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Haunted Plantations: Dark Tourist Experiences in Post-Reconstruction Fiction

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I investigate "haunted plantations" in the American South through the lens of tourism theory. Such plantations can be read as fictional dark tourism sites in late-nineteenth century fiction.

In Chapter 1 I define dark tourism studies as the discipline which studies the transformation of places associated with death and violence into tourist attractions. Dark tourism is a relatively new field of research, but the fascination for the macabre has always existed. I suggest that a precursor of dark tourism already existed before the latter's formal theorization and can be found in fiction-reading.

In Chapter 2, I explain how slavery defined Southern history, also giving shape to the dark and mysterious image of the region, and thus setting the grounds for the development of dark tourism, today. I also examine how the current touristic management of Southern plantations rely on a problematic interpretation of history: a good number of plantations glorify their idyllic past, while others also function as dark tourism sites. In particular, I analyze the case of Myrtles Plantation to explain how the ghosts of black slaves are spectacularized and turned into entertainment for tourists.

In Chapter 3, I read works of fiction centered on "haunted plantations" in the Post-Reconstruction period through the lens of tourism studies. At that time, the South's tormented past had already created for itself a fascinating image of mystery and darkness, but traveling was not a well-established reality yet. Therefore, late nineteenth century authors provided readers with vicarious experiences of dark tourism through

their literary works set in haunted plantations. In particular, I examine a few short stories by George Washington Cable, Thomas Nelson Page, and Charles Waddell Chesnutt.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores haunted slave plantations as dark tourism sites in Post-Reconstruction Southern literature, taking into account their different representations. Dark tourism is a relatively recent area of research within tourism studies and still shows some gaps. Starting from studies such as those by Sharpley & Stone (2009), Sharpley (2009), Stone (2006), mostly focused on the contemporary manifestations of this type of tourism, I suggest that instances of proto-dark tourism can be recognized in the past, when neither modern tourist practices, nor the discipline of dark tourism were established yet. In particular, I argue that gothic short stories from Post-Reconstruction fiction set in haunted slave plantations should be read as vicarious experiences of dark tourism for late-nineteenth century readers.

In Chapter 1, I investigate the paradoxical nature of dark tourism, a phenomenon that combines the leisure component of tourism with the strong emotions connected with the contemplation of death, violence and suffering. Besides exploring the spectrum of dark tourism experiences (Stone 2006) and the motivations of tourists who engage in this type of traveling (Stone & Sharpley 2008), I retrieve examples from ancient times to demonstrate that this practice, so popular today, already existed even if it did not have an official name yet (Seaton 1996 and 2018, and Seaton & Dann 2018). In this Chapter, I also set the grounds for considering fiction-reading as a form of vicarious tourist experience (Stowe 1994); this proved to be a particularly valuable tool when tourism was not yet an affordable practice for many, for it allowed readers to immerse

themselves in fictional worlds far-away from them, even when they did not have the possibility to physically explore realities different from theirs: this could be valid both for exotic evasions, and for dark adventures in mysterious locations.

In Chapter 2, I focus on the problematic touristification of plantations in the American South, and I evidence how these do not promote educational or commemorative messages. Rather, they either glorify the grandeur of the former white elites, or, as in the case I analyze, insist on elements of death and suffering. I observe how the haunted Myrtles Plantation, a former plantation house in Louisiana now reconverted as a bed & breakfast accommodation, can be ascribed to a dark tourism site, insofar as it attracts visitors by commercializing the darkest aspects of slavery. This location has become one of the favorite destinations for those who want to experience thrilling emotions in a safe environment. Here, the entertainment of the visitor is built on the hunting of the tormented ghosts of slavery still trapped in the plantation house.

In Chapter 3, I argue that slavery was the main factor to transform the South into a dark tourist destination, and that Post-Reconstruction fiction allowed vicarious dark tourist experiences of the American South for late-nineteenth century readers. More specifically, I read short stories set in haunted slave plantations in antebellum times, and I analyze how authors dealt with this complex fictional space, so dense with painful history, macabre details and somber atmospheres. For George Washington Cable, spaces haunted by the specters of slavery were the testimony of the cruelties allowed by the peculiar institution and the symbol of a decaying society. At the opposite side is Thomas Nelson Page, born and raised a Virginian, who yearned for the peaceful and bucolic way of living of the antebellum times; the haunted plantation in his tales signals the corruption of its old and respectable customs. Charles Waddell Chesnutt, instead,

concealed the horrors of slavery behind the magical occurrences of the plantation, haunted by a slave who was barbariously killed.

Although desecrating, this type of fiction might have actually attracted tourists to the American South precisely because of its gothic potential, thus creating the conditions for the development of what we can call dark tourism today.

CHAPTER 1. TOURISM, FICTION, AND THE FASCINATION WITH THE DARK

1.1. Towards a definition of dark tourism

> Consider for a moment battlefield and disaster sites, genocide camps, cemeteries, fright museums and assassination locations. Although these places are primarily associated with death, suffering and grief, they equally exist as some of the world's most visited tourist attractions. [...] Why would anyone choose to spend their holiday time consuming something as morose as death? (Johnston 22)

Universally speaking, our everyday lives tend to be busy, frantic, and rather stressful, and this is why it is always a relief to escape the daily routine and find refuge in leisure activities. One of the favorite pastimes for most people is tourism, which is typically conceptualized as a positive and pleasurable experience. At the same time, though, if we take a look around the world we will not only see people spending their leisure time sunbathing by the sea, or sightseeing around Europe's capitals: as a matter of fact, a darker side of travel exists. This much less glamorous holiday might not be everyone's prime choice when it comes to spending some good time away from home to unwind, but still, it seems to be attracting quite a lot of curious tourists, who are, indeed, interested in sites and events associated with death and suffering. This particular type of tourism is called dark tourism: recently theorized, it is still a complex and mysterious phenomenon.

Dark tourism could be seen as the opposite of its traditional, and tamer, declination; in fact, while the latter offers comfortable, pleasurable and relaxing experiences, the former provides thrills, mystery, and also a sense of transgression. To a certain extent, it might satisfy a taste for the forbidden, too. Nevertheless, even though the very expression 'dark tourism' might seem an oxymoron, because it combines two semantically opposed terms, disquiet and relax, the entertainment component is clearly distinguishable in both practices, though in completely different ways.

The acknowledgement of dark tourism as a self-standing discipline is quite recent, if we consider that the term was first coined by Foley and Lennon only in 1996; since then, dark tourism has been defined as a form of tourism that revolves around sites connected to death and tragedy – hence the adjective "dark" – and which has, in general, a macabre and sinister connotation. Prior to this notion, it is possible to identify another contribution given by Rojek, who in 1993 coined the term "Black Spots", intended as those places where massive amounts of people or celebrities died and which were eventually transformed into commercialized tourist attractions (Sharpley 13).

In order to give a clearer idea of what dark tourism is, it might be useful to first outline some examples of sites and experiences that fall within its scope. Among the various classifications made by scholars, a particularly exhaustive and encompassing one is that theorized by Philip Stone in "A Dark Tourism Spectrum", where he identifies "Seven Dark Suppliers". The first example this scholar gives is that of "Dark Fun Factories", that is to say, "funcentric" sites which simulate death and violence for entertainment purposes, like horror theme parks. The second item listed in this classification are "Dark Exhibitions" which, as the name suggests, display death and suffering away from their actual site, therefore in museums, for example, and usually offer learning opportunities. Next, "Dark Dungeons", which are represented by former

prisons and courthouses turned into tourist attractions. Cemetery sites and mourning sites are respectively labeled as “Dark Resting Places” and “Dark Shrines”: the latter, in particular, refer to places where to pay respect to the recently deceased, very close to the site of death. At the extreme end of this classification, we find “Dark Conflict Sites”, like battlefields, and “Dark Camps of Genocide” (152-157).

However, the extreme complexity of this phenomenon becomes clear just by observing the vast array of dark tourism sites included in this classification. According to Philip Stone, indeed, the above categories can be organized in the “Dark Tourism Spectrum” he theorized, where the “Seven Dark Suppliers” follow a succession from “lightest” to “darkest” which depends on the sites’ level of entertainment, commercialization, development of tourist infrastructure and authenticity, among others (151).

As Philip Stone’s model shows, talking only about ‘dark’ tourism would be overly simplistic. Because there are several factors – namely demand and supply – that can have an impact and give a different coloring to a commonly intended dark tourism experience, Sharpley concluded that it is possible to recognize multiple shades of darkness. Indeed, he explains that, according to the tourist’s level of interest towards death, combined with the level of purposefulness of dark tourism sites, four different shades can be recognized:

> Pale tourism – tourists with a minimal or limited interest in death visiting sites unintended to be tourist attractions.
> Grey tourism demand – tourists with a fascination with death visiting unintended dark tourism sites.
> Grey tourism supply – sites intentionally established to exploit death but attracting visitors with some, but not a dominant, interest in death.
> Black tourism – in effect, ‘pure’ dark tourism, where a fascination with death is satisfied by the purposeful supply of experiences intended to satisfy this fascination. (20)

Academic literature on this practice is not as established and solid as the proportions of this ever more increasing touristic phenomenon. Overall, the state of the art when it comes to dark tourism studies is still limited to the study of the supply rather than to the demand, and therefore, several questions remain to date unanswered. Some of the most frequent complaints raised from scholars concern the scarcity of academic reflections on tourists' motivations, emotional experience, and ethical concerns. These research gaps also make the very definition of dark tourists not easy to establish. In addition to that, as already seen, dark tourism experiences are quite heterogeneous and of difficult categorization.

This is also evident from the lack of volumes centered exclusively on the history of dark tourism (Seaton 2018, 2). But despite some uncertainties around the origins of dark tourism, and although this practice is growing today, many experts seem to give credit to the idea that a certain degree of interest in places or events that deal with violence and death has always existed, and that people have been drawn to these destinations throughout history (with different intentions and modalities).

1.1.1. The fascination with the dark: a long history

Particularly convincing is the theory elaborated by Seaton in 1996, who believes that for as long as people have traveled, they have always engaged in dark journeys, even when this practice did not have an officially recognized name yet. More specifically, this scholar coined the term "thanatourism" (Seaton 1996, 234), in describing medieval pilgrimages. These journeys implied a movement in space to come in contact with places associated with death and suffering although they were mainly conceived as redeeming and devotional paths.

For Christians in the Middle Ages, their relationship with death and the afterlife was a complex one. On the one hand, the Church worked heavily on the inculcation of the fear of death, "induced or aided by various forms of memento mori exhibit" (Seaton 2018, 11); on the other hand, the Church also promoted ways for people to redeem themselves and be prepared for the afterlife through pilgrimages. Therefore, "pilgrimage was the highest form of thanatopsis since it involved physical presence at a setting of death, rather than its symbolic contemplation in books and images." (Seaton 1996, 236). These travels enhanced humans' possibility of eternal salvation by coming in contact with "body parts of saints and holy figures and artefacts associated with them" and by remembering Christ's and his disciples' martyrdom (Seaton 2018, 21).

Moreover, Seaton also argues that the thanatopic tradition inaugurated within the context of medieval pilgrimages found a new and more intense life thanks to the values and the beliefs that permeated the Romanticism period. Indeed, besides an already significant growing interest in travel and movement, Romanticism gave an even greater impulse to thanatourism, for the spirit of the age was exactly built on a specific aesthetic made peculiar by a taste for the gothic and the sublime. Romanticism was, indeed, a period characterized by a strong 'touristic' interest for sites connected to death and suffering such as war battlefields, prisons, castles, cemeteries, as well as archaeological sites like Pompeii, for example, which was precisely discovered in the eighteenth century.

Besides these two instances, it is possible to observe more cases in history that present interconnections between death and traveling, but which include entertainment as well. In fact, while pilgrimages were journeys aiming at the contemplation of death for human salvation, other dark journeys in ancient times did not have the same noble purpose; rather, they were seen as entertainment opportunities.

The Colosseum and its gladiators are an iconic example of a site which attracted thousands of Romans to witness deadly shows; not only were spectators enthusiastic about seeing these cruel combats, but they also enjoyed their power to decide the fate of the gladiators at the end of the performance. Other scholars also highlighted that the Romans "crucified political prisoners, criminals, and escaping slaves along the Via Appia—the main highway that led travellers in and out of Rome." (Seaton and Dann 33), a custom which blended political power and cruel and exemplary punishment with spectatorship and touristic affluence to the strongest city of the ancient world.

Much later, Boorstin seems to hint at a case of dark tourism contextually to the emergence of packaged tours on board of England's early trains; by praising the modernity of such an innovative tourist formula, Boorstin also recounts that in occasion of the very first organized tour of that kind, in 1838, passengers in the train witnessed the public hanging of two murderers. The word choice used here is interesting: "since the Bodmin gallows were in clear sight of the uncovered station, excursionists had their fun without even leaving the open railway carriages." (87). As we can read, these nineteenth-century tourists witnessed a quite horrifying event which, though unintentional, was nonetheless amusing to them.

Another similar example of tragedies turned into entertaining shows can be found in Post-Reconstruction America, when racial violence against recently-freed black people was at its peak. In a dark era when colored Americans were arbitrarily turned into scapegoats and highly targeted for alleged crimes, it was quite common for lynchings and hangings to be performed publicly. Actually, they were regarded as grand communal events where spectators could gather and enjoy the view of cruel beatings and hangings. The executions were advertised in newspapers and were occasions for white people to enjoy day trips where they would be seeing an entertaining show of

violence and death. The touristic impact of this barbarous practice can also be seen in the proliferation of lynching postcards which portrayed the acts and which white people would send to friends and family to tell them about a fun performance they assisted to. The emotional detachment from these unspeakable cruelties was also demonstrated by the fact that, sometimes, the content of the postcard was completely unrelated to the violence that the image displayed: lynchings were in all respects a fun ordinary occurrence in the background of a day trip.

While these examples are definitively indicative of a certain taste for the macabre in past centuries, most dark tourism scholars agree that a fascination for death, atrocities and disasters is ever more visible in contemporary society, and as a consequence, they recognize that dark tourism has been gaining momentum especially now.

1.1.2. Dark tourism and the complex relationship with death today

In regard to such contemporary tendencies, Johnston advances an interesting concept, which perfectly applies to today's society and which can help us somehow understand why dark tourism is now an increasing trend: the commercialization of death.

> Modern humans are bombarded with the opportunity to consume death. Whether it is the plethora of daytime television advertisements selling funeral insurance or the prevalence of reality television shows focused on celebrities' dying moments, it is hard to avoid noticing the commercialisation of death. Commodified death sells television programmes, films, video music and newspapers. Likewise, death is used to promote the attractiveness of some destinations. Some of the world's best known tourist attractions are infamous primarily because of the commercialisation of death which has occurred there. (Johnston 22)

In order to explain the dynamics behind this bizarre and controversial phenomenon, Johnston identifies the influence of the media as the promoters of an idea of consumable death. As commented in the quotation, no day passes without the average person receiving several stimuli that, more or less directly, invite them to approach death and think about it from a commercial perspective: you can easily sign up a funeral insurance which you saw advertised on the internet, or you can decide to spend the night watching the latest documentary about a mass murderer, for instance. Similarly, you can likely contemplate the idea of organizing your next trip to, suppose, that sinister place which owes its fame to the tragic death of a notorious person. Tourism, in fact, is not exempt from the commercialization of death, rather, it has probably become one of the fields (besides the medical and funeral industries, for obvious reasons) that benefit the most from the end of life.

The commercialization of death is certainly an evident and convincing motivation at the basis of the growth of dark tourism today; indeed, it is easy for consumers to be influenced by the media and become attracted to certain tourist destinations. Usually, this works with the advertising of breathtaking landscapes or fun adventures, but the same strategy also applies to places that are the repositories of tragic histories, whether it be a natural disaster or a human conceived catastrophe. In any case, entrepreneurial activity always seems ready to take a tragic event in its hands, and transform it "from a scar into a memorial and, subsequently, into a product" that will be photographed, turned into a souvenir and sold (Johnston 22). Given this, it is reasonable to say that most dark tourist itineraries today seek to provide entertainment much more than an edifying purpose, and the experiences that the dark tourism industry promotes are much closer to the lynching spectacle, for example, than to the redeeming medieval pilgrimage.

Besides commercial reasons, though, I believe it is also important to explore the psychology surrounding humans' fascination with death, because it is natural to assume that there is something more visceral and instinctual that supports this behavior, too. The central, inescapable idea is that we are mortal beings, and therefore, as long as we live, we are confronted with the inevitable truth that one day we will no longer exist. For as much as we try to avoid this heavy thought and exorcize this quintessentially human fear, death will always haunt us, one way or another. And it is exactly for its omnipotence that death exerts a unique type of attraction, which is a peculiar combination of reverence and curiosity.

