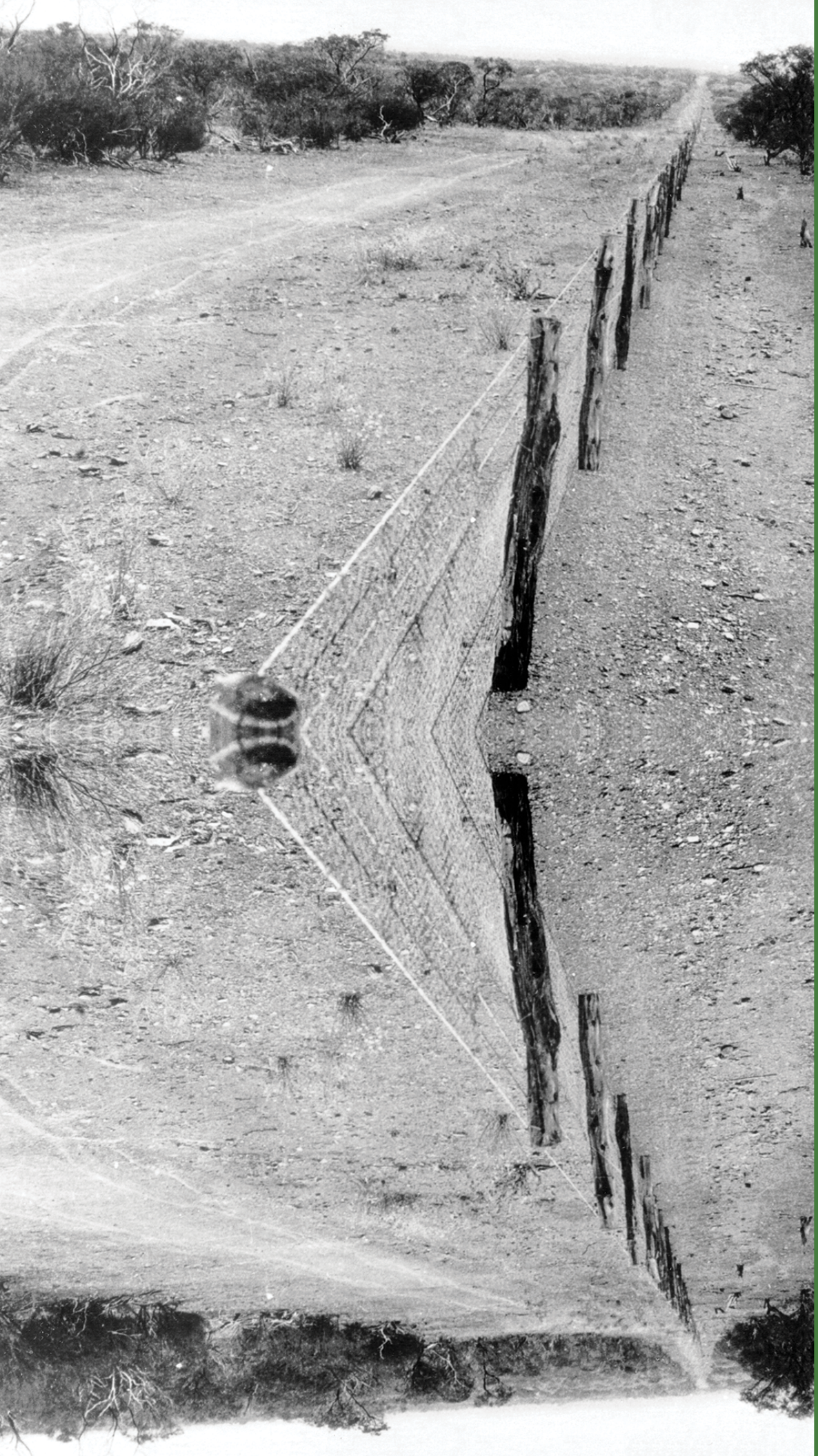


feature articles



Black Magnolia: Counter-Narrating a Plantation Tourist Site

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In 1870 Reverend John Grimké Drayton (1816-1891) oversaw what many people believed was a miraculous conversion: the Episcopal minister had transformed his rice plantation into a 500-acre garden and opened it to the public as a tourist site, making the property located in Charleston, South Carolina, the first plantation attraction in the postbellum Deep South.¹ Magnolia Plantation was now Magnolia Gardens, an extravagant English country-style garden where rare camellias and azaleas triumphed into floral jungles; a collection of Japanese-style footbridges festooned man-made ponds; a maze of rose hedges fostered an aristocratic flair; and a potpourri of cypresses, live oaks, and of course, magnolias swayed in the humid coastal breeze.² The estate soon became a nationally-known destination that hosted hundreds of visitors annually and featured prominently in newspapers, magazines, and travel guides, which referred to Magnolia with such effusive sobriquets as “Charleston’s Fairy-Land” and “Elysium.”³ This seemingly Edenic reinvention, however, concealed less blissful realities.

The federal government’s failure to adequately assist the newly free population left Magnolia’s former slaves with little choice but to stay on after the Civil War (1861-1865) and toil under their old master. These emancipated men and women beautified

¹ Derek Fell, *Magnolia Plantation and Gardens* (Layton, Utah: Gibbs-Smith, 2009), 14.

² Fell, *Magnolia Gardens*, 12-14.

³ Frances Duncan, “Magnolia Gardens: A Visit to Charleston’s Fairy-Land,” *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, May-October 1907, 513.

the plantation through backbreaking labor, under grueling conditions, for minimal pay. They and other Black laborers worked thereafter as gardener-guides, tending the grounds and shepherding white guests on tours of the property. By the early twentieth century, other estates had adopted the “Magnolia playbook” by reinventing as tourist attractions, relying upon entirely Black workforces, and maintaining whites-only admissions policies.⁴ Following the Jim Crow era (c. 1877-1966), these estates ceased using exclusively Black workers and admitting only white guests, but plantation tourism has since shown no signs of slowing down. Drayton’s descendants still own Magnolia and operate it as a tourist attraction, and today it seems as if one cannot throw a rock anywhere in the South without it hitting a plantation that has been remodeled into a public garden, heritage site, bed-and-breakfast, or history museum.

