



Moody, J., & Small, S. (2019). Slavery and Public History at the Big House: Remembering and Forgetting at American Plantation Museums and British Country Houses. *Journal of Global Slavery*, 4(1), 34-68. <https://doi.org/10.1163/2405836X-00401003>

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Link to published version (if available):  
[10.1163/2405836X-00401003](https://doi.org/10.1163/2405836X-00401003)

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# Slavery and Public History at the Big House: remembering and forgetting at American plantation museums and British country houses

Jessica Moody and Stephen Small

## Abstract

*This article considers the public history of slavery at plantation museums in the US South and at country houses in Britain. Drawing on original research, the authors critique recent and current efforts to bring connections between these ‘Big Houses’ and the history of slavery to the fore through different methods of interpretation. These elite residences are argued to have largely obscured such connections historically through distancing, distortion, and denial. However, some notable efforts have been made in recent years to diversify public history narratives and more fully represent histories of enslavement. Comparing these American and British house museums, this article contextualizes public history work at these sites and proposes possible lessons from this research, presenting some points to be taken forward which emerge from this transatlantic comparison.*

## Keywords

Slavery

Country Houses

Plantation Museums

Slave Cabins

Public History

Memory

Heritage

Tourism

National Trust

## **Introduction**

In Britain and the United States, the public presentation and consumption of the houses of elites have long been used within the construction of certain regional and national identities. Plantation houses in the American South, and rural country houses in Britain, have been used to signify the 'success' of the elite dominant class; and present largely romanticized, sanitized historical narratives. In both countries, much of this elite culture was founded on, and sustained by, systems of enslavement, either directly in the case of American plantation houses, or indirectly in the case of many British country houses. In both instances, the public history of slavery at these big houses is severely under-developed. Interpretation at such sites, which form a key component to heritage tourism in both countries, has been slow to make explicit connections between enslaved labor and these houses, lands, and residents. However, in recent years, some public history interventions have started to break this pattern and efforts have been made to try to bring such connections to the fore. Drawing on original research by the authors; including archival records, site visitation, interviews and close analysis of interpretative strategies and materials, this article is the first to consider the

comparative public histories of slavery at these 'Big Houses', in transatlantic perspective.

The more recent, albeit patchy, interest in more open acknowledgements about big houses and slavery, comes at a time of increasing tensions around race, racism, nationalism and identity. In the US, public debates around confederate monuments, museums and the Civil War, have pushed the history of slavery and its ongoing legacies further to the forefront of public consciousness. Moreover, such debates over confederate heritage take place against the horrific backdrop of its legacy - of murder and violence against African American people, often in the name of white supremacy. Conversely, and despite an entire year of public history focus on slavery in 2007 (when the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the British Slave Trade Act of 1807 was marked nationally), the same level and intensity of public debate and consciousness around this history and its legacies has not yet emerged in the UK. Efforts to publicly foreground connections between slavery and these 'heritage' sites (which are broadly viewed positively by large proportions of their white audiences) must do so at a time of rising attacks and incidents against black and minority ethnic people in Britain.<sup>1</sup> These are occurring against a climate of increasing anxiety and tensions over ethnicity and national identity in the wake of Britain's decision to leave the European Union, and the impact of the referendum's political campaigns which foregrounded issues of immigration, border control and 'sovereignty'.

Whilst public history efforts to represent connections between big houses and slavery in both countries are similarly complicated by their use as largely positive and celebratory identity symbols and sanitized heritage sites, some notable differences are clear. Britain's connections to its slavery empire are

separated by large distances; the plantation economy that financed and sustained large country house estates, careers and trade in the 'core', occurred within the 'periphery' of the Caribbean and American plantations, at a distance and largely unevicenced within the present-day manicured gardens of country house heritage sites. The black presence at American plantation houses was much more immediately integral to the direct workings of these sites, where people of African descent were forcibly enslaved in large numbers. By comparison, the numbers of what were termed 'black servants' are lower – though not absent – in the British context. People of African descent have left more evidence in the form of cultural production, artefacts and historic traces in the United States, whereas there is much less direct evidence of this at British country houses. Attempts to recover and present connections to slavery in both contexts, have had to contend with the years of silence and absence that have shaped public engagements with this past: the misdirection of interpretative focus on lavish grandeur, fixtures and fittings of the house, or the celebration of the financial, social and cultural power and influence of its white residents.

## **Confederate Memorials, Plantation-Museums and Slave Cabins: Public History of Slavery in the United States**

**Stephen Small**

The most salient issue on slavery and public history in the United States at the present time concerns Confederate monuments, related museums and the

legacies of the Civil War. There are thousands of monuments to the Confederacy across the US South in public squares, government and private buildings, ports and harbors, rural communities, and cemeteries.<sup>2</sup> There are also schools, street names and a vast number of private houses that honor (mainly male) Confederate heroes and events. In recent years, a series of highly politicized incidents, and some horrific crimes, have forced them into public discussion, and have highlighted current tensions, antagonism and conflict. This includes the murder in 2015 of nine African American women and men in a church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dylan Roof, a 21-year-old white supremacist, and an avid supporter of the Confederacy. The Confederate flag flying on a Confederate monument near the state building in Charleston, South Carolina was eventually removed in 2015. Following other incidents, there were further demands to remove monuments. President Trump has consistently opposed such calls, and mockingly added 'Who's next? Washington, Jefferson?'

Recent surveys indicate that a majority of American people want these monuments kept in place. Several prominent politicians have acted to defend them, many others simply kept silent, while several politicians acted to remove them. For example, in May 2017, the mayor of New Orleans, Mitch Landrieu, removed four Confederate monuments, including one of Robert E Lee, and made a powerful statement justifying his action. Early the following year he published a book decrying the monuments as deceptions.<sup>3</sup> These current developments remind us that the legacy of slavery and the Civil War remains ever-present; and that public history and collective memory have important consequences in contemporary life and raise important issues around who controls public history.

But specialists of the public history of slavery and the Civil War in the United States know that Confederate monuments are little more than the tip of the iceberg.<sup>4</sup> A far more extensive and impactful infrastructure of sites dedicated to a distorted, mythological and problematic memory of slavery, the Confederacy and Southern history stands steadfastly in place.<sup>5</sup> At the present time, there are thousands of plantation mansion houses and related outbuildings from the period of slavery incorporated into a vast heritage tourism industry across the US South. The sites contain plantation mansions, work structures and a wide range of other buildings, including slave quarters and slave cabins. They attract millions of domestic and international visitors each year.

While plantation-museum sites reveal a partial and distorted version of southern history, they do not go unchallenged. Many sites still possess original or replica slave cabins, and they are incorporated into site narratives in a variety of ways. Some of the more progressive narratives are compelling and powerful. While the mansions still receive the vast majority of visitors, interest and attention, the slave cabins – what I call ‘twenty-first century antebellum slave cabins’ – offer counter-narratives. A comparison of representations of big houses, with representations of the cabins, reveals what is at stake. There are also counter narratives at the small number of public history sites owned, managed or operated by African Americans.

Plantation-museum sites exist in all the states of the original thirteen colonies, and the vast infrastructure across the South makes it difficult to generalize. So, in this article I focus on Louisiana, which is one of the most prominent states in heritage tourism, and has some of the biggest and most visited sites. Louisiana, like all the Southern states<sup>6</sup> has several distinctive features;

however, it also reflects many of the common practices across the US south as a whole.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Plantation-museum sites in Louisiana***

The tourist infrastructure across Louisiana is comprised of a wide range of plantation museum sites. Some of the largest, most prominent and most visited sites in Louisiana (and in the US south for that matter) can be found on the so-called River Road between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, which was home to the largest sugar plantations - and highest concentration of millionaires that became rich from slavery - that the US ever produced.<sup>8</sup> There are public, not-for-profit and private sites. In rural areas, this includes sites housed in original or reconstructed plantation complexes, working plantations, and related buildings. They have on site mansions and outbuildings, including kitchens, workspaces like blacksmith and carpenter shops, sugar mills and cotton barns. In urban areas, they include mansions and townhouses that belonged to master-enslavers and their families. These sites organize guided and unguided tours of buildings and gardens. The sites receive millions of national and international visitors each year. I define these sites as *plantation museum sites*;<sup>9</sup> and the cabins as “*21<sup>st</sup> century antebellum slave cabins*”.<sup>10</sup> A *21<sup>st</sup> century antebellum slave cabin* is ‘A cabin built in the antebellum period, primarily for habitation by enslaved persons, and which has survived (restored or reconstructed) into the 21<sup>st</sup> century’.<sup>11</sup> I have visited more than sixty plantation museum sites in Louisiana currently open to the public, which



includes the vast majority of such tourist sites in the state. These sites possess at least twenty-seven slave cabins.