We can all agree that, sooner or later, in any society and on any step of the social ladder, everyone has to address their own mortality, and this naturally provokes anxiety and endangers our ontological securities. Interestingly, humans' relationship with the end of life has definitely changed throughout history. For instance, human societies in ancient times were largely accustomed to more precarious living conditions, a shorter life expectancy, more life-threatening illnesses, and thus, they must have been quite familiar with the process of dying in their everyday lives. Therefore, we can assume that, in the past, the possibility of coming in contact with death on a day-to-day level must have somehow mitigated its menacing effect. In addition to that, religion certainly boasted a privileged position in the personal and social life in the past centuries, and even though the Church did inculcate the fear of death, it did also give its members the 'purifying' tools to redeem themselves and the mental comfort to have access to a peaceful afterlife.

Today, instead, we could dare say the situation is much different, if not basically reversed; indeed, most contemporary societies witness what Stone and Sharpley call the sequestration of death from the public into the private sphere (583). There exist

different reasons for this: to begin with, differently from centuries ago, we are no longer used to taking care of our dying loved ones first-hand and, in general, death is no longer a publicly displayed event thanks to the medicalization and the professionalization of dying (Stone and Sharpley 585). Nowadays, dying tends to be in all respects a private and concealed matter confined to hospital beds, and likewise, the body undergoes a series of professional procedures implemented by funeral homes, which take off this painful burden from families. In general, then, we live with the near certainty that our death will be handled almost exclusively by some designated experts, and that the rest of our social group will not be touched by death.

Hence, these modern tendencies may explain why death has almost become a taboo and why it is now commonly perceived as frightening. Yet, and even more interestingly, the sequestration of death from the public sphere into the private space surprisingly coexists with a pervasive presence of death in popular culture, as explained earlier. As a consequence, there undoubtedly exists an ambivalent relationship with the afterlife, for death is both made into a marketable item and, at the same time, it represents a forbidden – but intriguing – space. Indeed, as Stone and Sharpley suggest, "it is this very insulation that leads us to crave some degree of information and insight concerning death." (585). Dark tourism, then, may have become a popular practice because it offers "a revival of death within the public domain, thereby de-sequestering mortality and ensuring absent death is made present, transforming (private) death into public discourse and a communal commodity upon which to gaze." (Stone and Sharpley 588).

As Stone and Sharpley demonstrated, in modernity humans have developed an ever more complex relationship with death, a natural occurrence which today's society tends to confine to the private sphere. The mysteriousness created around this matter

can suggest why people are increasingly interested in engaging in forms of tourism revolving around death and suffering.

Other scholars explain that dark tourism might be motivated by the desire to experience new, unconventional emotions: when the quest for otherness is no longer satisfied by the familiar, tourists might seek excitement in dark locations, and maybe even confront their own fear of death (Buda 43).

On the other side, one study reveals that, for some people, the reasons behind a visit to a dark tourism destination may have to do with a cultural need (Bittner 154) as well as a personal urge to learn more about a specific event or theme related to that site (155). In some cases, the visit to dark destinations may be related to the history of a certain group of people, and in that case, be motivated by the will to pay homage to the dead of that particular community.

In general, though, the area of research that revolves around motivational issues in dark tourism represents another aspect that could be further explored, so this shall not be regarded as a complete picture.

Similarly, the research on tourists' emotional experience at dark destinations still presents some significant gaps, while instead, a proper evaluation of tourists' multifaceted psychological responses would be crucial for the touristic management of these dark sites (Oren et al. 1). Nevertheless, some emerging literature based on surveys and scientific experiments does report worthwhile findings. One study, for example, found out that tourists are drawn to dark locations because they are eager to feel the negative emotions naturally associated with such eerie places: in other words, even though it might seem bizarre, the sense of uneasiness which surrounds dark tourism is exactly a major source of attraction for some visitors (Oren et al. 6).

Overall, it is clear that dark tourism is sustained by an array of very peculiar and, to a certain extent, mysterious motivations. In considering all of the possible motives, I would not exclude, however, the simplest, but maybe least socially acceptable reason, that is to say, a mere morbid curiosity towards sites associated with violence and suffering. Indeed, as previously demonstrated, humans have always been inexplicably drawn to gaze upon someone else's pain or death, and paradoxically, they might even enjoy the experience. Today, fortunately, we no longer engage in barbarous spectacles where other people suffer before our very eyes; however, we do come in contact with sites which are a reminder of other people's tragedies, and we might find the experience somehow entertaining.

In light of this, it seems that for a good portion of dark tourists the objective of their visits has little to do with commemoration or education, but they are more motivated by a mere curiosity and a taste for the macabre. Considering everything I have analyzed, I argue that the most proper definition of dark tourism is exactly the lighter experience, which does not have the pretense of commemorating deaths or educating the public, but which, instead, is founded on the leisure component that is by definition the essence of tourist activity.

I would say that dark tourists, precisely because of their status as tourists, look primarily for fun and diversion. Differently from the tourists as commonly intended, dark tourists do not look for pleasure in traditional destinations, but rather, their entertainment comes from the thrilling sensations they seek in spooky and eerie settings. The taste for the macabre, therefore, is the guiding principle for this category of travelers who gaze upon others' suffering and death for their own leisure.

In this regard, there are, however, some liminal cases which are worthy of note, and Southern slave plantations are an interesting example. In Chapter 2 I will shed light

on the phenomenon of contemporary dark tourism in the American Deep South, and I will examine the iconic case of a site where slaves suffered and died, and which has now been turned into a dark tourist attraction, called Myrtles Plantation. Naturally, because of the peculiar history of this region, it is inevitable that a great number of tourist sites associated with death and suffering are also related to the memory of slavery.

Yet, this kind of tourist sites cannot completely belong to the realm of dark tourism: in fact, although former plantations are undoubtedly characterized by a dark past, only very few of them center on the commemoration of slaves. If, like in these cases, the main reason for the visit is to pay respect to the victims of slavery, it would be more accurate to talk about slavery-heritage tourism; heritage-based tourist sites, in fact, are intended to foster reflections on a problematic part of history and remember the lives of those who were enslaved.

On the contrary, there exist other sites, such as Myrtles Plantation, which are, obviously, dense with slave history. However, the plantation in question does not at all promote an educational message of memorialization, rather, it offers forms of dark entertainment which exploit the tragedy of the slaves for the sake of tourists' leisure. As a matter of fact, I will argue that the primary purpose of the plantation in question is to be entertaining: hence why it might be considered a dark tourist attraction.

One last point which helps me close the circle of my reflection is insisting on the modernity of dark tourism. Lennon and Foley themselves, the founders of the term, argued it is an inescapably contemporary activity: in fact, the two referred to it as a mass phenomenon and they reckoned modern technologies as an essential component of dark tourism, especially because of the media coverage of tragic events; furthermore, they defined it as a product of global capitalism, in which dark tourists are primarily

regarded as consumers (Hartmann et. al 7). Additionally, Lennon and Foley also seemed to suggest that tragic events which did not occur in recent history cannot truly become dark tourism products because, if beyond living memory, their consequences do not really mine modernity (Seaton 2018, 10).

The very emergence of dark tourism studies in the last thirty years, moreover, is another demonstration that this practice is a modern product. Whether it is because humans' relationship with death is now more complex than ever, or because traditional tourism has become too banal and predictable, dark tourism is intimately connected to contemporaneity. Even the significant rise of manuals, documentaries, movies and tv series about dark tourism over the very last decades is indicative of a phenomenon which has only recently been fully recognized and become part of popular culture.

The very concept of tourism itself is quite recent. While it is true that it started to emerge some two hundred years ago, tourism acquired its definitive form in the last decades, that is to say, when it became a full-fledged mass phenomenon, sustained by adequate means of transportation, and whose huge expansion is mainly attributable to the affordability of traveling. As a consequence, since dark tourism is a direct product of tourism, these reasons reinforce the idea that the proper manifestation of the darker side of travel is only observable now.

1.2. Fiction as a tourist experience

Historically, the act of touring has by no means been restricted to actual physical mobility. Fiction was and still is a vicarious suspension of our everyday life and a way to get a taste of what lies beyond one's reality.

Tourism has now become an affordable practice for many, but prior to the democratization of the traveling experience, visiting foreign territories was a luxury

reserved to few lucky people. The emergence of the famous European Grand Tour in the early 1800s as a regular practice for affluent Americans, for example, was one of the consequences of the increasing social and financial power of the upper class of that time, whose members resorted to European trips to validate their social status by participating in a culturally sophisticated environment (Stowe 6) overseas.

Yet, while some Americans did have the possibility to travel even for leisure, "many more participated vicariously in the experience of travel by reading travel letters, sketches, and narratives in newspapers, magazines, and published volumes." (Stowe 3). The readers' vicarious participation in far-away adventures through the pages of a book was a highly valued concept in nineteenth-century fiction, so much so that Stowe, chapters later, reiterates the important role of the 1800s travel-writing narrator by describing him as a privileged figure with the function to recreate and interpret the experiences observed for the readers (196), so as to let them participate in the journey themselves, though imaginarily. Similarly, North deals with the same concept and explicitly states that narrators "offered their readers imaginary tours, which functioned as vicarious experience" (49) thus allowing them to "participate in a virtual visit" of the places described (53).

As a matter of fact, since going abroad was an unattainable reality for the majority of the nineteenth-century American population, many of them enjoyed others' adventures in foreign countries from the comfort of their homes, by reading the pages of the numerous travel journals and early guidebooks that proliferated in those years. Fanny W. Hall's 1836 *Rambles in Europe*, indeed, seems to hint at an audience of 'armchair tourists' by stating that her Grand Tour account proposed itself to "furnish a telescope, through which [her] home-staying friend, sitting at ease in his elbow-chair [...]" (Stowe 12) could join the experience of a tourist abroad from their living room.

All things considered, it is safe to say that literary works such as the 1800s travel accounts were in all respects a substitutive tool that allowed readers to imaginatively immerse into a different, far-away dimension, even if they did not have the opportunity to physically move from their domestic environment.

Indeed, fiction does have some characteristics that could lead us to consider it quite close to the tourist experience, and this might explain why it can be reckoned as a precursor and even as an alternative way of traveling. Besides being both definable as leisure activities, in which the entertainment component is dominant, both reading fiction and the practice of tourism respond, although in different ways, to the desire for escape. Boorstin, for example, argued that one of the prime reasons for travel since ancient times was man's curiosity towards the unknown, and the desire to evade the boredom of the familiar space (Boorstin 78). It is not difficult to understand why visiting a foreign territory holds a strong appeal to the individual: indeed, although having the possibility to count on a domestic dimension is certainly reassuring, it may become too limiting and tedious.

To explain the psychology behind the desire to escape, in his article on fiction, imagination and tourism, Reijnders reflects on other scholars' contributions and evidences the distinction between the places associated with the "Self", which are usually perceived as homely and comforting, and the locations in the realm of the "Other", which are associated with the unknown. However, the "Other" is not necessarily a negative place, and indeed, it might also take positive characteristics when it embodies the possibility to transgress and to have a taste of the exoticness and the mystery which lie beyond the borders of the "Self" (675-676).

As a matter of fact, the eagerness to trespass into the "Other" and discover more is an innate quality of the individual and it is what gave the impulse to the great

explorations of the past centuries, for example – and which, among other things, has led humanity towards progress and innovation in all sorts of ways. Tourism developed upon these premises, because it is fostered by the desire to evade one's reality and have a taste of the exoticness of foreign spaces; fiction can provide the same type of evasion, though in abstract terms. Indeed, the nineteenth century's extremely prolific travel literature evidenced an already significant "appetite for the foreign" which was successfully met precisely through the hundreds of articles, essays and books (Stowe 4) published before the democratization of tourism practices.

Moreover, and borrowing a concept highlighted by Boorstin (84), tourism and reading fiction might also be associated, in a certain way, for both being passive experiences: indeed, the former is currently conceived as an activity performed away from home which relies almost exclusively on comfort, so much so that it almost becomes an act of spectatorship; very similarly, the latter takes place inside the safe space of one's home and only requires the minimal effort to travel through the pages and take an imaginative plunge into the story.

Having established some common traits between fiction-reading and traveling, it can be argued that whenever physical movement in space is not possible, escapism can be achieved through the world of fiction, for reading allows the reader to engage in a virtual journey. When reading a literary work set in a particular place, borders and distances disappear, and the reader can become an imaginary tourist with the possibility of having a taste of a different land.

Imagination is, indeed, an extremely valid alternative to the physical experience of traveling. De Botton examined Huysmans's 1884 novel *A Rebours* to reflect on the imagination of a trip and its actual occurrence, and commented: "Des Esseintes [the novel's protagonist] concluded, in Huysmans's words, that 'the imagination could

provide a more-than-adequate substitute for the vulgar reality of actual experience'" (29); while the words of this famous misanthropic character are distinctly colored with pessimism, this statement is also interesting if we interpret it in more neutral terms. In fact, by calling Huysmans into play, De Botton offers a valuable starting point for reflection which can put in communication imagination and travel. Building on Huysmans, who identified imagination as a powerful tool to transport the individual to the dimension of the 'Other' without having to leave the borders of domesticity, I propose that reading fiction (which, indeed, requires an imaginative effort) can set in motion the same non-physical mechanism.

Although Des Esseintes might represent a hyperbolic case, for his strenuous refusal to leave domesticity and the space of the 'Self', it is interesting to note how Huysmans created a character who surrounded himself with objects (De Botton 29) which could visually replace the actual experience of traveling by offering an imaginative journey – the only viable possibility for his intolerant soul. Very similarly, fiction-reading can also achieve the same result by working on the readers' imagination. Through fictional stories, in fact, it is – and it has always been – possible to travel to the farthest imaginable locations, if our imagination and our curiosity allow it.

To reinforce this idea, it might be worth considering John Caughey's theory, according to which humans inhabit two worlds at the same time: the first is the physical, sense-based world, while the second is the abstract dimension where stories and imagination, for example, can transport the individual to the "elsewhere" (Reijnders 674).

As I evidenced, the 'ability' to conduct imaginative travels was particularly valuable in past times when mobility was not affordable but for very few lucky people,

but it could also serve in cases where the territory itself was not accessible for historical or social reasons.

1.2.1. Fiction-reading as a vicarious tour in the dark American South

In light of what I discussed up to this point, I would like to demonstrate that the idea of fiction working as a substitute tool for physical movement in space for leisure is particularly true and applicable to the nineteenth-century American South. In fact, if compared to the rest of the country, tourism in that area developed with different timing and modalities, due to a peculiar historical background. Inevitably, the events which characterized the history of the American South and the problematic legacy of slavery prevented the region from really enjoying a touristic development for a long time.

As a matter of fact, the territorial and societal destruction caused by the Civil war and its aftermath made the South an inhospitable, and even dangerous, place to visit. Although, to a certain extent, the American South remained idealized in the common imagination for its bucolic and pre-modern traits, I tend to believe that slavery and its legacy defined the region even more, so much so as to irremediably taint it. Therefore, the South did not promote for itself a very fascinating image, and it is reasonable to assume that the people who could afford to travel, on their part, were not too attracted by a territory based on racial inequalities.

Considering that tourism is based upon positive premises, and proposes itself as an entertaining and pleasurable experience, it is safe to say that it was quite difficult to really establish a proper tourism industry in the Jim Crow South. For these reasons, I believe that from the immediate post-Civil war period until the beginning of the civil rights movement, reading fiction was the primary – and for black people the only – means to tour the South. Thus, it could be argued that fiction was the only safe way for

the discriminated race to tour the Deep South avoiding racial discrimination; for the white readership, fiction represented an equally interesting tool because it satisfied their curiosity towards such a socially and territorially devastated region, without having to venture down there.

In fact, when tourism was beginning to flourish in the rest of the country, the South was not enjoying the same fortune: slavery first, and racial segregation then, controlled every aspect of daily life; additionally, the territory was still healing from the destructive consequences of the war, and Southern society was still dangerously unwilling to move away from the former status quo.

Another crucial concept I would like to highlight is the idea that, within a geographical scope, fiction contributes to reinforcing a certain image of a place and its culture, and makes the area in question more or less marketable and appetible. Indeed, I would dare say literature may work as a tourist guide, and may have the power to confirm or disavow positive or negative judgments on a specific territory.

Indeed, Lipovšek and Kesić seem to suggest that, for example, much of Italy's tourist appeal has been constructed thanks to its extensive representation in English literature – among others; as a matter of fact, fiction over the centuries has often portrayed this country with seemingly intrinsic positive characteristics, such as "the warm, sunny, luscious, liberated or serene as opposed to rainy, cold and restricted", a description which inevitably leaves a good impression on the reader (54).

Today, this function is performed not only by fiction, guidebooks and travel magazines, but also by blogs, websites, as well as by the quintessential evolution of the tourism industry in contemporary society, that is to say, travel influencers.