A growing body of scholarship attempts to reckon with the racial dynamics of plantation tourism. In the landmark 1991 study, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums*, sociologists Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small identify what they call the “white-centric” model of history on display at most plantation sites. This model, they argue, tends to downplay slavery, glorify slave-owners, and mythologize antebellum society in order to appeal to a predominantly white customer base, an assessment that applies to Magnolia today.⁵ More recent scholarship seeks to challenge such “whitewashing” by recounting plantations from the perspectives of the enslaved.⁶ As eye-opening as this discourse is in exposing how plantations in the living present (could) narrate histories of slavery, it fails to see that plantations emerged as tourist attractions in the early Jim Crow era, thereby overlooking the full historicity of the very practice under scrutiny. In the otherwise brilliant *Wounds of Returning: Race, Memory, and Property on the Postslavery Plantation*, cultural historian Jessica Adams typifies scholarly misconceptions about the onset of plantation tourism when she writes that the “plantation became popular as a film set in the early

⁴ Two such sites include Middleton Place, also in Charleston, and the Lewis Plantation and Turpentine Still, located in Brooksville, Florida.

⁵ Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington, DC and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002).

⁶ Some important works in this vein include Fath Davis Ruffins, “Revisiting the Old Plantation: Reparations, Reconciliation and Museumizing American Slavery,” in *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*, ed. Ivan Karp et al., (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 395-434; Perry L. Carter, David Butler, and Owen Dwyer, “Defetishizing the Plantation: African Americans in the Memorialized South,” *Historical Geography* 39 (2011): 128-146; Alan Rice, “Museums, Memorials and Plantation Houses in the Black Atlantic: Slavery and the Development of Dark Tourism,” in *The Darker Side of Travel: The Theory and Practice of Dark Tourism*, ed. Richard Sharpley and Philip R. Stone (Bristol: Channel View Publications, 2009), 224-246; James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory* (New York: New Press, 2006).

