

UNSETTLING AUTHENTICITY, QUEERING LANDSCAPES: THE ROLE OF NATURE AT
THREE STATE HISTORIC SITES IN DURHAM, NORTH CAROLINA

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ABSTRACT

Mary T. Biggs: Unsettling Authenticity, Queering Landscapes: The Role of Nature at Three State Historic Sites in Durham, North Carolina
(Under the direction of Banu Gökarkırsel and Christian Lentz)

Today, the outdoor landscapes of Durham's three state historic sites resemble each other closely. Historic Stagville, Bennett Place, and Duke Homestead all have mown grass lawns, large stands of trees, and nature trails. However, none of these sites would have looked this way during the historical periods they represent. In fact, certain aspects of these landscapes actually obscure vital historical truths, and the attention to authenticity inside the buildings of these public historic sites differs considerably from the management and interpretation of the physical landscapes outside. Drawing on scholarship in cultural landscape and authenticity, as well as queer theory, I investigate how site staff manage landscapes around preserved buildings and how visitors experience these managed spaces. Through a queer landscape analytic, I seek to unsettle the constructed natural landscapes in which we learn about the past and deepen our understandings of how articulations of the past act in our present.

To Gramma Mary, who taught me how to look, listen, and be curious.

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INTRODUCTION

Entering Bennett Place State Historic Site in Durham, North Carolina, feels like stepping back in time. The long, low stone wall; the grassy field marked by split-rail fences; the forest that surrounds the site and gives it an air of isolation despite its proximity to the interstate: all contribute to a space that feels distinctly other. Bennett Place is an oasis of green on a road that is otherwise filled with fast-food restaurants and office buildings, and Drew Smith, the site's landscape technician, is proud of it. When visitors remark on the beauty of the site, he says, he knows he's done his job. Indeed, maintaining a lawn and forested paths where the Bennett family would have grazed animals is easier, safer, and more appealing to visitors than maintaining a nineteenth-century livestock farm. Neither isolated nor frozen in time, Bennett Place's landscape is managed and maintained in the present, within present-day constraints, priorities, and considerations.

Bennett Place does not look today as it did in 1865, when two generals met at a small farmhouse and signed a treaty of Confederate surrender. However, it *does* look quite a bit like Historic Stagville and Duke Homestead: two other North Carolina state historic sites that sit within ten miles of downtown Durham. The same grassy lawns surround wooden buildings and fences; the same thick stands of pine and maple trees mark where the modern world ends and historic space begins. In short, all three operate within a consistent aesthetic of historic space that is notable precisely because it is *not* historically accurate. The tension between historical accuracy and modern priorities at these sites raises fundamental questions: Through what practices do site managers mark and manage a landscape to tell a certain narrative, and what

sociocultural traditions are upheld at the intersection of landscape design and cultural heritage management? How do visitors engage with the landscapes of these historic sites and how do embodied experiences inform historical education? How are dominant narratives of history encoded in physical landscape, specifically in relationship to constructed natural space, and how can landscapes allow, or foreclose, additional retellings of historical narratives?

My research aims to unsettle the constructed natural landscapes that surround and encompass preserved buildings through attention to management practices and decisions that are often invisible to visitors and unspoken in guided tours. I am interested in the cultural conceptions that shape the aesthetics of historic space that these landscapes enact and perpetuate. Through theoretical study and fieldwork at Durham's three state historic sites, I investigate how historical authenticity is constructed and experienced in the landscape at these sites. I analyze the priorities of site staff who are responsible for managing these landscapes and read their priorities alongside visitor engagement with the resulting spaces. In examining why, where, and how site staff intervene in ecological processes, and how these interventions shape embodied visitor encounters with history, I trouble the givenness of an assumed historical landscape and attend to the marginalized histories that are further lost when landscapes are assumed by visitors to be historically accurate.

Research Sites

Bennett Place, Stagville, and Duke Homestead tell a story of Durham that begins with eighteenth-century white settlement and black enslavement. Historic Stagville was, at one time, the largest plantation in North Carolina, encompassing 30,000 acres and enslaving nearly 1,000 Africans and African Americans at its height (Wise, 2003). Stagville tour guides narrate white owning and Black enslaved life in what would become Durham before the Civil War, and often

follow the experiences of Black sharecroppers after emancipation. The site today includes the Bennehan House built in the late 1700s, several cabins built by and for enslaved people in the 1840s, and a huge barn completed by enslaved carpenters in 1860. The site is partially bordered by Triangle Nature Conservancy land, and several hiking trails begin from behind the preserved cabins.

Bennett Place marks the site where Generals William Sherman and Joseph Johnston met to negotiate and then sign a treaty that surrendered 89,270 Confederate soldiers in April 1865 (Cheng, 2002). Although the original farmhouse burned down in the late 1800s, it was rebuilt in 1960 with materials sourced from a nearby farmhouse dating to the 1840s (Bennett Place State Historic Site, 2012). A long, low stone wall separates the modern road from the historic site's field where Civil War reenactments are held on a regular basis. Beyond the field, a small forest is cut through with walking trails.

Duke Homestead was the site of the Duke family's first tobacco farm before they moved their growing business into nascent Durham. Tour guides narrate the family's rise to fortune as parallel to – and, indeed, partially responsible for – Durham's own growth as an urban center. The site includes a small museum, tobacco barns, several garden rows planted with tobacco, and the Dukes' white house. The site itself is surrounded by thick forests, and a large field edged with split-rail fences includes several picnic tables.

Together, Stagville, Bennett Place, and Duke Homestead tell a state-approved version of the area's history. A visitor could progress through a version of the area's past from the 1700s to today by journeying between sites; indeed, a recently-released tour for school groups offers just that, with an emphasis on African American experiences from enslavement at Stagville, through emancipation at Bennett Place and sharecropping at Duke Homestead, to today. Chronology here

is fixed in place, requiring each site to narrate a specific time. Yet, all of the sites look the same as each other today. Despite each site's specific historic goal, the trees, grass, split rail fences, and nature trails are consistent, predictable. The similarities in landscapes compared to the differences in chronology make these sites a strong sample from which to gain a deeper understanding of the methods through which three different staffs manage physical landscapes of historic sites.

At my three research sites, landscape is not just an important aspect of the sites: it is fundamental to re-scaling larger cultural histories so as to make them available for affective, individual learning and consumption. The North Carolina Historic Sites (NCHS) program, of which all three sites are part, emphasizes hands-on engagement with the past and personal discovery of North Carolina's history. Program promotional materials emphasize visceral, embodied experiences in which visitors feel sensations and experience emotions that connect them to the past. As part of the NCHS program, my three research sites share a philosophy of making history come alive, open for visitor experiences. They are set apart from learning history in books or classrooms precisely because they allow a different kind of access to the past: an access grounded in the spatialized, the ambient, and the sensory. Visitors are invited to learn, explore, and experience history materially in embodied, immersive ways. Although each site narrates a different moment in time, each site emphasizes the opportunity to learn about the past in places where historical events occurred. Stagville is not just a museum, but an open-air complex of buildings built by enslaved laborers through which visitors can walk and navigate themselves. Bennett Place maintains a split-rail fence outlining the track of the Old Hillsborough Road on which the generals met and along which visitors can walk today. Duke Homestead includes a small tobacco field where visitors can see the crop growing, ostensibly where

Washington Duke planted it. At my three research sites, historical education becomes a personal experience, a personal journey, through engagement with space.

Theoretical Context

My theoretical work for this project draws on three broad themes: heritage, landscapes, and authenticity. Within the context of state-owned historic sites, I unsettle heritage landscapes and query conceptions of authenticity. Attending to scholars of queer theory, I offer a queer analytic of historic site landscapes that allows for examination of how we represent and imagine the past in this particular contemporary time and place.

Heritage, Landscape, and the State: A Background

I engage with theories of heritage through the work of geographer Derek Alderman, who has written widely on landscape and memory in the U.S. South. I follow Alderman's claim that articulations of the past in the present are never politically neutral. "While memory is ostensibly about the past, it is shaped to serve ideological interests in the present and to carry certain cultural beliefs into the future" (Alderman & Inwood, 2013, p. 186). My work, then, is not solely interested in the past, but in the present and future as well. I see public historic sites like Duke Homestead, Bennett Place, and Stagville as places where memory is made, both conceptually and materially. Examining the physical spaces through which memory is made available for public consumption offers an opportunity to understand what ideological interests and cultural beliefs are in play.

In the U.S. South, conceptions of heritage and the past have been mobilized by myriad social groups, often with competing political aims. The United Daughters of the Confederacy are one of the more famous groups to articulate collective memories of a Southern past with the purpose of maintaining white supremacy and justifying the South's part in the Civil War (Heyse,

2008). However, scholars within and outside of the academy have also pushed for a greater understanding and preservation of Black heritage experiences and spaces, framing heritage preservation as necessary to deeper understandings of Black histories and futures in the U.S. (Leggs, 2018; Gordon-Reed, 2008).

