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# THE DARK PAST OF SLAVERY IN AMERICAN PLANTATION HOUSES: WEBSITE PROMOTION AND PERCEPTIONS OF VISITORS IN TRIPADVISOR REVIEWS

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### *Keywords:*

corpus linguistics;  
dark tourism;  
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TripAdvisor;  
slavery.

*Abstract.* The visual and linguistic representations of tourism destinations for promotional aims may be affected by their primary function of acquiring new visitors; for this reason, they are not always “value-free expressions of a place’s identity” (Pritchard & Morgan, 2001, p. 177). The concept of dark tourism seems to perfectly mirror the connection between terminological choices and culturally-bound constraints. It has been acknowledged that several dark tourism sites tend to valorise (or hide) events associated with tragedy and death, attracting tourists’ interest for their (non)macabre details at the expense of historical objectivity. This is the case of plantation houses in the US, whose narrative on slavery has often been “whitewashed” and minimized (e.g., Harnay, 2022; Butler, 2001; Eichstedt & Small, 2002). This study aims at investigating how visitors to popular plantation destinations in the US perceive and evaluate the presentation of the experience of slavery in these sites vis-à-vis what is presented on the plantation websites. The analysis is therefore twofold: first, a qualitative multimodal study of the content included in the websites of the plantations will shed light on whether the websites include information on the role of slave labour in the plantations, and secondly, a corpus-assisted investigation of the visitors’ reviews posted on TripAdvisor will attempt to clarify how visitors perceive the plantations as a tourist location, and the importance they place on receiving honest information about the brutality of slavery during their visits. The mixed-methods approach has allowed researchers to delve into this phenomenon from two opposite, but intertwined, perspectives: one driven by experts officially promoting the visit through the websites and the other offered by visitors sharing their personal experiences and feelings.

“Coming away from the tour, I was thoroughly impressed and my previous concerns were assuaged. But my discomfort persisted. Eventually, I realised that it was not just what was present at the plantation, but what was absent that was the source of my discomfort.”

(Raymen, 2016)

### *Introduction*<sup>4</sup>

As the English writer Samuel Johnson wrote in a letter to Hester Thrale in 1773, “the use of travel is to regulate imagination by reality, and instead of thinking how things may be, to see them as they are” (Johnson, 1773, in Damrosch, 1989, p. 93). It is generally accepted indeed that travellers of any time visit places unknown to them in order to discover something new about the place in which they are. Apart from those who are travelling for business purposes, people undertake a journey for several different reasons, which include recreational and educational/study purposes (UNWTO, n.d.)—travel provides a momentary break from the routine of daily lives and gives the possibility to meet people of diverse backgrounds and to experience the local culture. Since ancient times, the purpose of the journey for human beings was precisely to explore, to reflect on the unknown and to re-centre themselves, in a way in which everyone could find benefit. In modern times, tourism, in its broader sense, is seen as a form of “personal development and improvement”, as it is “impossible to travel to another culture without experiencing some of its effects and products” (Lennon

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<sup>4</sup> The research for this article has been carried out jointly by the three authors: in writing, Silvia Cavalieri has dealt with the section “Materials and Methods” (Data Collection, Methodology); Sara Corrizato has dealt with the sections “Introduction”, “Dark Tourism and Plantation Houses”, “Perception of Slavery Narratives on TripAdvisor” (from the beginning to example 13), “Conclusions”; Valeria Franceschi has dealt with the section “Qualitative Multimodal Analysis of Websites” and “Perception of Slavery Narratives on TripAdvisor” (from example 14 to the end).