to mid-twentieth century and, later, as a tourist destination.”⁷ Such misdating confines plantations’ Black histories to the period of enslavement and ignores the fact that plantation tourism depended upon the continued subjugation of freed men and women not long after abolition. The case of Magnolia makes clear, however, that emancipated workers *lived* the transition to plantation tourism, contributing in no small part to its commercial success. Their labor—beautifying and maintaining the grounds, interacting with tourists, posing for photographers, etc.—mediated the landscape into a physical and symbolic space of white leisure and adapted the property to the socio-economic realities of America’s burgeoning consumer culture.

How did Magnolia’s former slaves and those workers who were born after abolition face tourism’s exploitative conditions through life-affirming acts of resilience and resistance? The paucity of surviving testimonials from these subjects makes answering this question rather difficult, as does the contrasting abundance of archival evidence attesting to the brutality of slavery and its afterlives. Because of this disparity, literary theorist and cultural historian Saidiya Hartman warns that scholars can easily “reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering” by reiterating the “routinized violence of slavery and its aftermath,” while Katherine McKittrick, a theorist of critical Black feminisms, similarly cautions that scholars run the risk of “analytically reprising [the] violence” of slavery and “reproducing knowledge about black subjects that renders them less than human.”⁸ The task, McKittrick notes, is to find ways “to write blackness by ethically honoring but not repeating anti-black violences.”⁹ I seek to strike this balance by drawing on the work of Hartman, McKittrick, and historian Tiya Miles, who notes that scholars must practice “imaginative restraint” when attempting to recreate the social worlds and lived experiences of those subjects marginalized in and by the archive.¹⁰ With due caution, I counter-narrate Magnolia from the perspectives of its Black workers, approximating their lived realities from records and research on other enslaved and freed subjects, and projecting their subjective experiences back into period accounts and historical images of the estate. I pay particular attention to how they inhabited the landscape to their benefit, managed interactions with tourists, and

⁷ Jessica Adams, *Wounds of Returning: Race, Memory, and Property on the Postslavery Plantation* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2007), 10.

⁸ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3.

⁹ Katherine McKittrick, “Mathematics Black Life,” *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 18; 20.

¹⁰ Miles suggests “imaginative restraint” to those scholars utilizing Hartman’s method of “critical fabulation.” Critical fabulation is a way of narrating the archival gaps and inadequate records of subaltern subjects with imaginative license. For more on critical fabulation see Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 1-14. For Miles’ take see Tiya Miles, *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley’s Sack, A Black Family Keepsake* (New York: Random House, 2021), 17-18.

created bonds of support amongst one another. With the site's workers as my guides, I endeavor to uncover Black Magnolia.

In the Shadows of the Garden

For emancipated Americans, the abolition of slavery represented freedom, hope, and change, but also danger, hardship, and uncertainty. Although Reconstruction (1866-1877) afforded a small minority of the newly free population the ability to attain an education, acquire property, and even open businesses, Magnolia's former slaves were but a handful of the overwhelming majority who struggled without enduring federal assistance.¹¹ The government's failure to follow through on its promise of providing freed men and women with reparations ("40 acres and a mule") frustrated their efforts to obtain economic independence. "I heard about the 40 acres of land and a mule the ex-slaves would get after the war," recalled Frances Andrews, a former slave from South Carolina, "but I didn't pay any attention to it. They never got anything."¹² Anne Broome, another former slave from South Carolina, held on to the possibility that reparations would one day come. "Now in our old ages," she ached, "I hope they lets de old slaves like me see de shine of some of dat money I hears so much talk about."¹³ The lack of compensation and opportunities for emancipated Americans confined many of them to new forms of servitude under their old masters, many of whom still owned their plantations. "Emancipation left the planters poor, and with no method of earning a living," observed leading sociologist and historian W.E.B. Du Bois in *Black Reconstruction*, "except by exploiting Black labor on their only remaining capital – their land."¹⁴ While most planters effectively re-conscripted former slaves into unfree labor through sharecropping, Drayton did so through tourism.¹⁵

With alternative options few and far between, Magnolia's emancipated workers undertook the backbreaking labor required to cultivate the estate in the manner of an English country garden. This landscaping style had emerged in the eighteenth century

¹¹ Lonnie Bunch, "Emancipation evoked mix of emotions for freed slaves," *The Washington Post*, September 7, 2012, accessed online at https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/emancipation-evoked-mix-of-emotions-for-freed-slaves/2012/09/07/57ad5184-f15a-11e1-892d-bc92fee603a7_story.html.