The management and interpretation of plantation landscapes, specifically, has come under close scrutiny by scholars concerned with preserving Black history and experiences. A focus on the modern landscapes of historic plantation sites in tours and interpretive materials has, all too often, directed public attention away from the vital, complex histories of oppressed communities. Studies have shown that tour guides at Southern plantation sites are far more likely to discuss a plantation's gardens – its landscape – rather than the enslaved people forced to toil in those gardens (Hanna et al., 2018). Landscapes here seem to assert a kind of neutrality – a “safer” history to share with the public than that of enslavement and its ongoing impacts in our world. Of course, the tendency of some tour guides to highlight landscape over enslavement at plantation sites is anything but neutral.

My research builds on previous work in heritage studies by engaging with the specific actors that create and reproduce ways of talking and thinking about place and history. Despite copious and exciting work on the spatial organization of historic sites (Ryan et al., 2016), memorial landscapes more broadly (Alderman & Inwood, 2013), and the politics of what narratives are preserved as history (Gordon-Reed, 2008; Modlin et al., 2011; Gable & Handler, 1993), there is a dearth of investigation into the material processes of commemoration and historic preservation written on the land. A recent work on the intersection of landscape and narrative theory calls for further research into the ways in which landscape and space impact visitor consumption of history at historic sites, as well as how these historical landscapes

“change and hybridize through time” (Ryan et al., 2016, p. 180). If we follow scholars who assert the importance of the visceral, ambient, and material aspects of place (Blair et al., 2010; Lauzon, 2019), then the landscapes of historic sites are central to the study of meaning-making that occurs through public pedagogy at and through historic sites like Bennett Place, Duke Homestead, and Stagville.

My engagement with landscape is informed by numerous geographers who have taken up the subject over the past several decades. Don Mitchell’s (1996) work on the rural working landscapes of California is particularly foundational to this project. In his seminal book, *The Lie of the Land*, Mitchell articulates how landscapes subsume and naturalize the labor that shapes them, thereby also naturalizing structurally oppressive labor relations and political realities such that they appear given and inevitable instead of constructed. I follow Mitchell’s lead by attending to the unseen site management practices that shape physical landscapes, interrogating the cultural and political realities that underpin these practices in the process.

Because all three of my research sites are part of the North Carolina Historic Sites program, the state of North Carolina is also part of my research project. By presenting public historic sites as doorways to the past, the state of North Carolina works to legitimize certain historical narratives by making them spatially accessible for individual consumption. As other scholars have articulated about “the state” more broadly, the state of North Carolina is a performative, semiotic, and ongoing process (Geertz, 1980; Abrams, 1977). It is an imagined community in Benedict Anderson’s (1991) sense, constructed through ongoing social processes including the creation of a communal, national past. Shaping and presenting a history of North Carolina is a vital part of shaping the entity of the state itself. By projecting an idea of North Carolina into the past, even, in some cases, before it was a political entity, the state historic sites

do real work. They emphasize a givenness to the current state and current state of affairs. They reach back into the past and pull out certain narratives that shape and define subjectivity within North Carolina. The landscapes that surround the reconstructed or original buildings and visitor centers are fundamental to this embodied access and provide useful sites of analysis because of the givenness they evoke, the narratives on which they draw, and the feelings they create, or aim to create, in the visitors who encounter them.

Queering Heritage Landscapes

My thesis queers the Southern historic landscape. In other words, I bring a queer analytic to bear on the physical landscapes of Stagville, Bennett Place, and Duke Homestead. Following Jaclyn Pryor (2017), I use the word “queer” to mean a disruption of patterns, relationships, and assumptions that are considered normal, natural, and desirable. Scholars of queer theory have shown us that much can be gained when we dig into the structures and assumptions underlying normalized – and normalizing – time and space (Halberstam, 2005). I offer a queer landscape analytic that unsettles the given past and given historical spaces to access and query the structures that shape them.

A queer analytic further troubles the teleological historical narratives often presented at heritage sites. Pryor (2017) identifies “straight time” as the linear narrative of progress that structures heteronormative and patriarchal life possibilities (e.g. puberty, marriage, having biological children, having biological grandchildren). Pryor writes that queer time, as opposed to straight time, “resists a simple progress narrative, and...reflects the actual temporalities of many queer and trans lives, mine included: nonlinear, multiplicitous, cyclical, spontaneous, delayed, defrayed, destroyed, deferred, derailed, disjointed, erratic, melancholic, and ecstatic...life on the margins of time” (Pryor, 2017, p. 30). Whiteness is often articulated in connection with straight

time as the neutral, normal version of the human (Sharpe, 2016; Wynter, 2015). My project thus works to trouble, not just landscapes seen as given, but normalized and normalizing articulations of the past that work in tandem with whiteness and heteronormativity to shape the present.

To do so, I draw also on geographer Gillian Rose's (2007) "critical visual methodology" which aims to complicate and interrogate visuals that shape and represent the world. Rose notes the importance of the visual to Western culture and maintains that images of and within the world are never innocent, but rather interpretations of the world that display particular things in particular ways. The landscapes of my research sites are inevitably visual for most visitors. However, the visual is only one part of how they are experienced as visitors move through them touching the old buildings, smelling the scents of grass and pine, and feeling the sunlight or a chill in the air. Indeed, in an earlier work on feminism in geography, Rose (1993) cautions against a limited, limiting view of landscape that assumes a transparency and universality of interpretation: a "visual ideology" (p. 87). Rose's critical visual methodology works at a contradictory crux: both aiming to de-center the visual within Western culture, and attending to the visual, critically, as something that shapes and is shaped by social processes. My research is also located at this crux. By offering a queer landscape analytic, I hope to both attend to the visual components of my sites' landscapes and acknowledge the embodied experiences of visitors and site staff as they move through and shape these spaces.

In her book, *Visual Methodologies*, Rose (2007) develops an idea of genre that attends to the repetition of certain visual aspects in images of a certain type. She writes insightfully: "It helps to make sense of the significance of elements of an individual image if you know that some of them recur repeatedly in other images" (p. 16). For my research, I use Rose's conception of genre to articulate my own idea of a historical genre of landscape design. Treating my three

research sites as visual entities with repetitive elements (mown grass lawns and thick stands of trees, specifically) allows for examination both of how managers shape the historical genre in landscape and how visitors experience this genre – make sense of the elements – in relation to public narratives of history.

Following Pryor (2017), I suggest that queering landscape allows for engagement with non-linear, non-normative, and non-white chronologies and realities. The landscapes of my research sites are neither inevitable nor neutral. The landscapes do not match archival sources that depict these sites in the nineteenth century – at times, they deviate so dramatically from archival sources that certain historical truths are obscured. Neither are these landscapes left untouched. Rather, the landscapes of Stagville, Bennett Place, and Duke Homestead are maintained specifically to be neutral backdrops to a preserved history. Examining the construction – what reads as neutral – affords a window, not into the past, but into how we think about the past in this particular contemporary moment. In addition, I posit that these landscapes both enact and perpetuate a sense of the historical that feeds on existing thoughts about the past, with an emphasis on the place of nature in history and the sensory experiences of authenticity. In the process, authenticity emerges, not as a given aspect of a place or object, but as an inherently relational, and inherently embodied, experience.

Research Methods

Interviews form the basis of my empirical data. I conducted semi-structured interviews (Longhurst, 2010) with site managers and landscape technicians at all three of Durham's state historic sites. Although I did not explicitly collect demographic data for any of my interviewees, I provide a brief overview of these individuals here to further contextualize my research. All three site managers are white women, two of whom have worked at other historic sites

previously. One has not, but has been working at her current site in some capacity for ten years now. All three balance different priorities and goals, as I explain in more detail in Chapter 1. At the time of my interviews, only Bennett Place and Stagville had landscape technicians: both white men, one of whom moved to North Carolina from Connecticut several years ago, one of whom grew up a handful of miles from the historic site where he now works. Both men noted that they provide landscape assistance at Duke Homestead as needed and help each other at their respective sites as well.

I also conducted semi-structured interviews with site visitors over two weeks in July 2019 at Historic Stagville. Although official data on visitor demographics were not available to me at any of the sites, cursory observations and casual conversation indicated that the visitors with whom I spoke at Stagville were diverse in age, race and ethnicity, gender, and hometowns. I spoke with people from Mexico, Germany, Oklahoma, Virginia, and the Dominican Republic, as well as more local visitors from other towns in North Carolina. Visitors often came in groups of families, extended families, or friends, although some came alone as well. Several had been to Stagville before but were returning with first-time visitors, often children or relatives from out of town. Others were passing through the area and spoke about finding Stagville online when they searched for plantation sites to visit in the South.