In the past, instead, when actual tourism was not really a common activity, but also within touristically inaccessible areas, reading fiction could, indeed, shape thoughts

and preconceived ideas around a specific place – even if not explicitly intended. As a matter of fact, Southern fiction produced in the post-Civil war or segregation eras, for example, might not have been overtly produced to have an influence on potential visitors to the area they dealt with. However, I argue this interpretation could be a possible key to reading this type of literature, and this is what I will attempt to do in Chapter 3, where I will analyze a selection of short stories written in the complex decades of racial segregation in the Southern United States.

In this specific case, the literary production of such a peculiar time and place necessarily intermingles with its history, and inevitably creates a very specific image of the area: as a matter of fact, the atmosphere evoked by the Deep South fiction does not convey a promotional message at all or, at least, not in the usual way. Therefore, what happens when fiction takes a deep turn, and depicts a place in a negative light? If we think about it in tourist terms and we accept the possibility that fiction can somehow work as a guidebook, the fact that a literary product insists on the most somber traits of a determined area might almost seem absurd, because the effect produced will not be that of an appealing territory. Literature can allow one to fully grasp the essence of a place and, indeed, after reading a work of fiction, it is not uncommon that the reader becomes interested in visiting the location used as a setting in the book in question, particularly with desirable destinations; interestingly, Frost and Laing use the expression "armchair reader/potential tourist" (54) so as to suggest that fictional works can help readers form an idea of a certain place, and can therefore generate potential tourist influx to the area. The case of Italy hinted at above is an effective example of a positive image of the country built also thanks to its praising in literary works.

Instead, by analyzing several cases within Southern literature starting from the long and difficult post-Civil war decades, I would say that the general picture provided

by local fiction is not bright at all. In addition to that, it is important to remember that, by definition, tourism is an experience built on positive premises, which hardly conciliates with the tormented past of the Southern United States.

Nevertheless, what is even more curious is that even the negative depiction of a place can foster curiosity and push visitors to get to know more about such a territory. In his article, Reijnders discusses a very interesting concept which correlates the degree – or rather, the type – of fascination of a location with its representation in fiction. Indeed, while some stories contribute to the positive perception of particular places, thus creating a form of "topophilia" (675), others can generate the so-called "topophobia", conceptualized as the fear of places which are employed as the setting of "horrific, frightening or dramatic events" – ghost tales being an example of this type of narrations (Reijnders 675). These types of stories are set in what we could define "fearscapes" (Reijnders 676) and therefore, do not typically appear as desirable locations, but in spite of their apparent negative connotation, I suggest that such places might also be somehow appreciated for the darkness and mystery which characterize their 'otherness'.

In this regard, Lipovšek and Kesić (56) recall another contribution of Reijnders's on Dracula, a fictional character that is now the protagonist of popular tourist itineraries. Through his Gothic novel, Stoker created a storyworld characterized by "haunted castles, decay, strange creatures and overpowering landscape" (Lipovšek and Kesić 56), which I suggest is ascribable to the category of "fearscapes". However, despite the horror atmosphere evoked by this work of fiction, the locations which inspired *Dracula* have always captivated readers and, subsequently, tourists. Interestingly, the mysterious Transylvania depicted by Stoker might have generated a

sort of "topophobia", but it was precisely for its 'strange' character that the area became – unconventionally – attractive from a tourist point of view.

In fact, if we accept the idea that fiction has the ability to influence the stream of visitors, we might not see it as a tool for the development of tourism conceived in a traditional way, but rather, it is possible to read Southern literature as paving the way for what we call dark tourism today. Although, as I explained earlier, the theorization of dark tourism is quite recent, I argue that this type of somber fiction, which insists on the darkness of the Southern atmosphere, the cultural devastation of the land and the haunting legacy of slavery, anticipated this more modern phenomenon. In a certain way, therefore, it could be said that dark tourism was somehow already performed through fiction before it became a recognizable and institutionalized practice.

In Chapter 3, in fact, I will analyze some nineteenth-century short stories set in haunted plantations, and I will attempt to analyze them through the lens of (dark) tourism studies. Although terrifying, the Deep South was still sinisterly intriguing, and I claim that before people had the possibility to physically visit it, they could resort to reading the local fiction. Fiction, therefore, could be a valid tool to satisfy their morbid curiosity towards places, events and stories of violence and suffering, and because of the affinities between tourism and fiction which I illustrated, we could actually say that reading dark stories of the American South constituted a sort of early dark tourism experience.

Even today, though, this land still preserves the same reputation, and not by chance, its disturbing past turned the region into a quite popular dark tourist destination.

CHAPTER 2. THE PLANTATION AS A DARK TOURISM SITE

2.1. The development of tourism in the Southern United States

This Chapter focuses on tourism development in the Southern United States as a unique phenomenon. Indeed, because of its particularly tormented past I would dare say that it is possible to recognize this region as a perfect dark tourism destination where haunted locations and somber legends abound.

The practice of tourism is, undoubtedly, a product of modernity; however, since its earliest manifestations, it became evident that tourism in the American South would experience a quite different development. The peculiarity of the Southern territory can be understood through a couple of fundamental elements which deeply characterized its culture and history: the attachment to a traditional and preindustrial lifestyle, and the presence of slavery, essentially. In the Introduction to the volume *Destination Dixie. Tourism & Southern History*, Karen L. Cox opens her argument by confirming that tourists have long been drawn to the South "in an effort to better understand what set it apart from the rest of the country." (1). Until the 1930s, the South, Cox says, was perceived as an idyllic location because of its "antimodern" (2) character, and that people from the massively-industrialized areas of the North or the Midwest often sought to spend time down there precisely to experience the 'exoticness' of a bucolic life no longer existent in the big cities (2). This depiction, indeed, already suggests that

innovations in general did not always find fertile ground in the Old South[1], and that the region distinguished itself for its willingness to remain anchored to the past. However, this revealed itself to be both the blessing and the curse of the region: in fact, while the South's pre-modern appeal was certainly appreciated for being the last vestige of a gone way of living, the cultural and social stagnation derived from this model also implied the persistence of racially unfair institutions, which irremediably tainted the idealized image of the South.

For an awfully extensive amount of time, in fact, the Southern way of living relied on slavery. I believe that the very existence of such a reproachable practice can very well explain why the South never stood out as a traditionally desirable tourist location – not even after the formal abolition of slavery, for racial discrimination continued to be perpetrated under the Jim Crow regime.

While in the rest of the country packaged tours were starting to flourish and thus transforming regions like California, for example, into new must-see destinations in the 1880s (Ioannides and Timothy 23), the complex social and historical circumstances in the Deep South and the heavy legacy of slavery long prevented the full development of the very concept of tourist destination, as well as the proper institutionalization of the practice.

The complex reality of the American South needed to be highlighted upfront, because it will be extremely relevant in my analysis and later readdressed. I suggest, in

[1] In the Deep South, for instance, the advent of the train did not have the same huge impact on tourism as in the North or in the West, nor did steamships. Actually, travel guidebooks of the 1860s demonstrate that transportation companies were much more interested in expanding their business elsewhere: George A. Crofutt's 1869 iconic guidebook, for example, was meant to encourage transcontinental train travel to the discovery of the new cities and natural sceneries of the newly conquered Western lands (Shaffer 17-18). The same massive promotional campaign did not include the Southern lands. In general, literature does not often mention the South in the foundational moments of tourism development, thus seeming to suggest that the region remained substantially absent from the more modern tourist scene for quite some time.

fact, that these unfavorable conditions possibly contributed to the development of darker forms of tourism.

2.2. The American plantation system: a bygone idyllic past

Regretfully, slavery occupied a major portion of the history of the United States, and it became such a distinguishing characteristic that it was renamed ‘peculiar institution’. In fact, this barbarous practice acquired such a preeminent role in the Southern States that it ended up becoming the defining feature of the whole region.

For a very long time, slavery was actually a particularly divisive activity, so much so that the Northern States, little by little, started to support the abolitionist movement for the emancipation of slaves, while in the South, the existence of slavery was basically a life-or-death matter. In fact, it was free slave labor that allowed the survival of this region, ruled by what we could define a latifundium economy. Not coincidentally, this enormous discrepancy in attitudes towards slavery was also one of the reasons which caused the outbreak of the Civil war; reducing the start of a conflict to one single cause is always too simplistic, but it is no mistake to say that the unwillingness of the South to abandon this practice was a decisive factor in this case.

The reasons for this strong and profound attachment to slavery in the South are multiple. First of all, to motivate the trade and the ownership of other human beings – which understandably raised quite a few complaints, even at the time – white masters justified the practice by essentially claiming that they were actually doing some good. In fact, slavery was made to appear like it was a necessary evil that would benefit the slaves in the first place, insofar as the ‘negro’ was deemed an inferior being who had to be governed like a child. Moreover, the very fact of being able to buy and to be in charge of black slaves was what granted the white man his supremacy, and by not

giving ‘negroes’ the same freedom and rights as the white population, it was also possible to preserve the purity of the ‘American race’. It was believed, finally, that the achievement of a multiracially emancipated society would never result in a peaceful or balanced situation: Thomas Jefferson himself, for example, firmly believed that incorporating blacks into society could be even dangerous. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, for example, the future President of the United States stated that “the real distinctions which nature has made” if set aside in favor of an interracial democracy, “will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions, which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race” (211).

Besides racial (and racist) arguments, slavery was mainly justified because of economic reasons. As a matter of fact, while the North had always been much more involved in activities like commerce and industrial work than in slave work, the South did not experience the same progress, and always maintained an old and stagnant structure, both socially and economically. In the Deep South, indeed, the economy was essentially based on agriculture, and the region actually became worldwide famous for its cotton and tobacco slave-based cultivations, among others. Not only did this type of activity determine the South’s fame, but it also made those in possession of large plantations quite wealthy.

The Southern territory was constellated with tens of thousands of rural mansions which sustained themselves and owed their prosperity to the unpaid hard work of their black slaves. These plantations, and the racial oppression they stood for, became the unmistakable symbol of this terrible chapter of American history. Today, what remains is not only a deep scar in the national memory, but also a great number of former plantations which survived the destruction of the Civil war and which have now been repurposed and turned into tourist attractions. Interestingly, they have become quite

popular destinations now attracting large numbers of tourists to see with their own eyes what once was the most emblematic symbol of the region.

2.2.1. Plantations today and their problematic touristification

The profound transformation of these sites – dense with painful history – inevitably brings with it some significant representational issues; in fact, the tourist management of Southern plantations still suggests a certain degree of racial oppression, and this is demonstrated by the fact that only very few of them give back to the public the perspective of the black slaves who were tortured and killed there. Indeed, the vast majority of the former plantation houses open to the public today portray themselves as still-standing examples of the grandiosity of the antebellum South, and promote a whitewashed version of the past. This first category, in fact, is apparently aimed at preserving an idealized image of the old South, so much so that the discourse constructed around these sites almost seems to convey a nostalgic sentiment towards that mythical era. As Eichstedt and Small pointed out, the tours offered at these plantations

> [...] Overwhelmingly focus on aspects of antebellum white southern life that maintain a vision of the genteel, honorable South. This framing relies on the language of romance, wealth, honor, and the chastity of white southern women and is created through a focus on architecture, furniture, and accoutrements such as paintings, chandeliers, candelabras, dishes, and so on, which all demonstrate the taste and refinement of the white elite; an additional and equally important focus is on the codes of conduct that guided family life and social interaction. [...] Such framing, we argue, is part of a racialized regime of representation that presents the preemancipation South as genteel, honorable, and gracious and generally disregards the fact that the enslavement of human beings provided the foundation that the society of white enslavers rested upon. (59-60)

More concretely, it might be worth taking as an example the official Louisiana state website for touristic promotion, which features a section dedicated to the so-called "River Road", a path which follows the stream of the Mississippi river and where a great number of former plantations were concentrated. To begin with, it is important to notice that this tourist trail is innocently advertised as "Historic Homes of the River Road" ("Tour Louisiana's Plantations on River Road"), and it completely disregards the horrors of slavery committed in those very places. As a matter of fact, the Louisiana website insists on a glorified version of the "River Road" and portrays it as a romantic and picturesque place.

These tours actually confirm what Eichstedt and Small already highlighted, insofar as they carry with them a whitewashed narration which systematically fails to admit that, in the past, these mansions used to serve a horrifying purpose; indeed, while each property is listed as "Plantation", the descriptions that accompany them are somehow misleading. They are often referred to as self-sufficient "communities" (where slavery is hardly mentioned), with outstanding architectural features and vast fields surrounding the mansions. They would all appear as dream homes, were it not for the fact that all kinds of horrors occurred on those grounds.

Overall, it is evident that this first category of reconverted plantations is particularly problematic in light of heritage tourism, because this type of representation does not give justice to the memory of the enslaved at all. However, as I clarified in Chapter 1, I will not be handling heritage tourism, which is conceptualized as paying homage to the victims of slavery and is sustained by a noble purpose. Instead, what I am mainly interested in is showing that, besides whitewashed plantations, another reality exists: that of the haunted plantations turned into dark tourism attractions.

2.3. The ghostly American South

The case I will analyze in this Chapter is that of Myrtles Plantation, but before diving into the dynamics specific to this site, it might be useful to outline more precisely the context in which it operates. Myrtles Plantation, in fact, might be the most famous, but by no means the only example of slavery-related haunted sites in the Deep South, now commercialized and touristified for their darkness. To borrow Tiya Miles's words,

> [...] African American forced migration and enslavement, deadly tropical diseases and unforgiving storms, and the bloody conflicts of the Revolutionary War and Civil War all cast the South with a gloomy air of unfinished business, as a place to which restless spirits would readily return. (Miles 2015, 27)

The Deep South is, indeed, different. It is a mysterious land with a unique identity, shaped by a combination of cultural, historical, and geographical factors. On the one hand, it has been idealized as a romantic setting due to its attachment to traditional values and lifestyle, but on the other hand, it has also been regarded with suspicion because of the plague of slavery. The peculiar institution was and remains such a defining characteristic of the region that we could argue that "it is slavery, in fact – the sense of a dusty black essence in tandem with the charm of aristocratic planter life – that gives the region its special character in popular imagination. Without slavery there is no South, as a region or an idea." (Miles 2017, 17-18).

Besides these very deep traces left in the social-cultural fabric, the legacy of this horrifying practice is also tangible in the sense that its specters still linger. Saying 'tangible' might actually sound ironic, given that it refers to the presence of ghosts, but it is nonetheless appropriate if we consider the pervasiveness of haunting entities in the region. The "unfinished business" mentioned by Miles still looms over the American South, so much so that this might probably be one of the most haunted places in the

entire world. Ghost tourism thrives down there, and such reality is inescapably connected to the region's turbulent and tormented past. Therefore, it has become the perfect location for the development of a ghostly declination of dark tourism, where visitors seek the thrill of the forbidden by hunting the specters of a violated race.

In this view, it becomes clear that Myrtles Plantation is only one of many other haunted places in America, which have now become part of well-established tourist itineraries. As a matter of fact, this light and funcentric form of dark tourism centered on ghost hunts is gaining momentum. In this type of experience, death and violence are lived by consumers in all respects as a leisure activity, and it is exactly what happens at Myrtles Plantation, where curious tourists pay their ticket to encounter the house's ghostly inhabitants and experience bone-chilling sensations, while at the same time being in a safe environment.

Like for dark tourism in a broader sense, scholars in the field of research of ghost tourism, too, recognize that there has been a recent increasing interest in death, spectrality and the paranormal. Besides the ever more complex attitude towards the death and the macabre, what might explain this particular attraction towards haunted spaces is the so-called "millennial anxiety" (Miles 2015, 25) united with "a post-modern rejection of the notion of fixed and rational truth" (25). In this regard, the ghost tours sold at Myrtles Plantation show that people are now more than ever interested in evaluating the possibility that ghosts might be real, and want to prove so with their own eyes.

It is not always easy, though, to establish with certainty what the final answer is. As a matter of fact, in conversing with other visitors to the site, ethnographer Vaughn observed that the majority of tourists cannot reach a definitive conclusion on this matter: while there are both people who convincingly claim the existence of specters,

and on the contrary, others who are completely sure about the inexistence of haunting entities, most visitors remain in an area of doubt and ambiguity (3-4). More specifically, the haunting performance at Myrtles Plantation is precisely built on this sense of vagueness, because it is in this space of ontological instability that ghosts "proliferate" (Vaughn 4) which, as a consequence, allows the existence and the success of such tours.

Because of this significantly increasing demand, we could even dare say that ghost tours have gained the status of "normative rather than fringe activities" (Miles 2015, 26), indicating that these itineraries are no longer taboo experiences, but rather, they have become part and parcel of modern dark tourism practices along with more traditional options.