¹² Interview with Frances Andrews, *South Carolina Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in South Carolina from Interviews with Former Slaves* (Federal Writers' Project, 1936-38; reis. Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 2006), 18.

¹³ Interview with Anne Broom, *South Carolina Slave Narratives*, 106.

¹⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (1935; reis. New York: Meridian, 1965), 671.

¹⁵ For more on sharecropping see Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, "The Ex-Slave in the Post-Bellum South: A Study of the Economic Impact of Racism in a Market Environment," *The Journal of Economic History* 33, no. 1 (March 1973): 131-148.

on English estates as a reaction to the French formal garden that had long been in vogue with the European aristocracy. Unlike the rectilinear, symmetrical order of the *jardin à la française* (the exemplar of which is Versailles), the more “informal” and “natural” English country garden imitated an idyllic pastoral landscape. It typically consisted of rolling hills beset with groves of trees and decorative lakes or ponds, and some sort of Arcadian “set piece” like a temple, grotto, or recreated ruin. Over time, this style acquired more “gardenesque” elements like carpets of floral varieties, as well as orientalist features like ornamental pagodas.¹⁶ The freed men and women tasked with translating this style to Magnolia beautified the plantation’s systemized rows of rice paddies into expansive, grassy lawns embellished with azaleas and camellias; created a constellation of winsome ponds adorned with little footbridges; laid a series of meandering paths bedecked with charming pergolas and trellises; and performed sundry other tasks that prepared the property into a space of recreation and leisure for white tourists. In so doing, these former slaves erased from the grounds and indeed from public imagination much of the evidence of their enslavement.



Figure 1. Postcard of Magnolia c. 1900-20, hand-colored postcard, approx. 3.5 x 5.5in. C.T. American Art. Source: College of Charleston Libraries, Charleston, South Carolina.

¹⁶ For more on English Romantic gardens see Elizabeth Barlow Rogers, Elizabeth S. Eustis, and John Bidwell, eds., *Romantic Gardens: Nature, Art, and Landscape Design* (New York: Morgan Library and Museum, 2010); Mark Laird, *A Natural History of English Gardening, 1650-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), and Thomas J. Mickey, *America's Romance with the English Garden* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2013).



Figure 2. Postcard of Magnolia c. 1900-20, hand-colored postcard, approx. 3.5 x 5.5in. C.T. American Art. Source: College of Charleston Libraries, Charleston, South Carolina.

Popular media amplified Magnolia's beautified image and promoted the estate as a spectacular wonderland for white tourists. Dramatic photographs of the site's Spanish moss-bearded trees and flower-flanked ponds graced several pages of the 1893 publication *Art Work of Charleston*.¹⁷ The 1900 edition of *Baedeker's Guide to the United States*, then the premier travel publication, urged sightseers: "No one in the season (March-May) should omit to visit the...Gardens of Magnolia (reached by railway or steamer), on the Ashley, the chief glory of which is the gorgeous display of the azalea bushes, which are sometimes 15-20 ft. high and present huge masses of vivid and unbroken colouring."¹⁸ In the early twentieth century, Detroit Publishing Company mass-produced and circulated colored postcards of the estate around the country to prospective visitors (figs. 1 and 2). The estate was even promoted as a glamorous destination in a 1938 *Philadelphia Inquirer* advertisement for Chesterfield Cigarettes featuring Metropolitan Opera star and Broadway actress Grace Moore (fig. 3). The cigarette advertisement in particular—which features the rosy-cheeked celebrity wearing an angelic white dress while reveling about the gardens in a scene of neo-Rococo exuberance—suggests the innocence, playfulness, and sentimentality with which white America approached Magnolia, and by extension, the institution of the plantation more generally. The modern phenomena of mass media, consumer culture,

¹⁷ *Art Work of Charleston*, Part Six, Historic Charleston Foundation (Chicago: W.H. Parish Publishing Company, 1893), unpaginated.