I focused specifically on Stagville for visitor interviews due to feasibility and because Stagville's landscape is so intimately connected to power. Site staff are working hard to center enslaved experiences through interpretation; I was curious to know if these efforts were impacting visitor interpretations of landscape. To ensure I was able to talk to people, I went on the free guided tours, built rapport with the other tour participants, and asked for interview volunteers directly after the tour ended. Because Stagville tours tend to run between an hour and

an hour and a half, and because it was July in Durham, I emphasized that my questions would only take five minutes and offered small water bottles as incentive to answer my questions. On every tour I shadowed, at least one person, and often several, stayed to speak with me. Each tour included anywhere from three to fourteen other people of diverse racial and gender backgrounds. With one exception, I conducted all of the interviews directly after the tours in some shade near the Great Barn. The one exception was an older woman who had gone back to the visitor center after her tour finished and found me there before she left. In total, I conducted 6 interviews with staff and 17 interviews with Stagville visitors over 14 total visits to all three sites.

The main limitation of my visitor interview set-up was that I only spoke with Stagville visitors who went on one of the three free guided tours of the day. Everyone whom I interviewed had been through the site with a tour guide, so I missed the perspective of those visitors who come to the site, walk around one or both parts of it without going in the buildings, and draw their own conclusions about what they see and feel. All of the interviews I conducted reflect views of the site that were mediated and shaped, at least in part, by a guided tour. The differences between what various tour guides highlight or do not highlight were often reflected in the responses I collected. For example, when tour guides pointed out the marks of a handheld ax on one of the cabins' rafter beams, visitors from that tour would often refer back to the rafter when discussing authenticity. I return to the content of Stagville's guided tours in Chapter 2.

In all, I witnessed five different tour guides at Stagville over my two weeks conducting visitor interviews. Two were summer interns from nearby universities: both young Black women who were conducting their own research projects in Stagville's archives in addition to giving at least one guided tour each day. One was Stagville's assistant site manager, a Black woman who had just begun the position in summer 2019. One was a volunteer, an older Black woman who

identified herself as a retired teacher. The last tour guide whom I heard was a white man who is a part-time employee of Stagville. Although these were the only five I heard give tours, I interacted with several other volunteer tour guides and interpreters during my participant observation.

A note on my own positionality is useful here, informing, as it did, my experiences at these sites and my relationships with interview participants. I am a young white woman who was born and raised in the U.S. South by highly-educated parents from the mid-Atlantic. My accent is far more mid-Atlantic than Southern, but I understand Southern accents easily (a fact which the landscape technician from North Carolina noted gratefully in our interview). My position as a UNC graduate student facilitated smooth introductions to site leadership and a recognizable reason for asking for interview participants among Stagville visitors. I grew up going to public historic sites all over the East Coast with my parents and grandparents, so I am intimately familiar with accepted cultural codes of conduct in these spaces. Furthermore, having lived in Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C., Spain, and now central North Carolina, I was able to connect with interview participants from a wide range of geographic backgrounds. Of course, my position as a white woman in modern American society further guaranteed that I would be made welcome in public spaces and inevitably shaped my interviews with both visitors and site staff.

I conducted participant observation to explore how visitors relate to the spaces of my research sites. Participant observation allows embodied, subjective experiences to lead the researcher in her fieldwork (Laurier, 2010). My own participant observation took the form of going on free guided tours at all three of Durham's state historic sites with members of the public; spending time sitting at picnic tables at all three sites and observing how various groups

of people used the spaces; and volunteering as a guest interpreter at Historic Stagville during the fall homeschool day in October 2019. Each of these experiences allowed me to use my own body as an instrument of research (Longhurst, 2008). I took note of what emotions and affective encounters I experienced at the sites, how other visitors engaged with the history and the space both outside of and during formal tours, and learned the excitement and challenge of engaging members of the public through historical interpretation firsthand. Copious fieldnotes taken during tours and after my experience as an interpretive guide allowed me to analyze these experiences textually as well, drawing them into a coding structure that made them legible alongside my interview transcripts.

Finally, I employed textual analysis to understand the narratives that the historic sites individually, and the North Carolina Historic Sites program overall, present about themselves in relationship to local history, authenticity, and the state of North Carolina (DeLyser, 1999). This analysis focused on documents such as self-guided tours, brochures, and websites. I treat these texts as archival documents that do social and political work (Stoler, 2009). The brochures and websites do not act as transparent windows upon an objective truth, but as reflections of how program and site staff position the sites in relationship to North Carolina's past, present, and future.

Thesis Organization

In the chapters that follow, I read my empirical data gathered from interviews and participant observation alongside literature on heritage, landscape, and authenticity. My aim is to unsettle the constructed natural landscapes of my research sites – to queer them – by attending to the management practices that shape them and the visitor responses that occur within them. In Chapter 1, I examine the priorities and considerations site staff balance when managing and

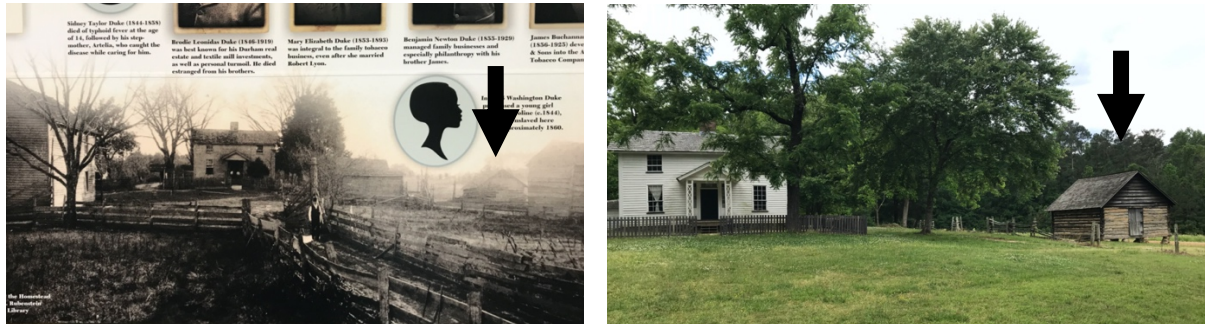
maintaining historic site landscapes. I attend particularly to how staff talk about the thick stands of trees and mown grass lawns at all three sites to investigate the role of tourism and conceptions of nature in shaping the genre of historic space. In Chapter 2, I draw on visitor interviews from Stagville to examine how visitors who go on guided tours at Stagville conceptualize authenticity in immersive and embodied ways. My conclusion draws these findings together to form an idea of historicized landscape that ultimately captures how historic sites are constructed, experienced, and projected into the future.

CHAPTER 1: MANAGING THE LANDSCAPE

Viewed from the road, Duke Homestead State Historic Site appears as a parking lot, a field with picnic tables and a split-rail fence, and a long, low building surrounded by trees. After parking, visitors are ushered immediately inside the building, which contains a small visitor center and museum complete with tobacco processing tools and farming equipment from the mid-1800s. A docent at the front desk hands out maps of the site's historic buildings with directions to exit the museum from a side door and turn left. Following the directions, the experience changes. A concrete path along the side of the museum quickly gives way to gravel, then packed earth. Visitors pass through a stand of trees, thick enough on all sides in summer and fall to create an illusion of forest. The first historic building comes into view framed by trees and fronted by a mown lawn; if one turns back to look, the museum and parking lot are now invisible, screened by the stand of trees with only a small dirt path leading back towards them.

The hallmarks of the historic space genre are clear: trees; grass; gravel and dirt paths leading from museums to old buildings; picnic tables. Today's landscape, however, differs starkly from the landscape depicted in the grainy photograph (*Figure 1.1*) mounted on an outer museum wall. Serving as a backdrop for a Duke family tree, the photograph shows Washington Duke standing facing the camera. Behind and around him are log and board buildings, only some of which still stand on the property. Lone trees flank two of the buildings and crops are clearly visible in the foreground. A rolling field is visible behind the buildings with a blurry tree line on the horizon. Standing in the photographer's place today yields a very different view: lush mown

grass where there were crops and swept dirt; a thick forest of pine trees crowding up to the house where before there were expansive fields (*Figure 1.2*).



Figures 1.1 and 1.2: A view of Washington Duke’s homestead in the late 1800s serves as background for a Duke family tree on a sign at Duke Homestead State Historic Site (left). The same view of Duke Homestead State Historic Site in October 2018 (right). Arrows point to the same tobacco barn in both.

In this chapter, I draw on semi-structured interviews with site managers and landscape technicians at Duke Homestead, Bennett Place, and Stagville to interrogate the priorities site staff balance when managing and maintaining landscapes that frame historic structures. I further explore what sociocultural traditions are upheld at the intersection of landscape design and cultural heritage management, and what considerations shape these landscapes in addition to – and sometimes more than – alignment with a certain historical moment.

Through my interviews, I learned that site managers and staff possess quite a bit of autonomy at these sites when it comes to outdoor landscaping. This is important for my research because it means that, despite the fact that all three sites are part of the North Carolina Historic Sites program, there is little to no governmental oversight of the outdoor spaces of sites. Despite the legitimacy Duke Homestead, Bennett Place, and Stagville receive from being state historic sites, the similarities between the outdoor landscapes of each do not arise from any state-level ordinance or mandate. Rather, I am interested in them precisely because they are all shaped by

different people with strikingly similar results, suggesting that there is a consistent vocabulary, a shared aesthetic, at work here.