& Foley, 2010, p. 7). Studies in this area offer different perspectives on what tourism is and how it has developed, examining the phenomenon from various angles, which give economic, political, anthropological, and linguistic readings (Lickorish & Jenkins, 1997; Kumar Dixit, 2020; Gursoy & Singh Kaurav, 2022). Interestingly, recent studies have demonstrated that the umbrella term ‘tourism’ seems to be no longer comprehensive enough to define the different forms of tourism that permeate contemporary society, as people travel for different reasons and to fulfil different needs. In this regard, cultural tourism, health tourism, sports tourism, business tourism, and dark tourism are some of the most common examples (Jayapalan, 2001). The wide variety of proposals and the almost countless number of places to visit has meant that the boundaries between one form of tourism and another are not so defined and definable, sometimes generating interesting reflections from a social and anthropological point of view. If we think of tourism in big cities, this consideration becomes very easy to understand: someone flying to Paris, Rome, New York or Tokyo for a few days may be interested in monuments (cultural tourism), typical food products (food and wine tourism), sporting activities (sports tourism) or places of death (dark tourism). It is worth noting that the different forms of tourism offered by a specific place are mainly governed by two factors: the promotion of the location offered by official channels (Ashworth & Goodall, 1990; Morrison, 2019) and the promotion of the location shared by people who have already been there (Hidalgo Alcázar et al., 2014; Youseff, 2017; Xu et al., 2021). In the ever-developing digital era, both actors play a crucial role in promoting a specific location, as a huge amount of content is posted online in real time.

The present study aims to investigate if and to what extent house plantations in the South of the US are part of the so-called ‘dark tourism’, exploring the way(s) in which selected sites are presented and investigating the perceptions of visitors on the issue of slavery. After providing a definition and scope of the concept of dark tourism and relevant literature on plantation houses as tourism destinations, the data collection process and analytical methods for the two stages of the research (analysis of plantation house websites and TripAdvisor reviews) are outlined. The paper continues with the description and interpretation of the main results.

### *Dark Tourism and Plantation Houses*

Theorised by Foley and Lennon in 1996, the expression dark tourism “encompass[es] the presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commodified death and disaster sites” (p. 198). In their opinion, “visitors may have been motivated to undertake a visit by a desire to experience the reality behind the media images and/or by a personal association with inhumanity” (ibid.)

looking for places associated with death. Overall, previous work offers a number of useful insights into how dark tourism has developed and into how dark tourists can be identified. Therefore, passion for disasters, deaths and atrocities has been identified as a growing phenomenon whose roots can be traced in the late twentieth century given the growing interest in tragic events and their mass media sharing (Urry, 1990; Rojek, 1993; Sharpley & Stone, 2009); parallel to this, such an interest has been recognized as something different from the previous assumptions through which cultural heritage tourists could be labelled as amateur ethnographers (Minić, 2012), as dark tourists seem to be more concentrated on macabre locations which remember gothic settings, such as perilous places, houses of horror, fields of fatality, tours of torment (Dann, 1998). Different definitions have been offered, but all these approaches seem to have their weaknesses—for a detailed overview see Hooper and Lennon (2016)—because they do not fully investigate the nature and scope of dark tourism. Recognizing this phenomenon more controversial than what non-experts might think, a strand of literature has addressed the topic from different angles, starting from the assumption that examining dark tourism means taking several components, even contrasting, into account: while Lennon and Foley (2000) agree on associating dark tourism with modernity, as dark destinations grow and develop “within the memories of those still alive to validate them” (p. 12), others see dark tourism in the first pilgrims who travelled long distances on foot to see where their religious/pagan idols or mass deaths had occurred (Olsen & Kostanje, 2020), promoting the idea that dark tourism is everywhere. According to this perspective, Europe is seen as a model for dark tourism, as “[...] it is a continent filled with bloody wars, and celebrations of the dead in pantheons and cathedrals. Death dominates much of European tourism, from visits to the graves of poets and kings, to the mass graves of soldiers who died in Europe’s many wars” (Tarlow, 2005, p. 53). However, such an approach can be rejected if the motivation that drives the travellers is not guided by interest in death. Indeed, it seems that it is the motivation that pushes people to visit a certain place that makes (or does not make) that specific location part of this subdomain. In this regard, many concert and opera fans enter the Arena in Verona without considering the number of deaths that have occurred because of gladiator fights, as well as countless visitors go to visit the Tower of London to see the royal possessions and they do not remember that it was a prison, and some people were executed within the Tower complex itself.