The touristic narrative priorities at sites privilege a version of southern history that largely excludes explicit or sustained mention of slavery or the enslaved. And many sites devote far more attention to periods after slavery was legally abolished, than to the period during slavery. The common elements at all sites includes a primary focus on mansion architecture, interiors and furnishings, gardens, elite white lifestyles, 'great men' like presidents, governors, senators and senior military personnel, as well as writers, painters and artists and important political events – like national independence and the Civil War. All narratives are articulated around gender – describing the expected and practiced roles and experiences of women and men, girls and boys. This includes a detailed focus on the social roles, experiences and aspirations of elite white men (in politics, economics and the military) and elite white women (in domesticity, family and philanthropy); and on the spaces inside and outside mansion in which elite men, women and children lived, worked or socialized. Only occasionally do sites focus on 'exceptional women'.<sup>12</sup>

Overall, sites consistently avoid, disregard or sideline mention of slavery and the experiences of the enslaved, with information and details a very distant second in volume to the lives of the elite whites. Slavery is typically described in passive, general and abstract ways, and black people are typically not described in detail, personalized or humanized. This is achieved at the vast majority of sites through three primary narrative styles. The narrative style that most obliterates mention of slavery is symbolic annihilation, which means that sites 'ignore the institution and experience of slavery altogether or treat them in a perfunctory way'.<sup>13</sup> And 'where

slavery and the enslaved are either completely absent or where mention of them is negligible, formalistic, fleeting or perfunctory'.<sup>14</sup> If the enslaved are mentioned it is often in highly stereotypical ways, for example, generic roles, nameless individuals and enslaved women in kitchens.

In Louisiana, prime examples of symbolic annihilation can be found at Destrehan Plantation, Grevenburg House, Houmas House, Kent House, Madewood Plantation, Nottoway Plantation, Oak Alley, Oaklawn Manor, Rosedown Plantation, and Shadows on the Teche. At Nottoway plantation mention of slavery is almost entirely absent. There is detailed information on the lives of the elite white residents, whose biographies, hopes, dreams and achievements are conveyed, while a simple statement like 'a slave made this chair' is all that can be heard about the enslaved. At Oaklawn Manor, occupied since the 1980s by the former Governor of Louisiana, Mike Foster, similar hollow references to slavery are made, amidst a sea of detail about furniture and architecture. There is a room full of ducks which is brought to the attention of visitors. At Grevenburg House in New Orleans, the tour guide showered praise on the wide range of wallpapers in the various rooms, along with details of odd pieces of furniture, like a square grand piano. There was not a single mention of slavery or of any black people. At Kent House the enslaved were described as 'workers', though there is some mention of them as 'slaves' in placards on the grounds tours. The tour guide mentioned that there was always 'a slave girl' available to serve and that the girl slept in the same room with the family's babies because of her dedication to the family.

One of the most complex and fascinating examples of symbolic annihilation occurs at Melrose Plantation in Natchitoches Parish. This is an intriguing site because it was founded by an enslaved Black woman and belonged for generations

to her descendants, a legally free family of color - the Metoyers. This family eventually owned more enslaved persons than any other legally free people of color in the South, that is, several hundred.<sup>15</sup> Like most sites, the main preoccupation during tours is with the lives of the elite plantation owners, and details of architecture, building interiors and furnishings, both during and after slavery. Mention of slavery itself is highly circumscribed. We hear a great deal about three exceptional women – Marie Therese Coin Coin (African), Cammie Henry (white) and Clementine Hunter (African-American, with Native American ancestry) – each of whom is closely identified with the plantation. While we hear a lot about these women, there is almost nothing about gender, and the women are presented as highly exceptional mothers.<sup>16</sup>

Marginalization occurs when there is only perfunctory, momentary or short-lived mention or reference to slavery. This includes ‘trivialization and deflection’ and ‘mechanisms, phrasing, and images that minimize and distort’ the nature of slavery. This sometimes includes foregrounding ‘faithful slaves’ and ‘the benevolence of plantation owners’.<sup>17</sup> Slavery is simply mentioned in passing—during the tour, in the leaflets or the videos—and in ways that may be literal, trivializing or dismissive. Marginalization is the dominant narrative strategy at Acadian Village, Audubon Plantation, Beauregard-Keyes House, Butler-Greenwood Plantation, Hermann-Grima and Gallier historic houses (two sites in one location), Longfellow-Evangeline State Historic Site, Magnolia Mound Plantation and St Joseph Plantation. At Butler-Greenwood, when the kitchen is described, we are told that in order to test the heat of the oven ‘a hand would be placed inside it’. We are told that ‘a boy’ would wait at the table and waft a large fan to keep flies off the food. At Beauregard-Keyes House, we are informed that the owner was a generous man

who gave the enslaved Sundays away from work, and that he ‘generously’ provided additional provisions at Christmas ‘much to the delight of the enslaved, who sang and danced in happiness’. At several of these plantations we are told that when slavery ended, several of the enslaved choose to stay on the plantation and be close to the family that they had worked for. Some said that these people were dedicated to the family and did not want to leave them even after slavery ended. There is no mention that a series of laws, and outright racial discrimination forced the former enslaved to remain in place. And that many of them, who had never been allowed to travel off the plantations, or very far from it, knew no other place to go.

A third narrative style is relative incorporation which means slavery and the lives of the enslaved are highlighted in a number of relatively significant ways. Explicit and relatively detailed information on slavery is provided, for example, in site literature (online and promotional leaflets) in placards and signs at the site. And the slave cabins at the sites are mentioned in significant and detailed ways and may even be part of a tour. In Louisiana, examples of relative incorporation can be found at Frogmore Plantation, Evergreen Plantation, Laura Plantation, Oakland Plantation and Magnolia Plantation.

At Frogmore and Evergreen the sites are extremely unusual because the guided tour begins at the slave cabins, rather than the mansion house or gift store. There is immediate and frank mention of slavery and the lives of the enslaved. It is made clear that the plantations would not have been profitable, or even existed, without the substantial labor of enslaved Africans. There are also several instances in which individualizing, personalizing and humanizing information on the enslaved is provided. For example, the tour guide relates that the enslaved ‘made

remarkable sacrifices' to grow cotton and other crops. When the tour guide was asked about the interests of the tourists and visitors to Frogmore, she said that no one gets offended at her discussion about "the truth. It's when you don't tell the truth that people get offended." She said, "People are coming because of their interest in cotton, which can't be discussed without a discussion of the enslaved." Mention of black music, black cooking and other aspects of black culture are central to the tour. The tour guide said that they wish they could provide more concrete information about the lives of the enslaved, like their names, their relationships to one another, and even about their ideas and thoughts but that the information is simply not available for Frogmore.

Oakland Plantation and Magnolia plantation are part of the National Park Service's Cane River Creole Site. Oakland belonged to the Prud'hommes, a local Creole family who had owned it for at least eight generations. And the two original slave cabins that remain on the site receive significant attention, with visitors being directed towards them, and information about the lives of the enslaved provided in exhibits inside the cabins. There is a third cabin named 'Gabe's Nargot's Cabin', and a kitchen that the enslaved woman that served as a cook lived in. Further information is provided on a cellphone tour, which began at the site in 2010. One of the buildings on the site is the 'Doctor's cottage' where it is mentioned that the enslaved suffered many ailments as a result of their strenuous work, and that they were attended to by the doctor. And in the main house, the tour guide relates information about two enslaved persons – Solomon Williams and Solomon Wilson – both of whom were skilled craftsman on the plantation. They were praised for their work. Some black and white photos at the site are of African Americans workers - women and men - during the period of Jim Crow. There is also a so-called

nanny's room (also called a 'mammy's room') in the main house. At the Magnolia site, similar information about slavery and the enslaved is relatively incorporated into site leaflets, and details. And there are eight brick slave cabins at the site, in a semi-circle grid, with occasional exhibits. The site has only a self-guided tour, and the main house is not open to visitors.

One additional site that incorporates discussion of slavery in a substantial way, and that prioritizes the lives of the enslaved, is Whitney plantation, which opened in 2013. At Whitney plantation, brutality, violence and economic exploitation are frequently mentioned; how the plantation's existence and success was primarily based on exploiting enslaved labor is a central feature of the narrative. As are the ways in which the lives – and often family members – of the master-enslavers and the enslaved were intertwined. People that visit other sites and do not visit Whitney, might be forgiven for believing that slavery in Louisiana was marginal, that the treatment of the enslaved was paternalistic and benign, and that the enslaved were grateful and faithful.<sup>18</sup> But after visiting Whitney, this lie is obvious for all to see. This site comes closest to what may be called 'full incorporation' of slavery, as suggested by Small, 2012 (p. 12). This site and its unique approach came about because of the personal wishes of the owner.