Ghost tours seem to have become popular because they challenge our sense of reality and, more importantly, they seem to give us the powerful tool to come in contact with a hidden dimension. Tours like that at Myrtles Plantation satisfy the visitors' curiosity – which we could certainly define morbid, given that ghosts are the result of cruel killings – and their desire to have access to a mysterious zone which would otherwise be unapproachable. In fact, "the ghost tour seems to provide participants elevated stimulation, access to a behind-the-scenes, secret knowledge of past events, and an authenticity of raw emotion [...]." (Miles 2015, 26). It is through the ghost that tourists find a path to gaze on someone else's chronologically distant tragedy, which indeed is also a forbidden space. By gazing upon the history and the setting of a cruel killing, and by hunting the specter which originated from that unspeakable crime, tourists have the stirring sensation that they are living an unauthorized and secret experience, which cannot but be exciting because they, instead, have found a way to enter such a space.

Another very interesting motivation in regard to the popularity of ghost tours is the one reported by Miles in *Tales From the Haunted South*, which emerged during her conversation with historian Geordie Buxton, author of several ghost books. What Buxton claimed had to do with the racial acceptance in place today: in fact, he explained that, because repression of other groups of people is no longer tolerated, violent feelings of that nature, when still present, are now projected into ghost stories. In other words, the problematic historical dynamics where there is an oppressor and an oppressed are translated and survive into this narrative form (7).

Everything considered, it appears that there exist many reasons for the massive development of ghost tours in the American South. More specifically for the Myrtles Plantation's case, while it is true that it had long been known as a haunted locale, it was only in the 1980s that the owners of that time, the Keermens, opened the mansion as an inn and thus inaugurated overnight stays, which boosted even more the Myrtles' haunting appeal.

2.4. Dark tourism and haunted slavery sites today: the case of Myrtles Plantation

The plantation as a dark tourism attraction is conceived as a site where the horrors of slavery have been commodified and turned into leisure for the entertainment of visitors. Myrtles Plantation, located in St. Francisville, Louisiana, is a restored antebellum mansion which has been building its dark tourism appeal by exploiting the tragic stories of its slaves for the tourists' entertainment.

The haunted Myrtles Plantation does emphasize the darkest facts behind the slavery system; however, it does not aim at educating the public, rather, it promises fun to tourists by satisfying their taste for the macabre in an eerie setting: in this regards, it functions exactly like any other dark tourism attraction. More specifically, the

entertainment here is precisely built around the hunting of what remains of the victims of the plantation: its ghosts.

2.4.1. The dark history of a stunning mansion

In regard to the history of the mansion, its foundation did not differ from that of many other Southern plantation homes run on slavery; however, its existence was soon tainted by tragic events. Myrtles Plantation was built at the end of the 18th century by David Bradford, and was initially called "Laurel Grove". Over the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, the plantation was home to several slave-owners families, one of those, the Stirlings, gave it its current name in the 1830s. The family, in fact, "sought to turn The Myrtles into their main residence and showplace. They enlarged and embellished the house, orchestrated the planting of myriad crepe myrtle trees", and "added the ornate European chandeliers and elaborate floral moldings formed of moss and clay plaster" (Miles 2017, 87). In other words, Myrtles Plantation gained the appearance of any other Southern antebellum estate: elegant, finely decorated, and with a sophisticated architecture indicative of the wealth of its family – a wealth which, of course, derived from the exploitation of the dozens of black slaves on the property.

Frances Kermeen, too, author of the non-fiction novel *The Myrtles Plantation. The True Story of America's Most Haunted House* described in detail the beauty of the mansion when she first set foot into the house in 1980. Its graceful charm fascinated Kermeen so much that she enthusiastically bought the property that year. The then-owner of the mansion praised the house as follows:

> [...] as we entered the foyer. It was even more beautiful than I remembered. The floors were made of polished cypress, so shiny you could see your reflection. The afternoon sun cast a golden reflection of the regal French cross design from the stained glass in the doors onto the floorboards. As I looked up, the first thing

> I noticed was an enormous wrought-iron chandelier, much too big for most homes, even with the highest of ceilings, yet perfect for the massive entry hall that ran the entire length of the house. Hanging from it were the largest crystals I had ever seen, both amber and smoky. (27)

Its timeless beauty, though, could not hide forever the tragic events which had already cursed the property. In fact, and seemingly unbeknownst to Keermen, the most legendary ghost tale of the Myrtles had already taken place in the 1820s, when the second family inhabited the plantation. In those years, Judge Clark Woodruff had married Sarah Matilda Bradford Woodruff, the daughter of the founder of the plantation, and had established himself and his family on the property, at the time called "Laurel Grove". Like in most plantations, it was unfortunately not uncommon for the master to exert his power on his slaves in whatever way he pleased, and oftentimes this included forcing himself sexually on the female slaves he owned.

In *Tales From the Haunted South*, Miles recounts her own experience at Myrtles Plantation and reports the legend narrated by the guide, who explains that among the female slaves in his possession, Woodruff chose a teenage slave called Chloe to be both a sexual instrument for himself and a nursemaid for his children. One unfortunate episode was fatal for the destiny of the girl, who was allegedly caught eavesdropping on an important political meeting in the house, and as a consequence, her left ear was cut. Additionally, she was punished by being exiled to the kitchen, and it was there, according to the story, that she began plotting against the family. Her plan consisted in baking a poisonous cake for the family, which actually ended up killing Woodruff's wife and his twin daughters. The master soon found out Chloe was guilty, and had her hanged and later thrown into the Mississippi River (90-91).

Whether or not it was true, Chloe's macabre legend became extremely famous, and it established the grounds for the image of the plantation as haunted; eventually, it

also constructed its tourist appeal. Despite the already existing rumors, when Kermeen first came in contact with Myrtles Plantation she seemed not to be aware of the crimes that had been committed on the grounds she had so enthusiastically purchased; indeed, she had initially envisioned to transform the property into a bed & breakfast, given the large number of rooms available, and could not imagine that her new home had actually been a crime scene for multiple of its past inhabitants. However, already on her very first inspections to the house, she claimed that she felt an uncanny sensation.

> I tried to field the questions and small talk directed my way, but my attention was focused on the incredible beauty of the rooms.
> "Frances." A woman's voice interrupted my thoughts. I looked over at Betty Jo, the only other woman present, but she was talking about how she had recently lost eighty pounds. A jovial John L. listened intently.
> "Frances," the voice called again. I frowned. An eerie feeling crept over me. Hesitantly, I asked John L. if perhaps there were something "unusual" about the house that we should know about.
> "Absolutely not," he scoffed. "Why do you ask?"
> "Oh, nothing really. I thought that I heard something." (Kermeen 28)

It was only after Kermeen and her husband finalized the purchase that they were finally informed about the supernatural occurrences at the Myrtles. The unexplainable sounds of footsteps and the mysterious voices she had heard were finally confirmed by a previous owner, and very soon, the new proprietors had to accept the fact that their long-awaited home was, in fact, haunted. At the beginning of their bed & breakfast activity, though, the couple avoided handling this matter with their guests, so as to prevent the proliferation of rumors which could be detrimental to their business (this had been the same strategy employed by former owners: that is probably why Kermeen was unaware of the ghosts, at the time of the purchase). Once the management was in her hands, what she initially wanted to emphasize was the rich history of the house and

the beauty of its antebellum architecture, furniture and overall elegant and aristocratic atmosphere.

However, when a group of reporters who stayed at the inn published an article on the ghosts at the Myrtles (which was eventually followed by many more publications about the house in national magazines), the haunting secrets of Myrtles Plantation irremediably came out. But then, and very surprisingly, more and more people started to visit the plantation precisely because of the ghosts (Kermeen 215-217). Despite the rumors, the owner still avoided mentioning the spirits to her incoming guests, but as visitors increasingly reported strange occurrences in the rooms, like the beds shaking and lifting off the floor, Kermeen finally stopped discrediting their spectral stories (220).

Kermeen seemingly ended up embracing the haunted character of the mansion, and among the initiatives she put in place to bring in additional revenue, she recounts, for example, the organizing of a theatrical production where she would have actors and guests dressed in antebellum period costumes to recreate the murder mystery of William Winter, a previous owner who had been killed at the Myrtles in the 1870s (Kermeen 253). This performance, of course, was not exempt from strange events, and in fact, the reenactment of Winter's murder caused the lights to go out (255) and the portraits in the house either turned upside down or crying with real tears for the killing (256).

Today, Myrtles Plantation is appreciated precisely for its ghostly legends and paranormal activity, which have been even more accentuated by current managers John and Teeta Moss. Tourists, on their part, seem more willing than ever to spend the night there and prove for themselves whether the thrilling sensations and the paranormal encounters everyone talks about are real or, on the contrary, are pure fabrications. The possibilities of encountering a spirit should be quite high, considering that the Myrtles

gained the label of the most haunted house in America also for the abundance of specters that haunt the property. At the beginning of her book, indeed, Kermeens warns the readers, as if they were preparing for a vicarious tour of the house through her pages, or in case they wanted to visit the site themselves, and informs them that they will come in contact with plenty of ghosts at Myrtles Plantation. Besides Chloe ("the one-eared slave tortured and betrayed by her master – before she killed his wife and daughters with a poisoned cake"), Kermeen identified several other specters during her years in the plantation, among which she lists the two little girls at a window (probably the children whom Chloe poisoned), and the "Voodoo Queen" who lurks in the Old Nursery.

The mirror in the hallway, for example, is said to hide the ghosts of Woodruff's wife and daughters (Miles 2017, 92), and it is currently one of the most touristically interesting spots of the house. Visitors are also invited to linger inside the French Bedroom, where guides recount the story of black Voodoo priestess Cleo – now a ghost – whose failed healing of an ill little girl cost her a painful death by hanging (Miles 2017, 91). It is Chloe, however, who seems to be the spirit that tourists are most curious about. As with the mirror in the hallway, visitors are encouraged to take photographs of any evidence of ghosts, in order to authenticate for themselves the haunted nature of the plantation (Vaughn 22). In this regard, one chilling story is about the shot taken in the 1990s by current owner Teeta Moss, who allegedly captured the presence of Chloe on the grounds of the plantation. Indeed, Moss had taken a picture of the property for insurance purposes, but this was rejected because the shot showed the presence of a person; that is how the owner established that the figure appearing in the photograph was none other than Chloe (Vaughn 23). From that moment on, the shot has been

circulating worldwide and has come to symbolize the very image of the Myrtles in the popular imagination.

2.4.2. Ethical concerns around the hunting of ghost slaves

While more and more visitors seem to enjoy spectral experiences like that offered by the Myrtles Plantation management, it is also rightful to interrogate ourselves about the ethical aspect of the transformation of former slavery sites into places for lucrative activities. Although ethical issues are a complex matter when it comes to dark tourism sites, it is nonetheless interesting to investigate how places like the Myrtles profit from the spectacularization of the dark allure created by death and violence. Moreover, the fact that the Myrtles is not only open for daily tours, but also profits from overnight stays (which allow visitors to verify the authenticity of spooks in the vulnerability of the night), does not but increase the level of commercialization of the oppressed race's tragedy.

In fact, and most importantly, it is crucial to highlight the fact that what haunts this now tourist site inevitably intersects with the concept of race: as a matter of fact, the ghosts whose stories attract visitors the most are the specters of black slaves, Chloe being an outstanding example. More specifically, the ghost here is the deadly consequence of the white master's deliberate abuse of power.

In his article on haunted plantation tourism, Benjamin D'Harlingue critically investigates the dynamics that come into play during such tours, and contends that this type of experience allows tourists to fully dive into the Old South (75) by reproducing for them the same mechanisms which regulated that reality. In particular, it appears that, for the way in which they are constructed, these tours encourage tourists to "identify with, feel empathy for, and even imagine that they are elite whites holding enslaved

black people in captivity." (D'Harlingue 75). The amusement derived from hunting the ghosts of slaves who were killed in the plantation "occurs alongside invitations to enjoy the beautiful grounds, mansions, and hospitality of these plantations, thus valorizing the time, place, and system of slavery." (D'Harlingue 75). If we think about it, everything at the Myrtles will make tourists feel as if they were transported back to live in that specific time as if they were playing the role of the white American 'aristocracy': the restoration of the interiors, indeed, has purposefully remained faithful to the original, so as to recreate the same splendor which surrounded wealthy slave owner families at the time of the peculiar institution. This type of hospitality offers its tourists an authentic experience of the Old South, as if time had frozen to that antebellum atmosphere, and this is also what allows the rising of its tormented ghosts – whom tourists will enjoy.

Not only this: I argue that, in these tours, it is once again a black slave (now as a ghost) who is at the service (entertaining) of a powerful master (now the tourist). Although with different modalities, the social inferiority of the slave seems to be perpetrated even today, and it unmistakably occurs through the touristification of the black ghost. Subsequently, dynamics of enslavement in haunted plantation tourism seem to be reinforced.

The turning of this plantation into an adventure for visitors is, actually, the exemplification of how dark tourism works: death and suffering are transformed into a commodified product for the entertainment of curious tourists who seek the thrill related to ghostly matters. Moreover, this already debatable dynamic intermingles with an even more problematic element, that is to say, racial oppression and unfair social dynamics.

Death and violence which occurred in this plantation two hundred years ago have now been turned into a spectacle, but what is even more important to consider is that this type of cruelty is not just like any other type: it was a form of systematic

violence against enslaved black people which ruled in the country for an extensive amount of time, and which also contributed to giving shape to America's contemporary social relations. Interestingly, the same flawed image – given by slavery – which once might have prevented most tourists from being attracted to the South is now a powerful driving force for visitors exactly because of its darkness. In other words, slavery and its horrors are no longer seen as deterrents today, rather, they generate curiosity and are mostly seen as powerful elements of attraction in a dark tourism frame.

One more issue is that, similarly to the typical tour of River Road, where the point of view of the slaves is almost never taken into account, at the Myrtles little is known about its slaves. As was often the case with the oppressed black race, these slaves were not granted a place in the official history: we know that slavery in the South existed, for it was documented, but the individuality of the enslaved person was forever erased by this unjust system which did not consider slaves as people, but only as property. Thus, the very few things we know about the former slaves at the Myrtles come to us mostly through their ghost stories. People like Chloe, who were never considered human, are now stuck into the status of spirits.

2.4.3. Plantation ghosts' ontology

This last consideration also allows me to reflect on the ontology of most of the ghosts that entertain dark tourists so much in today's plantation homes. First of all, who can become a ghost? Ghosts are typically intended as the spirits of dead people who continue to live in the afterlife, but who occasionally return to the living realm and manifest themselves through sounds or movements, or even in more or less distinct visible form. The question of their coming back to the world of the living is relevant

because it explains the common understanding of ghosts as being stuck in a specific location and tormented by unresolved matters.

But more specifically, who are the spirits that fuel the American ghost routes, and why so much of this tourist traffic centers of the Southern plantations? This is actually the same issue raised by Miles in *Tales from the Haunted South*, who recalled the intervention of historian David Glassberg during the conference "The Future of Civil War History," held in 2013; in fact, Glassberg provoked the audience by calling in question the acceptability of ghost tours in certain locations: would it be tolerable, he asked, to perform such activities at the Twin Towers Memorial, for instance? (11). Assuming that for most people the answer is automatically no, it is necessary to interrogate ourselves on why, instead, it has become perfectly normal to tour the South to hunt the ghosts of slavery.

The very concept of ghost tours, indeed, collides with the respect which should be shown to the deceased. This regardful attitude seems to be only partial, or at least not applicable to any dead soul, but only to certain categories. In the same conference mentioned above, Miles also includes Richard Sharpley's contribution to the debate, who explained that ghost tours are typically conceived as "a playful, frivolous end of the dark tourism spectrum." (Miles 2017, 10). Inevitably, the question arises: since this performance is, indeed, a game, why are there some ghosts who are touristified and experienced as entertaining, and why are there others who are not turned into a frivolous attraction because it would be deemed offensive? African American slaves seem to unmistakably fall into the former category, and this is demonstrated by the fact that the dark tourism industry is not reluctant to exploit the victims of slavery and turn them into the protagonists of ghost tours in the American South.

Scholars have long interrogated themselves on the nature of ghosts, because they are undeniably fascinating entities which test our sense of reality, and I found some interpretations which are particularly fitting for the case of enslaved African American ghosts.

To begin with, in *Specters of Marx* Derrida defines the ghostly appearance as a "spectral moment, a moment that no longer belongs to time, if one understands by this word the linking of modalized presents (past present, actual present: "now," future present)." (xix). In a very few words, the apparition of a ghost, according to Derrida, interferes with the traditional structure of time, and following his lead, Miles explains how ghosts do, indeed, allow a peculiar connection to the past:

> We cannot fully access the past because it is no longer present. It is distant, shrouded, mysterious. To visit the past we require a sort of mental time machine, such as the feeling of transcendence that can be invoked by standing at an atmospheric historic site, viewing rare objects in a museum, reading a gripping historical study, or perhaps encountering a ghost. And of all the possible means of transport into the past, a ghostly encounter is arguably the most immediate, the most personal, and for some people, the most "real." (Miles 2017, 14)

With ghosts, therefore, we are allowed into a past dimension, often complex and problematic, which would not be easily accessible otherwise; but on their part, spectral entities make use of the Derridian concept of transcending the standard chronological structure and might come from the past to disrupt the present in order to signal there is still some "unfinished business" in the air which needs to be resolved. Ghosts do, in fact, tend to manifest themselves repeatedly and in a specific and confined location, and in doing so they seem to be refusing to go away from the time and place they haunt. This is not a casual behavior, and in connection therewith, ethnographer Vaughn calls into play the contributions of two more scholars, Avery Gordon and Nicholas Mirzoeff,

who respectively define the ghost as a "social figure" and, most of all, as an entity that is not "indifferent to the time and place of its hauntings. The specter is nothing if not historical." (13).

