearly inevitable occurrences, creates a much-needed sense of empathy with the enslaved. This also illustrates that Linda could keep her visitors engaged and captivated without creating the unnecessary empathy towards the masters.

In the interview, Linda explained her approach to create a common ground. Describing an incident when a parent asked her to aid in answering her daughter’s question, “why did the slaves run away?” Linda described how she explained the topic to the child by relating to her. After asking her what was her favorite food, she explained that,

Slave owners wouldn’t give them this just because they knew that they liked it and that’s way they ran away. They weren’t running a way because they were bad, they were leaving the property because they weren’t given anything. They weren’t given any choices if they wanted something for dinner they had to eat whatever was given to them and it was also always going to be the same thing every single night and it wasn’t gonna be good and they wouldn’t get dessert and they wouldn’t get nice things and they wouldn’t get toys and they wouldn’t get books. If you had the option to stay there or to take your family with you and leave, what would you do? ‘well, I’d leave!’ and it came down to meatballs. (Interview O, 2018)
There is no doubt that explaining slavery to a child demands sensitivity and creativity. Nonetheless, the equation of chattel slavery with not receiving luxuries is highly problematic. While Linda is not at fault for utilizing the best of her abilities, Oak Alley’s lack of guidance is apparent as Linda was left to her devices, improvising an answer to a question that requires professional training.

Moreover, at the Whitney Plantation, guides often reported that children are easier to guide because they come with less pre-conceived ideas. The same was mentioned by a guide who is leading the Slavery at Monticello Tours at the high-profile Thomas Jefferson plantation who receives a similar mix of visitors. While places like the Monticello plantation can also afford special training for guides, there are plenty of non-profits in New Orleans who conduct such trainings at low, or no cost.

It is hard to imagine an African American guide explaining slavery that way to a child, as it is hard to imagine an African American guide constructing a script where she encouraged people to focus on the “gifts” the enslaved brought to Oak Alley, so they can continue enjoying their day undisturbed. If an African American guide had taken that approach, however, it may have been received differently because it would not have been as entangled in unrecognized white privilege. This lack of awareness also came across when Linda, in the interview, describes Antoine, an enslaved gardener. It is evident that Linda deeply admires Antoine’s skill and perseverance as Antoine first grafted paper-shell variety of pecan trees, noting as,

An enslaved gardener who has never given any recognition for his skill that we know almost nothing about. I don’t even know what happened to him after the Civil War. I don’t know if his descendants are still alive today. I know almost nothing about it except that he gave me something that I enjoy every fall I make pralines. It’s just sugar and pecans and it’s delicious and I get to share that with family with friends with coworkers and neighbors and that probably wouldn’t have been possible without his contribution. (Interview O, 2018)

It is evident that Linda is truly appreciative of what she perceives as “contributions” of the enslaved, may it be when she prepares pralines or visiting beautiful plantations. What she seems not to perceive, is how her privileged position allows her to enjoy these various “contributions.” Will descendants of people like Antoine, who received no recognition nor compensation, feel the same urge to celebrate the beauty of their ancestor’s exploitation and pain gained for Oak Alley?

Having a nuanced approach toward appreciating different legacies of slavery or
incorporating them into one’s personal narrative is not impossible. This was demonstrated by the Whitney’s Director of Operations when I inquired whether the Whitney is planning to host weddings as a management member at another plantation suggested. Her response was short: “The answer is going to be no. Because you don’t get married at Auschwitz.” She immediately elaborated and noted an exception:

There are people who are descendants of enslaved people who are interested in having the story of enslaved people [as a part of their wedding]. Enslaved people couldn’t marry legally. Black people couldn’t marry white people. There is a lot of stories about lack of access to right of marriage that originates from plantation. And there are some people [for whom] that is a powerful narrative in their life. If somebody wants to do it for that reason and they want to incorporate a tour to have their guests learn about it, that would be a different conversation that I would have with someone specifically about that. (Interview J, September 2018)

As Cornel West (2017) noted in the American historical and contemporary context, for better or worse, race matters. At Oak Alley however, this important contextualization and attention to the ways racial identities relate to space is missing. Linda’s lack of awareness of her whiteness (which also represents an indication to Oak Alley’s lack of awareness to its whiteness), appears to be full of good intentions, passion and charisma. Nonetheless, without the crucial recognition of her own positionality and how it relates to this space and this history, her final messaging at times results in more space-taking than space-making.