### *Discussion*

Slavery in the United States lasted for more than 250 years. At its peak, in the 1860s, almost four million African Americans were legally enslaved, while the lives of almost 500,000 legally free African Americans were directly shaped by their origins in the slave system. Slavery in the United States was built on brutality,

violence and torture, with people systematically bought and sold, women, children and men whipped and beaten. Africans were kidnapped, transported in miserable conditions aboard ships, sold like animals on auction blocks across the south and destined to a life of subordination and misery. It was, as multiple authors have mentioned, an institution fundamentally shaped by the economic demands and political domination of the white population. Racism was the engine that drove it, and it was elaborated by elites, middle-class, working class and the poor. Systematic racial discrimination, from the cradle to the grave, codified across the South, and implemented with the brute force of the military and the police, ensured black people existed primarily to meet the needs of white people. Racism was also the basis of social domination across the entire south. Tens of thousands of African Americans – including women and children - were ripped apart from family members each year, and sold across vast distances. Sexual violence – in the form of rape, and forced child birth – was an indispensable component, backed by law, of the entire system. The enslaved consistently resisted and rebelled in a wide array of individual and collective ways, from sabotage of crops and property, escape, and the establishment of maroon communities.<sup>19</sup> But any such attempt by the enslaved to challenge, escape or rebel against the system was met with brutal force, sometimes involving sadism.

But such information is completely absent from Confederate memorials. Confederate memorials function to symbolically or literally annihilate these facts; they function to obfuscate and distort these facts; and they function to turn our attention to a far more narrow, self-congratulatory set of priorities and issues. They focus on white people's economic, political and social needs, on the bravery and honor of white men, on efforts to preserve a beloved society. They are heavily

masculine, and they foreground whites, who are personalized and humanized in highly individualistic ways. While marginalizing Black people, who remain faceless and voiceless.

Such information is also largely missing from the vast majority of plantation museum sites across Louisiana (and the entire south). The plantation museum sites of Louisiana function in many of the same ways as Confederate memorials, as memorials to southern ideology and aggrandizement. Both do similar kinds of work – institutionalizing a narrow and distorted portrayal of complicated history. The sites praise elite white men and women, in the appropriate gendered roles – men leading, fighting, defending; women protected, cooking, cleaning serving. And both operate under the thrall of southern mythology.

It seems remarkably unlikely that Confederate memorials could offer a fundamentally different history than the one they present (though they could tell a more accurate one). However, plantation museum sites in Louisiana could do a far better job of providing a more comprehensive and honest representation of slavery and southern history. The sites that I describe in this article as relative incorporation already reveal how that could be done. The other sites have the potential to do a much better job too. And there are sites that are run or managed by black people that do a good job.<sup>20</sup> There are also other promising initiatives that reveal many ways in which effective change can be undertaken, as for example, with TOURISM RESET research and outreach initiative.

For example, there are at least sixty slave cabins at the sites in Louisiana. Currently, most slave cabins are typically located at the back of big house, they are typically not mentioned, very few sites provide individualizing or humanizing information about the enslaved Black women or Black men in them, and they



receive far less attention, benefit from far fewer resources and receive far less interest from visitors, as compared to the main houses. That is because they are treated in ways best described as symbolic annihilation or marginalization. However, there are striking exceptions. For example, Evergreen plantation, Frogmore plantation and Laura Plantation all devote considerable attention to the cabins. At Frogmore, and Evergreen the main tours actually begin at the cabins and are primarily about them. At Laura, the cabins are a major part of the tour. At these sites we hear details of the lives, labors and crafts of the enslaved, there are exhibits or placards with names and jobs of men and women that were enslaved. Evergreen has more cabins in their original location, as constructed in the antebellum period, than any other site in Louisiana. At Evergreen the tour guide insisted that the cabins are an indispensable component of the visit. And at Frogmore the main house is not even included in the tour, or available for visiting (it is privately owned). Slave cabins are also prominent at Magnolia Plantation and Oakland Plantation. Neither site has a guided tour of the cabins, but both provide information and maps for self-guided tours, including a recent cell phone audio tour since 2010. Each site typically has one cabin open to visitors, and a series of exhibits in them with general details of life under slavery. These sites make it clear that most of the economic labor required to make plantations successful was carried out by the enslaved; including skilled and craftwork. They also mention the ways in which white families and black families' lives were intertwined, through sexual relations and children. Several other sites have recognized the potential and value of developing such narratives and in recent years, and slave cabins are also increasingly valued for the authenticity they bring to sites. For example, in 2008

Destrehan plantation brought the cabins it had located at the back of the site, to the front; and in 2013, Oak Alley Plantation built several replica cabins<sup>21</sup>.

Finally, there are a number of public history sites owned or managed by African Americans that approach slavery very differently from main sites and offer a stark contrast to the narratives at plantation museum sites. In Louisiana, this includes the River Road African American Museum in Ascension Parish, the New Orleans African American Museum (NOAAM) and the Odell S Williams Now and Then Museum in Baton Rouge parish. At these sites slavery is typically only one aspect of the history told, and typically not the major one. Instead these sites focus on a panorama of African American life. Sites frequently begin their representations with information on life in Africa, and they always privilege the Civil Rights Movement. When they mention slavery, it is to highlight and confront the injustice, inhumanity and violence of slavery; the resistance, resilience and dignity of Black people. They also foreground the Underground Railroad. At these sites, they exhibit works by African American artists; and they personalize the victims of slavery, especially leaders, by mentioning their names, families and accomplishments. For example, at the Odell S Williams Now and Then Museum, there are many names of African American leaders, and role models, including those in Louisiana (like the African American, P.B. Pinchback, the first African American to become governor of the state; and Louis Armstrong, and Doug Williams, MVP 1986, and Super Bowl champion). And others known nationally (like Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King). The guide said that one of the missions of Odell Museum is “to use history as a tool for restoring pride.” Because “many black visitors are ashamed of their identity because a slave identity is not a positive identity”. These sites reflect the long history of African American

commemoration; similar names appear at the NOAAM, where the cruel tools and implements of punishment used to dominate the enslaved are on show.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the River Road African American museum in Ascension Parish is one of the most persuasive sites in its emphasis on resistance, resilience and humanity.

The recent events that have thrust Confederate memorials to the front of public attention in the United States remind us that we are still living history, that history is not dead and buried, and that struggles over historical facts, meaning and legacies are palpable and consequential. The supporters of Confederate memorials seek to turn our attention away from the brutality, violence and exploitation of southern slavery. They seek to turn our attention away from the fact that a major impetus for the Civil war was the determined defense of slavery. They seek to highlight (white and mainly male) individual acts of heroism, bravery and sacrifice, and are preoccupied with the details of individual battles, ripped apart from the motivations or context of such acts. And they do all of this under the thrall of an ideology of southern gentility. Confederate memorials reflect the ideological pre-eminence of southern gentility, paternalism and the 'lost cause' as the historical pillars of southern heritage. They seek to convince us that slavery was somehow fair and just, that Black people benefited from slavery and were content with being enslaved. And they present the south as a beacon of gentility, civility and progress. Nothing could be further than the truth.

Plantation museum sites do many of the same things. They avoid mention of slavery, minimize or marginalize it; they avoid mention of brutality, violence and the inherent injustice of slavery; they personalize and humanize elite white men, and to a lesser degree, women; and they depersonalize and dehumanize black people. They do all of this under the thrall of southern gentility - around the

framework of (white) paternalism, including southern notions of (white) gentility, civility, decency and honor. This puts an inordinate emphasis on wealthy and powerful whites. Compared to Confederate monuments they are far more impactful and consequential, given their vast infrastructure, the far more subtle and indirect narrative deployed, and the massive numbers of visitors. They have so far failed to attract the kind of public or national attention, evaluation or criticism that Confederate monuments have received. The sites in Louisiana described in this article are indicative of common practices across at sites in all the southern states, as recent research has revealed.<sup>23</sup>

The hegemonic narratives of confederate monuments and plantation museum sites do not go unchallenged. A focus on slave cabins, the lives of the enslaved, and the work of Black sites highlights different goals, and provides dramatically different information. They enable us to highlight brutality and violence, resistance and resilience, the humanity and dignity of Black people. They provide the opportunity to reveal black people as major actors in the narratives they tell, and to name and humanize black people. The indefatigable work of Joe McGill's Slave Dwelling Project, is just one powerful example. It is unlikely that Confederate memorials will ever allow for such alternative accounts. But the plantation museum sites do allow for that possibility. They reveal that counter-narratives exist, and that issues of power and access to resources are important.<sup>24</sup> At present only a tiny number of sites provide relative incorporation of slavery, slave cabins and the lives of the enslaved. But there are far more addressing these issues than in the past. This small number of sites offers an opportunity to provide an institutional and ideological antidote to what is going on at the majority sites in general, and at Confederate memorials in particular. These sites enable us to make

public history of slavery and the South more accurate, more comprehensive, more inclusive.