As many other tourism destinations, such as places pertaining to events of World War I and World War II, Sook Ching sites in Singapore or the Kigali Genocide Memorial in Rwanda, the plantation houses in the Southern United States can be associated with dark tourism, as they testify the growth of slavery in the United States. However, as anticipated above, applying fixed categorizations seems almost impossible because, even in the case of plantation heritage

sites, more than a univocal observation should be done. As testified by researchers in the field (Modlin, 2008; Harnay, 2022) as well as by journalists publishing in international newspapers<sup>5</sup>, the reconstruction of plantations seems to lose “this aspect of a historic site (such as a plantation or genteel antebellum home) [becoming] masked, elided, or simply footnoted in the presentation of beautiful buildings and gardens for tourist consumption” (Gruben, 2015).

Understanding the fact that there is no one interpretation that fits all, the present analysis aims to understand what groups of people are motivated to visit plantation complexes in the USA, if plantation houses can be included among those places recognised as part of dark tourism and, if so, how plantation houses are presented to the wide audience through official websites and travellers’ private reviews.

### *Materials and Methods*

*Data Collection.* The data for the analysis of plantation tourism were gathered from the Web and we started our collection by typing the search string “most visited plantation houses in the US” as a parameter in the Google search engine. We were directed to platforms offering insights and suggestions to tourists interested in taking a tour of the “most notable” and beautiful plantations located in the southern part of the US. As a first step, we selected the most cited locations in the list of sites that appeared on the first landing page of Google. Then, we checked the presence of those plantation houses on TripAdvisor, and we decided to consider only those with at least 300 reviews in English. However, given the substantial numerical discrepancy in the amount of reviews for each plantation on TripAdvisor, ranging from 300 to 7000 roughly, we decided to focus on the 100 most recent reviews up to the end of July 2022 to obtain a balanced corpus. Data was downloaded and saved in Word format to be analysed quantitatively using corpus linguistics analytical tools. Texts were then cleaned of all data fields such as star value, date, traveller ID, and traveller profile (business, couple, family, friend or solo), keeping only the textual description of the review. The resulting corpus consists of 110,598 words. Table 1 provides a summative overview of the data detailing the list of the plantations taken into consideration with the address of their official websites (if present) as well as the number of words of the TripAdvisor reviews for each plantation in the corpus:

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<sup>5</sup> For a thorough investigation see Holpuch, 2019 and Lawrence-Sanders et al. 2021.

Table 1. List of plantations chosen for the analysis

Name	Website	TripAdvisor reviews (n. of words)
Andre Jackson's Hermitage	<a href="https://thehermitage.com">https://thehermitage.com</a>	8,709
Belle Meade plantation	<a href="https://visitbellemeade.com">https://visitbellemeade.com</a>	5,813
Boone Hall Plantation	<a href="https://www.boonehallplantation.com">https://www.boonehallplantation.com</a>	8,182
Destrehan Plantation	<a href="https://www.destrehanplantation.org">https://www.destrehanplantation.org</a>	6,286
Evergreen Plantation	<a href="https://www.evergreenplantation.org">https://www.evergreenplantation.org</a>	9,380
James Madison's Montpelier Plantation	<a href="https://www.montpelier.org">https://www.montpelier.org</a>	12,279
Laura Plantation	<a href="https://www.lauraplantation.com/discover/the-plantation">https://www.lauraplantation.com/ discover/the-plantation</a>	6,455
Magnolia Plantation	<a href="https://www.magnoliaplantation.com">https://www.magnoliaplantation.com</a>	8,147
Oak Alley plantation	<a href="https://www.oakalleyplantation.org">https://www.oakalleyplantation.org</a>	9,352
Pebble Hill	<a href="https://pebblehill.com">https://pebblehill.com</a>	7,527
SanFrancisco Plantation House	--	10,840
St Joseph Plantation	<a href="https://www.stjosephplantation.com">https://www.stjosephplantation.com</a>	9,802
Whitney Plantation	<a href="https://www.whitneyplantation.org">https://www.whitneyplantation.org</a>	7,826