The state of North Carolina is not absent at these sites. Rather, state-level leadership is concerned with aspects other than the outdoor landscape, specifically broad interpretive themes and building maintenance. Mission statements at all three sites provide grounding and structure for interpretive priorities, and several interviewees mentioned that the director of the North Carolina Division of State Historic Sites has pushed for broader African American inclusion in historic interpretation on a state-wide level. In addition, state policies require any construction on or around preserved buildings to adhere to a strict set of standards. Both Drew Smith and Tony Strother – the head landscape maintenance technicians at Bennett Place and Stagville, respectively – noted that they cannot dig around the historic buildings without first contacting state archaeologists. When the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century buildings at Stagville need repairs, a state craft services agency arrives with period-specific materials repurposed from other sites. Interestingly, Smith noted that he also has to use period-correct materials when repairing the Bennetts’ farmhouse, despite the fact that the farmhouse at Bennett Place today is a twentieth-century replica of the original structure. However, any space beyond the buildings and their immediate surroundings seems to be left up to individual sites and their landscape technicians. Strother notes that the landscape around Stagville’s buildings is “pretty much up to date:” a stark temporal contrast to the buildings and interiors.

Julie Hoekstra, the site manager at Duke Homestead, prioritizes material culture in her management plan, specifically costumed interpretation. “A big part of running a living history museum,” she said, is “having the costuming sorted out – and authentic costuming, no less. Not all clothing stuff out there is created equal, and you’ve got to research and know what’s

appropriate.” Hoekstra’s comments equate “living history” with period-specific clothing. She notes that extensive research is required to do living history properly, and connects historical authenticity with materials and techniques consistent with a specific historical period.

Still, when I steer the conversation to the outdoor landscape of Duke Homestead, Hoekstra’s position on historical accuracy immediately changes. When I asked Hoekstra if Duke Homestead’s current landscape bore any resemblance to its historic reality, she shook her head with a laugh. “The Duke family would *not* have had a lot of trees around.” She motioned out the window at the thick pine trees that stretch alongside the visitor center. “Any farmer family on their property probably won’t have many trees because you need that land for planting.” She laughed again, emphasizing that assuming a farm would have any trees at all is ridiculous. “I mean, we’re in the mid- to late-nineteenth century now when we’re talking the Duke family. If it was 1810 or 1710 or something, then yeah, there’d be a lot of woods still around as they slowly start to clear but no, we’re in the Victorian era, we’ve got stuff cleared.” To Hoekstra, Duke Homestead does not interpret “the past,” but rather a specific historical moment: the late 1870s, to be exact. Interestingly, however, her insistence on period-specific clothing and interpretation does not translate to an insistence on a period-specific outdoor landscape.

Hoekstra is not alone in her distinction between period-specificity inside and “up to date” landscapes outside. Again and again in my interviews with managers and technicians, a vivid difference emerged between how site staff conceptualize buildings versus the buildings’ grounds in relationship to historical specificity. As Diane Smith, Bennett Place’s site manager, noted: “The historic area, we have to be careful because we have to keep it as close to what it looked like at the time.” However, she herself has made some changes to the broader landscape. “Most families had kitchen gardens back in the day. I made my own changes to it, versus what was

there before, which was not much of anything.” Smith’s own creativity must take a backseat to historical specificity around and within the reconstructed buildings. However, she can give it free rein on the landscape, using what she knows of Piedmont farms in the 1860s to put her own spin on the site. One could almost envision an invisible line that encircles the buildings, delineating the spaces where period-specificity is prioritized and where it is not. State oversight stops short at that invisible line. The outdoor landscapes beyond these lines reflect, not state direction, but individual managers making autonomous choices. While site managers are certainly aware of available archival evidence of their sites’ period landscapes, they do not insist on compliance.

The question remains: if not adhering to a specific archival record of how a given site would have looked at a given historical moment, and not following any kind of state-wide management plan, how do these outdoor landscapes come to look the way they do today? What purpose(s) are the outdoor landscapes serving and how do site managers think about these purposes? In other words: if period-specificity is not a priority, what are site managers and landscape technicians prioritizing when managing the “non-historic” parts of their sites? Furthermore, how does the resulting landscape management erase historical inequalities and everyday forms of violence that were part of a former landscape design?

Lawns and “Curb Appeal”

In 1865, the Bennetts’ farmhouse would have been surrounded by swept dirt and chickens. A contemporary engraving of the Confederate surrender published in 1865 in Harper’s Weekly shows the Union and Confederate forces meeting (*Figure 1.3*). Beneath the soldiers’ feet, there is what looks like dirt; indeed, most small farms in the U.S. South had swept dirt yards in the nineteenth century (Jenkins, 1994). Drew Smith, Bennett Place’s current landscape technician, laughed when I asked him if Bennett Place today looked as it would have when the

generals met. “Mr. Bennett wouldn’t have had lawn. It would’ve been dirt and it would’ve been chickens.” He shook his head. “But that’s not that attractive.” Smith’s comments suggest that strict attention to period specificity, at least in the case of the Bennetts’ yard, is not actually what he as the landscape technician prioritizes. Rather, a certain idea of attractiveness takes priority over an archivally-authentic landscape.



Figure 1.3: Engraving published in Harper’s Weekly in 1865 shows the typical Southern swept dirt yard surrounding the Bennett farmhouse and buildings. Accessed via Open Durham.

Certainly, much can be said about how differently Bennett Place is used today from the 1860s. Bennett Place as a farm and Bennett Place as a historic site and tourist destination are, in many ways, two completely different entities, despite the historic site’s insistence on its proximity to the past. However, the landscapes of historic sites are not static either. In the early 2000s, Bennett Place’s landscape was again different from how it looks today. Ryan Reed, the assistant site manager, described it as the “abandoned farm feel,” dominated by high grass, brushy hedges, and dirt around the historic buildings. Drew Smith noted that when he started working at the site nearly four years ago, it felt very overgrown:

To me, that wasn't inviting to the visitor. When you bring children, you want to let them play in that field. If the grass is knee-high, there's ticks, there's snakes, and they [parents] are less likely to go, 'Run and play in the field, kids.' Now, when I see people let their kids run there, just run aimlessly and roll over in the grass, I know I've done my job.

Smith's attention to both visitor safety and visitor recreation manifest as a mown grassy lawn throughout the site. He uses words like "clean" and "crisp" in the same breath as "safe" and "inviting," and ties it all to evenly-mown grass. "I've got a long stretch of road frontage," he said when I asked about his approach to landscape maintenance. "That's my curb appeal right there." Smith's management practice aims to create an appealing visual aesthetic that draws in potential visitors. Once the visitors arrive, he hopes they enjoy their time in green space as much as they enjoy learning about history. For Smith, curb appeal is not a byproduct of his management, but the ultimate goal: a goal achieved through keeping a lush green lawn cut close.



Figures 1.4 and 1.5: The reconstructed Bennett farmhouse in 2009 (left) and 2018 (right). Lush mown grass now encircles the entire structure. Photo credit (left): Gary Kueber, accessed via Open Durham; (right) author

The queer landscape analytic I offer unsettles Smith's perceptions of lawns as inherently connected to safety and aesthetic value. In his seminal book on lawns in American culture, political ecologist Paul Robbins (2007) notes that lawns in the U.S. have historically been connected to a very specific kind of aesthetic beauty that is "tied to the reproduction and representation of state power and elite opulence" (p. 25). Ecologically, they are challenging to

create and maintain, drawing as they do on exotic grass species and necessitating copious amounts of labor. Lawns first appeared in the U.S. in the Deep South as wealthy landowners sought to emulate French and English landscape design. Lawns spread with the growth of suburbs as middle-class, mostly white, people created domestic spaces that pushed against the growing urban populations they perceived as disorderly and dangerous (Robbins, 2007). The pastoral ideal, here appearing in public space, draws on certain (white and European) cultural conceptions of cleanliness, good taste, and beauty (Duncan & Duncan, 2004). The pastoral has also been connected with the rural, the pure, and the nostalgic, in opposition to the urban, dirty, modern world (Williams, 1973). Thus, lawns in the U.S. today are articulated in tandem with both safety and whiteness. Through the pastoral ideal, they are also connected with the historic, despite their relatively short tenure in the U.S. When I asked Tony Strother, Stagville's landscape technician, to define what he meant by "clean," Strother elaborated: "If you go to a rest stop, you know, when you drive in and everything looks clean and neat." For Strother, cleanliness in the landscape is directly tied to perceptions of neutrality, for what is more neutral – less noteworthy – than a rest stop on a highway?