## **Slavery, Public History, and the British Country House**

**Jessica Moody**

Compared to American plantation museums, country houses in Britain do not have the same degree of direct, tangible, or obviously visible connections to systems of enslavement. Whilst there are notable examples of houses having had black servants in their workforce, there were not large numbers of enslaved African people forced to live and work on site. Financial connections between slavery and the British country house were separated by the Atlantic Ocean. Some stately homes in Britain have direct links to investment in slave voyages and plantation ownership, however many more have seemingly more tangential connections which are a step or so removed; for example, through the administrative roles of house owners and their bureaucratic careers within the running of the British empire. In thinking about bringing the connections between slavery and the British country house to the fore through public history at these sites, a number of issues emerge. Firstly, the British country house is a symbol of a particular articulation (and celebration) of national identity. The transformation of stately homes into 'heritage' in the last two centuries, and particularly post Second World War, has relied intensely on their presentation as national sites of pride against which stories of slavery sit uncomfortably, or more accurately, do not sit at all. Further,

the national public memory of transatlantic slavery in Britain has been dominated largely by the story of its abolition on the one hand, and the ‘maritimized’ Middle Passage on the other, and there is still some way to go before more land-based, financial, or indeed bureaucratic dimensions are fully acknowledged. Crucially, national historic narratives of Britain, especially those at pre-twentieth century heritage sites, rarely include fully integrated histories of a black presence. Correspondingly perhaps, heritage sites in Britain still largely attract a majority white and affluent audience, and there are distinct barriers to engagement from under-represented groups including black and minority ethnic communities which include the kinds of histories (particularly in relation to empire) being told (or not).<sup>25</sup> Despite some notable efforts during the national marking of the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the British Slave Trade Act in 2007, the public history of slavery at British country houses is woefully under-developed. The following sections discuss the issues around representing slavery at these sites in relation to the points raised above and relates these to a specific case study at Dyrham Park, Gloucestershire, southwest England.

### *The British Country House as ‘Heritage’*

One of the key issues which complicates the public history of transatlantic slavery at country houses in Britain, is the way in which such sites have been transformed from “a private home into a public symbol”.<sup>26</sup> In *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home*, Peter Mandler mapped the evolving status of historic houses in Britain, exploring the processes by which “aristocratic heritage came to be part of the national heritage”.<sup>27</sup> Private until the nineteenth century, such houses became

symbols within efforts to construct an emerging national and shared history of Britain. This was followed by a somewhat uneven fate of widespread disdain for aristocratic wealth in the early twentieth century, and interwar decline and demolition of increasingly expensive stately homes. Numerous houses were utilized for a combination of military and civilian endeavors during the Second World War, following which economic constraints, and a shortage of labor and materials rendered repair and maintenance of such large estates untenable.<sup>28</sup> Whilst the power, influence, and wealth of the British aristocracy further waned after the Second World War, this occurred alongside an increasing public interest in country houses for tourism, as places to spend increased leisure time and post war affluence. Such sites were reframed and re-marketed by their cash-strapped owners and national bodies alike, who capitalized on this renewed public appeal by presenting such estates as ‘national heritage’.<sup>29</sup> The ‘heritage’ label was particularly strongly applied to country houses following a landmark exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, in 1974, titled “The Destruction of the Country House”, the dramatic deployment of ‘destruction’ used “so as to align the fear of loss with nationalist sentiment.”<sup>30</sup>

Country houses went through an intense period of touristic commercialization and heritage rebranding following the reorganization of the National Land Fund in 1980 as the National Heritage Memorial Fund (which financially supported the running and acquisition of such sites).<sup>31</sup> However, such developments drew criticism from several historians who perceived the creation of country house museums as symptomatic of a rising heritage ‘industry’ according to Robert Hewison, or reflective of a backward nostalgic nationalistic glance, as Patrick Wright suggested.<sup>32</sup> In her critical 2006 monograph, *Uses of Heritage*,

Laurajane Smith argued that the country house formed a significant component of the Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD). The AHD, Smith argued, is a hegemonic discourse which constructs a ‘common sense’ and ‘naturalized’ understanding of heritage, particularly in the West, as being synonymous with first and foremost “‘old’, grand, monumental and aesthetically pleasing sites, buildings and artefacts” rather than anything intangible, working class or ‘ordinary’.<sup>33</sup> The homes of elites, she suggested, are moreover, “typically portrayed in the West as representational of national heritage and identity”.<sup>34</sup> The construction of the country house as ‘national heritage’ is a process which has relied upon the deployment of conspicuous imagery – the proliferation of stately homes on TV, film and literature but also through the ubiquitous little houses on brown heritage signs that pepper the British countryside. Through such imagery and representations, Smith suggested, the country house has become a banal symbol of national identity in Britain, drawing on Michael Billig’s thesis on banal nationalism.<sup>35</sup> In 2004, Smith conducted large-scale qualitative interviews at English country houses which revealed common expressions of an unproblematic sense of national identity. Visitors also expressed a sense of comfort, nostalgia, of people ‘knowing their place’ in relation to class identity.

British country houses have a long and complex relationship with the histories of slavery and empire which emerge through a variety of engagements between owners and their employment, investment and inheritance, alongside cultural expression through art, architecture and artefacts.<sup>36</sup> The status of country houses, as Stephanie Barczewski argues, as “centers of wealth, status and power” meant that they came to embody a special place within national identity, distilling virtues of stability and tradition. This was (and arguably still is) a ‘national’ identity



which was nonetheless often an “insular version of Englishness”. Despite the landed elite of Scotland, Wales and Ireland also participating in imperial activities, and their houses also therefore playing major roles in such performances of empire, the ‘big houses’ in Britain’s nations also became entangled within particular expressions of nationalism. Scottish country houses have been used as part of a brand of political nationalism directed against English sovereignty, however in Ireland (both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland) there is a distinctly more complex picture which presents itself “at the nexus of nationalist, unionist and imperial forces”.<sup>37</sup> The big house in Ireland is a particularly *dissonant* heritage, embodying both colonial and colonized past and the fight against British sovereignty, whilst also being largely perceived as representative of certain (namely Protestant) elite culture.<sup>38</sup> The inherently *colonial* context of the big house in Ireland is in some major ways, more evidently present and less easily obscured, than in England’s stately homes. However, a notable proportion of visitors interviewed by Smith at English country houses in 2004 (21%) explicitly stated that they wanted to know more about ‘servants and slaves’, about where the money came from, and indeed from whose labor this ‘grandiloquence’ was supported. Smith has suggested that perhaps this attitude marked a turning point in terms of public appetite for more diverse narratives.

In 2007, the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the British Slave Trade Act of 1807, commemorated nationally across Britain, brought to the fore some of the more diverse and complicated connections between country house estates, their residents, their black presence, and transatlantic slavery. As Geoff Cubitt has argued, events marking the Bicentenary took place up and down the country and were not confined to urban or maritime sites, making notable new appearances in

more rural and regional locales.<sup>39</sup> Activities occurred across both private, National Trust, local authority and English Heritage owned properties.<sup>40</sup> A total of 285 projects across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland were funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund which was the largest single funder of Bicentenary projects, dedicating over £10 million to these.<sup>41</sup> However, public responses and attitudes during the Bicentenary year were disappointingly familiar. The AHRC-funded *1807 Commemorated Project* (University of York, 2007-2009, led by Laurajane Smith) analyzed museum and visitor responses to exhibitions concerning slavery and abolition during 2007.<sup>42</sup> Smith argued that responses from white British visitors overall demonstrated significant strategies of distancing and disengagement, and that responses from Harewood House, (the only country house where visitor interviews were undertaken), recorded higher levels of this than at other museum sites.<sup>43</sup>

This kind of emotional and aggressive rejection of the connection between country houses and histories of slavery played out particularly strongly in reaction to materials put out by the National Trust.<sup>44</sup> In 2007, the National Trust ran a four-page feature in its magazine about transatlantic slavery and connections to some of its properties. The feature also outlined how, in response to the bicentenary year, the Trust would be reinterpreting a number of its properties to bring such pasts to the fore.<sup>45</sup> According to the editor, this article elicited some of the most extensive, “and heated” responses from readers the magazine had ever received. Some readers suggested that the article and the Trust’s planned activities were welcomed, and overdue. However, there were notable and familiar suggestions that this episode in history should not be “singled out”, or apologized for, and did not form a significant part of the financing of country houses.<sup>46</sup> Some of these

letters may have been prompted by messages in the forum of the far-right white supremacy website *Stormfront*, where one member drew attention to this article, giving direct contact information and advocating others send their responses to the Trust.<sup>47</sup>

### *The Banality of Slavery at the British Country House*

As John Oldfield has argued, Britain's story of slavery has predominantly been told as the story of its *abolition* which has dominated the public memory of this past.<sup>48</sup> The lives and activities of abolitionists have been foregrounded, accompanied by corresponding silences surrounding Britain's much longer involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, systems of slavery, and administration of the slave-based economy more broadly. Furthermore, the dominant focus given to the slave *trade* in Britain's memory of slavery, the 'maritimization' of this history, has created a skewed focus on the movements of ships across the Atlantic Ocean at the expense of more sustained critical engagement with the mechanisms and impacts of the slavery business on dry land.<sup>49</sup>