¹⁸ Karl Baedeker, ed., *Baedeker's Guide to the United States* (New York: Scribner's, 1900-01), 390.

and popular leisure thus intersected with landscape design to constitute the plantation's romanticized visual culture and re-present the estate from a space of Black servitude to one of white fantasy. The Black figure is tellingly absent from these representations. As with most Jim Crow-era tourist sites, Magnolia catered exclusively to white, primarily middle- and upper-class tourists, and was strictly off-limits to African American visitors. This visual culture therefore broadcast the fact that plantation tourism, like plantation agriculture, would maintain what abolitionist Frederick Douglass called "the color line."¹⁹

Magnolia's Black workers did inhabit the landscape, sometimes in ways invisible to whites. Scholars have uncovered the specialized practices the enslaved developed in order to negotiate landscapes of unfreedom, including passing down practical knowledge of plants, roots, and herbs²⁰; sharing strategies of terrestrial navigation and celestial wayfinding²¹; creating hidden paths and hiding spots where covert activities could take place²²; and communicating in code on the "grapevine telegraph" by singing, marking trees, and mimicking animal calls.²³ Although Magnolia's workers were now free, the ever-present threats of Jim Crow laws and lynching bees, as well as the regular presence of white tourists, may have compelled them to adapt some of these clandestine



Figure 3. Advertisement featuring Magnolia. Chesterfield Cigarettes. Source: Philadelphia Inquirer, May 22, 1938.

¹⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois popularized the term in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), but Douglass is credited with first using the term. For more see Frederick Douglass, "The Color Line," *The North American Review* 132 (1881), 567-579.

²⁰ Judith Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

²¹ Dennis B. Fradin, *Bound for the North Star: True Stories of Fugitive Slaves* (New York: Clarion Books, 2000).

²² Rebecca Ginsburg, "Freedom and the Slave Landscape," *Landscape Journal* 26, no. 1 (2007), 36-44.

²³ Sergio A Lussana, "Enslaved Men, The Grapevine Telegraph, and the Underground Railroad," in *My Brother Slaves: Friendship, Masculinity, and Resistance in the Antebellum South* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2016), 125-146.

practices to the property's new landscape, creating a secret garden-within-the-garden only perceptible and accessible to them. They may have even taken some liberties by arranging a flowerbed here, a tree line there, diverting a path this way and remodeling a bridge that way in order to extend their covert geographies further beyond tourists' purview. Indeed, the steady stream of visitors trampling everywhere about, paying little to no mind to the site's human histories, could have compelled Magnolia's caretakers to create secret spaces or spots that were effectively inaccessible to outsiders: a non-descript grave marker for a child gone too soon, perhaps, or a disguised looking post where workers could surveil visitors and even Drayton himself. This mastery over the landscape, camouflaged though it was, would have allowed former slaves a certain ability to manage interactions with tourists, the least predictable, and most fraught, element of their jobs.

Black Labor, White Leisure

The dynamics between workers and visitors—between Black labor and white leisure—can be gleaned from their face-to-face interactions. Some of Magnolia's female workers served as guides who led guests like travel writer Frances Duncan on tours of the property. Duncan visited Magnolia in 1907 on assignment for *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*. The "group of voluble negro guides" the writer encountered must have left quite the impression on her, as she described in detail the guide who accompanied her tour. Duncan found "herself under the wing of an elderly negress, who, with the solicitude of a hen for a brood of incautious chickens, was ushering her little flock along the path." At some point, though, the writer wandered off and got lost among Magnolia's hundreds of acres. After a few disorienting minutes, Duncan heard "the sound of approaching footsteps; then the shriek of a whistle." It was "the ancient negress, who, displeasure in every line of her face and feature, had come to look for the truant escaped from her safe convoy."²⁴