All these theories perfectly apply to the case of enslaved ghosts. At the Myrtles, in fact, tourists do not encounter generic spooks, but they are actually confronted with the specters of the whole nation. If ghosts like Chloe exist and do not go away, it is not just because they intend to scare visitors, which is, instead, the main and also more superficial motivation for the existence of ghost tours; as already said, these itineraries are frivolous in nature, for they are built on an entertaining scheme and privilege the fun and thrilling component of coming in contact with a supernatural entity. The more profound, and mostly ignored, reason why some ghosts appear is because they often need to unearth a social and historical wound.

Chloe (like the other spirits which inhabit Myrtles Plantation) shows up quite frequently in the mansion, and the immediate effect she produces on the visitors – and which visitors actually seek – is mainly a sensation of fear, or at least discomfort. However, Chloe does primarily need to be interpreted as a historical figure, and more specifically as the symbol of a history of oppression. A history of violated race which was silenced for too long, and which now emerges silently but distinctly in a ghostly form.

While it might be argued that there still exists a form of hegemony in the relationship between tourists and ghosts, in the sense that visitors exploit the black slaves' tragedy for their own spooky entertainment, it is also worth noting that the specter is not entirely passive in this performance (which in any case remains a performance of power, for the reasons addressed above). In fact, the truth is that not

only do ghosts make apparitions, but they also stare back at us, almost defiantly and fearlessly, we could say.

The passage which describes Frances Kermeen's first encounter with Chloe exemplifies this bidirectionality very well. According to the then-owner of the Myrtles, this happened when she decided she no longer needed to keep the lights on at night to feel safer, but it was right at that time that the sounds and the movements she had felt until that moment materialized into a distinctly visible figure.

> I had not been asleep long when I once again awoke with a start. I had the eeriest feeling that someone was watching me. I had been sleeping on my stomach, and as I rolled over to look around, from the dim light in the room I could see a figure standing next to the couch looking down at me. The woman was dressed in a long, flowing, dark green gown, holding a round tin with a candle in it. I realized that the light in the room was coming from the candle. Her face was dark and very square, and a green turban was wrapped around her head, concealing her hair.
> I closed my eyes tightly, as if that would make the intruder disappear. A few minutes later, I peeked out. She was still there, right next to me, staring at me. [...]
> I opened my eyes again, praying she would be gone, but she was still there. I was terrified to look up into her eyes. I can't explain why I had that fear, or what I thought might happen if her eyes met mine, but I just couldn't bring myself to look up. Could she read my mind, or even steal my soul? That was silly. There was no way.
> I knew this couldn't possibly be a real person, although it appeared to be solid. Finally I gathered enough courage to reach out and touch the long flowing gown. As my hand passed right through her gown, through her body, she slowly disappeared. As her image melted away, the room turned pitch black, as the candle she had been holding that illuminated the room had vanished with her. I lay paralyzed in the darkness for quite some time. (61-62)

In this passage, it is clear that the alive person is now being watched by the spectral entity. The figure is looking down at the woman, and gives no sign of wanting to leave the room. It is almost as if the ghost subverted the typical dynamic of the observer-the observed, and seems as if it was the one in power, for once. This very unusual gazing relationship had Kermeen terrified, who feared the most terrible

consequences for this encounter. It is true that this passage might be somehow read as hyperbolic and exaggerated, knowing that Kermeen will develop truly paranoid behaviors throughout the story. In fact, even though Kermeen mentions the name of Chloe (which she will discover later in the narration) only three times in her book, this womanly figure with a green turban is highly significant because it will unleash the owner's obsession with the ghostly inhabitants of the Myrtles, a fixation which will result in madness. However, the type of situation evoked here effectively demonstrates that, although visitors are called to take tours of haunted plantations like the Myrtles to hunt and see ghosts, ghosts themselves hunt and see visitors, too.

It appears, therefore, that gaze is not unidirectional, rather, visitors are stared at through an invisible gaze. More precisely, Vaughn explains this happens because the ghost is embodied in all the objects of the house: not only do we look for Chloe, but she looks for us, too, and she does so by taking possession of the house and its belongings.

> In fact, while I'm on tour, I am never out of Chloe's sight. She stares back at me (at us) from the 350 pound chandelier with its 14 teardrop Baccarat crystal eyes, from the coffee colored parlor doors with their highly reflective, glass encased mercury knobs, from the sewing kit seated politely in the corner of the room, from the shoe fly fan that once hung ominously over the dining room table but now slumps crumpled against the wall, and from the richly evocative, green velvet curtains that plunge from great heights to puddle on the floor. Everything possesses the aura of her reticulated body. Moreover, she is constantly in motion or at least the performance of the tour has taught our touristic bodies how to "see" her in motion. With every creak of the floor, every rattle of a window, with every jump, every bump, with every breath of over air-conditioned air, and with every twist of the story, I get the uncanny feeling she is, or at least could be, watching us. And sometimes, thousand little eyes—our collective goose bumps—look back for her or toward her, the distinction is difficult to parse. (27-28)

This passage recounting Vaughn's experience on tour is also very much in line with the idea of the Myrtles' willingness to transport the tourists to the Southern bygone

past to let them appreciate its idyllic atmosphere. In fact, Vaughn here lists a series of splendid furniture items and precious antique objects which are evidently the testimony of the beautiful architecture of the wealthy Old South – from which and in which ghosts like Chloe can see and can be seen. In this regard, D'Harlingue confirms that tourists are, in fact, "invited to discover haunting itself embedded in these material artifacts." (79) which are, once again, nothing but the direct link to the aristocratic South that the Plantation so nostalgically wants to bring back to life. Ultimately, "while haunting as spectrality often implies a kind of absence of physical form, here it is material culture that ultimately provides the evidentiary grounds, the conditions of possibility, for a discourse of haunting." (D'Harlingue 79). Almost ironically, the specter, which obviously does not have a body anymore, but is only a nebulous shape, comes to inhabit the whole house and its antebellum objects, and looks at tourists from multiple points of view.

2.4.4. Chloe as a social figure between corporality and spectrality

In this part I will expand on the complex figure of Chloe the slave, and more specifically, on her female body. Chloe is by far the most famous ghost of the Plantation, and her vicissitudes are among the favorite subjects of legends, essays and novelistic accounts of the Myrtles. Let us not forget, however, that her status of spirit was necessarily preceded by her earthly condition of black enslaved woman; interestingly, according to the legend revolving around this slave, her body becomes both a hyper-sexualized object and, at the same time, a nursing and caring figure. Therefore, and almost paradoxically, Chloe – presumably like many other black slaves in the antebellum South – came to identify two diametrically opposed stereotypes: the Jezebel and the Mammy.

The Jezebel epithet was a label typically associated with black women in slavery times, and conveyed a profound sense of dehumanization: in fact, it implied a vision of these women as lascivious and inherently erotic, which highly contrasted with the ideals of delicacy and purity typically attributed to white womanhood; because of this animalistic association, that is to say, black women's alleged sexual deviance, white men found a way to gain control of them not only in terms of slave labor, but also in terms of physical dominance. As a matter of fact, Chloe herself was chosen by Woodruff to become his concubine when she was only a young teenager, and almost surely against her will.

If we stick to the legend, we will realize that Chloe is made to appear as if she was at least partly consenting to the 'affair' with her master; according to the story, the girl "catches the judge's eye, wins a place in his household, desires to stay in his home, and thus concocts a scheme that threatens the white mistress and children of the estate" (Miles 2017, 94-95), which seems to imply that the slave was conscious of her beauty and that she was willingly playing the part of the master's 'paramour'. However, if I interpret these lines correctly, I find myself disagreeing with parts of this statement because I tend to believe, instead, that being a slave, Chloe could not possess free will and full agency because she found herself in a subaltern position. Let us not forget, then, that refusing to give herself to the master was not an option, because the consequences for such a choice could be extremely painful. Moreover, I suspect that the alleged competition with Woodruff's wife might have been a fabrication of posterity created to make the story more intriguing.

This narrative reconnects with D'Harlingue's theory according to which visits at the Myrtles replicate a setting very similar to what once was the antebellum plantation; he argues, in fact, that "Myrtles tourism [...] replicates nineteenth century dominant

cultural and legal prescriptions." (81). Indeed, the legend constructed around Chloe's vicissitudes is problematic: at that time, rape was so institutionalized that it was conceptually inexistant, and the tourist management of the site seems to align to this idea by offering a romanticized – though most probably distorted – version of this relationship where Chloe voluntarily and cunningly engages in an affair with Woodruff.

On the contrary, Chloe's is primarily a story of systematic abuse by a cruel white master, and we can only but imagine the trauma she had to endure; moreover, all the speculations about her agency and her alleged desire to outshine the master's wife, even if true, do not change the fact that physical, sexual and ideological violence was repeatedly perpetrated against her.

If, on the one hand, Chloe is identified as an erotic and hyper-sexualized body, on the other hand she also keeps her role of Mammy, who is a highly maternal figure, instead. In fact, as already mentioned, among her duties is taking care of the master's children, and for this reason, she needs to be submissive and completely at the service of the family. Kermeen, for example, highlights the beauty and the allure of the ghostly slave, but also her homely and reassuring traits: "She goes from room to room, carrying her night-candle, checking to be sure that everyone is safe and warm. On more than one occasion, his house-guests had gone to bed without a blanket, and awakened to find themselves covered up, or worse, being covered." (68). We might imagine this is what Chloe was doing when Kermeen saw her, and if that is the case, we might acknowledge that her gaze is not only defiant and 'scary', but can also be comforting and motherly.

Both roles simultaneously existed for Chloe, and both visions seem to have been experienced by those who managed to see her: she appears as a seductive young woman, as well as a loyal house servant. Interestingly, this ambiguity positions her in a

liminal space, which also contributes to making her a ghost. This is what Vaughn explains, by calling into play the concept of intersections:

> Given her story, Chloe is an ideal candidate to be a ghost if, as Benjamin asserts, ghosts show up at intersections. In life, Chloe occupied the intersectional terrain between Woodruff and his wife and children, [...] and, ultimately, between life and death. In death, as a ghost, she exists at the intersection of past and present. Caught as she is at multiple intersections of history and mystery, her story is a journey story that evokes here and there, now and then, (38)

In other words, Chloe constitutes in all respects the "spectral moment" theorized by Derrida: a tormented soul trapped in the past which transcends the traditionally conceived structure of time to reemerge in the present. Again, the reasons why she appears are worth investigating. Ghosts are not necessarily demonic in origin. Although some visitors claimed to have been scared by the paranormal activity going on at the Myrtles, especially at night, guides at the site believe that ghosts mean no harm. Whether the spirits' intentions are to scare people away or not we cannot be sure, but one thing is certain: as mentioned earlier, these specters do certainly want to unearth past wounds. African American ghosts like Chloe demonstrate that two hundred years later, the memory of slavery still finds a way to reemerge among us: as said before, ghosts are "social figures" intimately tied to past history, and their existence and apparitions are not at all casual.

In *Tales from the Haunted South*, Miles effectively conveys the idea that "ghosts are our guides to the troubled past" (16) by mentioning literature scholar Renee Bergland's theorization of ghosts as symptoms of a failed repression: according to this view, specters "are the things that we try to bury, but that refuse to stay buried." (16). This perfectly applies, indeed, to the horrors of slavery. It is not irrelevant that after almost two centuries of racial emancipation, the specters of slavery still haunt the

American South and, subsequently, the nation as a whole. Slavery was a practice too cruel and too pervasive to be erased and forgotten by the national memory. The same country which promoted justice and progress and set itself as a beacon for all the other modern nations failed its own people by committing horrors which scarred the country forever. No matter the efforts to reconstruct America as a just land, the wrongful system put in place by the alleged white suprematism was so powerful that, even when dismantled, it left an indelible legacy which affected generations after generations of African Americans and prevented them from completely achieving a full status of freedom.

But most of all, what seems impossible to do is handling the memory of slavery properly. The charming River Road Plantations and the haunted plantations like the Myrtles are the perfect example of the American inability to confront its past in fair terms. On the one hand, in fact, the former sites of slavery are promoted as the symbol of an idyllic and romanticized past which we can now only fantasize about, while completely neglecting the terrible crimes committed there. On the other hand, former plantations such as the Myrtles nostalgically praise the beauty of the Old South while at the same time they do, indeed, emphasize the darkest site of slavery. However, instead of commemorating the lives lost on those grounds, they now promote an extremely popular type of dark tourism which is based on the playful hunt of the specters of slavery.

Not only this: the way in which haunted plantation tourism is constructed seems to imply that abuse against slaves was merely confined to occasional acts of violence, instead of being a defining feature: in fact, tour guides explain the presence of black ghosts as simply originating from unfortunate incidents, and tend to omit that cruelty was, instead, a daily occurrence (D'Harlingue 76).

In conclusion, the paradox is that these biased – and historically inaccurate – narratives acknowledge slavery and use it as their background, but at the same time they seem to deny what the peculiar institution was really about; current tourist practices, unfortunately, perpetrate this questionable model. Such misrepresentations might actually signify that the scars of the antebellum period have never truly healed, and the ghosts that still linger in these locations and that keep returning to visit us to this day definitely want to signal the "unfinished business" which will probably continue to haunt not only the South, but the entire country.

CHAPTER 3. THE HAUNTED PLANTATION IN POST-RECONSTRUCTION FICTION

3.1. Introduction

The perpetuation of almost two centuries of slavery and the outbreak of the Civil war impacted the country like no other event in American history. The aftermath of the conflict was already catastrophic in itself, and in addition to that, the various tensions which inhabited the Old South violently re-emerged in the Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction era. This period of American history following the resolution of the conflict was, in theory, intended to rebuild the social and territorial fractures generated by the peculiar institution and by the war, but in practice, it worsened the already compromised racial relations in the country.

In fact, if on the one hand the formal emancipation of slaves was a huge milestone for black people, on the other hand, the former slave-holding elites had been defeated in the war and now saw themselves in extreme difficulty: the economy they had been relying on was demolished, and they were now forced to abide by new racially-fair laws in order to be readmitted into the Union. Unfortunately, though not surprisingly, the new interracial democracy imposed by the radical measures of Reconstruction caused more and more resentment among white elites, and resulted in a new, powerful wave of racial hatred. Acts of violence on a daily basis, and new forms of social and economical subjugation concealed under the name of Jim Crow laws demonstrated that black Americans in the South continued to be subjected to an unjust

treatment not so dissimilar from the condition of enslavement they had endured until a few years before, with the only difference being their status of free people on paper.

It was clear that the postbellum South was not yet healed from the scars of slavery. While a nostalgic part of the Southern population still hoped and believed in the possibility of returning to an idyllic past, others recognized that the destruction caused by slavery and by the Civil war had permanently scarred the territory. Indeed, the South remained for a long time a place of unresolved conflict in the popular imagination, and its tragedy a vivid memory.

In Chapter 1, I argued that before the formal establishment of tourism, traveling to far-away, exotic destinations was made vicariously possible through fiction-reading. In this regard, I suggest that Post-Reconstruction literature set in slave plantations did, indeed, satisfy the curiosity of nineteenth-century readers towards the mysterious American South, and provided them with what we could deem as vicarious (proto-)dark tourism experiences.

In this type of fiction, the antebellum South is often depicted as a "fearscape" (Rejinders), with threatening landscapes, reckless ghosts of slavery, and permeated by an overall sense of death and decay erasing the Old South's grandeur. Most importantly, these works also feature a very specific type of haunted building. In fact, if one of the most recurrent settings of gothic literature at large is the haunted house, which functions as the repository of personal fears, as well as national anxieties (Grider),

> In its Southern manifestations, [this] regularly assumes the form of the slave plantation house, a spectralised locale whose materialist substructure is exposed by way of irrepressible ghosts. [...] These spectres register historical traumas caused by antiquated and abusive institutions of power guilty of commodifying human beings—including, and most prominently, the peculiar institution, the back-bone of the Old Southern economy—and demand reparative action. (Davison 56)

By going back in time to retrieve the emblematic space of the haunted plantation, Post-Reconstruction authors manifested the long-lasting effects of slavery in postbellum America. These writers dealt with the memory of the peculiar institution and with the space of the plantation in many different ways. George Washington Cable, for example, employed in his fiction the dark history of the South as a way to understand and critically examine his contemporaneity (Turner 514); for him, the plantation and slavery at large represented a dangerously outmoded, and therefore decaying, way of living. Thomas Nelson Page, instead, looked back at the Old South with nostalgia, and linked the haunted character of the plantation to the corruption of the old Southern customs. Others, like Charles Waddell Chesnutt, tried to leverage the national sense of guilt towards a tragedy of huge proportions, and as a black man himself, let transpire the darkness of slavery through his stories.