The country house (as well as most rural spaces in Britain) is also a historic site which has been culturally severed from connections to a black British presence. British country houses do not have the same level of intense, direct and embodied connections to enslaved labor that American plantation museums do, where enslaved African people and their descendants were forced to work, live and die. However, some notable evidence exists which places people of African descent centrally within the domestic space of the British country house. Paintings

depicting a young Florence Smyth, daughter of the Smyths of Ashton Court, Bristol, alongside a black page, and the more well-known portrait of Dido Belle and her cousin, great niece of Lord Mansfield of Kenwood House, London attest to this. Despite the presence and historic record of black servants and pages, domestics and even descended family at British country houses, such connections are rarely part of permanent holistic narratives of these sites. Whilst, as Stuart Hall has argued, there has been a “widespread selective amnesia and disavowal” of the colonial contexts of the wealth and labor sustaining heritage sites, connections between empire and British culture, come through largely within a master narrative sustained by images, scenes and artefacts which testify to the ‘success’ and power of empire, components which country houses, as ‘treasure houses’ of – often colonial – collections, embody.<sup>50</sup>

Recent scholarly interventions have the potential to shift focus from the ‘maritimized’ narrative of Britain’s history of slavery to broader interpretative frameworks which encompass larger implications of the slave economy to Britain. The UCL based project, *Legacies of British Slave Ownership*, which systematically examined the compensation records detailing monies paid to slave owners following the British Emancipation Acts of the 1830s, has some key implications for interpretation at stately homes.<sup>51</sup> The connections to plantation slavery and absentee ownership opens up otherwise less visible connections between British country estates and the Caribbean plantations which financially fed their construction, alteration, and upkeep. Nick Draper has argued that this research can serve as a useful starting point for exploring the connections between enslavement and British country houses.<sup>52</sup> Although he identifies some issues with their use, such as their inability to capture figures whose investments moved away from

slave ownership before the 1830s, the records have nonetheless shone light on an otherwise obscured part of this history.

The more mundane organizational roles of slavery need to be better foregrounded within public history in Britain. Whilst the country house might be 'banal' in its grandiloquence and nationalism, as Smith argued, such sites can also be seen as products of the 'banality' of the bureaucracy of empire. When considered in relation to systems of enslavement, this is a banality which aligns much closer to Hannah Arendt's usage than Michael Billig's.<sup>53</sup> There was a banal 'evil' behind the management of systems of enslavement, as there was in the organization of the Nazi Holocaust, as Arendt argues; a mundane, normalized, everyday, administrative inhumanity performed through the careers of civil servants of the British empire - those who administered the trade and taxes of colonial plantations, who oversaw, who wrote reports, who advocated for the financial success of the slave economy. These are not the dramatic stories of slave ship captains, of the middle passage, or even of direct slave or plantation ownership. However, much like the Holocaust, without the bureaucrats, the slave economy could not have existed.

### *Dyrham Park, Gloucestershire*

Dyrham Park, a National Trust managed country house estate on the outskirts of Bristol, southwest England provides a clear case study of the issues surrounding bringing connections between country house estates, empire and slavery to the fore. Dyrham has recently been identified as one of eight 'transformation properties' by the National Trust, sites chosen for having both outdated and

problematic displays and interiors but also as places where significant improvements can be achieved. One of the key developments identified by the Trust needed at Dyrham is the potential to make connections to issues relevant to visitors lives, including global trade and colonial emigration.<sup>54</sup> Further, as part of the Trust's National Public Programming scheme, the year 2022 has been identified as a milestone year for events and exhibitions addressing 'legacies of slavery', a key opportunity for integrating histories of slavery and empire into the interpretation of its properties.<sup>55</sup>

The surviving estate and house at Dyrham were renovated by William Blaythwayt (c. 1649-1717). Blaythwayt's life and career connect this country house to histories of empire and slavery, not through the well-worn and celebrated narratives of abolition, nor through the maritime connections of the transatlantic slave trade, or even in the ownership of enslaved African people. Instead, his eminent career as a colonial administrator highlights the less dramatic, more bureaucratic connections between the British country house and the slave economy. Blaythwayt initially inherited the estate through marriage to Mary Wynter in 1686, whose family had connections to West Indian plantations going back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>56</sup> Blaythwayt was also highly influenced (in career, culture and taste) by his uncle Thomas Povey (c.1613-c.1705), who supported Blaythwayt after his father's death and gave him his first colonial position.<sup>57</sup> Povey's own father had colonial connections as a commissioner for the Caribee Islands in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century and Thomas Povey also had a number of different roles. Two of his brothers were resident in Jamaica and his daughter married a man in Virginia.<sup>58</sup> Blaythwayt began his career as a clerk in the plantation office (Lord of Trade and Plantations) in 1675 and rose within colonial administrative ranks, becoming

Surveyor and Auditor General of Plantation Revenues in 1680 until his death in 1717, where he was responsible for overseeing the financial contributions of British colonies including Virginia, Jamaica and Barbados.<sup>59</sup>

Blaythwayt's colonial connections through his career have not yet been systematically integrated into the public history narratives of the property's interpretation. The general guidebook of the property (published originally in 2000, revised until 2009) whilst outlining his titles and roles, did not give any indication of the colonial context of his position within the leading introductory sections, where Blaythwayt simply "made his fortune by marrying well and acquiring lucrative jobs in the government of William III".<sup>60</sup> Later in this text, his role is stated as "auditor general for the British colony of Virginia" though largely to contextualize the presence of Virginian walnut for the staircases, with more detail being given about the process of construction and decoration than on what his livelihood actually entailed.<sup>61</sup> A new guidebook written by the Trust's regional curator, Rupert Goulding, however, does make concerted efforts to present more of this past, particularly through the chapters on Blaythwayt, Povey, The Wynters of Dyrham, and 'The Colonies', however these have yet to become part of interpretative practice within the house itself.<sup>62</sup>

Beyond Blaythwayt's career and familial connections, Dyrham has a number of tangible links to slavery and empire evidenced through the fabric of the house and its collection. His colonial career afforded Blaythwayt access to luxury commodities from the colonies, and he was given many gifts which he displayed in his home at Dyrham.<sup>63</sup> Blaythwayt drew on his colonial connections, sometimes in the form of bribes for favorable endorsements of those under his supervision, to acquire materials in the rebuilding of Dyrham, including walnut and cedar wood

from America. Blaythwayt also imported seeds and plants into Dyrham from the colonies which constituted a ‘wilderness garden’ at the estate, made up of trees from Virginia, peach stones and black walnuts amongst other seeds, and also included two rattlesnakes to display within the gardens.<sup>64</sup> In part this is one area where connections to empire and slavery have come to the fore within Dyrham’s public history offer, though this has varied in its emphasis. The general guidebook mentions the “exotic palms and pineapples” on display and the newer guidebook extends on this interpretation, particularly in relation to the ‘exotic’ flora and fauna Blaythwayt had imported and the colonial timber used to construct the main staircases.<sup>65</sup> Whilst volunteer room guides do use these materials and artefacts to raise some of these connections, this is usually as far as the discussion goes.<sup>66</sup>

The most overt and tangible connection between Dyrham and slavery have come to the fore in public dialogue, not through the life and career of the man who built the house, but through two artefacts; decorative stands listed as ‘torcheries’ in the house’s inventory. The stands, made in London between 1670 and 1700, show two chained black African men, each holding a bowl in the shape of a scallop shell above their heads. Whilst there was a common decorative trend to feature ‘blackamoors’ in a Venetian tradition depicting black African figures in brightly colored adornment, such sculpture did not commonly include chains – which in Dyrham’s stands are shown to link a collar around the neck to the ankles of the figures.

<<< Figure 1. Decorative ‘Slave’ Figure Stands, Dyrham Park (Photo: Jessica Moody) >>>



The stands, and the dearth of interpretation around them, have for some become symbolic of the sense of purposeful silencing of the connections between Dyrham and slavery. In 2007, the HLF-funded National Trust and First Born Creatives project, 'RE: Interpretation' led by Shawn Sobers and Robert Mitchell, worked to connect different community groups from Bristol and Bath to properties in the southwest of England. The groups visited three National Trust properties in the region; Dyrham Park, Tyntesfield House and Clevedon Court, sites with varying levels of connection to slavery. Of these, it was Dyrham Park's stands which elicited the most reaction. During the visit, participants felt that volunteers were unable to provide much information.<sup>67</sup> The statues have largely been displayed in the same vein as other decorative artefacts of the house, as "part of the background".<sup>68</sup> However they are also the place where general links between Dyrham and slavery have started to be made. In the 2000-2009 general guide, it is only following the description of the "candle stands, supported by chained black slaves" that there is also an acknowledgment that Blaythwayt "derived part of his wealth from administering the slave plantations of Jamaica." However, the language used implies a mitigation, and distancing, that "Blaythwayt himself appears to have had very little involvement in the slave trade" whilst there were local connections elsewhere, that "nearby Bristol was second only to Liverpool in its promotion of the transatlantic trade in slaves."<sup>69</sup> In a later interpretative booklet, designed in a 17<sup>th</sup> century style, the "striking pair of stands" are referred to in a passive tone, whereby they "arrived at" Dyrham via Blaythwayt's uncle, Thomas Povey – already one step removed from direct connection to the house's owner. A certain unapologetic inevitability is presented, that "*slavery was part of colonial life* and unfortunately William would have been unconcerned by this depiction of slaves."