*Methodology.* As for methodology, the study adopted a two-level analysis and a mixed method approach, i.e., qualitative and quantitative, drawing on discourse analytical and corpus linguistics tools. The first phase of the investigation took the official websites of the selected plantations into consideration. A qualitative multimodal analysis was carried out to see whether and to what extent historical information about slavery and the laborers who worked at the plantation is included in plantations' webpages. To reach this aim several parameters were considered:

1. Visual information about slavery: historical images of the slaves at the plantation, of the places they lived and worked in, maps, reproduction of historical documents;

2. Historic information about slavery and slaves: this includes sections and text narrating the history of the location considering the pivotal role of slave labor in the management of the plantations. In addition to timelines and historical events, lists of names of slaves and descriptions of their jobs may also be present as well as external links to other websites and resources focusing on African American history;

3. Presence of exhibits, museums, or dedicated tours: this larger category includes advertising of occasions for visitors to learn more about slavery on the plantations, directly on the premises, that is, exhibits, permanent museums, or plantation tours that focus specifically on slaves and their life at work at the plantation.

The second step of the analysis involved the corpus of TripAdvisor's reviews, and we performed a quantitative analysis using *SketchEngine* (Kilgarriff et al., 2014) to automatically calculate single-word keywords. Amongst the numerous reference corpora available on Sketch Engine, the English Web 2020 (enTenTen20) was selected as a reference corpus, since it represents an example of text corpus collected from the Web. We calculated the keywords of the corpus, setting the 'simple maths' option of SketchEngine (Kilgarriff, 2009) at 10 and with a minimum frequency of 5. Since our aim was to see to what extent slavery is still 'felt' by tourists in these locations that have very often been repurposed for other tourist uses, we chose to take into consideration the thematic node "slavery" focusing on the lemmas related to the topic in the first 50 positions of the keyword list and we extracted 3 items: *slave* (rank 6 in the keyword list, 441 occurrences), *enslave* (rank 8 in the keyword list, 109 occurrences), *slavery* (rank 10 in the keyword list, 178 occurrences). For each term, concordance lines were explored to observe the context of the selected lemmas and to determine recurrent patterns in their use.

In the next sections, the findings obtained by the methodology detailed above are presented, starting from the qualitative multimodal overview of plantations' websites, then moving on to the quantitative analysis of TripAdvisor reviews.

### *Qualitative Multimodal Analysis of Websites*

Out of the 13 selected plantations, 11 websites (one plantation did not seem to have an official website, and one website was not reachable) were examined to evaluate whether and to what extent historical information about slavery and the laborers who worked at the plantation is included in the websites.

All the 11 websites make some kind of mention to slavery, an immediate sign that there are no attempts to bury the darker side of plantation history; however, quantity and detail of information on the topic, as well as prominence on the website, vary considerably across the dataset. 9 out of 11 websites included visual information of some sort, from reproductions of historical documents reporting names and information about the slaves currently at work on the plantation, to larger galleries showcasing pictures of African American slaves and their families, again to educational videos about the topic.

Sections on the history of the enslaved communities on the plantations are present, to various extents, in 10 out of 11 websites. Some sections briefly recall the history of slavery in the area the plantation is in, whereas other websites devote multiple sections to illustrating the stories of slave laborers on the plantation, including lists of names, more detailed biographies of some of the slaves, glossaries describing the jobs and tasks the slaves would carry out in the



plantations. 9 out of 11 websites have exhibitions, museums, or offer tours that deal specifically with slave labor on the plantation. It should be noted that while Evergreen Plantation does not include dedicated exhibits or tours, as it is not open for tours. The website states that “are dedicated to research and education” and provide extensive resources on the enslaved community at the plantation.