3.2. "The "Haunted House" in Royal Street" and the dark tourist guide

Although not set in a rural plantation, but rather, in a house in an urban context, "The "Haunted House" in Royal Street", originally written in 1889 by George Washington Cable, is nonetheless a perfect example of a dwelling haunted by the ghosts of black slaves. Born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana, Cable made his territory an integral part of his literature, and did not refrain from conveying even its darkest aspects. To begin with, being a harbor town, in New Orleans sex, crime and gambling intermingled, and contributed to building the fame of "The Big Easy" as a place of perdition and moral decay (Francescato 9). Furthermore, over the course of the decades, it had also been hit by various instances of deadly pestilences.

But the array of dangerous opportunities this city offered and the disease were not the only elements which shaped the gloomy image of New Orleans: much of its

gothic charm had to do with the geography of the place itself, which deeply defined its somber atmosphere. Indeed, many have been the accounts that reported and let transpire the peculiar essence of this city, where "the smell of water, briny Mississippi River and salty Atlantic Ocean water [...] soaks the streets and atmosphere with a forlorn feeling of loss and desecration." (Miles 2017, 47).

It was in this cultural, historical and geographical context that Cable found himself operating, and it is not difficult to understand why ghost stories proliferated in such a setting. However, "The "Haunted House" in Royal Street" is much more than a simple ghostly tale: in fact, despite the appearance of a light short story, the text conveys much deeper meanings, which subtly but explicitly reveal what was Cable's political stance. The writer, in fact, has been widely known for his witty realism in depicting the complexities of New Orleans' multiculturalism and its stratified society. His voice, we could argue, is almost a satirical one, for it certainly did not portray his contemporaneity in a positive light. Cable never refrained from expressing his – sometimes inconvenient – positions, and distinguished himself for being a lone voice, to a certain extent: suffice to say that he was exiled to New England after the publication of *The Creoles of Louisiana* in 1884 for his explicit critique towards the Creole class of his times (Robinson 204). The hypocritical members of this caste were, in fact, among the subjects he judged as the most responsible for the perpetration of inequalities in the society of that time, namely their owning black slaves (Robinson 201).

Cable is remembered for his realism, and in this, he perfectly adhered to the literary strand of regionalist fiction, a genre that developed and became extremely popular in the second half of the nineteenth century. Among other things, this type of fiction was a particularly valued tool insofar as it allowed readers access to distant corners of America that they could have not reached otherwise, both because traveling

was not yet an established reality, and because, in the immediate postbellum times, a good portion of the country was still physically inaccessible (Brodhead 116). According to Brodhead's definition, this type of literature

> [...] requires a setting outside the world of modern development, a zone of backwardness where locally variant folkways still prevail. Its characters are ethnologically colorful, personifications of the different humanity produced in such non-modern cultural settings. Above all, this fiction features an extensive written simulation of regional vernacular, a conspicuous effort to catch the nuances of local speech. (115-116)

Cable does, indeed, convey the customs and the peculiarities of his territory, and offers an authentic cross-section of the society of his time. But because he couples a realism-based regional narrative with the higher purpose of illuminating the thorny issues of his time, he inaugurates what can be defined a "hybrid regionalism" (Francescato 17). In a sense, this author redefined regionalist literature because he overcame the conventions of the genre by dealing with the important matters of his past and present in the American South. Cable's stylistic ambiguity posits, indeed, the issue of the extreme fluidity of the boundaries between fiction and history (Castillo 19). As a matter of fact,

> His text exhibits some of the characteristics of historiographic discourse, as we can see in his use of archival material; he cites notarial records, passenger lists, writs of sequestration, first-person eyewitness accounts, letters, travel narratives (such as Harriet Martineau's *Retrospect of Western Travel*) and newspaper sources, specifically articles from the *New Orleans Bee* (which he also cites under its French name, *L'Abeille*), the *Advertiser*, and the *Courier*. At the same time, however, we can point out certain features in *Strange True Stories* which, would allow us to classify it as a literary or fictional text; namely Cable's strong and at times intrusive authorial presence, his use of direct speech and dialogue, his recourse to analepsis (flashback) and catalepsis (literally leaping forward into the future), and the profusion of adjectives and adverbs which characterize his prose. (Castillo 33)

Being a realist, Cable could not omit slavery from his literary mission, and one of the most outstanding examples of his dealing with the horrors, as well as the hypocrisy, of slavery can be found precisely in his short story "The "Haunted House" in Royal Street". Ironically, Cable had originally been a Confederate partisan, but after the Civil war his vision was transformed, so much so that he started to advocate in favor of racial equality. The fact that he gave birth to this story in the 1880s is the evidence of his sensibility towards the still unsolved racial matters of his times, and highlights the author's awareness in terms of the problematic heritage left by the peculiar institution in the postbellum decades. However, although he firmly believed in the reformist scope of his fiction, Cable was also very careful not to exceed in his social criticism, or at least not to the point of alienating potential readers: indeed, he always tried to adapt his subversive political message to the conventions predicted by regionalist fiction and, most importantly, to the tastes of the public (Francescato 15).

While he might not have always been completely objective, the result is an enjoyable short story in which the author's polemical undertone is nonetheless clearly distinguishable. To give birth to this tale, Cable retrieves a very well-known news story dating back to the 1830s which saw as a protagonist a cruel mistress who went down in history for her unspeakable violence against her black slaves. By picking this famous episode as the starting point for his writing, Cable has thus the opportunity to go through what were probably the most tormented decades of New Orleans history, from its golden age of the slavery chapter to the complexities of the Reconstruction period.

But besides his political agenda, another thing that clearly emerges from the beginning and that is worth pointing out is that this extraordinarily thrilling short story is also particularly interesting from a (dark) tourism point of view for two reasons: firstly, because the house in question has remained, to this day, one of the most famous

spots in New Orleans, attracting thousands of tourists in ghost-hunting itineraries. Secondly, because Cable here employs a narrator who seems to embody none other than an imaginary tour guide leading visitors in a haunted house.

From the very first lines, indeed, the text evidences the presence of a speaking voice who is addressing a hypothetical reader/potential tourist and suggesting that he/she, together with a companion, visits the Crescent City. The tale opens with the voice saying "When you and — make that much-talked-of visit to New Orleans [...]" (Cable 2023, 174), a visit that the I in charge of the story will be performing for his audience on an imaginative level: in fact, with a vast knowledge ascribable to that of an experienced tourist guide, he will lead the two visitors – and the readers – to observe the Haunted House in Royal Street from the outside, and then inside as well, and will eventually tell them its "strange true story" (Cable 2023, 174).

This narrative strategy is particularly interesting in light of my argument, because in doing so, Cable is explicitly dealing with his readers as if they were tourists physically present at the site in question. Therefore, I would say that the author seems perfectly aware of fiction's potential to offer audiences vicarious experiences of (in this case dark) tourism. In other words, by addressing them directly, Cable is establishing a certain level of confidence with the readers and he is providing them with the possibility to almost gain bodily access and participate in the visit to the haunted house.

The imaginative tour begins in front of the mansion. Besides hiding terrible secrets later revealed to the readers/tourists, the house in itself is noteworthy for my analysis because, within the very first pages, it is specifically defined as a place where very few have been allowed. As a matter of fact, the house remained mainly closed to the public throughout the years, and the owners who succeeded one another tended to guard its secrets jealously. The author also explains that, over time, hundreds of people

had requested to visit the house, probably in hope to get access to the 'behind the scenes' of the infamous legend and walk around in the same rooms that once saw violence and death. Unfortunately for them, visitors or photographers were always firmly rejected, and hardly anybody had the chance to breathe that somber atmosphere saturated with evil and pain. Therefore, the only possibility to take the tour Cable personally took, and which he will be imaginatively conducting for his audience, must have been when the house was uninhabited.

This is a clear and important indication that the Haunted House in Royal Street was ascribable to a restricted area, where unauthorized people could not (and still to this day cannot) enter; this might also explain, to some extent, why it has always been perceived as a particularly fascinating location, whose "silence spoke a *hostile impenetrability*." (2023, 176, emphasis mine). But thanks to the leading role of the narrator/guide, the audience will finally have the privilege to access that unknown territory and unearth all its mysteries.

After having established the house almost as a forbidden site, the narrator starts acting as any other guide leading tourists in New Orleans would do: indeed, he provides some historical context, and he presents a few names of prominent people who slept in the building before it was inhabited by the infamous Madame Lalaurie: he precisely does so, as he clarifies, to establish the authenticity and the veracity of the strange facts narrated. After this informative parenthesis, he finally begins describing the house in all its elegance.

Here, it must be noted, Cable is not actually portraying the image of the house as it was in Madame Lalaurie's days: as will be explained later, the mansion was destroyed by a fire, and was irremediably damaged. Therefore, what Cable had the chance to see – and to convert to his audience – was not the original version, but rather, the result of a

sophisticated renovation by later owners. Among the beautiful features, the author highlights marble floors, carved panels, lofty ceilings and other embellishments, which give the house not only elegance, but a somewhat positive aura, too.

However, the memory of Madame Lalaurie was still very much alive, despite the new look of the mansion. Cable, it is evident, was perfectly aware of the dark potential of the haunted building, and every description he provides is meant to attract the curiosity of the readers/vicarious tourists by scaring them with creepy details. Indeed, there is much more below the apparently refined surface. Curiously, this is already signaled by the iconic poetry line "said the spider to the fly" (Cable 2023, 178), which Cable includes as a reminder for his audience not to trust appearance or, more specifically, not to be fooled by the beauty of the restored interiors: in many respects, the true essence of the infamous Haunted House in Royal Street still lingers there.

To begin with, the original architectural structure seemed to have been maintained, and in fact, Cable talks about a multi-story building with a wing dedicated to the slave quarters, as it used to be in the older times. Moreover, the feeling that the ghosts are still trapped inside the house surfaces and gets progressively stronger as Cable hints at the strange behaviors observable in the pieces of furniture and in the structural elements of the house. "And already here is something uncanny" (Cable 2023, 178) constitutes the explicit intervention of the narrator/tourist guide who wants to draw the attention of the readers/visitors to the unexplainable and sinister characteristics of the place. For instance, the focus is immediately directed towards a tiny dark room, which would be "[...] hardly noteworthy; only neither you nor — can make out what it ever was for." (Cable 2023, 178). However, on a second reading of the tale, that is to say, after being made aware of the horrors that took place in the house, the audience

might hypothesize that such a mysterious opening might actually have been a torture cell where Lalaurie's slaves were confined.

The imaginary visit continues as the two tourists, guided by Cable's voice, witness more strange occurrences, such as a door opening by itself, or walls that seem to whisper words trapped among the bricks. The guide points out more eerie details, like an inner court that very few people could see: could it have been the repository of some horrifying secrets? Doubts around the real function of the spaces arise, and as the two imaginary visitors approach the above-mentioned slave quarters, the dark exceptionality of the house reveals itself more and more clearly. The tour guide thus explains:

> Wings of that sort were once very common in New Orleans in the residences of the rich; they were the house's slave quarters. But certainly some of the features you see here never were common – locks seven inches across; several windows without sashes, but with sturdy iron gratings and solid iron shutters. On the fourth floor the doorway communicating with the main house is entirely closed twice over, by *two pairs* of full-length batten shutters held in on the side of the main house by iron hooks eighteen inches long, two to each shutter. And yet it was through this doorway that the ghosts [...] got into this house. (Cable 2023, 180)

The visit to the haunted house becomes darker here: as is evident, everything in the slave quarters suggests that whoever inhabited the mansion really wanted to make sure that their slaves suffered greatly and could never run away. Here is also the first mention of the ghosts that allegedly (although some people claimed actually seeing them) lurk in the house: having been starved, tortured and hurt in any possible way, it was reasonable to believe that the restless souls of those poor slaves continued to haunt that hellish house.

The visit is almost coming to an end; the following passage represents, to a certain extent, the culmination of the sense of eeriness and darkness that pervades the haunted house and that has been evoked up to this moment. Cable once again speaks

from experience, for he once had the chance to be there first-hand, and leads the visitors up a cramped staircase to reach the belvedere. From that privileged vantage point, the narrator/guide begins illustrating the view and, probably more than any other part of the visit, he appears incredibly good at transporting the readers into the physical dimension of the visit, as if they were on the belvedere themselves. From that elevated point, the guide's gaze spans the entire city of New Orleans, with its ships docking in the harbor, its maze of streets, and its most famous buildings: at first sight, it is a majestic spectacle, and through his narration, he seems to lend his own eyes to the visitors/readers for them to immerse into the story and appreciate the beauty of The Big Easy. In this respect, as Robinson confirms, "Cable's own role as narrator and guide is crucial, as it renders the city as a work of art to be studied." (205).

The grandeur of New Orleans, though, is obscured by an approaching thunderstorm. Might this reveal that, despite its colorful and picturesque character and the sun peeping through the clouds, New Orleans actually hides a somber reality? The magic spell is soon broken, as some additional details unveil, indeed, a 'gothic' geography. For instance, Cable immediately mentions a strong wind that makes the belvedere shake under its powerful effect, thus impairing its stability. But not only this: most importantly, the panoramic view portrayed by the guide cannot fail to note the element of darkness permeating the city. The imminent storm is described as "the dark northern enemy" (Cable 2023, 184) threatening the ships and adding up to the cloak of black smoke enveloping the city. The bricks of the buildings around him are rotten. Farther away are the ever-present mossy swamp and the yellow Mississippi river, two natural elements which are highly recurring in Southern gothic fiction; the vicarious immersion into the space is so intense that readers can even smell the sweet odor of Lake Pontchartrain hit by the storm.

Besides Bayou Road, that is to say, the street through which Madame Lalaurie's carriage vanished during the riot, one last spot attracts the attention of the visitors; the guide thus explains:

> Before you descend from the belvedere turn and note how the roof drops away in eight different slopes; and think – from whichever one of these slopes it was – of the little fluttering, befrocked lump of terrified childhood that leaped from there and fell clean to the paved yard below. (Cable 2023, 186)

The most macabre detail is revealed, and the suspects around the little paved court mentioned above are confirmed: that secret spot, possibly even more hidden than any other part of the house, functioned as an accomplice to the cruelties of the mistress, and allowed her to act undisturbed and conceal the most terrible misdeeds from curious eyes. With this terrible newly acquired knowledge, I believe the visitors consciously become dark tourists, at last. At the beginning of the tour, indeed, they were simply coming across strange details which, for as suspicious they were, did not receive much attention or explanation from the guide. But in this instance, the guide is drawing their attention towards an actual crime scene, and they find themselves gazing at tragedy and death. Conscious of their macabre privilege, the two visitors now begin a new part of the visit, which has less to do with the visual experience of the mansion, and more with the listening to its dark history.

From this point onward, Cable dedicates his attention to the figure of the infamous Madame Lalaurie, mistress of the Haunted House in Royal Street, and to the narration of the most incredible strange true story of New Orleans. Madame Lalaurie was a Creole woman who, like many others from the same social class in the 1830s, owned a good number of slaves. The woman was not only famous for her wealth, for the splendor of her house, and for the socialite events she held, but also for the dark

rumors circulating about her property, more specifically about the wellbeing of her slaves. Indeed, the exceptionality of her story had to do exactly with the uncovering of the unusual degree of cruelty against them, so much so that the mansion soon became known as the Haunted House in Royal Street.

Cable then proceeds to reconstruct for the readers and the imaginary tourists what was probably the most famous and tragic event concerning the Lalaurie mansion. According to the story, one of her slaves, an eight-year-old child, had accidentally hurt her mistress while combing her hair; furious for the incident, Madame Lalaurie hurled herself at the girl, who tried to escape to no avail. Desperate, the child climbed up to the belvedere and, seeing no way out, she jumped off the building and died by violently landing on the hidden courtyard. This terrible event was disclosed by a neighbor who witnessed the dreadful scene from a nearby window and reported it to the authorities.

Cable tells us that the only legal action taken against Madame was the confiscation of her slaves, which seemed a pointless measure since she could easily buy them once again very shortly after (2023, 196). In this regard, Cable also explains that "Madame Lalaurie was not legally chargeable with the child's death" and that "No one saw more than what the law knows as assault; and the child was a slave." (2023, 198): through these very few words, it is evident that the writer is quite openly criticizing the system according to which the ugliest crimes perpetrated against slaves were simply ascribable as minor acts of violence. Because the young victim of the deadly rage of Madame Lalaurie was deemed as an inferior being with no rights whatsoever, she could have never found justice under the law. In this passage, Cable's anger and shock in finding out that Madame Lalaurie was simply punished with a fine are clearly visible; indeed, Castillo confirms that Cable was definitely disgusted by New Orleans

authorities and society and their despicable code of silence (30) when it came to slaves' mistreatments by Creoles masters.