Here, more emphasis is placed on mitigating Blaythwayt's assumed emotional reaction to his decorative belongings, rather than his central role in administering the actual enslavement of African people in the colonies. More jarringly perhaps, is the inclusion of "unlike our own reactions today" after this statement, which assumes the viewer's own reactions and emotions.<sup>70</sup> Without full, frank and open interpretation exploring Blaythwayt's role in slavery and empire, these feel like empty statements which respond to assumptions rather than historical points.

More recent interpretative measures have placed a distinct focus around acknowledging the dissonance of these artefacts in both engagement and representation. Visitors' emotional engagements with these artefacts act as a 'way in' to discussing their broader meaning. They are described as Dyrham's "most emotive items of furniture" in Goulding's 2017 guide, which "have the power to make your physically recoil" according to recent interpretation cards added to the room these stands occupy.<sup>71</sup> This is also the position a volunteer leads with in the television programme *The Remains of Slavery*, presented by Bristol Poet Laurette Miles Chambers. In this episode, Chambers visits Dyrham Park as one of a number of sites around the southwest with links to transatlantic slavery. Chambers asks the volunteer whether these artefacts should be on display, given their offensive aesthetic, to which the volunteer responds that "despite the disturbing feelings that one has when one looks at them, these feelings have got to be faced".<sup>72</sup> In comparison to the older guidebook, Goulding's text more openly acknowledges these artefacts as symbols not only of 'colonial life' but of both Povey's specific agency in colonial slavery through the Royal African Company, and Blaythwayt's acquisition of exotic goods that were acquired as a direct result of the "human suffering that lay behind much of this explosion of prosperity."<sup>73</sup> The interpretative

cards describe them as the “most challenging items” in Dyrham’s collection; they are seen to reveal what is otherwise “hidden” about Dyrham, that the house was built via a “*global economy* that increasingly exploited enslaved men and women.”<sup>74</sup> There is a slight distancing in this introductory paragraph, in the “global economy” that Blaythwayt joins, rather than presenting him as an active agent in its maintenance and development. The interpretation cards also speak from the position of the present-day visitor, the sections come under questions that might be posed on a visit: “What are they?”, “Why would anyone want them?”, “Was the house built by a slave owner?”. This last question raises points about the state of public understanding of the British slave economy, where relatively little is known of the more administrative roles integral to this system. In answer to this question, the cards state that, “[i]t seems he was not a slave owner, nor did he own lands in *British colonies*. However, a lot of his income came from salaries associated with his colonial responsibilities.” The section ends definitively, and collectively, having arrived *with* the visitor at the conclusion that “[w]e can see that Blaythwayt directly benefitted from the growing slave economy of the late *17<sup>th</sup> century*.”

These forms of public history necessarily require a degree of agency on behalf of the visitor: to read the guidebook, to pick up the interpretation cards by the window. More creative forms of engagement in the room itself, have met with mixed results. Academics have generally argued positively for the use of contemporary art as a way to challenge traditional narratives, and bring to the fore complex, sometimes contradictory facets of these histories in creative and engaging ways which allow space for multifarious and individual public engagement.<sup>75</sup> In 2012, Dyrham Park hosted an exhibition called ‘A World Away’ in which artworks from the Arts Council Collection were displayed throughout the

house. Above the two slave-figure stands hung Soweto-born artist Johannes Phokela's *Candle Bathing*, which – in Phokela's artistic style – the figure of Sampson in Ruben's *Sampson and Dalila* was depicted as a black African man. The painting, hung above the black subservient figures in chains, drew out and emphasized their presence. No longer simply 'part of the background', the stands spoke *to* and *with* the painting, which replaced a white classical figure with a reclining African man, purposefully *out of place* and juxtaposed against African figures which were supposed to know theirs. Whilst effective in bringing these figures more prominently to the fore, the artwork prompted a number of complaints from visitors, about the stands themselves, but also about the painting which some visitors felt was itself in some way racist.<sup>76</sup> The Trust had not received much in the way of comment on these figures before this artistic intervention, and although as Goulding noted, such silence may indicate unvoiced reactions, this creative engagement did act to disrupt their 'background' status and increase attention to them.

Goulding has suggested that some of the key challenges facing the development of more meaningful public history efforts around Dyrham Park's connections with slavery concern precisely the type of narrative Blaythwayt presents, and public perception of this. Firstly, Goulding suggests that there is a 'blind spot' in relation to public understanding of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Britain which does not tend to go much further than figures like Samuel Pepys.<sup>77</sup> Secondly, he suggests that there is not a 'national dialogue' about the kinds of connections Blaythwayt has to slavery which would enable these connections to be part of larger national narratives. Thirdly, and most significantly, there is a public detachment from Dyrham and slavery following the realization that he was 'not a

slave owner'. However, there is a public history in-road here that concerns 'following the money'; asking about salaries, talking about the organization and running of colonies, the taxing of plantations, their revenue, and the whole structure of bureaucracy needed for such systems of exploitation to run successfully. This reveals in many ways a much fuller insight into the broader story of Britain and slavery than a focus on ships leaving from Bristol, or even the records of compensation paid to slave owners will tell.

The focus given to the movement of ships or the heroism of abolitionists has left stories of the more mundane – the more *banal* – connections to slavery and empire generally untold at heritage sites. But it is this banality which is nonetheless integral in making meaningful reflective connections. The National Trust has chosen the year 2022 as a form of non-commemorative commemorative year – a point in their research strategy when they aim to have reinterpreted the houses in their care in line with research into connections to transatlantic slavery. As Caroline Bressey has argued, 2007 as an official celebrated commemorative year saw the delivery of events at country houses (just as with many other types of site) which were temporary and project-based, sustained only by limited funding for the anniversary year itself.<sup>78</sup> Whilst some of the information, research and materials from these projects have been made available through institutional websites, leaflets, and sometimes (though rarely) within audio guides, there has been very little which has been embedded in any meaningful way into the main public history narratives of the houses themselves. If the National Trust is serious about addressing omissions and silences so long continued around this topic, then this research and interpretation must be rethought holistically and integrated overtly and permanently.

## Conclusion

The mansions at plantation museum sites across Louisiana and the south can be considered as analogues of British country houses. They were built on the income, wealth and profits derived from slavery, and the slave trade; they were occupied by the elite families that benefited from this wealth; they are celebrated today for their magnificent architecture, elaborate interiors and furnishings, and beautiful gardens while the families are remembered today for their elite lifestyles and alleged decency and hospitality. Country houses in England share many of the same characteristics. Like the plantation mansions, they are loath to mention the pervasive brutality, violence and economic exploitation during slavery that provided the economic basis for their creation and maintenance. Similarly, the mansions in the US foreground and celebrate southern gentility and hospitality, while failing to address the racial supremacy, brutality and human suffering upon which such supposedly moralistic codes were based. Part of this avoidance has been achieved through a temporal focus within interpretation on the period after slavery's legal end. Country houses in England, despite overtly focusing interpretation on the centuries of enslavement and the domination of these systems within the British Empire across the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, have been better able to avoid such topics until recently. In large part this is because they are located so far from the sites where the vast majority of the enslaved were born, labored and died; and because England does not have the same large, long-standing and segregated black populations that exist in the US. In recent years, shifts in public history at country houses in Britain have seen an increasing and now relatively commonplace incorporation of the stories of 'downstairs', of the

kitchens, servants quarters and experiences of the majority of country house residents and workers, however there are no equivalent 'slave cabins' which can be used as tangible reminders of the lives and labor of the majority of US plantation mansions' residents, to feature as challenges to previous efforts to annihilate their presence. In both countries, black people have played a central, and major role in challenging the hegemonic and partial representations that existed for so long; through public historical intervention, creative response, challenge and critique.

There are, however, some public history lessons that can be gleaned through this transatlantic comparison, and some possible points to take forward as these 'Big Houses' seek greater acknowledgement of their dissonant pasts. British country houses could take on board some of the more successful interpretative strategies from plantation museums such as the Frogmore, Evergreen, Whitney and Laura Plantations who gave full and frank acknowledgements of their histories of enslavement from the outset. Such sites did so whilst deliberately adopting a humanizing language, by focusing on the lives and experiences of people rather than the cold economic language which so often dominates histories concerning trade and investment in the British empire. The focus given to reconstructed slave cabins in these plantation museum sites also helpfully decenters the Big House itself from the story of enslavement. This was particularly strong at Frogmore plantation, where the Big House is not even part of the tour. How far can British country houses decenter the materiality of the house from the interpretation of this past? The obsessive focus given to material authenticity in British heritage stands as an obstacle in rethinking interpretative strategies which instead must foreground human experiences. This is particularly crucial in bringing the black

experience to the fore, which must be made visible in spite of (indeed, *because of*) having been 'hidden' historically. This focus on social relations over material tangibility is one which can also draw attention to the intertwined relationships between black and white people and their families through these sites. There are comparable interconnected narratives of families which can and should be told at British country houses, especially through the children of mixed racial parentage. However, this should include full histories of these relationships, including power and sexual violence, and could also consider other types of 'inter-connections'; the more cultural, social and economic co-dependence that persists through empire and slavery. Some of the strongest lessons to be learnt however, come from the sites owned and run by African Americans. Their focus on injustice, inhumanity and violence, but also resistance, resilience and dignity, the personalized and humanized stories of the enslaved, and the incorporation of work by black artists are all approaches which can be adopted within British country houses.