In addition to providing factual historical data, both the sections on the history of the enslaved communities and those detailing exhibits, museums and tours highlight the importance for such places to educate the public on the conditions of slaves on plantation and remember with respect the people that lived and worked on plantation grounds. In an ‘Our Mission’ section the Belle Meade Plantation reports that they “are committed to be a site that provides historical context for meaningful and honest conversations.” Evergreen Plantation states that they are “committed to telling the stories of the men, women, and children who were enslaved here”. Most websites use respectful language that underlines the plight of the enslaved communities and other marginalized groups at the time, such as the Native American populations that lived in the areas of the plantations, as well as other communities such as the Louisiana Creoles (St. Joseph; Laura), the Gullah<sup>6</sup> (Boone Hall), German farmers and the Acadians (Destrehan).

The purpose of these sections and of the advertised dedicated tours is to make visitors (also prospective ones) aware of the history of these locations, which built their wealth on the labor of enslaved African Americans and to “honor”, “acknowledge and pay respect”, and give a voice to these people, who will be “no longer anonymous”. The tours in particular do not only aim to provide information about the “moving stories of the marginalized people who stood there before [visitors]” (Destrehan) but to prompt visitors to reflect and discuss how this part of the American history informs how race and race relations are perceived to this day. While Montpelier’s website does not have a section on slavery on the plantation, their tours and exhibits aim at fostering awareness and discussion: “this exhibition explores how the legacy of slavery impacts today’s conversations about race, identity, and human rights”. Magnolia Plantation’s tour description states that “visitors will leave with a newfound perspective on the lives of the men, women, and children who have lived here since the beginning. We urge you to participate”. Encouraging visitors to participate in tours focusing on these aspects of the plantation’s history also has the purpose to remind them that while some of these places have now become commercial attractions as wedding and party venues, wineries, and so on, the beauty of the mansions and surrounding gardens should never distract visitors from what occurred in the past and its consequences on contemporary society.

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<sup>6</sup> The Gullah are an African American group “inhabiting the sea islands and coastal districts of South Carolina, Georgia, and north-eastern Florida” s.v. *Merriam Webster Gullah* noun <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Gullah> (last visited 23/08/2022).

Due to the extensive presence of historical material about slavery, it is not possible to say that plantation websites are “whitewashed”, although it may be observed that attention to this aspect of plantation history and life is not treated equally and with the same tact and concern in all the locations taken into consideration.

### *Perception of Slavery Narratives on TripAdvisor*

Concordances of the words *slavery*, *slave(s)* and *enslaved* were carried out on the 110,598-word *TripAdvisor\_Plantation* corpus. The words are prominent in the corpus, all three within the first 10 keywords for keyness score, with 178 occurrences for *slavery*, 441 for *slave/s* and 109 for *enslaved* in 12 out of 13 plantations.

Overall, the presence of discourse about slavery in the reviews differs across plantations: certain locations receive few mentions of the terms under investigation (e.g., Pebble Hill, 14 occurrences; Belle Meade, 8 occurrences) while the topic appears to be extensively discussed in others (e.g. Evergreen, 117 occurrences; James Madison, 100 occurrences). As Butler (2001) clarifies indeed, “plantation ownership proved a crucial factor in determining what [is] the emphasis or lack of focus on slavery” (167).

Total of 294 out of 728 instances of the three terms are neutral in evaluative terms: in a small number of instances (27) *slavery* appears as part of tour/exhibit names or is listed as one of the subject guests can learn about in their visit, as in the example below:

1. We’ve been to other cash crop plantations, and understood the design and how slavery was incorporated and enforced. (Belle Meade)

There are also several cases in which the terms are used in their attributive form, neutrally qualifying buildings, objects or human activities. For instance, the nominal compounds *slave cabin/s* and *slave house/s* appear respectively 46 times and 19 times within the corpus.