This is reflected in a story Linda shares in the interview, when she gives an example of a guest “shutting down,” when the Jenga tower had fallen (Interview O, 2018). The incident began when two African American women left the Big House tour mid-way, one of them visibly upset. She describes approaching them as she hoped to “jolt her back into going or at least learning, or at least looking at the cabins or something.” She therefore told them about the shackle that was found in archaeological excavation that is the centerpiece of the second floor. She described that move as “Strike One.” As the visitor became more upset, Linda asked whether they would like to see the reconstructed cabins and learn about the people who lived there. She describes that move as “Strike Two,” adding that the visitor “already knew about the people who lived here. They were slaves, and that history was bad.” Linda then asked them whether they will be willing to hear about just one more person and they seemed to agree. After she told them about Antoine, the remarkable enslaved gardener who grafted the paper-shell pecan in spite of his status: “Strike Three.” The women stood up and left (Interview O, 2018).
It is hard to know what happened that day and why exactly were the visitors upset. Nonetheless, it appears that Linda is unaware of the possibility that her very presence, as a white carrier of these messages was in itself discomforting. She explains the incident by noting that “it was too difficult. Because she wasn’t from here, but this is where her ancestors were. This is her history” (Interview O, 2018). At Whitney, white guides seem to rely on the understanding that it is their history as white Americans, alongside the understanding that it is theirs in profoundly different ways than it is of African Americans. That understanding leads them to carefully consider how their bodies function in the plantation space, how they must relate to it appropriately when they tell its history. While aware of the identity of their visitors, black and white guides at Whitney adjust their narration. Linda, on the other hand, states that she does not factor the racial identity of her visitors into her calculation. It also appears that she does not factor her own identity either.

5.3.10 “Make a Way Out of No Wax” - Max’s Interpretation

Max, unlike Linda, applied to work at Oak Alley only after he was convinced by one of his Public History professors that Oak Alley is moving away from its valorizing narrative. While his interpretation is not as interactive as Linda’s, he similarly captivates the visitors and addresses common misconceptions. Moreover, Max is also able to humanize the enslaved and illuminate their agency without undermining their endurance and the pain inflicted upon them by their enslavers. In contrast to Linda, he is able to do so in a way that is less concerned with pushing the wrong Jenga brick, and without a desire to dismantle the old tower as much as he is laying down a new, common foundation.

When telling the story of Detterville, Max ensures that visitors understand exactly how stressful his job was in spite of being enslaved as a personal driver and a domestic servant. He takes detail at describing the feeling of being constantly observed when among whites: in the Big House, and in the city when he drives the Romans for their errands. Nonetheless, Max notes that when Detterville arrives to the city alone, for the first time in a long time, he can decide to take a certain route and not another. The long way instead of the short, one street instead of another. Max notes that for us today, that decision may seem insignificant, however,
To Detterville, a man that was held in bondage, each decision that he made on his own was a moment of freedom that he created for himself. Because he now wasn’t doing exactly what the Romans told him to do. And when to do it and how to do it. He was doing what he wanted to do. And for these small moments, he had some agency and control of his own life. Something that he didn’t have when he was around the Roman family. (Slavery at Oak Alley B, 2018)

He then adds that in “each moment of freedom that he created and took for himself was a rejection of his bonds of slavery. And in essence, an act of defiance against the Roman family who held him in those bonds” (Slavery at Oak Alley B, 2018).

In the interview, Max explains that he decided to center his interpretation in “acts of resistance and the creation of freedoms” (Interview P, 2018). This allows him to both position the Romans as enslavers, while also bracketing them to make space for the enslaved persons’ humanity and agency at the center of the narrative. A key feature in Max’s interpretation, is his use of active language. The enslaved do not carry out certain tasks, but are “made to” by the Romans who profit from their enslavement. Within these circumstances, the enslaved still find ways to create small, but meaningful moments of freedom.

In his second story, centering Rosalie who was an enslaved seamstress and domestic, Max first ensures the visitors understand the nature of her relationship with Celina. Celina is her enslaver, and thus he uses active language to describe how Rosalie “was often times forced to travel with her” (Slavery at Oak Alley B, 2018). Nonetheless, after establishing this context, he also positions them as equals when he notes that they learned through a letter “that those two ladies got into a disagreement” (Slavery at Oak Alley B, 2018). In many ways, Max is able to generate a sense of endurance, humanity, and agency that even Whitney, who brings the enslaved to the center of their narrative, struggles to communicate. He explains his reasoning in the interview:

Just because we know so little about them, just because they were trapped in the system of slavery. Just because the Romans saw them as property and probably no different than from a cow that they had, they were still people, and you have to keep that in mind to fully get their story. (Interview P, 2018)

Max goes on to explain how sometimes he feels he has “to emphasize the humanity of them” and that he tends to feel this way more so when his audience is white (Interview P, 2018). He also hopes, through his interpretation, to make the link between the past and the present clearer to people, how the legacies of slavery still operate in the contemporary US. He recognizes,
however, that this connection is more evident to African Americans. He mentioned an African American woman who approached him at the end of the tour told him that his description of Detterville, and how his movement was policed in “white spaces,” resonated with her and the way she constantly feels watched – in the shop, the café, the bank (Interview P, 2018).