But even before the terrible crime involving the child slave, Cable already pointed the finger at New Orleans authorities and their deliberate negligence when it came to addressing the rumors around Madame Lalaurie's alleged cruel behavior. Indeed, the writer reports the doubts of other residents, who used to gossip about slaves being chained and starved in the dark attic of her beautiful mansion (2023, 194). Although it is true that the Old South relied on slavery insofar as it was necessary, excessive cruelty was not – theoretically – permitted. In fact, Long explains that Section 16 of the Louisiana Black Code established that masters who inflicted extreme corporal punishments (among which whipping and chaining were not included) would be punished with a fine; according to Section 17, furthermore, a cruel master would be prosecuted in case of cruelty unless he could prove the contrary: ironically, though, black slaves could not testify against a white person (Long 202-203).

In light of this, one day a Creole law student finally visited the mistress to inquire about the situation and have her abide by the old Black Code, but he was so charmed by Madame Lalaurie that her kind words were apparently enough to disprove any speculation about her illicit conduct. After all, if some people were ready to accuse her, others were equally prone to defend her and deny any ill-will: how could one suspect of that gracious lady? Her black driver was so well-treated that his skin shone! And how shameful to speak badly of her, when everyone has seen her kindness in offering some wine to her servants!

In his short story, Cable does contemplate the possibility of Madame being insane – which, from a human point of view, would have been the 'best' hypothesis. However, he is quick to discard this option because if she really was mentally ill, why

would her folly not hurt her driver, too? (Cable 2023, 198-200). Cable purposefully highlights the ambiguous traits of Madame Lalaurie's personality: she acted kindly towards her slaves in front of others, but behind closed doors, she turned into the evil mistress, and all kinds of horrors occurred. Through the depiction of her contradictory behavior, Cable wants to illuminate the hypocrisy of the system of slavery, and namely, of the Creoles, as the members of society that relied on and benefited the most from this unjust system.

In truth, Madame Lalaurie is, for Cable, an extreme case: while his anti-slavery stance is clear and coherent throughout the story, the writer also implies that the evil mistress did not really represents the category of slave owners at large, from the point of view of her cruel actions: as he writes, "Madame Lalaurie, let it be plainly understood, was only another possibility, not a type." (Cable 2023, 192). Indeed, the horrors she committed against her slaves were, of course, allowed by the peculiar institution, but they represented the evil of a woman, not necessarily of the whole slavery system. In Johnson's words, "the effect is to suggest that the system allows for the kind of torture performed by LaLaurie and to suggest that this horror was, itself, severe enough to stand out as the evil of slavery." (137). Nonetheless, this story did have a significant impact, and it somehow inaugurated a literary genre featuring the violence and the horrors of slavery (Johnson 138).

Besides the incident which saw the little girl jumping from the roof, the rest of the horrors hidden inside Lalaurie Mansion were finally unearthed when the cook, who lived perpetually chained to the stowe, decided to set fire to the house during a socialite dinner: it was then that the guests looked for the slaves to rescue them, and found out the terrible conditions they were living in. They were chained, almost starved to death, with evident scars due to whippings, and one of them with a deep wound in her head.

They were so weak that two of them died immediately after being rescued. Others were already skeletons. All the others, Cable comments with a hint of sarcasm, “were tenderly carried – shall we say it –to prison; – to the calaboose.” (2023, 206) to testify against their mistress.

As I established at the beginning of this analysis, the Haunted House in Royal Street is still remembered for its terrible legend, and is known today as one of the main dark tourist sites in New Orleans. But this is not at all a recent phenomenon: as a matter of fact, one passage reveals that from the exact moment its unspeakable horrors were uncovered, the Lalaurie Mansion became in all respects a dark tourist attraction. Cable thus states: “Thither “at least two thousand people” flocked that day to see, if they might, these wretched sufferers.” (2023, 206). This sentence perfectly exemplifies, in my view, the type of dark attraction that places associated with death and violence exert on humans, and proves, once more, that the fascination for the macabre has a long history. It is interesting to note, indeed, that as the news spread, masses of people from all over the neighborhood came to the Lalaurie mansion precisely to see the dying slaves (or what remained of them) and try to satisfy their macabre curiosity. Evidently, this true crime case was particularly shocking even for a not-so-safe city like The Big Easy, and nobody would have wanted to miss that spectacle of exceptional cruelty.

The people who rushed there, though, were not only curious, but especially furious, and they gathered in an angry crowd surrounding Madame Lalaurie’s carriage; yet, the evil slave owner managed to flee as the mob burnt the house to the ground. The enraged reaction of New Orleanians upon this terrible revelation is certainly indicative of the exceptionality of Madame Lalaurie’s unspeakable crimes, considered much beyond the limit even for a city where black slaves’ subordination was commonplace, as I suggested earlier. Moreover, Johnson observes that, for Cable, the demographically

mixed crowd also contributes to conveying the uniqueness of Lalaurie's sadism; in fact, her actions were so cruel that they overthrew the city's social order, insofar as both slaves and slaveholders participated in the angry mob in the name of justice (142).

However, Castillo also points out that the furious mob was quickly severed so as to avoid a potentially revolutionary escalation: in fact, "the fear of a slave rebellion, the nightmare of every southern slave holder, quickly overcame any humanitarian scruples or feelings of guilty conscience which the spectacle of Mme. Lalaurie's cruelty may have awakened among the elites of New Orleans." (31). In other words, protecting the status quo was once again the priority for the city, which might have felt outraged in the beginning, but at the same time unwilling to risk the collapse of the whole slavery-based system: again, a hypocritical move that highlighted the inability to really move from a socially stagnant and unfair model.

In conclusion, nobody ever knew precisely where Madame Lalaurie escaped, but it is said that, eventually, she died in Paris. After recounting the horror story for his audience as if he was a tourist guide in front of Madame Lalaurie's Haunted House, Cable addresses the readers/tourists and once again transports them to the bayou where the legendary mistress sailed: every time they are there, he says, they will think of how she mysteriously disappeared (2023, 210).

The second part of the narration opens with a flashforward to the 1870s. The strange true story is now set in the Reconstruction era, when the Haunted House in Royal Street was, ironically, turned into a school where the newly emancipated black students could finally sit next to white pupils and conquer the right to an education. Cable enthusiastically witnessed with his own eyes "the experiment of a common enjoyment of public benefits by the daughters of two widely divergent races, without the enforcement of private social companionship." (2023, 224). Outside this apparently

happy reality, however, the city struggled with the newly imposed racial equality, and while one part of the population was committed to the pacific coexistence of the two races, others could not accept the overcoming of the old system made of masters and slaves.

What Cable puts attention to, in this historical fragment, is another incident that occurred in what used to be Madame Lalaurie's house and which, once again, had to do with race-related matters. The White League, in fact, raided the school to expel its colored students, and forced them to leave the building and face the enraged crowd waiting for them outside. Once again, Cable's criticism is perceivable in his reporting of the soldiers' exact words, which is evidently aimed at ridiculing their spurious motivations (Castillo 32). The White League embodied the white supremacism spirit which did not tolerate the establishment of a racially equal society: unfortunately, this was a deeply pervasive sentiment in the years following the abolition of slavery.

This was not the only racist raid in the school, and years later, in the 1880s, the experiment of biracial education definitively failed. In 1882, the Haunted House in Royal Street became a Music Conservatory. While journalists and historians claimed that ghosts abandoned its grounds and were simply replaced by a curse (Long 406), Cable concludes the short story by claiming that spirits never left the building, actually.

Cable is not only a tour guide for readers and potential tourists wishing to be told about the details of a famous tourist spot. In reporting this story, he also allows a symbolic journey in nineteenth-century Louisiana through its cultural and historical changes and its contradictions. The bottom line, it appears, is that Post-Reconstruction Louisiana was not so different from what it looked like in Madame Lalaurie's times, after all. That period should have theoretically revolutionized society in the name of a newly-found equality, but instead, racial discrimination found did not stop. The ghosts

in the Lalaurie Mansion are, indeed, the products of the cruel mistreatments by an evil mistress, but they were nonetheless allowed by the peculiar institution. The building, despite having been reconstructed and not representing its original version, is still widely known as a haunted locale, and it is intimately associated with Madame Lalaurie's unspeakable tortures took place. To this day, tourists visit the French Quarter in New Orleans for its exotic and mysterious allure, and the infamous haunted house remains one of the most requested stops in dark tourism itineraries.

3.3. "Jean Ah-Poquelin": the haunted plantation and the specters of a decaying society

George Washington Cable did not limit himself to exposing the decay and the haunted locales infesting New Orleans, but he also devoted himself to depicting the horrors of slavery in the remote Southern countryside. One of his earliest short stories is "Jean Ah-Poquelin", first published in 1875 and set in the first decade of the 1800s. This tale exemplifies the cultural stagnation of Louisiana and its implications on the territory; moreover, this tale shows how a putrescent and ghostly locale fueled the curiosity of a community and, to a certain extent, gave rise to what we could define a dark tourism 'attraction'. Not only this: Cable also managed to convey the deadly consequences of slavery coming back to haunt the white master in the form of an incurable illness.

The protagonist of the short story is Jean Marie Poquelin, the last descendant of a wealthy indigo plantation dynasty, now at risk of extinction: indeed, after gambling away all of his slaves, Jean Marie found himself old in age, without heirs, and deprived of his most valuable assets. In truth, Poquelin's decadence was not really an isolated case. In fact, the power of his social class at large, the Creole, was being challenged by

the arrival of the Americans in 1803; the new rulers put in place a deep process of modernization which determined the beginning of irreversible changes in the Louisianan social structure. The intrusion of historical facts into the narration must not come as a surprise; as usual, Cable subtly hints at more profound social and political dynamics and allows his thoughts to filter through the story: throughout the pages, his irony can be clearly perceived when he refers to the cultural inertia embodied by the Creole class, as opposed to the more innovative Yankee component, and Jean Marie Poquelin himself is the representative of this more and more powerless social group.

The adaptation of the Creoles to the way of life Americans required was not gladly accepted. Poquelin's character exaggerates, though perfectly represents, the Creoles' stubbornness and reluctance to adhere to any innovation by isolating themselves into what remains of the past. One of the main events of the story, for instance, has to do with the imminent reclamation works and subsequent building of a new road and villas in the wild lands belonging to Jean Marie Poquelin. However, this progressive measure will be strenuously hindered by the old man, who will even go so far as to protest against it in front of the local authorities. Instead of welcoming new, positive changes, and leaving behind the stagnation of the past, Poquelin "[fortifies] himself in an anachronistic, essentially horrible, and yet majestic stronghold, [and] ignores or defies the insistent encroachments of time and progress." (Stone E. 434).

But even more than his actual self, the element that most blatantly symbolizes his and the Creoles imminent decline is his property. Within the very first lines of the tale, the state of ruin of the old plantation house, which we could deem as one of the protagonists of this story, is immediately signaled and problematized. What once used to be a wealthy mansion, inhabited by a rich slave-owning family, is now a dilapidated building whose only resident, Jean Marie, has been isolating himself from civilization

and is destined to perish in solitude. In Edward Stone's words, Jean Marie Poquelin is the "proud and doomed but indomitable last representative of an important family of a bygone era of the South", in conflict with "the progress of an encroaching and usurping civilization." (437).

The house is with no doubt a sinister place, and it mirrors its owner and his dark secrets. Cable exalts the somber character of the massive but ruinous mansion by immediately pointing out its distance from the rest of society, and by noticing the extent to which it changed for the worse from its glory days. The writer does actually dedicate several lines to the description of this towering, though now decaying, building. At a visual level, its architecture is enough to make it appear scary; the plantation house is rotting, lifeless, and framed by two dead cypresses with vultures, just to mention a few details. Moreover, Cable insists on adjectives such as "dark" and "grim" to define the remains of that old colonial house, but such a description could very well apply to Louisiana on the whole. According to Robinson, in fact, "this also has striking parallels with many accounts of New Orleans and its environs overall, both in the settlement's earliest years and up to Cable's own time." (210).

It is interesting to note, in light of my analysis, that in 1875 the State was still quite an unknown territory to most readers (Petry 90), and the ugliness and the mysteriousness of the place conveyed by Cable is certainly one of the aspects which must have attracted and impressed the public the most. Here, these negative characteristics are not only reiterated several times throughout the story, but they actually occupy the most prominent section of the narration, that is to say, the opening (Petry 90).

The surrounding environment is another crucial element of the story, and is possibly even more awful than the building. The house sits on "one of the horridest

marshes within a circuit of fifty miles" (Cable 1879, 88), and is surrounded by "a dense growth of low water willows, with half a hundred sorts of thorny or fetid bushes" (Cable 1879, 89). Mud, putrid waters and wild plants grown uncontrollably contribute to the building of a totally undesirable location. In doing so, Cable seems to be willing to convey to his readers a picture of the region which is diametrically opposed to the idealized version of the bucolic, romantic South, which had been predominantly spread in the old days, but which was still somehow surviving even in the postbellum years. This unfavorable depiction is quite interesting, from a tourist point of view. Even more evident than in "The "Haunted House" in Royal Street", Cable employs "Jean Ah-Poquelin" to build a "fearscape" (Rejinders), that is to say, a negatively connotated, and even frightening, fictional space, in which the readers/vicarious tourists can immerse themselves to get a taste of a dark, ugly dimension, and symbolically stuck in the mud because resisting to any form of innovation.

In Cable's portrayal of rural Louisiana, the aquatic element is certainly dominant, and contributes to the delineation of the fearscape. To begin with, the Mississippi River is, indeed, a fundamental component of the story and of the Louisianan way of life, for it creates the swampy setting (Petry 91) already discussed. Yet, the watery character permeating this story is not only limited to the putrid canals and the untamed marsh surrounding Poquelin's rotting house, but it actually applies to the protagonist as well. As a matter of fact, Petry suggests that Poquelin's isolation in the wild morass makes him an island (91) impossible to be approached, as if it was bordered by a deep, deadly ditch with "big, ravening fish and alligators" (Cable 1879, 89). As it will become clear at the end, the old Poquelin consciously decided to live exiled from the rest of society for his house harbored a terrible, and potentially lethal, secret.

Because of this, the reader has the impression of being immersed into a gloomy, threatening, and even funereal atmosphere from the beginning. Indeed, Jean Marie is not really alone in his dilapidated mansion, and suspicions of it will become more solid throughout the narration. Although it was known that his parents had long been dead and therefore no longer in the house, the fate of his much younger half-brother had remained a mystery for many years. All the people from the city knew was that the two siblings had always been very fond of each other, but one day the young Jacques had suddenly disappeared. More specifically, the two had embarked on a vessel to Africa to capture black slaves, but when Jean Marie returned home two years later, there seemed to be no trace of young Jacques.

This event is extremely important for the development of the story, but also, I believe, in light of Cable's critical analysis of nineteenth-century Louisianans customs and practices. The fateful consequences of such a trip, indeed, immediately problematize the immorality of being involved in the slave trade: it appears that Cable purposefully gave shape to a character who contracted leprosy – as we will later find out – as a result of his colonizing voyage to Africa. The correlation between the peculiar institution and this incurable illness were quite evident even at that time. Indeed, the proliferation and the worsening of the disease, which was presumably non-existent before the arrival of Columbus, seemed to be directly related to the slave route (Bird 841). Not by chance, the city of New Orleans used to be one of the main protagonists of this despicable human trade, and was actually the first to inaugurate a leprosarium already in the early seventeenth century (Bird 841).

Besides this quite blatant critique to the system, the somber element of the illness is also functional to strengthen the overall sense of darkness evoked by the story. Indeed, we could say that leprosy adds one more, and possibly even worse, layer of

decay to the already compromised portrayal of plantation Louisiana shaped by Cable's merciless depiction of Poquelin's place and time. The disease remains concealed and confined inside the walls of the ruinous mansion for quite a long time, that is to say, it theoretically exists unbeknownst to the rest of the city; nonetheless, people constantly rumor about the young man's mysterious disappearance, and start to have doubts about Jean Marie's apparently good soul.

In light of all this, and interestingly for my analysis, Jean Marie Poquelin's old mansion becomes a full-fledged haunted house. Similarly to "The "Haunted House" in Royal Street", Cable manages to highlight the problematic legacy of slavery by converging his reflection into a building infested by the specters of an old sin; this time, the link with the peculiar institution is even more evident for Cable sets the story, emblematically, on a rural plantation. Although this short story does not feature the ghosts of slaves violently killed on the plantation, the association with the peculiar institution is also, as already hinted and quite ironically, evidenced by the fatal disease contracted during a colonizing trip to Guinea. For this reason, the mansion is, indeed, haunted, – an expression which Cable himself employs, actually – even though the truth about Jacques's desperate state will only be revealed at the end of the story.

