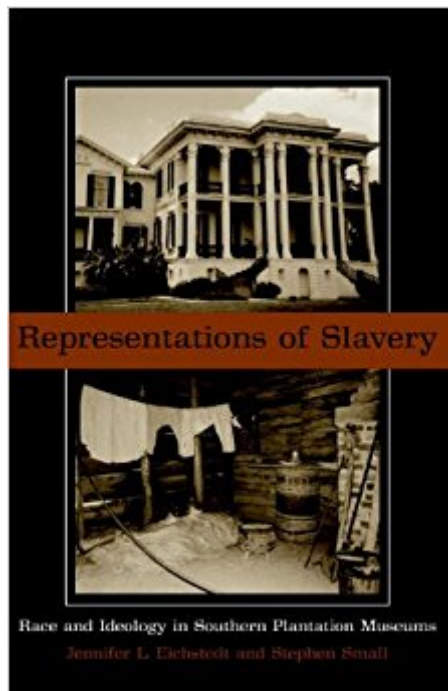




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Representations Of Slavery: Race And Ideology In Southern Plantation Museums



Synopsis

How is slavery presented at the public and private plantation museums in the American South, almost 150 years after the Civil War? Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small investigated this question in Virginia, Georgia, and Louisiana by touring more than one hundred plantation museums; twenty locations organized and run by African Americans; and eighty general history sites. Their findings indicate that the experience and legacy of slavery is still inadequately presented within the larger discourse surrounding race, racism, and national identity. The vast majority of slavery sites construct narratives of history that valorize a white elite of the pre-emancipation South and trivialize the experience of slavery for both enslaved people and their enslavers. Through systematic analysis of richly textured data, the authors of *Representations of Slavery* have developed a typology of primary representational/discursive strategies used to discuss slavery and the enslaved. They clearly demonstrate how these strategies are linked to representations and practices in the larger social and political arenas. Eichstedt and Small found counter narratives at sites organized and staffed by African Americans, and a small number of white-organized sites have made efforts to incorporate African American experiences of slavery as part of their presentations. But the predominant framework of the “white-centric exhibition narrative” persists, and the authors draw from contemporary literature on racialization, museums, cultural studies, and collective memory to make a case for public debate and intervention.

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Customer Reviews

Jennifer L. Eichstedt is an assistant professor of sociology at Humboldt State University in Arcata,

California. Stephen Small is an associate professor of African American studies at the University of California at Berkeley.

Although slightly dated in terms of when the observations that form the basis of these studies were made, that in no way reduces the applicability of this study to contemporary problems of the representation of slavery within the metier of sites wherein these problems are being addressed today. Insightful, applicable, highly useful.

Great book! I spent the summer of 2014 in South Carolina and this text helped to give me perspective on both the house museums and plantation museums located there. Maybe that was not the intention of the authors but I was then able to assess slavery and how it was represented at all of the museums I visited.

There is some fantastic information between the covers, here. However, the authors continually whine, so it can be difficult to read. Also, they have no sense of humor, so in areas where there are jokes, they take it personally and use it against the people who said it. BUT, if you can get past all of the unpalatable "Yankeeisms," then you will find information to make your site one of the greats. I definitely learned a great deal from the authors, but it made my teeth hurt at times.

African American history in general, and slavery in particular, should be an integral part of the story told at any plantation museum. After all, not a single plantation would have or could have existed without the complex institution slavery. Yet as the authors ably demonstrate, that story is not being presented by the vast majority of plantation museums. The authors create a useful framework to categorize the nature of interpretation. "Symbolic Annihilation" occurs when slavery is not acknowledged at all. "Trivialization and deflection" might actually be more insidious, because it presents slavery as benign, with happy "darkies" gratefully serving Massa. "Segregation or marginalization" is at least a step in a better direction; here museums offer interpretative programs relating to the black experience, but in separate and less frequent programming. "Relative incorporation" occurs when the story of the plantation's black inhabitants is told at least alongside that of its white inhabitants. There is no reduction to a so-called "white vs black dichotomy" nor is this book in any way "white bashing." The sad truth is it's impossible to discuss slavery without mentioning the enslavers, and vice versa...and it is the life of the enslaver that is explored and commemorated by these museums. The authors simply argue that it's high time we heard about the

enslaved as well, and that plantation museums offer the perfect opportunity to explore the institution in all its complexity. And that is apparently starting to happen only at Afro-centric sites, or publicly funded ones. The private foundations exist primarily to keep alive the myth of the Lost South, and integrating the story of slavery into those sites is - I fear - a lost cause.

Eichstadt and Small's study of the ways in which Southern Plantation museums do and do not address slavery is primarily useful in that it confirms what most of us already recognized. Most Southern plantation museums do not confront the issue of slavery in a useful or balanced way. This is not news to public historians. Although the book does serve to document the lack of slavery representation in most southern house museums, as a whole, it is not particularly profound. Some of Eichstadt and Small's conclusions and terminology, however, do provide useful tools for public historians studying the representation of slavery in house museums. The introductory sections are thought provoking as they address some of the reasons that the issue of slavery is often absent in the interpretive framework of many southern house museums.

Although I see the validity of their points throughout the book, I walked away from it feeling bad to be a white person. Yes, slavery happened, yes, it was a horrible atrocity, but I don't think that they do an adequate job of truly examining museums but instead reducing it to a white vs. black dichotomy. If you want to read something truly interesting and non white bashing, go elsewhere.

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