At the end of his talk, Max’s prefaces the Slavery at Oak Alley Exhibit with the request to keep in mind the forms of slavery that they will not see there: the stress, the separation from a family, the prevention of telling your own story to future generations. Like Linda, he makes sure the visitors know that it is thanks to the work and skill of the enslaved that Oak Alley stands today. Nonetheless, instead of encouraging them to appreciate these contributions and enjoy the day, he encourages them to look at the exhibit and remember “that Detterville and Rosalie are just 2 of nearly 220 individuals that were once enslaved here” (Slavery at Oak Alley B, 2018). While he does not know their stories, he asks the visitors to “keep in mind they were each individual people. And through their everyday actions they were able to defy their bonds of slavery, create their own freedoms, and make a way out of no way” (Slavery at Oak Alley B, 2018).

5.3.11 “We Will Never Stop Learning”

Sheila, Oak Alley’s Curator, notes that they are still in an ongoing process of “learning” and “uncovering” (Interview M, 2018). The transitions Oak Alley made are dramatic due to both its established position with a loyal visitor-base and highly influential nature given the sheer number of visitors who walk through its gates. While there were some concerns at the beginning, the staff reports that overall, the changes are received well by visitors. Lisa, the Day Manager, believes that unlike other plantation museums around that either “try to white-wash the slavery aspect or they try to go overboard with it,” Oak Alley has “a nice balance. It is not one way or the other” (Interview L, 2018). For some, this “balance” can also be too much, as Sheila explains:

> Sometimes it is simply a matter of somebody who has looked forward to see this place – you know sometimes for years – and oh my gosh, we are going to talk about slavery. “But it is so beautiful, I wanted to come because it is beautiful. Why are you telling me about slavery?” (Interview M, 2018)

It is therefore interesting to consider whether these visitors, those who Linda refers to as “the ones that are upset that there are no dresses,” (Interview O, 2018) can look for that experience elsewhere. Perhaps they will find the Houmas House a comforting fortress where no one will
speak to them about slavery. For others, who are upset with the continuous celebration of wealth and romanticism, Whitney may seem more appealing.

In a way, Oak Alley tries to situate itself between the two narratives through incorporating the enslaved yet maintaining commodified version of the Old South romanticism. Against this backdrop it is fair to ask: why not have both and? Perhaps Oak Alley offers a compromise that rejects the polarizing either or framework in a way that allows everyone to have a more rounded view of the antebellum plantation. For some visitors, this rounded, balanced interpretation may provide a sense of fairness that does not require their discomfort The problem, however, is well-articulated out by Ana Lucia Araujo (2012) who writes that “because the memory of the victims and the memory of perpetrators are in competition, it is impossible to harmoniously reconcile them.” (p. 31).

For those who wish to maintain a Jenga tower, balance is necessary as it is the only thing keeping the fragile structure from crumbling. The desire to make it higher may overshadow the fact that its foundations are unstable. Sometimes, deconstructing old and rebuilding new foundations is necessary, otherwise we can only anticipate an inevitable collapse.

Whether Oak Alley is able to maintain itself as a non-profit without the allure of southern romanticism, depends on the Foundation’s willingness to both make structural changes to its funding streams and to reevaluate the relationship with the enterprises bearing its name. The potential departure from Oak Alley’s “balancing act” does not necessarily demand a whole sale vilification of the plantation, but rather a re-articulation of it. While Max proves that this re-articulation is possible, the Big House’s and Linda’s interpretations, however, demonstrate that Oak Alley has yet to reform its core understanding of itself. Moreover, the contemporary interpretations and strategies in addressing the Property’s difficult history reflect that critical voices that are crucial for a successful re-articulation are not included.

The fact that Oak Alley caters to a large, diverse group of visitors poses real challenges, but also real opportunities to break through increasingly fortified echo chambers of American discourses. Here again, Monticello, Thomas Jefferson’s grand estate comes to mind. As many visitors come to the Plantation to hear about the Founding Father’s enlightened notions of freedom, learning about his position as enslaver can be extremely difficult for some who revere
his memory. While speaking to a group that joined the *Slavery at Monticello Tour*, a senior white male guide stopped himself in the middle of the introduction and looked at the visitors. He noted that the stories we will hear today are “uncomfortable” and that it will make some of us feel uncomfortable too. In fact, he remarked that he himself feels uncomfortable telling it. Nonetheless, unlike the Whitney that at the sight of discomfort reminds its visitors that “none of us was there,” or Oak Alley that tries to avoid discomfort altogether, the guide reassured the group that it’s, “okay to be uncomfortable” and added “in fact, it is important.”

**6. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

“*Journey beyond the city limits, and explore a place where time stands still. Beautiful, historic plantations await your visit, each with their own unique stories and mystique*”

(Experience New Orleans!, 2019, para. 1).

The Houmas House, the Whitney, and the Oak Alley plantations certainly provide visitors with their own unique stories and experiences. They also represent different approaches to the very conceptualizations of what *place*, *time*, *beauty*, and *history* mean. In the next chapter, I will analyze the differences in the plantations’ approaches to three particular themes: *place*, *time* and *politics*.