From the context of British country houses, there is perhaps something to be drawn from the acknowledgement of the *banality* of slavery and empire, and the efforts taken thus far to tell histories which have otherwise been long obscured from view. Are there also more banal, bureaucratic, everyday connections to be made at American plantation museums which go beyond dramatic stories, or speak to the ways in which slavery was sustained for so long and 'normalized'? In relation to efforts to go beyond maritimized narratives of slavery in Britain, can connections be made beyond the boundaries of the plantation? To tell fuller histories of the ways in which these sites connected to other people, places, culture and economy? In this way, much like efforts to avoid placing sole focus on the movements of ships, telling histories that go beyond the plantation can help



guard against the compartmentalization of public memory. There may also be some merit in considering the British focus on the materiality of heritage sites. At Dyrham there were useful connections made to American colonies through the fabric of the building and its contents; the types of wood imported, the flora and fauna of the gardens, which link directly to histories of empire. This is an interpretative strategy which works *with* the grain of public engagement at such sites; utilizing interest and focus in the grandiloquence of elite houses and their lavish material culture to forge connections to slavery and empire in places where it might otherwise be avoided.

The public history of slavery at American plantation museums and British country houses must be understood and considered against national and regional social and political contexts and in line with the broader public memory of slavery in these places. The dominant public memory of slavery in Britain has shaped public understanding of these pasts into fairly one-dimensional silos; the heroic narrative of abolition on the one hand, or, the understanding of ‘involvement’ in slavery meaning only the direct buying, selling, or owning of human beings, rather than any more ‘banal’ or bureaucratic management of the slavery business. Bringing meaningful connections between slavery and the British country house into greater focus will rely on developing a greater public awareness and understanding of these systems and roles. Just as the guide at the Frogmore plantation museum site in Louisiana made clear, the history of cotton cannot be told without a discussion of the enslaved, neither should the ‘successful’ careers of civil servants of the British empire be discussed without acknowledgment of the enslaved, whose forced labor propelled them further into polite society. Further, whilst there is currently a large public debate unravelling over monuments and

museums of the Confederacy in the US, plantation museums, despite their integral financial and cultural role in sustaining systems of enslavement, have largely evaded this scale of public focus and criticism. This picture is in some ways replicated in Britain. Whilst there has been some sustained ongoing public debate surrounding the commemoration and statuary of specific individuals involved in slavery and empire, such as Edward Colston and his legacy in Bristol, and Cecil Rhodes in Oxford, this has not been replicated to the same scale towards country houses. Like confederate monuments, however, plantation museums and British country houses function as memorials to racialized ideologies, of a specifically gendered aggrandizement of a sanitized southern identity in the US, and to ideologies of national pride, economic and cultural power, and class structures in Britain. To bring the systems of enslavement, which underpinned and sustained these institutions, into greater prominence within public history narratives, is to disrupt these ideologies. In both contexts, and a time of increasing racial tension, violence against black and minority ethnic people, and rising political hostility as both Britain and America become more inward-looking, these are precisely the ideologies that should be disrupted and challenged at these sites.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2016-17 reported hate crimes rose by 29%, particularly around the EU referendum result and after the attacks in Westminster Bridge and Manchester Arena. 78% of all reported hate crimes were classified as 'race hate'. Aoife O'Neill, *Hate Crime, England and Wales 2016/17* UK Government Home Office Report, 17 October 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Cook, *Civil War Memories. Contesting the Past in the United States since 1885* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017)

<sup>3</sup> Mitch Landrieu, *In the Shadow of Statues. A White Southerner Confronts History* (Viking Press: New York, 2018)

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<sup>4</sup> James Horton and Lois Horton, eds. *Slavery and Public Memory. The Tough Stuff of American Memory* (New York: New Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> C. F. Bright and P. L. Carter, "Who Are They? Visitors to Louisiana's River Road Plantations," *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 11(3), pp. 262–274 (2016); Stephen Small, "Social Mobilization and Public History of Slavery in the United States", in *Eurocentrism, Racism and Knowledge. Debates on History and Power in Europe and the Americas*, Marta Araújo and Silvia Rodríguez Maeso (Editors), 2015, pp. 229-246. Jennifer L Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery. Race, Ideology and Southern Plantations Museums* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> In Louisiana there is a greater focus on 18<sup>th</sup> century rather than 19<sup>th</sup> century heritage than in other states. This includes an emphasis on French, and to some extent Spanish culture; and on ethnic differences between these two groups and Anglos; and there is a greater emphasis on the multi-racial system of Blacks, so-called mulattoes and whites.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Small, *Inside the Shadows of the Big House. Twenty-First Century Antebellum Slave Cabins in Louisiana Heritage Tourism*, forthcoming, 2019; Stephen Small, "Social Mobilization and Public History of Slavery in the United States"; Carter, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Rebecca J. Scott, *Degrees of Freedom. Louisiana and Cuba After Freedom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2005). Carlyle J Sitterson, *Sugar Country: The Cane Sugar Industry in the South, 1753-1950* (Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 1953).

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Small, "Still Back of the Big House: Slave Cabins and Slavery in Southern Heritage Tourism" *Tourism Geographies: An International Journal of Tourism Space, Place and Environment*, DOI: 10, 2012 pp. 1-19; Stephen Small. "Multiple Methods in Research on 21st Century Plantation Museums and Slave Cabins in the South" in John H. Stanfield, II, *Rethinking Race and Ethnicity in Research Methods* (Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, 2011a) pp. 169-189.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Small, "Slavery, Colonialism and the Transformation of Museum Representations in Great Britain: Old and New Circuits of Migration" in *Human Architecture; Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, IX, 4, Fall, 2011b, pp. 27-38; Stephen Small, "Still Back of the Big House, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Small, Twenty First Century Antebellum Slave Cabins in Louisiana: Race, Public History, and National Identity. Paper presented at the annual conference of the Organization of American Historians, Seattle, Washington, March, 2009, p.2, fn1.

<sup>12</sup> Melrose Plantation in Natchitoches Parish is unusual, because three exceptional women – Marie Therese Coin Coin, Cammie Henry, and Clementine Hunter - occupy central roles in heritage tourism. But this focus on women lacks any significant attention to how gender ideologies operate (Small, 2019 forthcoming).

<sup>13</sup> Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*. p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*. p. 107.

<sup>15</sup> Mills, G. B. *The Forgotten People. Cane Rivers Creoles of Color*. (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press) 1977.

<sup>16</sup> Small, *Social Mobilization and Public History of Slavery*, 2015; Small, 2019 forthcoming.

<sup>17</sup> Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*. p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Micki McElya, *Clinging to Mammy. The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America*, (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Ellen Craft and William Craft, *Running A Thousand Miles to Freedom* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> Evidence of some of the innovative initiatives being carried out at several sites, is described and interpreted via the metaphor of 'symbolic excavation' by some of the foremost Geographers of heritage tourism in the south. See for example, Derek Alderman and Rachel Campbell, 'Symbolic Excavation and the Artifact Politics of Remembering Slavery in the American South. Observations from Walterboro, South Carolina, *Southeastern Geographer*, 48, 3, 2008, pp. 338-355.

<sup>21</sup> An insightful evaluation of the achievements and limitations of Oak Alley's use of slave cabins, deploying the concept of 'commemorative surrogation' is provided by Hanna. These efforts reveal some of the ways in which Oak Alley seeks to move beyond 'symbolic annihilation'. See Stephen P Hanna, 'Placing the enslaved at Oak Alley Plantation; narratives, spatial contexts, and the limits of surrogation', *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, DOI: 10.1080/1743873X.2015. 1100628. Articles by Hanna, and others, such as Derek Alderman, Candace Forbes Bright,

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Perry L Carter, E. Arnold Modlin, and Amy Potter, provide detailed insights into some of the individual sites mentioned here.