Paul Robbins (2007) credits early landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead with naturalizing the mown grass lawn. Some of Olmstead's most high-profile projects – Boston's Emerald Necklace, for example, or the landscape around Yosemite – are today popularly viewed as completely natural spaces. "In this sense, Olmstead's legacy is not just making grassy landscapes, but naturalizing them so that they appear inevitable, timeless, and appropriate" (p. 27). But lawns are neither natural nor neutral. The lawns at my research sites draw on a very white, twentieth-century, middle-class aesthetic of orderly beauty that is explicitly framed in opposition to disorderly, non-white urban spaces. It is no coincidence that site managers today

talk about visitor safety in the same breath as they talk about mowing the grass. Beyond the very real logistical concerns of keeping children safe from snakes lies an understanding of safety that can be traced to Olmstead and his contemporaries. That grass lawns draw on conceptions of beauty and cleanliness associated with middle- and upper-class whiteness does not mean that Drew Smith and Tony Strother are consciously working to create a space in which only white people are welcome. I do argue, however, that both interviews reveal cultural cues that equate cleanliness and desirability with a landscape feature inextricable from race and class.

Trees and “Buffer Zones”

The mown lawns of Bennett Place, Duke Homestead, and Stagville are all bordered by trees: another component of the genre (Rose, 2007) of historic space. Specifically, the thick – although sometimes relatively small – stands of pine and maple bring their own aesthetic impacts to bear on management priorities. Ecologically, these thick stands of trees are evidence of a previously agricultural landscape reverting to forest. Pines are the first succession species in the Piedmont landscape after agricultural land goes fallow. However, at my three research sites, the trees are used to tell a different story. All three managers noted that providing visual and spatial separation between the historic site and the rest of Durham – even the rest of the modern world – is crucial for the educational and preservation work the managers hope to achieve. Regarding Duke Homestead, Hoekstra noted that if the site’s landscape looked today as it did in the nineteenth century:

That would mean seeing into our neighbor’s yards where kids are jumping on trampolines and Mr. So-and-So’s mowing his lawn in his underwear, and that doesn’t exactly scream historical...If we have that wall of trees, that helps us preserve at least a *more* historical landscape than modern houses would show.

Hoekstra’s quote emphasizes the importance of visual consistency to her interpretive project.

Experiencing period-specific activities and seeing buildings from the eighteenth century is only

one part of the “living history” experience. Another seemingly equally important part is the sensation of being removed from the modern world: the sensation of being back in time that can only be accomplished with the correct visual setting. A man mowing his lawn in his underwear would disrupt this visual aesthetic, as would children jumping on trampolines. Authenticity becomes identifiable on a sliding scale. Trees are more authentic than suburbs, although still anachronistic.

The anachronism of trees becomes even more intriguing when positioned against the institutional goals of historic sites like Duke Homestead. When I asked Hoekstra why she thought living history was important, she responded:

People want to know what the past looks like. If you were transported back in time, what would it look like in this spot? What would you have seen? Because people are very visual, and they need to *physically* see what it was like.

Hoekstra’s words emphasize the importance of the visual to her project. The connection she draws between the physicality of embodied experience and visual consistency with a certain archival moment suggests that she views the visual as a central component to creating a living history experience. She also echoes her earlier goals of creating period-specific clothing for costumed interpreters and ensuring that the furnishings within the Dukes’ farmhouse are correct for the 1870s in the interest of creating a visual experience as close to an 1870s reality as possible. Interestingly, this quote both supports and complicates Hoekstra’s relief that Duke Homestead is surrounded by trees. Why do trees *not* disrupt the visual aesthetic? Why do trees seem more historical? Certainly, trees *could* have surrounded the Dukes’ farmhouse in the 1870s in a way that lawn mowers and trampolines could not. However, we know from archival and oral evidence that they did not; there were no trees surrounding the Dukes’ farmhouse in the 1870s. If Hoekstra’s goal is only to shield visitors from aesthetically modern features, why is Duke

Homestead not surrounded by a wall, for example? A wall built with 1870s materials would, in many ways, be more accurate to the period, or at least equally as (in)accurate as trees.

I argue that the trees, along with visually and, thus, mentally separating historic sites from the rest of Durham, bring their own aesthetic impacts to bear on management perceptions. Vera Cecelski, Stagville's site manager, also mentioned the practicality of having thick stands of trees shield Stagville's historic spaces from the view of modern encroachments, from cars driving along the road to people hanging out in their backyards. In addition, she noted another incentive to maintain "buffer zones," as she called them, of trees around the site: "There are absolutely visitors that value our site, the way there are at any historic site, because it's beautiful and it feels historic and it feels secluded." She paused in thought. "The trees don't feel ahistorical to them. They don't know." Cecelski's comments on visitor expectations and priorities highlight a few things. One – a constant at any tourist attraction – is Stagville's economic need to attract visitors. Being welcoming to visitors, here, means adhering to a very specific visual aesthetic of which the trees are an important part. Like Drew Smith's emphasis on the curb appeal of mown grass at Bennett Place, Stagville's trees help frame the historic site in a way that is seen as being attractive to tourists. These state historic sites are not only concerned with presenting versions of the past, but also with being viable tourist attractions.

Cecelski's comments also directly connect beauty, seclusion, and the historic. She suggests that visitors assume a historic authenticity when certain criteria of seclusion and beauty are met, and that those criteria are directly related to seeing trees. Trees, here, are more than just visually attractive, and do more even than block the view of modern cars or houses. Numerous scholars have noted that Western societies equate forests and trees with naturalness and history, sometimes over other more ecologically or historically natural ecosystems (Dove, 2004; Cronon,

1996). In the U.S., as William Cronon (1996) notes, untouched “natural” nature takes the form of wilderness, which is a cultural construct based in histories of colonization. As with lawns, the connection between trees, nature, and wilderness as history has racial undertones. When trees reappear as visual components of North Carolina’s history at Duke Homestead, I argue, they tap into an idea of wilderness as a past open for white discovery.

Indeed, the language of discovery weaves through Duke Homestead’s public-facing literature, as well as through the North Carolina Historic Sites program more broadly. Duke Homestead’s website advertises festivals throughout the summer, all of which emphasize individual engagement with historic games, crafts, food, and other activities (Duke Homestead, *About*). “Field Trips” allow children between the ages of 5 and 10 to “experience the daily lives of 19th-century farmers.” The page continues: “Through hands-on activities, a film, and interactive exhibits, school children will discover and learn about the social and economic history of our state” (Duke Homestead, *Field Trips*). This discourse fits within the larger online marketing narrative of the NCHS program, which similarly emphasizes hands-on engagement with the past and personal discovery of North Carolina’s history. Further, this embodied discovery is framed as essential to a true understanding of North Carolina:

If you haven't heard our tales of Native American cultures and 19th-century plantation life or know about the accomplishments and vivid personalities of our famous writers and educators, then you really can't know North Carolina, even if you've lived here all your life. Today you can still feel the cool dampness underground in an early gold mine, marvel at early 20th-century steam locomotives, and relive a colonial or Civil War battle. (North Carolina Historic Sites).

The emphasis here is on visceral, embodied experiences: visitors feel sensations and experience emotions that place them in the past. The “About” page of the NCHS program web page continues:

North Carolina Historic Sites...invites you to see our state as it was, to open doors to the past. So when you're planning your next trip, don't just think of tomorrow or today — think of yesterday (North Carolina Historic Sites).

This quote not only highlights the possibility of stepping through “doors to the past” – it re-imagines “yesterday” as a place, somewhere visitors can go, rather than as a time. The spatialization of history is also immediately connected to education and authenticity, positioning these sites as real past spaces to be explored and discovered in the interest of a more authentic North Carolinian self.

Children discover nineteenth-century farm life; visitors of all ages discover famous writers and educators. Personal discovery of regional historical narratives positions individuals in intimate contact with those regional histories selected for preservation; the regional and the personal become inextricable from one another. Thus, the trees at Duke Homestead, Stagville, and Bennett Place do not simply provide “buffer zones” against the visual encroachment of modern Durham. They also draw directly on white American cultural connections between trees, wilderness, and the past to create a visual feeling of the historical that is rooted in and thus unintentionally reproduces histories of colonization.

Site managers and landscape technicians balance numerous priorities when managing the landscapes of Duke Homestead, Bennett Place, and Stagville, beyond any kind of fidelity to a historical record of land use. Attending to cultural ideas of safety, cleanliness, and an aesthetic of natural beauty are also vital as these individuals manage spaces that balance historical interpretation with tourism. At all three sites, both trees and lawns compose an aesthetic of appealing visual beauty that invites visitors to safely and enjoyably discover Durham’s history. They also grant a sense of naturalness to the separation of these sites from the rest of the modern

world, ossifying particular historical narratives in place so that they can be experienced by the public and subsuming all traces of the labor that created them. To return briefly to this chapter's opening vignette: whereas Washington Duke's farm was cleared and embedded within contemporary spatial and economic networks in the 1870s, today's historic site is intentionally separated from the larger, modern world of Durham. The landscapes of my sites are not historical landscapes, but *historicized* landscapes, created to invoke an imagined past that can best be described as the "Old South" (Ferris, 2014). Commonly understood as the rural South before emancipation – and thus, rooted in a violent social order based on white superiority – the Old South landscape here uses certain landscape features to create and perpetuate a visual genre of historic space through drawing on specific cultural conceptions of nature and rurality as history. In the following chapter, I turn to how this visual genre impacts visitor experiences and examine how visitors interpret these spaces – these landscapes – themselves.