**6.1 Spatial Articulations - Half of the Plantation, the Plantation, and the World**

One key difference between the three sites, is the way they each articulate the idea of what is a plantation. Thinking through the Houmas’ conceptualization of plantation, it is useful to consider how Benjamin Cole, the Houmas House owner, defines the spatial scope of his estate:

> If you look it up and see what the word is, it is the land that was farmed by a family [that] lived on the property, primarily in a large house. The word plantation and slavery are not mixed. So, I don’t feel a burden to tell the story of slavery. (Interview A, 2018)

Cole’s emphasis on the Big House and the planter family underlines well the traditional expectation of what a plantation museum is about. Nonetheless, this expectation in itself is constructed around popular conceptualizations of the plantation, very much like the one the Houmas House offers. Counter to this notion, however, are Moneyhon’s (1992) and Campbell’s (1982) often cited definitions where the words *plantation* and *slavery* do not only mix, but depend on one another. Under their rubrics, one qualifies as a large planter if he owned more
than twenty slaves. A large plantation, therefore, is one with a minimum of twenty slaves laboring it. There are however, other scholars that use the general term of property to measure whether one qualified as a planter and his estate as a plantation. Nonetheless, in this historical context, these terms (slaves and property) are largely synonymous. Regardless, the existence of a Big House that served as the white family’s residence is not mentioned as a prerequisite in any definition.

Without the slaves in other words, there would be no antebellum plantation, nor a planter. Cole’s persistent erasure of this relationality, however, still does not explain his museum’s focus on the house rather than the land the white family allegedly farmed. His tour focuses exclusively on the house, and more specifically, on the whitewashed part of the white part of it. Without addressing the black part that was cleaning, dusting, cooking, washing, and serving, there is no need to address the white part that was enslaving, terrorizing, separating, and abusing.

Using this narrow definition of a plantation allows Cole to assert that the Whitney Plantation does not qualify as a plantation. He sees their utilization of the word misleading as he contends the Whitney should be understood as a “slave museum” (Interview A, 2018). Moreover, given Cole’s skepticism regarding the existence of factual information about slavery and his assertion that plantation museums must adhere to a high factual standard, he characterized the changes Oak Alley made in terms of “the slavery part they are showing” as “deviations” because he is “not so sure they are based on facts” (Interview A, 2018). Therefore, Oak Alley might also be on its way to lose its “plantation” status following Cole’s definition.

In terms its spatial focus, the deviations Oak Alley is making are well-known to its staff that actively works to undermine the narrow understanding of what was a “plantation.” As Sheila, the curator explains:

Especially with tourism in Louisiana – even across the South, there is a huge fetishization of the mansion, the Big House. People really come thinking that the plantation really is the mansion and that’s not true. It also poses the most constraints and challenges in terms of visitor capacity, in terms of quality of experience. Those rooms are not huge. So by de-emphasizing and destressing the house and putting out interpreters underneath the oaks and in the slavery exhibit. One day in the garden area. We are quite literally showing that you can have the history of Oak Alley plantation without ever entering the house. That [the house] was just one part [of the plantation]. (Interview M, 2018)
This spatial re-articulation conducted at Oak Alley automatically translates into a new historical interpretation. As Linda explains to her tour group: “for every front of the big house there is a back of the Big House. Without back here, none of the property is possible” (Slavery at Oak Alley A, 2018). Due to their different definitions of the plantation, the Houmas House can focus on a decontextualized half of the Big House while Oak Alley had to add more structures and exhibitions outside of it. Sheila explains that “goal is to demonstrate through a very human lens every aspect of plantation life” (Interview M, 2018). This mission is understood as impossible to meet using the Big House alone.

As discussed, however, Oak Alley continues to struggle in presenting the relational nature of these various aspects of plantation life. This is especially the case within the Big House tour which still constitutes the bulk of the Oak Alley visitation. Moreover, it is apparent that Oak Alley’s spatial definition of the plantation, is that of the Oak Alley Plantation. Expanding the site’s interpretation from the white Big House to its current inclusion of the enslaved within both the Big House and the fields allows Oak Alley’s visitors to “better understand the people of one specific sugar plantation” (Oak Alley Foundation, 2019, para. 4). It also allows the Oak Alley Foundation to confine its own definition of the duty it has towards its visitors. As Sheila explains, Oak Alley’s duty to “tell the truth” means that the foundation is done obscuring or hiding what happened on the Planation’s premise (Interview M, 2018). Nonetheless, this duty does not seem to carry an expectation to contextualize Oak Alley itself within the broad and entangled scope of the plantation economy and the way that connected the different geographies and demographic that comprised it.