Duncan may have exaggerated this anecdote for dramatic effect, but her account nevertheless captures the dialogic of power relations between workers and tourists. Even though Magnolia's employees were free, tourism's conditions of display recommodified their laboring Black bodies into objects of consumption for white spectators. That said, the guides were nominally in charge of guests, and in their supervisory roles possessed some authority, however temporary and tempered, over white folks. Yet the attendants' power, such as it was, had been vouchsafed them by the Drayton family to protect the gardens from tourists on the family's behalf, and for that reason, could just as easily have been taken away. Duncan also exhibits the patronizing attitudes and language white Americans reserved for African Americans,

²⁴ Duncan, "Magnolia Gardens," 516-519.

and conveys, perhaps unwittingly, the means by which African Americans put up with and tolerated white folks. The guide, whose intimate knowledge of the landscape allowed her to quickly find the writer, communicated her “displeasure” the way an adult might do to a child. Her expression represents writ large how Black America viewed (and often still views) white America: immature, foolish, and reckless. These racial dynamics were further interpolated by guides’ gender and age.

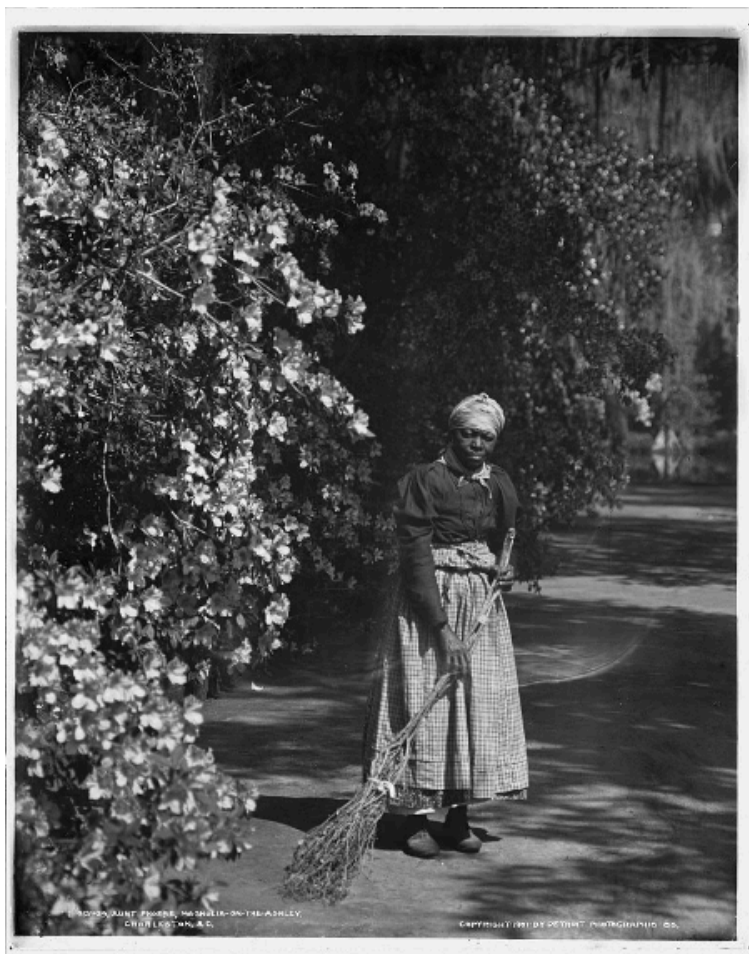


Figure 4. William Henry Jackson, *Aunt Phoebe*, c. 1901, dry plate negative, 8 x 10in. *Magnolia-on-the-Ashley* series.
Source: Prints and Photographs Division, Library of