2. Also be sure to view the historic outbuildings, including the 1840s slave cabin and the schoolhouse dating to the 1830s. (San Francisco)

3. The grounds were available to tour, slave houses were on the property also. (Boone Hall)

Similarly, an in-depth analysis reveals that the term *slave* is strongly used (84 times) in its attributive position together with *quarter/s*, which are mentioned within tours and exhibitions:

4. The Big House is a guided tour while the slave quarters are self-guided. (Oak Alley)

5. The greeter mentioned that we could also include the freedom tour of the slave quarters at no added cost. (Magnolia)

Despite a number of neutral uses, the majority of the concordances display either evaluative or emotional stance towards the management of discourse on slavery in plantations. A clear majority of statements expressed satisfaction in relation to their experience and to the tours they participated in, or included positive evaluations on the way plantations touched upon the delicate subject of slavery.

6. Learned so much information about the house, family, and slave uprising. (Destrehan)

7. If you are looking to learn a lot about the slave trading and their lives, this would be a great tour. (Whitney)

Some visitors simply highlighted the quality of the offered tours, without providing any additional information about their own perspective on this part of American history.

8. The Slavery to Freedom tour is now included with admission and is well worth the time. (Magnolia)

On the other hand, other reviewers make more explicit observations about how they felt the issue of slavery was approached by specific guides or by the plantation in general.

9. The tour is honest and challenges romanticized versions of slavery that are propagated to make Americans feel more comfortable with our terrible history. (Belle Meade)

This review appreciates that the tour at Belle Meade does not shy away from discussing the more difficult aspects of this era and does not draw from a traditional vision of the past “through which Southerners worshiped an idyllic Old South where benevolent masters lived in harmony with their happy, loyal slaves on a peaceable plantation” (Harnay, 2022).

From a different perspective, the following examples celebrate the tour guides’ skill in presenting historical events and slaves’ every-day life.

10. Desiree, our tour guide, was enthusiastic & professional. She provided a DENSE history of the era, the plantation and the slaves FOR AN HOUR AND A HALF! (Evergreen)

11. This your (sic.) focused more on the historical culture and slave history and was a great perspective. In the past the tours, which were very good, focused on the societal and architectural aspects and some on slavery, but not to the detail that Lindie provided. (Laura)

Another example shows awareness of how delicate discourse on slavery is, and the reviewer values how the tour guide approached the topic, again with sensitivity but without sugar-coating the worst part of how slaves were treated.

12. Plantations and slavery are very sensitive topics and they were handled with honesty and diplomacy (sic.) by Robin on this tour. (Evergreen)

13. The museum tells the story of the plantation and the enslaved with respect, honor, and compassion. (Whitney)

The examples below show a more emotional angle, as it focuses on the strong response visitors may have when learning about the harsh realities of slave life on plantations:

14. The exhibition below the house on slavery has to have tissue boxes strategically placed; it reduces viewers to tears. (James Madison)

15. In the slave cabin I experienced such sadness that I nearly cried and unusual heart palpitations. (San Francisco)

16. Thank you for telling this story from the enslaved people's perspective – it was educational and moving. (Whitney)

It appears then that visitors who are aware of the atrocities committed in those years appreciate tours and locations that do not whitewash the narrative by downplaying the experience of slave laborers in the plantations, and support the “reformist trend” (Harnay, 2022) that curators are increasingly taking in the representation of slavery. Indeed, when guests feel that the interpretation provided does not give justice—and a voice—to the slaves that laboured there, they are ready to point it out in their reviews: there are a consistent number of occurrences of reviewers criticizing the plantations for not highlighting this part of the history of the plantations:

17. They say in the ‘Big House’ tour that it is important to recognise that none of what is standing today would be possible if it wasn't for slaves and that we need to recognise that, so why is the slavery exhibit shunned to behind the nice, big, pretty house? (Oak Alley)

In example (17), the reviewer feels that while slavery was touched upon in the tour, it was left in the backseat when compared to other aspects of the visit. In the following examples, the complaint is stronger as the reviewers expected the tour to emphasize the cruelty of the slave system in place on the plantation, but this aspect was not highlighted, focusing instead on the owners of the plantation and their life.