At the Whitney Plantation, monuments stand to honor those enslaved on the plantation as well as in Louisiana as a whole. The Antioch Church provide avenues to inform people of the role of the Catholic Church in facilitating slavery, and a banana tree provides guides with the opportunity to explain how following the successful slave revolt in Haiti, some white planters fled to Louisiana and brought the plant with them. Others remark how some planters also brought those they enslaved who themselves carried the seed of the 1811 German Coast Uprising. The large iron bells that were used to commend the enslaved represent a link to the North’s
entanglement in slavery as visitors learn that they were manufactured in New England, as were many of the insurance policies planters used to insure their human property.

Whitney spatial expansion is crucial to contextualize the plantation. If Oak Alley shows that one cannot understand the wealth of the Big House without understanding the labor that facilitated it, Whitney notes that one cannot understand the plantation itself without understanding the political economy that drove it. Whitney also draws temporal connections to its spatial articulation; the Field of Angels serves as a location to connect present rates of African American maternal and child mortality to the molecular legacy of slavery. The holding cells facilitate the link to the contemporary state of mass incarceration. As each plantation defines its temporal limits, they also define their idea of time.

6.2 The Times They are a-Changin’ - From Jefferson Davis to Barack Obama

One of Cole’s sticking points when it comes to the Houmas House’s history and slavery, is that John Burnside, the last planter that lived in the estate before the Civil War, had freed his slaves in 1858 (Interview A, 2018). Aside from the questionable foundation of that assertion (the literature presents Burnside as one of the largest enslavers in US history (Scarborough, 2003)) and the fact that all the other planters who lived in the Houmas House owned people too, Cole’s reasoning showcases a disparity in the way the timeline of emancipation is understood between the three plantations.

Explaining how Burnside freed his slaves, Cole essentially describes the sharecropping system that many planters adopted following emancipation (Interview A, 2018). This adherence to the de-jure date of emancipation absolves Cole from troubling slavery and his estate further. Under the sharecropping form of ‘employment,’ planters did not pay those they enslaved retroactively for their work, nor did they compensate them for their suffering, nor paid a share of the profit they made on their expense. At the Slavery at Oak Alley exhibit, a sign explains that after emancipation planters began charging the freed for the poor housing and food provision they received on the plantation and paid them in tokens they can use only in the plantation’s company store. Therefore, they could not leave as their earnings could not be used elsewhere. This system, compounded with racial terror, confined many African Americans to the plantation
even after emancipation. At the Whitney, the sharecropping system was referred to by some guides as “slavery by another name.”

The different interpretation of when, how and indeed whether emancipation took place translates to how each plantation links its historical narrative to the present. Historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2015) suggests slavery itself should not be seen as the source of the US’ contemporary racial relations and inequalities as slavery was no less significant in Brazil and the Caribbean. The fact that slavery continues to be so relevant to understanding the modern US, has more to do with how it is remembered in the US and its ongoing legacies in contemporary institutions rather than the history of slavery itself. While Whitney takes visitors by the hand and spells out these legacies, Oak Alley merely troubles the initial prospects of emancipation and stays away from suggesting any long-term implications that are experienced today.

At the Houmas House, where slavery is understood as benign, the past is not functioning as an instrument to understand the present, but rather a period to reminisce and become nostalgic about. Conceptualizing the Houmas House as a place absolved of historical wrongs allows it to clear itself from contemporary wrongs too because offenses lose their contextual foundations. As offenses are legitimized due to the abstraction of their historical circumstances, so are contemporary racial and class inequalities. The conditions of being offended, being poor or being both, can therefore only be understood as self-imposed. No historical or structural reason are present to explain them.

Social Dominance Theory suggests that people who stand to benefit from the existing structures and institutions, tend to be more conservative and opposed to progressive changes (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Nonetheless, advocating for the preservation systems and structures that are unjust can conflate with maintaining a positive self-perception that is associated with values of justice and equality. Therefore, conservatives need to find alternative explanations to the persistence of inequality, one that allows for the continuous justification of the systems that privilege them – or in other words, why is it necessary to keep things the way they are (Pratto et al., 1994).

Against this backdrop, the Whitney Plantation represent a progressive perception of time, one that works to uncover the unjust nature of the systems in place in order to justify changes to
the way things are. Oak Alley, on the other hand, recognizes that the times are changing and that it can no longer maintain its reputation with the progressive standards of our time. Nonetheless, is appears to adhere to these new standards’ minimal requirements: staying relevant without rocking the conservative boat. The Houmas House altogether refuses to recognize that the times are changing as it holds on not only to the way things are, but to the way things were. In that sense, the Houmas House does necessarily express nostalgia towards the imaginary bygone era of the pre-1860s and the Civil-War. Instead, it holds on an imaginary time before the 1960s and the Civil Rights, a time Cole remembers as harmonious, before any marginalized groups had enough power to question the hegemon’s memory and challenge his justifications to keep things static.