<sup>22</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage *The Southern Past. A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005); Kathleen Ann Clark, *Defining Moments. African American Commemoration & Political Culture in the South, 1863-1913*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Glymph, 2003; David Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield. Race, Memory, and the American Civil War* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> Stefanie Benjamin, and Derek Alderman "Performing a different narrative: museum theater and the memory-work of producing and managing slavery heritage at southern plantation museums," *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/13527258.2017.1378906; C. F. Bright and P. L. Carter, "Who Are They? Visitors to Louisiana's River Road Plantations," *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 11(3), pp. 262–274 (2016); Perry Labron Carter, "Where are the enslaved?: TripAdvisor and the narrative landscapes of southern plantations museums" *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, DOI: 10.1080/1743873X.1100625, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

<sup>25</sup> Nilufer Rahim and Lidija Mavra, *Barriers to Engagement in Heritage by Currently under-Represented Groups: An Inclusion Report to the National Audit Office* (The National Audit Office, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> Peter Mandler, "Nationalising the Country House," in Michael Hunter (ed) *Preserving the Past: The Rise of Heritage in Modern Britain* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1996). p. 99

<sup>27</sup> Peter Mandler, *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). p. 1

<sup>28</sup> Mandler "Nationalising the Country House." p. 103

<sup>29</sup> Mandler, *Fall and Rise*. p. 2

<sup>30</sup> Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006). p. 120

<sup>31</sup> Mandler, "Nationalising the Country House." p. 112

<sup>32</sup> Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London: Methuen, 1987); Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London: Verso, 1985).

<sup>33</sup> Smith, *Uses of Heritage.*, p. 11

<sup>34</sup> Smith, *Uses of Heritage.*, p. 117

<sup>35</sup> Smith, *Uses of Heritage.*, p. 126; Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995).

<sup>36</sup> Stephanie Barczewski, *Country Houses and the British Empire, 1700-1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014). p. xiii, 2; A.V. Seaton, "Sources of Slavery-Destinations of Slavery: The Silences and Disclosures of Slavery Heritage in the UK and the US," in G.M. Dann and A.V. Seaton (eds) *Slavery, Contested Heritage, and Thanatourism*, (New York: Haworth Hospitality Press, 2001). p.111, 121

<sup>37</sup> Barczewski, *Country Houses and the British Empire*. p. 8

<sup>38</sup> Barczewski, *Country Houses and the British Empire*. p. 8

<sup>39</sup> Geoffrey Cubitt, "Bringing It Home: Making Local Meaning in 2007 Bicentenary Exhibitions," *Slavery & Abolition* 30, no. 2 (2009).

<sup>40</sup> A useful database of the events of 2007, "Remembering 1807", has been created as part of the AHRC funded Anti-Slavery Usable Past project (Universities of Nottingham and Hull). See <http://antislavery.ac.uk/remembering1807>

<sup>41</sup> Heritage Lottery Fund. "A review of HLF's activity during 2005 – 2007 to mark the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in British ships", March 2009. Available at <https://www.hlf.org.uk/bicentenary-review>; The National Archives. "Government Funding for the bicentenary" (2007)

[http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20070705232216/http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/slavery/DG\\_065898](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20070705232216/http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/slavery/DG_065898)

<sup>42</sup> See Laurajane Smith, Geoffrey Cubitt, and Emma. Waterton, "Guest Editorial: Museums and the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the British Slave Trade," *Museum and Society* 8, no. 3 (2010); Laurajane Smith et al., eds., *Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums: Ambiguous Engagements* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>43</sup> Laurajane Smith, "'Man's Inhumanity to Man' and Other Platitudes of Avoidance and Misrecognition: An Analysis of Visitor Responses to Exhibitions Marking 1807 Bicentenary," *Museum and Society* 8, no. 3 (2010). p. 198

<sup>44</sup> The National Trust is a charitable body established in 1895 and manages around 350 heritage properties, made up predominantly of country houses and their estates in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, but also includes some natural spaces, landscapes and industrial monuments. Scotland has its own National Trust. The National Trust is one of the largest landowners in England.

<sup>45</sup> Katherine Hann and Jacqueline Roy, "Addressing the Past" *National Trust Magazine* Spring 2007 pp. 20-23

<sup>46</sup> Letters, *National Trust Magazine*, Summer 2007 p. 9

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- <sup>47</sup> “The National Trust Magazine, Spring 2007 Edition” *Stormfront.org* <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t362691/> [accessed 3 November 2017]
- <sup>48</sup> John Oldfield, *‘Chords of Freedom’: Commemoration, ritual and British transatlantic slavery* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007)
- <sup>49</sup> The ‘maritimization’ of Britain’s memory of slavery has been achieved through a memorial focus on maritime activities and trade, including a dominant narrative focus more on the slave *trade* than the institution of slavery on plantations, and the location of most museums and heritage work around slavery in port cities such as Liverpool and Bristol. See John Beech, G., “The Marketing of Slavery Heritage in the United Kingdom,” in G.M. Dann and A.V. Seaton, *Slavery, Contested Heritage, and Thanatourism* (New York: Haworth Hospitality Press, 2001); John Beech, “A Step Forwards or a Step Sideways?: Some Personal Reflections of How the Presentation of Slavery Has (and Hasn’t) Changed in the Last Few Years,” <http://www.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/exhibitions/museums/step.html> [accessed August 21, 2013]. However, this ‘maritimization’ can also challenge distancing and forgetting by remembering the enslaved, see Jessica Moody, “Liverpool’s Local Tints: Drowning Memory and ‘Maritimising’ Slavery in a Seaport Slavery”, in Katie Donington, Ryan Hanley, and Jessica Moody (eds) *Britain’s History and Memory of Transatlantic Slavery: Local Nuances of a ‘National Sin’*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016).
- <sup>50</sup> Stuart Hall, “Whose Heritage? Un-Settling ‘the Heritage’ Re-Imagining the Post-Nation,” *Third Text* 49, no. 13 (1999).
- <sup>51</sup> *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership Database* <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/>. [accessed on 30 May 2018]
- <sup>52</sup> Nicholas Draper, “Slave Ownership and the British Country House: The Records of the Slave Compensation Commission as Evidence,” in Madge Dresser and Andrew Hann (eds) *Slavery and the British Country House* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2013).
- <sup>53</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Faber, 1963).
- <sup>54</sup> “Executive Summary of Major Project: Dyrham Park,” (The National Trust, ND). Internal document, referred to with permission.
- <sup>55</sup> The National Trust, *Research Strategy 2017-2021* (Swindon: The National Trust, 2016). p. 10
- <sup>56</sup> Rupert Goulding, *Dyrham Park and William Blaythwayt* (Swindon: The National Trust, 2017). p. 5, 11; Madge Dresser, “Slavery and West Country Houses,” in Madge Dresser and Andrew Hann (eds) *Slavery and the British Country House* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2013).p 23
- <sup>57</sup> Goulding, *Dyrham Park*. p. 11
- <sup>58</sup> Rupert Goulding, interview by Jessica Moody, 6 February 2018, 2018, Dyrham Park.
- <sup>59</sup> Goulding, *Dyrham Park*. p. 5, 11
- <sup>60</sup> The National Trust, *Dyrham Park Guide Book* (Swindon: The National Trust, 2009). p. 3
- <sup>61</sup> Trust, *Dyrham Park Guide Book*. p. 8
- <sup>62</sup> Goulding, *Dyrham Park*.
- <sup>63</sup> Barczewski, *Country Houses and the British Empire*. p. 164
- <sup>64</sup> Barczewski, *Country Houses and the British Empire*. p. 223, 226
- <sup>65</sup> Trust, *Dyrham Park Guide Book*. p. 4; Goulding, *Dyrham Park*.
- <sup>66</sup> Goulding, *Interview*
- <sup>67</sup> Shawn Sobers and Robert Mitchell, “**Re**: Interpretation: The Representation of Perspectives on Slave Trade History Using Creative Media,” in Madge Dresser and Andrew Hann (eds) *Slavery and the British Country House* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2013).p. 146
- <sup>68</sup> Goulding, *Interview*
- <sup>69</sup> Trust, *Dyrham Park Guide Book*. p. 9
- <sup>70</sup> *A Delight for All the Senses: Or a Guide to Mr Blaythwayt’s Apartment ...* (Dyrham Park: The National Trust, 2015).
- <sup>71</sup> Goulding, *Dyrham Park*.; “A close up on a challenging history” Slave stand interpretation cards, Dyrham Park, National Trust
- <sup>72</sup> “The Remains of Slavery” *Civilization Stories*, Series 1, BBC1. First broadcast 30<sup>th</sup> April 2018.
- <sup>73</sup> Goulding, *Dyrham Park*. p. 43
- <sup>74</sup> “A close up on a challenging history”. Emphasis original.
- <sup>75</sup> See for example, Alan Rice, “Revealing Histories, Dialogising Collections: Museums and Galleries in North West England Commemorating the Abolition of the Slave Trade,” *Slavery & Abolition* 30, no. 2 (2009).
- <sup>76</sup> Goulding, *Interview*.
- <sup>77</sup> Goulding, *Interview*.

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<sup>78</sup> Caroline Bressey, "Contesting the Political Legacy of Slavery in England's Country Houses: A Case Study of Kenwood House and Osborne House " in Madge Dresser and Andrew Hann (eds), *Slavery and the British Country House* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2013).