18. I was very disheartened by this tour. I made the assumption that it would focus on slavery and the atrocities that occurred on plantations, however, it focused on the house and the plantation family and their wealth. Barely a mention of slaves. (St. Joseph)

19. Plantation really doesn't touch on the REAL history of the enslaved people. If you want to know how the plantation owners lived then certainly visit this one. (Evergreen)

The same sensation is shared in the following two comments, in which reviewers complained about the way in which slavery is portrayed:

20. In the house you will learn about the white's (sic.) who owned it. There are side mentions of the house slaves. The sugar shack video to the side is a disgrace. It's an extremely distasteful video that is all about CURRENT sugar can production. (Oak Alley)

21. [...] how can we build a better world, when we refuse to acknowledge our mistakes? So shameful and disrespectful (sic.) to the thousands of slaves that were tortured, beaten and separated from their children. (Pebble Hill)

Comment (21) contributes to broadening the perspective on what could really matter for future generations, as “[I]f slavery or slaves are missing, then the extrapolation process and the production of verisimilitude are also denied. If plantations falsify or remove slavery from prominence in their museums, the result is a lost opportunity for a nation to learn from its past mistakes” (Butler, 2001, p. 173).

In this sense, some of the reviews within the corpus highlight the fact that information on slavery and specifically on slaves living in a given plantation are only retrievable through the autonomous reading of leaflets made available in the corners of the rooms or through the individual exploration of the plantation complex.

22. House tour was very informative about the owners...no tour for slave quarters, but if you read the plaques, you get plenty of information... (Oak Halley)

23. With the experience of the tour behind you, the photos fill out a lot about slave life that is hinted at but not explicit in the tour. (Laura)

In addition to the thematic axes outlined so far, a third category of evaluations emerges from the analysis: a number of reviews, primarily—but not only—for James Madison's plantation, introduce a completely opposite perspective on slave narratives. In such reviews, visitors indeed complained that attention to slavery was excessive and that not enough attention was paid to Madison's figure, who, in addition to being the 4<sup>th</sup> president of the US, was one of the Founding Fathers and contributing author to the US constitution.

24. The grounds are lovely and from the outside all looks wonderful and appropriate for such an important American historical figure. Unfortunately, it's all downhill from there as you are hit across the face with the lack of balanced content and appreciation for the man and his place in history. Instead, it's some kind of weird propaganda that hits you across the face with an obsession about slavery. (James Madison)

The review above appears to find the information provided “unbalanced” and a focus on slavery as “propaganda”, suggesting that such visitors appear to find information on the atrocity of slavery superfluous as well as almost offensive towards the historical figure of Madison, who, like many of his contemporary

peers, also owned slaves. The same intolerance towards discourse on slavery is found in the following examples:

25. All about slavery and nothing about architecting the greatest nation the world has ever known. (James Madison)

26. Honestly, we didn't come and take this tour to learn about slaves and slave life at Montpelier, we come to learn about James and Dolly Madison. (James Madison)

27. Regarding the enslaved, I'm not suggesting the fact that the Madison's owned slaves should be ignored, but that is not THE story. (James Madison)

Other reviews complained that tour guides “bashed white men” when discussing slavery, or that history was ruined by “the Leftists”. This appears to be a particular category of visitors, especially those at Madison's plantation, whose goal was to learn about a patriotic figure and for whom highlighting a dark aspect of Americans perceived as a slight to Madison and his role in the establishment of the US Constitution. This shows that the romanticization of plantation narratives is still very much appreciated by certain visitors, whereas a more realistic representation of life on the plantation is perceived, rather than a more balanced interpretation of history and an educational opportunity, as a leftist distortion on the preferred narrative.