6.3 The Pendulum of Politics

Interpretations of the plantation’s place in our current time translates into politics. At the Houmas House, historical erasure serves to fuel conservative politics because it suggests that the current state of racial inequality is due to individual responsibility. At the Whitney, it is evident that guides wish for visitors to both leave with a greater understanding of the historical source of racial injustices and to care to amend them. During his interview Cole suggested a clear partisan line among plantation visitors: liberals like the Whitney and conservatives like the Houmas House (Interview A, July 2918). Moreover, he framed the current efforts to revisit the antebellum period and the Civil War history (reflected in both the Whitey Plantation and Confederate monuments’ removals) as a (liberal) weaponization of history for political ends while remaining seemingly oblivious to his own adherence and facilitation of a conservative, politics of denial.

Understanding various efforts to revisit the US racial history as a way to mainstream white blame leads Cole to see these projects like the Whitney as a manifestation of identity politics. Therefore, he is concerned that turning to the past to explain contemporary inequalities helps facilitate redistributive policies such as affirmative action in higher education, racial representation quotas in companies, social welfare programs, and reparations. Using Hochschild’s (2016) terms, policies and programs that facilitate “cutting in line.” He succinctly summarizes his case against reparations by stating: “none of my ancestors were in the Civil War.
On either side. Why should I have to give something to someone else for something that happened 150 years ago?” (Interview A, 2018).

At the Whitney, staff seem to have been waiting for someone to ask this question. Not because they necessarily want to see monetary reparations, as much as they desire to have a conversation over the harms and injustices of the past, their contemporary repercussions, and ways to make the future better. Naomi, an African American senior staff at Whitney remarks:

I think if we were to address this subject more, I think us today, living in the results of it, could move a lot better. I think about [what if a] government entity would just acknowledge, ‘Hey, this happened, we are going to give a formal apology. How do we move forward now?’ And I think if the powers that be would address it in an open unbiased manner, that every day people could move better on race issues. I think talking about this and revisiting this history could definitely do that. Especially for people in the States (Interview D, 2018).

Every year since 1989 and until his retirement in 2017, Congressman John Conyers Jr. introduced the HR-40 bill which aimed to fulfil the desires Naomi expresses. As Congressman Conyers Jr. explains, the bill “does four things”:

1) It acknowledges the fundamental injustice and inhumanity of slavery;
2) It establishes a commission to study slavery, its subsequent racial and economic discrimination against freed slaves;
3) It studies the impact of those forces on today’s living African Americans; and
4) The commission would then make recommendations to Congress on appropriate remedies to redress the harm inflicted on living African Americans. (Conyers Jr., n.d., para. 6).

Not once in these 28 years did Congress support the bill to bring it to a vote, in spite of the fact that it merely asks for a theoretical study with no stated goals of producing a policy of reparations. Taunya Lovell Banks (2002) examined the different attempts made at racial reconciliation in the US, concluding that white resistance to reconciliation is so strong that black Americans are better off exercising strategies of self-healing rather than wait for whites to get on board.

In light of the resistance to approach the topic of slavery and reconciliation, it is not surprising that Naomi does not feel optimistic regarding a hope for a national reckoning. She notes,

Unfortunately, I don’t foresee that happening in my lifetime. It would be wonderful if it did. I think visiting this information really puts things in perspective about the history of the United States. The state that our government is in at this point is all a progression from all of this. We never - and I don’t think we ever really took the time to revisit or try to correct something and that spot has grown into the space that we are in today with the administration that we can see in society today. (Interview D, 2018).
Indeed, over the course of the Obama administration places like the Whitney Plantation, the *National Memorial for Peace and Justice* and the *National Museum of African American History and Culture* were built. Conversely, under the Trump administration, white nationalists are characterized as “very fine people” and white-nationalist violence is soaring (Sonmez & Parker, 2019). Nonetheless, it is also under Trump that reparations, the topic Naomi hypothesized she will not see addressed in her lifetime, and the topic Cole worries the democrats are striding for, is receiving more attention and legitimacy than ever.

In 2019, as the US prepares to determine whether to re-elect Trump or not, reparations, to many people’s surprise, became a “litmus test” for democratic candidates (Lockhart, 2019, para, 1). From being largely considered a political land mine that both black and white politicians preferred to avoid, reparations are now understood as something candidates who wish to take the seat of the incumbent president must address in mainstream platforms (Kurtzleben, 2019; Lockhart, 2019; Segers, 2019). Was it sites like the Whitney that made this topic mainstream? Or was it Trump, the white nationalists who protested Confederate monuments’ removal, and places like the Houmas House that reflected to many Americans that despite Obama’s two-term presidency, the US is still far from being post-racial?