CHAPTER 2: EXPERIENCING THE LANDSCAPE

In Chapter 1, I examined how the visual genre of historic space is shaped through drawing on cultural connections between the ideas of the pastoral, the wilderness, and the past. Mown grass lawns and thick stands of trees are two distinctive features of this genre and are reflected in individual management choices that prioritize visitor comfort and rural beauty over strict adherence to a historical record. In this chapter, I draw on semi-structured interviews with Stagville visitors to examine how visitors engage with the historical genre and how it shapes their experiences learning Stagville's history.

As at Bennett Place and Duke Homestead, visitors entering Stagville first drive down a winding gravel driveway through thick stands of pine. A wooden fence running along one side separates the state's property from a private estate next door, also densely wooded. Suddenly, a white house comes into view, framed by trees and surrounded by brilliant green grass. Visitors drive past the house to park a few yards away in front of a dark green visitor center, still surrounded by trees that obscure the modern road in the small valley below. When visitors get out of the car on a hot summer's day, all that is audible are birds and, occasionally, cicadas singing from the bushes. The back of the white house is visible through a few younger trees, and other buildings become visible, nestled in their own stands of trees, as you walk from the visitor center onto the property. No other buildings are visible beyond the visitor center and the historic structures. Vera Cecelski's "buffer zone," discussed in Chapter 1, is doing its work.

Stagville's guided tours are unique among my research sites in that they are done in two parts. Cecelski holds periodic training for volunteer and staff tour guides, so the overall content

of each tour is fairly consistent. Stagville tours begin at the visitor center near the parking lot. Tour guides first lead visitors through the Bennehan House, which is the two-story white home of Stagville's enslaving family. While guides do narrate the rise to fortune of first the Bennehans then the Camerons, tracing the family's lineage through four prominent white patriarchs, there is additional emphasis placed upon the role of enslaved men and women in the domestic space. Guides often stop in the small room behind the family's grand dining room to point out the lower ceilings and plainer walls of a less important (read: enslaved) space. In the ornate parlor, guides point to a painting of a young white girl on one wall to talk about her enslaved companion: a Black woman who took her freedom one summer when the two women travelled together to Philadelphia. In short, although the white enslaving family figures prominently in the tour, Stagville guides also intentionally and explicitly weave in narratives of enslaved people – mostly women – who were forced to work in the enslavers' home. Each of the tour guides whom I followed emphasized that, while popular culture sometimes portrays domestic slaves as having an easier life than field slaves, the costs of being within easy reach of one's enslavers far outweighed any outwardly-perceived gains of working indoors. "Slavery is slavery," said one tour guide bluntly. "It doesn't matter where you're working if you're not considered human."

After finishing the tour of the house, guides ask visitors to get back in their cars and drive about a mile down Old Oxford Highway to another dirt road. This one leads visitors to a line of five wooden houses: Horton Grove, where a small fraction of the thousands of people enslaved by the Bennehans and Camerons lived. Here, the lives and experiences of the enslaved take center stage. Visitors can enter the bottom floor of one of the houses and see the small rooms that would have housed an entire enslaved family, furnished with replicas of straw mattresses and herbs hanging from the rafters. Stagville tour guides use specific narratives of enslaved

individuals to paint a picture of what life was like at Horton Grove before emancipation. They usually also mention that these five houses are still standing because sharecropping families and their descendants lived in them until the 1970s, although not always. However, tour guides do always point to the chimney of one of the preserved houses where the fingerprints of an enslaved craftsman are still visible, pressed into the brick. These fingerprints always elicit gasps. Often, visitors reach up and lay their own fingers alongside or atop the fingerprint in the brick, pulled into an embodied response by the trace of a dead craftsman's hand.

The final stop on the tour is the Great Barn: a huge, echoing cavern of a barn built by enslaved craftspeople and finished in 1860. Here, tour guides emphasize the skill of the enslaved carpenters, bricklayers, and masons who worked together to construct the edifice. Some tour guides also take the opportunity to bring the historical narrative into the present: the older Black woman and the white male tour guide both explicitly connected chattel slavery to ongoing racial discrimination and structural violence in the U.S. today.

At Stagville, as at Duke Homestead, the interior furnishings work to create as close of a visual to the historical record as possible. In fact, studies have shown that furnishing enslaved spaces like the cabins creates a scaffolding for visitor imagination that allows for stronger emotional engagement with the stories of enslaved people (Alderman & Gentry, 2011). At Stagville, visual adherence to the archival record is prioritized as part of the site's overarching goal to center enslaved experiences. However, the outdoor landscape actually obscures vital historical truths. As at Bennett Place and Duke Homestead, Stagville today looks very different than it did in the 1840s when the cabins were built. Stepping out of the cabin, visitors emerge onto the ever-present evenly-mown grass, surrounded by pine trees (*Figure 2.1*). In 1840, however, no trees would have screened the cabin from the surveillance of the enslavers' white

house on the nearby hill. Additionally, today's grass replaces what would have been swept dirt yards. In our interview, Vera Cecelski told me that the swept dirt yards once so ubiquitous in the U.S. South are, in fact, a West African landscape practice brought to the region by enslaved people. Stagville's modern landscape thus obscures several things: the power regimes built into the plantation's space; the visual connections between the enslaved individuals working in the owners' house and enslaved individuals working in the fields; and African cultural resilience that transformed American landscapes.



Figure 2.1: View looking south from the Horton Grove parking lot, July 9, 2019. Trees surround the preserved cabins instead of the open vistas of plantation surveillance, and there are mown grass lawns instead of swept dirt yards.

Knowing that site managers intentionally use components of the outdoor landscape read as natural to create historic site landscapes that facilitate historical education and tourism, I wondered how Stagville visitors were understanding the outdoor landscape. Would they appreciate the supposed naturalness of the trees, the aesthetic appeal of the grass? Or would they be suspicious of a plantation site that is covered by trees instead of fields? Going into my visitor

interviews, I assumed that visitors would identify the trees and grass as signifiers of authenticity, based on scholarship that connects perceptions of authenticity at heritage tourism sites to natural beauty in the tradition of European landscape painting (Lovell, 2017). However, visitor responses to my interview questions were more complex than simply defining Stagville's landscape as either authentic or inauthentic. As with site managers, I learned that visitors balance a variety of considerations and assumptions when visiting a historic site. The landscape is taken up, or left aside, in different ways depending on the visitor, the tour guide, and their expectations grounded in previous experiences. Furthermore, responses moved past the visual and into the realm of the embodied as visitors articulated their experiences. Authenticity arises, not only as something that is seen and recognized, but as something that is produced in encounters and felt in embodied ways.

Visitor Responses

I asked visitors a short series of questions that addressed their expectations coming to Stagville, the emotions they felt navigating the site, and whether or not they thought the historic site seemed authentic (*Appendix*). Overwhelmingly, visitors responded that Stagville did feel authentic, but their stated reasons for saying so were far more nuanced and complex than attending only to the outdoor landscape. In the following sections, I examine how the landscape and nature appeared or did not appear in visitor responses. I also examine what did appear in visitor responses alongside or instead of the outdoor landscape. In this way, I examine how Stagville visitors both experience and inform the genre (Rose, 2007) of historic space.

Built and Natural Landscapes in Visitor Responses

Visitors brought up the natural landscape in various, sometimes conflicting, ways in relation to authenticity. One woman noted that she had not expected such a “manicured” site, but

that the trees – the “natural environment” – gave a good sense of what would have been around the buildings. She assumed the historical authenticity of the trees, despite their actual anachronism, and thus got a favorable impression of Stagville’s authenticity. Another woman said that Stagville felt authentic because it felt different from “downtown,” which I took to imply that the rural character was part of what made the site feel authentic. Similarly, one man noted that “once you get out here [to Horton Grove and the barn], away from the house and the visitor center – once you’re actually out here... that helps a lot for the authentic feel.” Again, I took this to mean that the more surrounded he was by trees – the more rural his surroundings – the closer he felt to an authentic past despite the anachronism of the trees themselves.

The responses that praised Stagville’s authenticity based on the site’s outdoor “natural” landscape were balanced by several other visitors who commented that they were surprised to see so many trees. Three of my interviewees noted that, because they were visiting a plantation, they had expected to see agricultural fields instead of pine forests, and one man lamented that he could not readily picture where the fields would have been because of all the trees. A woman later that day said that it was “tough to imagine” without the trees, and two women whom I interviewed together agreed that when they think “plantation,” they think of farmland, not forest. Still, all of these visitors – even those who expressed surprised at the trees – said that Stagville felt authentic. Clearly, something else was happening for them in their recognition of authenticity: something not limited to the visual aspects of the outdoor landscape.

