

Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums

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Review

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Eichstedt, Jennifer L. and Small, Stephen. *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums.* Smithsonian Institution Press, \$45.00 ISBN 1588340716

Racism or reality?

Interpretations represented in public exhibitions evaluated

When a museum presents a representation of the past, that representation takes on the nature of reality for the majority of its visitors. Having not personally experienced the event or culture being interpreted and generally predisposed to trust museums as accurate sources of information about the past (see Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), most visitors are generally accepting of the interpretations they encounter. With this authority comes a great responsibility: ensuring that the representations created are worthy of the trust accorded them by the public.

The abdication of this responsibility by all too many Southern plantation museums lies at the heart of this disturbing new book by Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small. Between 1996 and 2001, Eichstedt and Small conducted extensive fieldwork at 122 former plantations now open to the public as museums or bed and breakfasts, as well as at 20 sites organized and interpreted largely by African Americans. Centering their research on the representational/discursive strategies used to discuss the institution of slavery and the lives of enslaved and/or free blacks, the authors argue that the vast majority of largely white-operated sites employ strategies that deflect, trivialize or annihilate both the institution and those who toiled under it. The profound extent to which the African American presence has been systematically erased from sites at which blacks once outnumbered whites by as much as ten to one effectively disproves the claim that such museums provide an accurate

representation of life in the plantation South. The white-centric assumptions underlying so much of the plantation museum industry are revealed for what they are: products of a racialized society and tools in the production and reproduction of racialized inequality and oppression. Rather than ascribing calculated racism to particular docents or sites, the authors suggest that symbolic absence of the black experience at the majority of plantation sites is a reflection of the extent to which racism has been institutionalized as a cultural framework.

Central to the book's thesis is the fact that representations of the past not only reflect the concerns and priorities of the present, but play an active role in shaping them. Drawing on their disciplinary background in sociology and cultural studies and displaying enviable command of the contemporary literature on racialization and collective memory, Eichstedt and Small link the four primary representational/discursive strategies used by sites to racialized framings and practices found in the larger culture. According to the authors, 55.7% percent of the sites surveyed employ as their predominant strategy an approach termed, *symbolic annihilation* (ignoring slavery altogether or treating it in a perfunctory way), which they parallel on page 13 to the larger culture's outright erasure and denial of Black suffering at the hands of whites. *Trivialization and deflection* (emphasizing the benevolence of plantation owners and the affectionate loyalty of faithful slaves), the primary avenue for exploring the topic at 27% of sites, is linked to both the narrative of white victimization and the perpetuation of negative stereotypes of African Americans.

Eichstedt and Small found *segregation and marginalization of knowledge* (presenting the bulk of information about the black experience in optional and less-frequently-offered special tours) to be the dominant strategy at 4% of sites. Linking this approach to contemporary segregation in housing, employment, and education, they suggest that despite providing valuable information about slave culture, such tours perpetuate the notion of the white experience as central and the black experience as peripheral. Only 3% of the sites surveyed meet the authors' criteria for inclusion in the category of *relative incorporation*, which is paralleled to contemporary attempts to achieve real integration, both in an intellectual and cultural sense and in the daily practice of social interaction. Sites characterized as practicing *relative incorporation* attempt to portray the plantation world as an integrated reality in which the white experience and the black experience cannot be understood in isolation from each other.

The rhetoric of inclusion has pervaded the museum field for at least 15 years, forging a widespread commitment to making audible voices that have been previously marginalized in the narrative of American history. This inclusion of multiple perspectives has greatly increased the complexity of interpretive programming across the country. The majority of museums and historic sites, plantation museums included, have a sincere desire to broaden the stories they tell. Yet too often, that desire remains unrealized. Perhaps the greatest weakness of **Representations of Slavery** is the authors' failure to explore the political factors influencing museums to sanitize their stories. Also missing is a discussion of the fear that given their history of elitism, an attempt on the part of largely white institutions to interpret the story of slavery would be viewed in the black community as patronizing and offensive. Some sort of formal audience evaluation would also have been a fascinating addition to the study, offering opportunities to test the authors' assumptions regarding the contemporary implications of interpretative frameworks.

The fact that this book had to be written at all tells us a great deal about where we are both as a society and as a museum community. Eichstedt and Small force us to face the reality that white-centric museum representations are neither a thing of the past nor the products of deliberate and purposeful racism. Instead, they are witnesses to the enduring power of the kind of unconscious structural racism that continues to shape our culture. On page 21, the authors pose a powerful question: How is it that, decades after the first civil rights legislation was passed and Black racial justice activism rocked the United States, most of the sites we explored still engage in symbolic annihilation and trivialization? How indeed? Yet perhaps the fact that the book was considered important enough to be written is a hopeful sign that such wrongs shall not go forever uncorrected.

Jill Ogline is a doctoral student in the History Department at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and a Historian in the Northeast Regional Office of the National Park Service. She is currently working on a Park Service initiative entitled Civic Engagement, which aims at increasing the contemporary relevance of historic sites by making them centers for dialogue about civic issues.