In either case, both Obama and Trump seem to represent parts of an ongoing pendulum in America’s relation to its past. After all, it was already in 2004, when Barack Obama was still a young senator making his first national steps at Democratic National Convention as the Key Note speaker, and Donald J. Trump just aired his reality television show, the *Apprentice* for the first time, that historian Ira Berlin wrote:

> Slavery has a greater presence in American life now than at any time since the Civil War ended. The intense engagement over the issue of slavery signals—as it did in the 1830s and the 1960s—a crisis in American race relations that necessarily elevates the significance of the study of the past in the search for social justice. (p. 1251)

As issues of race continue to be central to the US politics and understanding of itself, the nation’s demographic makeup increasingly changes. Sheila, the Oak Alley curator notes the “biggest change” in their visitor base has been a spike in the millennial visitation which she characterizes as having:
A wider make-up in terms of racial and financial stability as opposed to your older group, who pretty much looks the same, acts the same, is the same. It is interesting that millennial visitor group not only become more significant but also more diverse. (Interview M, 2018)

Tom, the white guide at Whitney who grew up in conservative, rural Mississippi believes that younger generations also “are more willing to talk honestly about politics and culture even if they don’t agree with the kind of work we are doing here. They are more open to having a discussion about it” (Interview D, 2018). Max, the Slavery at Oak Alley guide, provided a similar take noting that “for so long people came to plantation homes to see pretty dresses, to see the pretty homes. People are tired of that now. Newer generations are wanting to learn more” (Interview P, 2018).

Census data shows that by 2045, the US is expected to become a white minority nation (Frey, 2018). Against the backdrop of becoming strangers in their own land, some white Americans may find places like the Houmas House increasingly appealing as a fortress where things are great again. Yet under this demographic trajectory, it is hard to imagine places like the Houmas House surviving without building walls around them. Moreover, it is crucial to consider whether efforts to mainstream counter-narratives do not feed into furthering discourses of internal Orientalism.

Without addressing the continuous burdening of the white Southerners in accounting for the US history of racial oppression, “new” narratives risk fueling counter-protective defensiveness and its rising walls. Moreover, they may risk not recognizing how this increasing defensiveness furthers hegemonic America’s absolution of itself; places like the Houmas House are an “easy target” for disavowal and displacement, an internal other against which America can continue claiming its innocent, virtuous statues and leave its wounds unattended.

Reflecting on his personal transformation from idealizing the Confederacy to working as a guide at the Whitney, Tom notes: “I’m really hopeful that my generation and the generation behind us can really Make America Great Again in a really completely different way than when Trump means it” (Interview B, 2018). Debates about the US racial past have never been as entangled in the US racial future.
7. CONCLUSION

As the US continues to struggle with racial inequality and marginalization, debates over the way slavery is remembered have increasingly taken center stage in American discourse. Due to collective memory’s connection to collective identity, these debates are emotionally charged and may indicate a significant shift to the construction of the US identity as a whole. While the nation’s identity is rooted in ideas of justice, liberty, and equal opportunity, minorities’ recollections of the past (and present) suggest a vastly different construction of *America*. These debates are clearly reflected in the US contemporary political climate where an overwhelmingly white sect of the population (Coates, 2017a) wishes to make America great *again* while for other social groups, the past, generally speaking, represents a time that was considerably worse for any American demographic except white, heterosexual, cis-gendered, middle to upper class, and able-bodied men.

This manifestation of *white ignorance* stems from the orchestrated omission of facts that do not align with the white narrative in hegemonic knowledge production. In addition, white ignorance results from individuals’ epistemological positionings which prevents certain subjectivities from either accessing knowledge or cognizing it. As mentioned above, what makes challenging white ignorance so difficult is that the racial polity who holds the power has little incentive to overcome their own ignorance. Nonetheless, Hochschild’s (2016) account demonstrates that white ignorance can also be detrimental to white people, who at the end of the day are not all cis-gendered, heterosexual, middle to upper class, and able-bodied men.

Erasure of the historical root causes of inequality may foster nostalgia to an imaginary white past and provide a false sense of superiority for whites who continue to struggle today. This elevating feeling, however, does not aid marginalized whites in addressing the sources of their hardships. The White, anti-racist organization Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) argues that white people must align with people of color and combat white supremacy for *mutual interest*, maintaining that “white supremacy is integral to economic injustice, to maintaining patriarchy and other forms of oppression. Racism and white supremacy keep the many divided for the benefit of the few” (n.d., para. 3). As Hochschild’s (2016) ethnographic work suggests, some marginalized whites find it easier to conceptualize people of color fighting for equality as
“cutting in line” rather than acknowledging that the “planters” they admire and identify with (in their ante-bellum and modern incarnations) are responsible for the marginalization of both of them.

Given the contemporary political climate, where white ignorance is pervasive and hard to deny, efforts to combat it are recognized as increasingly legitimate and desired. Compounded with the ongoing battle for social justice and racial equality, places like the Whitney Plantation provide a relevant avenue for Americans who wish to understand their contemporary reality better. This trend also emphasizes the complicity of places like the Oak Alley Plantation. The Foundation’s recently-changed whitewashed narration could not have been understood any longer as a mere failure to provide factual information for entertainment purposes. Instead, it had increasingly been perceived as an active contribution to racial inequality and white domination that needed to be addressed. Nonetheless, it is hard to imagine places like Oak Alley successfully reversing these racializing processes without acknowledging their own role in contributing to them (e.g., by presenting the narrative change as rooted in new adherence to facts rather than acknowledging the deeply problematic nature of the previous regime). In other words, they must attend questions of accountability.