Interestingly, the only person I interviewed who specifically said that Stagville did *not* feel authentic did so because of the trees. “There’s so many trees now so it’s hard to imagine what it was like, being able to see all the acres and all the people in the field.” She continued, “I think the trees kind of take away what it was really like because the trees provide shade, and

there was no shade. They make it look nice, but it's changed the whole experience for me." This woman noted a discrepancy between her own embodied experience of the site and the embodied experiences of the people who lived at Stagville in the early nineteenth century. The trees, and the shade they provide, irrevocably altered the site's immersive experience for her and ultimately detracted from the site's overall authenticity. However, her response – that Stagville feels *less* authentic because of the trees – is singular. Everyone else who mentioned the outdoor landscape said that the site felt authentic, at times *despite* knowing or guessing that there would have been fewer trees and manicured lawns, more fields and crops. In these responses, the outdoor landscape seemed again removed from measures of historical authenticity to visitors, echoing the mental divisions brought up in my interviews with staff.

The built landscape appeared much more frequently in visitor interviews as proof of the site's authenticity. One woman mentioned the gravel driveway: "The minute you...get on a gravel or dirt road, you're back in history," she said with a laugh when I asked her if Stagville felt like an authentic historic site. In addition, the buildings came up numerous times in visitor interviews and seemed to serve as definitive proof that the site was truly historic. The visitors I interviewed were blown away that the "actual structures" were still standing. Within the visual genre of historic space, preserved or reconstructed buildings seemed particularly significant in visitor conceptions of authenticity. One man who was visiting Stagville for the second time with his children commented that "being able to see the actual bricks and their fingerprints – I mean, I don't know if you can get more authentic than that." For him, as for many others, the fingerprints in the chimney were the ultimate signifier of authenticity. The trace of a human hand, of human labor, seemed to smolder like an ember, drawing visitors close and bathing the rest of Stagville in reflected heat and light.

Fingerprints do not stick to pine trees. The labor of long-ago hands, preserved as fingerprints in the chimney bricks, serves as the ultimate signifier of authenticity. However, other forms of labor on Stagville's landscape have been subsumed and obscured today: that of the site managers and landscape technicians who have shaped today's landscape over time and through a myriad of choices; that of the enslaved workers who toiled in agricultural fields that have today become forest; that of the enslaved housekeepers who swept the dirt yards. Reforested after agricultural activity by pine trees and mown for safety and tourism aesthetics, the trees and grass tell their own story of management and intentional design. However, these stories are harder to read – indeed, they are nearly impossible to decipher because, as Don Mitchell (1996) reminds us, landscapes naturalize and neutralize. Thus, when the outdoor landscape appears in visitor articulations of authenticity, the “natural” landscape is largely described as incidental to perceptions of authenticity. Stagville can be experienced as an authentic site *even when* visitors understand that they are looking at anachronistic trees instead of historically-appropriate fields. These interviews suggest that within the genre of historic space, the presence of preserved buildings is so strong that these components assert authenticity against and despite visitor understandings of how the past would have actually looked.

Previous Expectations and Embodied Experiences

In many of my interviews, visitors compared Stagville with other historic sites they had visited in the past. The comparisons themselves varied: one woman said that Stagville felt *more* authentic than another historic plantation she had been to because it was not “sanitized” like the other one. When I asked what she meant, she referred to Stagville's interpretive focus on enslaved experiences, not mentioning the landscape at all. Several other visitors said that Stagville felt authentic because it *looked* as they expected an authentic historic site to look based

on previous visits to other sites. One woman commented that she had not been expecting fields because she had visited other historic plantation sites and was thus unsurprised to see trees. Her interpretation of the outdoor landscape was shaped by previous visits to historic sites and the resulting expectations.

Overall, these responses suggest that historic site experiences are referential. To return to Rose's (2007) concept of the visual genre: if genres are created by individual site staff drawing on cultural conceptions of landscape design, genres become recognizable to visitors, and thus usable by staff, through repeated visits across time and space. Trees and mown grass lawns become embedded within the genre of historic space through repeated exposure within the experiences of each visitor. As they move through each site, embodied and aware, visitors draw conclusions about what historic sites looks like that are inevitably grounded in previous visits to other historic sites. Thus, the expectations of visitors and the management practices of staff inform each other intimately in the landscapes of historic sites.

Embodied experiences also arose in visitor interviews when I asked about authenticity, at times instead of visual aspects of the site. These comments would often link to, or come out of, visitors noting that learning about the past at Stagville was different from learning about the past in other ways, specifically in school or through books. One woman commented: "You read about history – study it – but I think this is the first time I've been to a historic site...It was a very moving experience to be here." I suggest that the site moved her, at least in part, because she moved *through* it. The spatial, ambient, and sensory components of Stagville – in short, Stagville's geography – drew her in and moved her both physically and emotionally. Another woman noted a similar feeling: "Just walking through where it happened, you know – you see it, touch it, feel it...and you could actually walk in the room and be a part of it...you can feel what

it's like to be in that room, what's the temperature like, the scale of the furniture." Here, too, the engagement of multiple senses both signified authenticity and allowed for deeper engagement with the narratives presented. Earlier that July day, a woman had commented: "It's blistering hot today and I'm thinking about what it was like for the slaves to be out in the fields under the sun in these conditions." Even more than the visual components of Stagville, embodied experiences like these seemed to enable visitors to position themselves in relationship to the experiences of the enslaved in new ways, across actual lived experiences related to race and time period.

At public historic sites like Stagville, part of the draw is the idea of going back in time physically, not just mentally. In fact, two of my interviewees, both fathers visiting Stagville with their children, talked about the importance of "stepping back in time" and "re-visiting history" in connection with youth education. Unspoken but suggested by both of these comments is the assumption that one can directly access the past by going to a specific physical space – *this* specific physical space, to be exact. Their assumption of unmediated access to the past underlies much of historic site popularity and discourse. Historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen's seminal 1998 study on how Americans interact with the past found that Americans tend to trust museums as sources of historical knowledge over other sources like history teachers or nonfiction books because museums give the impression of allowing unmediated access to the past (Lyon et al., 2017). Of course, this sense of an unmediated form of access to the past is not so simple; I return to this point below. However, it is telling that embodied experiences signify authenticity to visitors in a way that seems to go beyond intellectual reasoning.

The above interview responses map neatly onto other work that has been done on perceptions of authenticity, or realness, by visitors regarding immersive historical education. In a study conducted on perceptions of realness by viewers of historical performances at museums,

Catherine Hughes (2011) found that perceptions of authenticity were “generally based on a complex awareness of the performance medium and emerged from individual interpretations grounded in spectators’ *prior understanding and experience*” (p. 134, my emphasis). In the case of Stagville, the performance medium is the physical space – the landscape – of the site itself, perceived by individuals. I read this to mean that exact alignment with a given historical record is only part of the complex process of *feeling* that one is in a historic landscape. Another, and perhaps even larger part, is a history of previous contact with spaces interpreted as historic.

Clearly, Stagville visitors do not experience the site in a vacuum. When asked about authenticity, they engaged in the complex work of comparing Stagville to other sites they have visited or seen and gauging their own embodied experiences at the site to confirm Stagville’s authenticity. They also referred to the buildings again and again, noting especially the physical traces of human labor that remain in the original buildings (hand-hewn beams and chimney bricks, specifically) as certain signifiers of authenticity.

Authenticity as Embodied Encounter

Visitor responses to my questions indicated that Stagville’s presumed proximity to the past – its authenticity – was a key piece of what brought visitors to Stagville in the first place. Respondents talked about bringing their children to Stagville to see what life was like for ancestors or people in the past. Furthermore, implicit in Stagville’s self-advertisement as a historic site is the accuracy of the educational experiences made available there. As discussed in Chapter 1, Stagville, Bennett Place, and Duke Homestead are all set apart from learning history through books, films, or even classes because of their spatiality. Visitors can learn history in the spaces where history happened.

I follow numerous scholars of heritage, memory, and tourism in treating authenticity not as a given fact, but as a constructed and contested signifier with sociopolitical implications that vary from place to place, time to time, and person to person (Lovell, 2017; Urry & Larsen, 2011; DeLyser, 1999). Through my authenticity-focused visitor questions, I aimed to get a sense of how Stagville visitors were conceptualizing authenticity in relation to Stagville and their experiences at the site. In particular, I attended to the spaces and experiences which visitors highlighted in connection to authenticity to understand where and how authenticity is produced at Stagville. I especially hoped to understand how visitors were engaging with and conceptualizing Stagville's outdoor landscape, since it is not aligned to a specific period but is being maintained by site staff with today's historical genre in mind.

The responses I received led me to conceptualize authenticity, less even as a constructed signifier and more as an embodied experience akin to Sara Ahmed's (2014) articulation of emotion. Ahmed defines emotions, not as inherently given external or internal events, but as encounters and relationships between entities informed by cultural and personal histories of previous contact. Her book, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, gives the example of a child who is afraid of a bear to posit that fear is not "in the child, let alone in the bear, but is a matter of how child and bear come into contact. This contact is shaped by past histories of contact, unavailable in the present, which allow the bear to be apprehended as fearsome" (p. 7). Cultural memories, familial narratives, even past encounters with bears or other wild animals have shaped how this specific child sees this specific bear. "Another child, another bear, and we might even have another story" (p. 7). Ahmed asks us to consider that emotions are neither given nor universal, but rather created in and through histories of encounter between individuals, communities, and spaces. For Ahmed, emotions are relational. In the context of my work,

thinking of authenticity as an embodied encounter grounds the concept at the scale of the body and brings it into direct conversation with histories of prior contact, unavailable in the present but informing the present all the same. Authenticity thus becomes, not something inherent or inevitable, but something produced relationally at the scale of the body through encounters with certain spaces, objects, and experiences.