The specific woman Duncan refers to as the “elderly negress” may be the attendant immortalized as “Aunt Phoebe” in a single photograph taken circa 1901 by travel photographer William Henry Jackson (1843-1942). The original black-and-white dry-plate negative shows the employee standing broom-in-hand beside a riot of Magnolia’s famous azaleas (fig. 4). Her outfit—an aproned dress, kerchief, and bandana—evokes the stereotypical outfit of the mammy, a caricature that represented older Black women as nurturing, matronly figures contented with lives of domestic servitude. This characterization colors Duncan’s description of the “ancient negress” who dutifully cared for “her little flock.” Historian Kimberly

Wallace-Sanders notes that the mammy’s typical attributes, including her “effortlessly soothing voice, her infinite patience, her raucous laugh, her self-deprecating wit, her implicit understanding and acceptance of her inferiority and devotion to whites—all point to a long-lasting and troubled marriage of racial and gender essentialism, mythology, and southern nostalgia.”²⁵ Scholars like Wallace-Sanders and Melissa Harris-

²⁵ Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 2.

Perry have analyzed how the mammy stereotype infantilized white Americans, romanticized interracial relations, and burdened Black women with expectations of excessive self-restraint, leaving a lasting imprint on ideas of African American womanhood to this day.²⁶ What I am interested in is whether Magnolia's female guides negotiated the "faithful servant" stereotype in order to ensure their employment and livelihood.

To put it more straightforwardly, who was Aunt Phoebe? At the time, "Aunt" was a stereotypical moniker for formerly enslaved women, and "Phoebe" or "Phebe" was particularly common. Writer Essie Collins Matthews formalized such stereotypes in her 1915 book *Aunt Phebe, Uncle Tom, and Others: Character Studies Among the Old Slaves of the South, Fifty Years After*.²⁷ Matthews interviewed several "Aunt Phebes" and "Uncle Toms," the female and male versions of the "happy slave" archetype made famous by author Harriet Beecher Stowe, taking special care to mention the fondness with which they remembered "slavery times." Jackson could have easily projected the "Aunt Phoebe" character onto the guide and titled the photograph accordingly, with no regard for the woman's real name.

But what if the attendant played up the persona in accordance with tourists' expectations? "Aunt Phoebe" was a relatively common character name in minstrel shows, including those performed by African American entertainers.²⁸ Historians Eric Lott and Rachel Sussman have observed how blackface minstrelsy sublimated America's "racial unconscious" under the guise of lively entertainment, while anthropologist and writer Zora Neale Hurston, writing some years earlier, noted that many of these racist caricatures were ironically based on Black interpretations of white forms of expression.²⁹ The "Negro is a very original being," Hurston insisted in "Characteristics of Negro Expression," an essay from 1931. "While he lives and moves in the midst of white civilization, everything that he touches is reinterpreted for his own use...His

²⁶ Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

²⁷ For more on the "Aunt" and "Uncle" character-types after slavery see Essie Collins Matthews, *Aunt Phebe, Uncle Tom, and Others: Character Studies Among the Old Slaves of the South, Fifty Years After* (Columbus, OH: The Champlin Press, 1915).

²⁸ For more on Aunt Phoebe characters and Black minstrelsy see Henry T. Sampson, ed., *Blacks in Blackface: A Sourcebook on Early Black Musical Shows* (Plymouth, UK: Scarecrow Press, 2014): 176, 693, 1206, 1463, 1478.

²⁹ In fact, the very name Jim Crow is based on a Black character created in the late 1820s by white minstrel performer Thomas "Daddy" Rice, Jump Jim Crow, whom he based on a disabled Black stableman from Louisville enslaved by a Mr. Crow. For more see Eric Lott, "Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy," *Representations* 39 (Summer 1992), 23-50; Rachel Sussman, "The Carnivalizing of Race," *Etnofoor* 14, no. 2 (2001), 79-88.

interpretation has been adopted by the white man himself and then re-interpreted.”³⁰ If Aunt Phoebe did play up stereotypical associations, she likely engaged in this self-conscious mimicry, with multiple degrees of irony, for her own survival. This is not to say that she took much pleasure from the situation. Returning to Jackson’s photograph, Aunt Phoebe appears stilted and even slightly restive, as if waiting for the photographer to finish. She eyes him as much as he gawks at her. Looking directly at the camera, she squints her eyes, furrows her brow, and purses her lips. Her unswerving stare meets Jackson’s touristic gaze and betrays a growing exasperation. She seems to be thinking, “Will this man hurry up!” This is not the warmhearted countenance of the kindly, ever-patient mammy; this is an expression of annoyance that recalls the displeasure Duncan noticed “in every line” of her guide’s “face and feature.” Tourists may have wanted to see the guides as nostalgic caricatures of Black femininity, but attendants like Aunt Phoebe let visitors know exactly who they were looking at.