With movements to counter white ignorance and supremacy strengthening, sites which continue to adhere to and produce whitewashed narratives may feel under attack. Joined by the growing legitimacy anti-politically correct culture receives from the current presidential administration, places like the Houmas House can harness these signals to justify and maintain their unapologetic interpretive footing. The fact that places like the Houmas House are still economically viable in spite of their widely recognized problematic regime of representation stand to show that resistance to amend the white America’s collective memory is still strong.

It is important to understand, however, where resistance for adaptation is coming from. Counter-narratives that aim to challenge false interpretations of the ante-bellum US by placing the entire burden of racial oppression on the US South are bound to feed into the harmful discourse of internal orientalism that can potentially enhance resistance to change. Other than the historically inaccurate relegation of slavery and racial oppression to the South, these “counter-narratives” risk pushing white southerners further into defensive postures while
othering them. By doing so, they allow hegemonic America to symbolically separate itself from the South and absolve itself from any burdens. Therefore, these efforts result in emboldening the white ignorance of both the white South and hegemonic America. Against this backdrop, for America to be able to come to terms with its past, an honest reflection that recontextualizes the plantation within the entire economic structure of the US (both North and South) is necessary.

For an honest reflection on the collective memory of the US to take place, institutions such as the Oak Alley Foundation must find a way to forsake the notion that two historical interpretations can coincide in harmony and cease commodifying white nostalgia. In order to so, Oak Alley must pay close attention to its white positionality and political economy out of recognition that adhering to pressure to change does not resolve the question of how.

The Whitney Plantation stands out as an institution that has considered these complex questions. It demonstrates that white narration is important and possible when it recognizes its responsibilities and limitation. It also illustrates that when it does, the narrative(s) presented can apply to all demographics. Nonetheless, the Whitney appears to struggle in not relegating itself to a narrative of trauma and reinforcing a one-dimensional conceptualization of African American history. In addition, the Whitney illustrate that sites that wish to carry out the important task of challenging master-narratives must also account for the guides on the ground who carry out the physical and emotional labor associated with the sensitive terrain of collective memory and identity. Moreover, close attention should be given to the specific support needs different guides may have as their intersecting identities and circumstances bring about different challenges.

In order to better understand the political trends that shape the narratives offered in these plantation museums, further research is necessary. Research aimed at understanding visitor’s political affiliations to various plantation museums can shed light on the relationship between a person’s conceptualization of history and political views. This can also reflect whether the growing trend of slavery incorporation into plantation museums generates a political echo chamber. In addition, more case studies are needed to examine whether a counter-narrative site’s proximity to a traditional plantation museum influences their narrative. If there is an influence, does it lead to the incorporation of slavery into a traditional narrative, or does it reinforce a white-washed interpretation? Lastly, given the way in which collective memory is
ingrained within social groups’ understanding of themselves and the world, a study of plantation museums’ narrative changes can greatly benefit from the methodological and theoretical frameworks of Social Psychology.

8. REFERENCES


### 9. APPENDIX

**Interview Guide**

**Gray Line:**
Interview I, July 5, 2018. Personal, semi-structured interview with New Orleans’ Gray Line Director of Operations

**The Houmas House:**
Interview A, July 26, 2018. Personal, semi-structured interview with Benjamin Cole (pseudonym), owner of Houmas House.

**The Whitney Plantation:**


Interview E, July 24, 2018. Personal, semi-structured interview with Beth (pseudonym), guide at the Whitney Plantation.
Interview J, September 18, 2018. Personal, semi-structured interview with the Whitney Plantation Director of Operations

Oak Alley Plantation – Interviews:
Interview M. July 25, 2018. Personal, semi-structured interview with Sheila, (pseudonym), Curator at the Oak Alley Plantation.
Interview N. July 25, 2018. Personal, semi-structured interview with Rose, (pseudonym), Interpretation Coordinator at the Oak Alley Plantation.
Interview P. July 25, 2018. Personal, semi-structured interview with Max, (pseudonym), Slavery at Oak Alley interpreter.

Oak Alley Plantations Tours:
Slavery at Oak Alley A. July 20, 2018. Interpretation by Linda (pseudonym).
Slavery at Oak Alley B. July 22, 2018. Interpretation by Max (pseudonym).

Amistad Interviews
Interview R. July 2028, 2018. Personal, semi-structured interview with Dr. Anastacia Scott, Researcher and Program Director at the Amistad Research Center.

Le Musée de F.P.C. | Free People of Color Museum Interviews
Interview S. July 18, 2018. Personal, semi-structured interview with Kim Coleman, Curator at Le Musée de F.P.C.