## *Conclusions*

The qualitative analysis of websites and the corpus-assisted investigation of slavery-related keywords has provided a better understanding of how plantations are presented and how the perception of tourists is expressed in TripAdvisor reviews. More specifically, the study aimed at seeing whether there is a trace of negative evaluation linked to the tragic past of slavery on plantations, or whether that perception has been completely overturned due to whitewashing and to location conversion into party/wedding venues. As data demonstrate, the opinions extracted from the reviews within the corpus are controversial: on the one hand, they celebrate honesty, accuracy and awareness in the portrayal and contextualisation of slavery; on the other, they complain about the lack of appropriate and objective information. In this sense, resulting reflections could be multifold. Firstly, the inclusion of slavery-related information in the promotion of websites can influence the expectations of prospective tourists. Secondly, as anticipated in the introduction, data confirm that it is the visitors' intentions—and what they want to find—which builds a relation between plantations and dark tourism. Undoubtedly, the official promotion contributes to influencing visitors' perceptions; however, the evaluation of slavery-related

content by those visiting plantations is inextricably linked to individual knowledge of the historical period and all that it entailed. Visitors unconcerned with slavery would not complain of whitewashing, and, on the contrary, complain that attention to slavery would overshadow the romanticised narrative on the white owners. On the other hand, visitors more aware of the history of plantations would be more likely to evaluate the detail and historical accuracy in the information about slavery. Future research in this field could involve the triangulation of the reviews, which evaluate positively or negatively the inclusion and the treatment of slavery on plantation tours, with the writers' nationality, assuming that an American tourist could be more aware of what visitors should experience than a traveller from another continent. Political orientation and ethnicity would also be important aspects to investigate, although not easily gleaned from TripAdvisor profiles.

Preliminary results should then be followed up with the administration of a questionnaire, which would provide an insight into background knowledge regardless of nationality. Moreover, a diachronic multimodal and linguistic analysis of the promotional materials related to plantation as well as information given by tour guides could provide an opportunity to understand if and to what extent the inclusion of slave-related content has undergone changes in its presentation. In addition to that, it could be worth investigating the political views of the plantation owners and managers.

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## Мрачна прошлост ропства у америчким плантажним кућама: веб-промоција и перцепције посетилаца из рецензија са веб-странице *TripAdvisor*

### Резиме

На визуелне и језичке презентације туристичких дестинација, које се користе у промотивне сврхе, може утицати њихова примарна функција да привуку нове посетиоце због чега оне нису увек и „објективан израз идентитета неког места“ (Pritchard & Morgan, 2001, стр. 177). Чини се да концепт мрачног туризма савршено одражава везу између терминолошког одабира и културолошких ограничења. Постоји неколико примера локација мрачног туризма који валоризују (или прикривају) догађаје повезане са трагедијом и смрћу, привлачећи туристе који су заинтересовани за (не)језиве детаље на рачун историјске објективности. То је случај и са плантажним кућама у САД, чије се приповедање о ропству често „пере“ и минимизира (нпр. Butler, 2001; Eichstedt & Small, 2002; Harnay, 2022).

Ово истраживање имало је за циљ да утврди како посетиоци плантажа, популарних дестинација у САД, перципирају и оцењују презентацију ропства на овим локацијама у односу на оно што је представљено на веб-страницама плантажа. Стога је анализа била двострука: прво, квалитативним мултимодалним истраживањем садржаја поменутих веб-страница требало је да се утврди да ли оне садрже информације о улози робовског рада на плантажама и, друго, корпусном анализом рецензија посетилаца које су објављене на веб-страници *TripAdvisor* настојало се разјаснити како посетиоци перципирају

плантаже као туристичке локације и колики значај придају добијању тачних, искрених информација о бруталности ропства током посета. Овакав приступ мешовитих метода омогућава истраживачима да дати феномен сагледају из две супротне, али повезане перспективе, и то перспективе стручњака који званично промовишу посету путем веб-страница и перспективе посетилаца који деле своја лична искуства и осећања.

*Кључне речи:* корпусна лингвистика; мрачни туризам; плантажне куће; *TripAdvisor*; ропство.



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