What about the guides’ male coworkers? The historical accounts that mention the site’s guides refer exclusively to women, and the sole mass-produced postcard to depict any of the site’s workers shows only Aunt Phoebe (fig. 5). The gendered division of labor that positioned female guides as the public faces of Magnolia seems to have confined the estate’s male workers to more “behind the scenes” roles like groundskeepers, carpenters, and handymen. The relative visibility of female workers and invisibility of male workers cannot be divorced from what journalist W.J. Cash coined the “Southern rape complex” in his 1941 book *The Mind of the South*. Cash notes that many white Southerners feared the “danger of the Southern white woman’s



Figure 5. William Henry Jackson/Detroit Publishing Company, *Aunt Phoebe*, c. 1901, hand-colored postcard; approximately 3.5 x 7in. *Magnolia-on-the-Ashley* series. Source: Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

³⁰ Zora Neale Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” in Robin G. O’Meally, ed., *Jazz: Cadence of American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 308 [1931].

being violated by the Negro.”³¹ This racist hysteria ignored the sexual violence perpetrated by white men on Black women and girls and revealed more than anything the sensitivity and insecurity of white masculinity. It rationalized and often occasioned lynching as a highly visible, spectacular form of punishment for those Black men accused of assaulting white women and sexually transgressing racial boundaries. More often than not, these allegations were mere pretenses contrived to justify mob violence. Perhaps the tendency of white folks to mask their violence as victimhood is why the guides treated visitors like “a brood of incautious chickens,” because the workers recognized the danger white guests posed to *them*. If this were the case, the guide who raced to find Duncan would have been less concerned for the writer than for one of her male coworkers. The lack of legal recourse for African Americans in the Jim Crow South would have made it all the more likely that Magnolia’s employees looked out for one another by engaging in acts of mutual protection and collective security.



Figure 6. William Henry Jackson, *The Caretakers*, c. 1901, dry-plate negative, *Magnolia-on-the-Ashley* series; 8 x 10in. Source: Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

³¹ W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1941), 117.

Another photograph of Jackson's, *The Caretakers*, highlights six of Magnolia's employees, four men and two women, including Aunt Phoebe on the right (fig. 6). In this image, no eyes meet the photographer's camera; the workers look downward and edgeways while holding their tools. They appear less defiant than Aunt Phoebe gazing back at Jackson in her individual photograph, as if submitting as a group to the prying lens. Another interpretation recognizes their averted faces as a refusal to engage the photographer entirely on his terms. In such a reading, the subjects deny Jackson the condescending image of Black servitude by diverting their eyes, turning their heads, and looking anywhere but the camera. Together they engage in what historian Stephanie M. H. Camp calls the "everyday forms of resistance" that enslaved subjects regularly utilized on the antebellum plantation and "that might otherwise appear to be little more than fits of temper." Some examples include dragging feet, losing tools, and feigning illness.³² Looking at *The Caretakers*, Magnolia's workers have adapted such "hidden or indirect expressions of dissent" and "quiet ways of reclaiming a measure of control" to the realities of tourism.³³ Whereas before they negotiated the vision of the overseer, they now face the gaze of the photographer. Aunt Phoebe and the others jointly unsettle Jackson's objectifying intentions and make the photograph less an image of servitude than solidarity. When read against the grain, *The Caretakers* reminds us that Magnolia's history can be found in the bonds the site's workers forged amongst themselves, connections that allowed them to exercise some mastery over the estate.

³² Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2004), 2.

³³ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 2.

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