If we consider authenticity as a feeling produced through encounters, it is useful to examine how and when these encounters happen, especially in spaces where visitors of all ages are accessing and consuming narratives of the past. Despite the fact that the perception of unmediated access to the past is part of what sets Stagville, and sites like it, apart from other ways of learning history, unmediated access to the past must be queried (Radstone, 2005). Visitors experience Stagville alongside and through their own histories of prior contact and previous experiences with historic sites and images of the past. Authenticity is not inherently embedded in any part of Stagville, but is produced and negotiated through and within visitor encounters. Furthermore, it is informed by previous histories of contact carried by visitors and spaces alike. It is an embodied experience, formed through encounters, with lasting implications.

At Stagville, the vast majority of responses that mentioned the “natural” landscape did so because they were not expecting to see what they did. I posit that the rest of the responses – those that did not mention the “natural” landscape – did so because they saw what they expected to see: a seemingly neutral, seemingly natural backdrop to the “real” history of the buildings. However, there is exciting potential in interpreting landscape change over time at historic sites like Stagville, to which I now turn in my conclusion.

CONCLUSION

My queer landscape analytic troubles the assumed givenness of historic site landscapes, pushing against both the naturalizing quality of landscape (Mitchell, 1996) and the teleology of “straight time” (Pryor, 2017). In Chapter 1, I examined the many priorities site managers and technicians balance when managing a historic site’s landscape. Interestingly, aligning with a specific historical moment is of secondary concern to creating a space that is welcoming and safe for tourists, as well as straightforward to maintain for state staffs with limited funding. However, site managers still consider certain aesthetic priorities when managing these sites. Thick stands of trees to block visitor views of modern buildings and roads and mown grass fields to create a visually-appealing, safe experience are two of the most ubiquitous aspects of the visual genre of historic space. These aspects draw on cultural conceptions of what historical space should look like rooted in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European and Euro-American ideas that connect the pastoral ideal and forested wilderness to a safe past ripe for white discovery. Attending to landscape management at historic sites allows us to ask: what experiences, rooted in and caused by a different landscape, are erased? Along with appealing to white middle-class sensibilities, the visual genre of the historic as enacted at my three research sites obscures historical violence and replaces it with visuals of pleasure and leisure. Even at sites like Stagville, where tour guides emphasize the horrors of slavery, visitors learn this history within beautiful scenery.

In Chapter 2, I examined how Stagville visitors conceptualize the landscape they are seeing and through which they are learning historical narratives. The “natural” landscape was only touched on briefly in most or not mentioned at all in visitor interviews, with interviewees

instead using the original buildings, their own embodied experiences, and their expectations based in histories of previous contact with historic sites to articulate feelings of authenticity. For the most part, when visitors explicitly spoke to the outdoor landscape, it was to note that they were surprised to see trees at a plantation site, suggesting that for those who did not speak to the outdoor landscape, Stagville's thick stands of pine and mown grassy lawns did not register as unusual. I posit that, within a framework that measures authenticity against visitors' prior experiences and expectations of historic sites, Stagville's outdoor landscape reads as a neutral, natural backdrop to the "real" history of the buildings and the embodied experiences of public pedagogy at historic sites. At Stagville, as at Duke Homestead and Bennett Place, the visual genre of historic space is recreated and reproduced. New questions arise: what is the role of intellectual reasoning, as compared to embodied experience and emotion, in the hierarchy of decision-making? Within frameworks of education and communication, how do members of the public acquire knowledge and deploy that knowledge later?

Although landscape does not figure prominently within site management or visitor conceptions of the historic at these state sites, it can enrich public pedagogy and visitor experiences. I witnessed this firsthand on one of the Stagville tours I shadowed. "It looks like a postcard now," said Ned, one of Stagville's part-time tour guides, to his tour group as he motioned toward the white Bennehan house surrounded by lush green grass and deep pines. "But in 1840 it would have been really different. It would have been loud, it would have been dusty, it would have been hot. It would have been tense." Ned didn't talk about the sight lines that would have stretched between the Bennehan house and the cabins of the enslaved, now hidden behind trees in Horton Grove. Nor did he say that the swept dirt yards which would have surrounded all of the houses were a testament to West African cultural contributions in the U.S. South. Still,

Ned's attention to Stagville's landscape in this moment accomplishes several things: it engages visitors' imagination as they work to picture what the site would have looked like in the past; it activates numerous senses ("loud," "tense," "hot,") to mimic the embodied, sensory experience of visiting a historic site. Perhaps most importantly, Ned's comments remind the visitors that the site they are visiting is not an unmediated doorway to the past. Rather, Stagville – like Duke Homestead and Bennett Place a few miles away – is a constructed space shaped by management choices in the present and interpreted by visitors with prior experiences and expectations.

Ned's comments are also singular because they place the landscape at the center of interpretation. Instead of disregarding the landscape altogether, Ned taps into the differences between Stagville's landscape today and Stagville's landscape at the moment of historic interpretation to further engage visitors and enable a deeper connection with the interpretive narratives he presented. When I spoke with a few of these tour participants later, all of them expressed a desire to know more about how Stagville's landscape would have looked in the 1840s, based on Ned's opening comments. Despite the fact that outdoor landscapes are understood to fill different needs by management staff, and often viewed as neutral by visitors, they are central to the processes of meaning-making that occur at historic sites. Furthermore, if used intentionally, they can open space for further discussion about how past spaces would have felt, how we imagine the past in the present, and what this means.

Returning to Jaclyn Pryor's (2017) conception of queer time, I suggest that landscapes can serve as conduits for troubling straight time in and of themselves. Histories and futures meet in landscapes, both through the long histories of human management that become apparent at my research sites with further study, and through attending to the cultural concepts that inform management and visitor perceptions of nature and authenticity. If site managers are drawing on

and perpetuating white American cultural connections between mown grass lawns and cleanliness, between trees and histories of colonization, what does this mean for how historical education is being made available to Americans with diverse backgrounds and experiences?

My research lights the way for exciting future studies regarding how visitors engage with historic sites through landscape. I only spoke with visitors who had gone on guided tours, so all the interviews I conducted reflect views of the site that were mediated and shaped, at least in part, by a guided tour. An interesting direction for further study could be to compare the experiences of visitors who go on guided tours with those who do self-guided tours or simply walk around the site. Another interesting possibility would be to focus more on the backgrounds and identities (race, gender, nationality, age) of the visitors to gain a better sense of how different groups of visitors perceive the space differently. Regarding the landscapes of historic sites, a long-term study on how historic site landscapes change over time – that is, how the genre of historic space has evolved through the years – might yield interesting insights into how imaginations of the past change over time. What reads as neutral backdrop in 1920, or 1960, versus in 2019? How has management of natural resources shaped the management of cultural resources in different parts of the U.S.? What is the scale of the visual genre I have observed in Durham’s three state historic sites? Is it generalizable by state, by region, by biome? Do historic sites in desert ecosystems, for example, work within a different visual genre? Further, how do existing models of historical preservation – the National Park Service’s National Register of Historic Places, for example – shape the physical spaces within and through which we learn history? The answers to these questions could afford a clearer understanding of how collective memories are made and reproduced through time. Done together with the above visitor studies,

they could also shed light on the visitation practices of various cultural groups over time, with important implications for historic site management going forward.

Ultimately, this study attends to the nuances and complexities of managing both natural and cultural resources in tandem: a project that will only grow in importance as green space becomes more valuable and diverse groups continue to draw on history to define identities and belonging. In practice, attending to the landscape of historic sites opens the way for interpretive opportunities, like Ned's tour, that can further connect visitors to marginalized histories that would otherwise be obscured or lost. Landscapes are far from neutral. Speaking to their creation and ongoing management allows visitors and site managers alike to think about how we frame the past in the present, with numerous implications for how we move forward, together.

APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Site Staff: Stagville, Bennett Place, Duke Homestead, April 2019-October 2019

My semi-structured interviews with site managers and landscape technicians included the following questions, with additional follow-up questions as applicable:

- Please describe your position/role at this site.
- How much oversight do you receive from the North Carolina Historic Sites Program?
- Has anything about this site changed in your time here?
- Does the site today look anything like it would have during the [period of interpretation]?
- How do you see the outdoor landscape in relation to the work of historical education at this site?
- What are the main benefits of public historic sites/living history sites, in your opinion?

Site Visitors: Stagville, July 2019

My semi-structured interviews with Stagville visitors included the following questions, with additional follow-up questions as applicable:

- Is this your first time at Stagville?
- How does the site compare with your expectations?
- Does this feel like an authentic historic site to you?
- What emotions have come up for you during this experience?

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