To be fair, an – alleged – ghostlike figure is, indeed, present in the story, and that is precisely Jacques Poquelin, or what remains of him. Cable plays a lot with the idea of leaving the reader, as well as the other characters of the story, unsure about the actual state of the younger brother. Is he dead, or is he alive, trapped in the house detained by the evil Jean Marie? One night, an unfortunate passerby, who happened to find himself in front of Poquelin's house at dark, noticed to his horror that the old man was not alone: "I see Jean–Marie–Po-que-lin walkin' right in front, and right there beside of him was something like a man–but not a man–white like paint!–I dropp' on the grass from

scared–they pass'; so sure as I live 'twas the ghos' of Jacques Poquelin, his brother!" (Cable 1879, 100-101).

Although with no complete certainty, the old plantation house was deemed to be cursed, and therefore, hardly anybody dared to get close to the property. However, despite the threatening character of the mansion, and subsequently, of its owner, the rotting plantation house was still an object of curiosity among the most daring ones.

> The man and his house were alike shunned. The snipe and duck hunters forsook the marsh, and the wood-cutters abandoned the canal. Sometimes the hardier boys who ventured out there snake-shooting heard a slow thumping of oar-locks on the canal. They would look at each other for a moment half in consternation, half in glee, then rush from their sport in wanton haste to assail with their gibes the unoffending, withered old man who, in rusty attire, sat in the stern of a skiff, rowed homeward by his white-headed African mute.
> "O Jean-ah Poquelin! O Jean-ah! Jean-ah Poquelin!" (Cable 1879, 92-93)

In my view, this passage offers the first hint of a dark tourism experience for the characters of the story. The adventurous boys here mentioned, in fact, often take part in spine-chilling journeys to spy on Poquelin's house, a site which is definitely sinister and highly connotated with tragedy (or rather, the suspect thereof) and darkness, and they seem to enjoy the experience. In fact, these unsolicited and disrespectful visitors venture into the horrid marsh with the aim of challenging the danger of being in a supposedly haunted location, and also in order to mock and defy the dreaded Jean Marie. Although it is not really accurate to talk about tourism here, for the type of experience narrated is more precisely a visit, these boys' macabre curiosity towards what everybody deemed as a dangerous place, as well as the entertainment they gain from the hazardous mockery, constitute two essential components of the commonly intended dark tourism experience. In other words, the fear and the excitement of trespassing into a forbidden and macabre place conjugate with a significant dose of adrenaline.

A similar experience can be found in another part of the text, when some other boys reported awfully frightening occurrences at nightfall, thus confirming the numerous superstitions and horror stories about the old plantation house that had grown among the city's inhabitants:

> The story of some lads, whose words in ordinary statements were worthless, was generally credited, that the night they camped in the woods, rather than pass the place after dark, they saw, about sunset, every window blood-red, and on each of the four chimneys an owl sitting, which turned his head three times round, and moaned and laughed with a human voice. There was a bottomless well, everybody professed to know, beneath the sill of the big front door under the rotten veranda; whoever set his foot upon that threshold disappeared forever in the depth below. (Cable 1879, 93)

The fearless curiosity shown by people in regard to Jean Marie Poquelin and his scary, decaying mansion grows together with deep sentiments of hatred towards him. Over the time, he stood still against the inexorable reclamation works on his putrid and marshy lands; all around him, modernization was taking control over the stagnation which had permeated the territory up to that point; very soon, the marsh was drained and the controversial road was opened, an event that also determined the construction of new houses and the arrival of new neighbors next to the old hermit. All of the people around him continued to regard him as evil, and believe that he had been keeping his brother captive in the haunted house, so much so that they deemed the old Poquelin responsible for any tragedy affecting the population. Cable's irony is particularly detectable here: interestingly, "most of these assertions come not from the Americans in the community [...] but from the Creole community which would be expected to stand behind Poquelin, especially in a time of culture clash." (Petry 94).

The story takes a turn when Little White, the Secretary of a building company which aimed at persuading Poquelin to sell his property, was instructed to go to the old

house to spy on the owner. Surprisingly, after seeing with his own eyes the allegedly haunted house and its mysterious owner, Little White will become the only lenient and less prejudiced person towards the old Jean Marie. But besides this glimpse of hope and mercy, the passage in question is also noteworthy for its horror, because it describes in detail the Secretary's frightening minutes on the haunted grounds. It must be noted that once again, like with other mocking visitors or unfortunate passersby, the coming in contact with the house happens at night, when darkness makes everything even more terrifying.

What appeared before Little White's eyes was beyond any of his worst expectations, and through his writing, Cable powerfully conveys the sense of unmeasurable dread the Secretary felt once he entered the premises. The writer dedicates quite some space to recounting this horror scene, which probably constitutes the darkest passage of the whole story: Cable creates tension, and is able to transport the readers into that haunted dimension within the very first lines. Like for the character, all of the readers' senses are on alert, as though they were vicariously living the same horrifying experience. By describing the scene with such emotional and sensorial accuracy, and by maintaining a loathsome environment always as a backdrop, Cable effectively pieces together all of the darkest components of a fearscape.

After being hit by a fetid smell, Little White finally sees the object of the city's numerous speculations, that is to say, the infamous ghost; but is it really a ghost? Cable purposefully creates confusion around this issue to maintain the mystery of the story (Petry 95), clarified only at the end: again, the writer plays with Jacques's supposed ghostliness, and makes both the frightened spectator, and the readers, wonder whether the shape is the product of hallucinations, or whether it is a living, though moribound, person. The two possibilities are both valid for the readers, who are guided through the

Secretary's incredulity: on the one hand, the figure is so diaphanous and feeble that Little White evaluates the possibility that he is actually looking at a ghost, but on the other hand, he is sure that it cannot but be a real person. He can hear its steps, as well as a voice, though "so unnatural was it – so hollow, so discordant, so unearthly [...]" (Cable 1879, 109) conversing with Jean Marie. The pungent smell might very well be a symptom of death, though as Petry explains (95), the stench is the clear indication for Little White that he is in front of a leper, that is to say, a literal walking dead. While the mystery remains for the reader, Little White, profoundly disturbed by that spine-chilling experience, flees the scene in terror; nevertheless, having intuited Jean Ah-Poquelin's heavy burden, he starts to protect his name against everybody else.

The rest of the population, on the contrary, appeared ever more adamant to punish the old man, who so strenuously refused to demolish the ruinous ghost house to build a new one; one night, therefore, they organized a massive shivaree. Similarly to "The "Haunted House" in Royal Street", here, too, we have an angry mob determined to re-establish justice on their own terms, in a sense; Little White functions as peacemaker and tries to dissuade the crowd from assaulting Poquelin, but quite in vain. The angry mobbers still march, clamoring and banging, through the morass, towards the "house of ghosts" (Cable 1879, 119) they so desperately want to be demolished.

And it is in front of the old mansion that those who dared get close to it have a terrifying revelation: they all find themselves witnessing the funeral of Jean Ah-Poquelin, lying in a casket transported by the African mute who had loyally served him until the end of his days. But the black servant is not alone: next to him, to the horror of the spectators, stands the infamous ghostly figure, "the living remains–all that was left–of little Jacques Poquelin, the long-hidden brother–a leper, as white as snow." (Cable 1879, 122). The mystery is thus solved, and the reader finally learns the truth.

The story closes with the incredulous and terrified crowd gazing at the two brothers, one with the appearance of a living corpse and the other in a casket, disappearing into the marsh, towards the Terre aux Lepreux. At the end, the reader realizes that the general hostility towards this old man was extremely unjustified. Jean Marie sacrificed himself for fraternal love, and he comes out a hero for having secretly taken care of his younger brother to spare him a loveless existence in a leper colony, which would have been a much worse experience than the haunted house. Moreover, at a civic level Poquelin should have been praised for his self-imposed isolation: indeed, while the rest of the population disregarded him for his hermit-like life, he was actually limiting any social contact in order to preserve the whole community from contracting the same fatal disease his brother – and, probably, himself, too – had contracted.

On the contrary, the other inhabitants were blinded by their prejudice, and what they chose to see was a strange man and a mysterious haunted house which could satisfy their macabre curiosity and which could be intruded and disrespected. In truth, Poquelin's only fault was that he had chosen to remain obstinately anchored to the last vestige of a past where he had been guarding his only remaining affection until his own death.

In conclusion, both Jean Marie and Jacques end up being the "mere ghosts of their former selves" (Petry 96), with their identities being effaced by leprosy and, if put on a larger perspective, by the Creoles' decline in the name of Americanization. In my view, Cable might read Poquelin's death as the end of an era, because although he inevitably suggests empathy towards this humane but tragically misunderstood character, he also ridicules his stubbornness and the Creole cultural intransigence and obsolescence that he embodies throughout the narration.

Poquelin's death, indeed, is most definitely a moving moment for it reveals the extent of his self-sacrifice, and Cable admires him for his act of courage. At the same time, though, Cable is always very clear in establishing that Poquelin's fortune, and that of the Creole class at large, was essentially built on the immorality of slavery (Petry 97). Last but not least, Jacques's death from leprosy is unmistakably a direct consequence of the whites' involvement in the slave trade, and Jean Marie had probably lived a miserable existence racked with guilt ever since. The haunted plantation is, therefore, the glaring symptom of an irremediably declining society with all of its faults and specters.

3.4. "No Haid Pawn": when curiosity intrudes into the haunted plantation

As already demonstrated, the haunted plantation house was a quite frequently employed literary formula in Post-Reconstruction fiction, and examples abound. One story which retrieves this fictional space and which can be analyzed in parallel with "Jean Ah-Poquelin" is Thomas Nelson Page's "No Haid Pawn" (published in the collection *In Ole Virginia* in 1887). Similarly to Cable, Page, too, presents the haunted plantation house as a space dense with tragic slave history; moreover, his story features the same curiosity and invasion into the infested locale, though possibly with an even greater intensity. In addition to that, the two tales also share a curse inflicted upon the white slave master.

The plot in "No Haid Pawn" is slightly less articulated than "Jean Ah-Poquelin", where Cable had wisely dosed the darkness and death element, the components of fraternal love and selfishness, and a societal critique. Page, instead, gives shape to an even more explicit terror tale pervaded by fear and horrifying details throughout the

entire text. However, Page, too, lets his opinions transpire through the text, although less evidently than Cable, in my view.

Before approaching the text itself, it might be worth delineating Page's artistic and social stance. Much has been said about Cable's political commitment and his critical interpretation of Louisiana's past and present, which he conveyed in his works. Thomas Nelson Page, instead, was part of a completely different category of writers who did not have at heart social change in postbellum times: rather, they embodied a nostalgic attitude towards the aristocratic Old South, its institutions, and its idealized way of living.

Born in Virginia in 1853, Page was the descendant of a wealthy and conservative slave-owning family; interestingly enough, Cable, who was born in 1844, could boast the same type of origins, for he, too, grew up on a plantation and experienced first-hand the social order dictated by the peculiar institution (Turner 512); furthermore, Cable had served in the Confederate Army during the Civil war. But while the New Orleanian author drastically changed his positions in the aftermath of the conflict, Page remained anchored to a vision of the past which the Reconstruction measures strongly challenged, and he became part of a generation that spread the Lost Cause myth through a nostalgic type of fiction. In regard to this, it is also true that Page and his family were deprived of their former privileges and found themselves impoverished as slavery was abolished (Mackethan 316).

For these reasons, the Virginian writer is mostly known for his idealized vision of the Old South, which he had personally known as quiet and peaceful: in Mackethan's view, most of Page's fiction reveals his vision of the plantation and of the Old South as the "definitive version of the dream of Arcady." (314), that is to say, as an ideal rustic paradise coherent with the bucolic experience of his life before the Civil war. The

contrast between life before and after the conflict is indeed a recurrent theme in Page's fiction, and of his distinctive traits.

This is why "No Haid Pawn" might be viewed as an exception in his literary production: as a matter of fact, this story detaches itself from the rest of his tales, where the Southern plantation is glorified. Here, instead, this idealized locale takes an unexpected, dark turn, incoherently with the rest of the stories in the collection, and contrary to his readers' expectations. In terms of its reception, "No Haid Pawn" was not particularly praised by literary critics, and it was often disregarded for being just another Poe-sque ghost story in the American literary landscape (Cuenca 134) of no particular value or interest. Instead, it might be worth looking at this tale in light of its impact on late-nineteenth century readership to the discovery of the complexities of the Deep South and its sinister attractiveness.

Once again, prominence is given to the house, or rather, the haunted plantation house. Very similar to "Jean Ah-Poquelin", the setting chosen by the author is a pre-Civil war Southern mansion, this time in 1850s Virginia, abandoned by its former slave-holding owners and now in total state of neglect. The plantation appears as "a ghostly place in broad daylight" (Page 197) and the common traits with Cable's tale are evident in the way the house and its premises are characterized.

One relevant and immediate analogy has certainly to do with the two buildings' aloofness from civilization: if Petry had defined Poquelin – and, by extension, his house – as an island completely isolated from the rest of the population (91), Page employs a similar expression always tied to a water imagery; indeed, he writes: "The place was as much cut off from the rest of the country as if a sea had divided it." (Page 198). The sea Page talks about might not only be metaphorical, but also a factual element. In fact, the plantation in "No Haid Pawn" is not only surrounded by a thick forest, but also located

in the heart of a treacherous swamp, on the marshy banks of a river. In general, the evident degradation of the house would already constitute enough reason to be intimidated by it, but Page, like Cable, though unlike his usual, decides to build additional tension in the reader by stressing the terrifying environment, no less scary than the building itself.

Another element which immediately comes to the attention of the reader are the numerous superstitions and thrilling legends circulating around the place, especially fabricated by the black mammies and uncles of that area and handed down to white children so as to warn them about "evil sperits" (Page 198). Since it is totally abandoned and with no human presence whatsoever inside, this plantation is possibly even more dreaded than Poquelin's. As a consequence, Page insists even more on the fact that nobody ever dared to pass in the vicinity of the haunted house. To give an idea of the extent to which the population was scared, suffice it to think that

> Even the runaway slaves[2] who occasionally left their homes and took to the swamps and woods, impelled by the cruelty of their overseers, or by a desire for a vain counterfeit of freedom, never tried this swamp, but preferred to be caught and returned home to invading its awful shades. (Page 199)

One aspect which is definitely worth being investigated is the reason why No Haid Pawn – this is the name of the property – is haunted, and where Page's unusual narrative choice comes from. For this writer, experimenting with a plantation that is the antithesis of the ideal, natural world he normally praised has to do with a critique towards the Creole class. If, for Cable, Creoles embodied cultural stagnation and rejection of modernity, Page viewed the members of this caste as the disruptors of the

[2] The tale intersects with the Fugitive Slave Act and the issue of runaway slaves through the Underground Railway, also a significant threat to the plantation system.

perfect equilibrium of the Arcady and, as a consequence, responsible for its ruin. Mackethan proposes an interesting interpretation in this respect:

> Page wants to show here what happens to the plantation ideal when unworthy beings attempt to imitate its concepts. No Haid Pawn was built by strangers to the area [...]. Because they are not Anglo-Saxons reared in the Virginia manner, the owners of No Haid Pawn build a mansion totally out of keeping with what was expected from the true plantation house. An unhealthy atmosphere surrounds the place from the very beginning, and eventually [...], Page allows nature to reclaim what the evil Creoles forfeited by their lack of morality and their disdain for the customs of the community. (319-320)

To cite Page himself, the owners of the property were "aliens" (198) who never entertained friendly neighborly relations with anybody, for they did not reside there on a regular basis. Furthermore, the writer notes with disdain, the owner seemed to have purposefully chosen an extremely swampy and isolated location, contrary to what any "native and to the manner born" (Page 202) would typically do. As a consequence of this breach of plantation customs, the house could not but be doomed from the very beginning: blacks in the areas said, indeed, that slaves had tragically died already during the construction process and the reclamation works, and that the dungeons of the mansion hid horror chambers. As if that was not enough, typhus malaria also decimated the slave population of No Haid Pawn, and even caused some of the ill slaves to be buried alive.

In truth, the owner of the isolated plantation was not simply a foreigner who "either from caprice or ignorance, spoke only a patois not unlike the Creole French of the Louisiana parishes." (Page 205), but he was also rumored to be an actual monster who would drink human blood and who was terribly dreaded by his slaves. His brutality culminated when he decapitated one of the slaves and hung his head from a window, a terrible crime for which he was punished and decapitated himself; he was subsequently

buried on the plantation grounds: hence why nobody but ghosts remained in the haunted house. In this regard, Mackethan suggests that such a turning of the events also confirms Page's tendency to establish a strict correlation between the plantations of his fictional works and their owners (320); in other words, if the charming and mythicized plantations he typically wrote about were inhabited by respectable and benevolent Virginian gentlemen, a Creole master unobserving of the plantation customs and cruel to his slaves could not but live in a dilapidated, infested property. In the end, in fact, the ancestral curse of No Haid Pawn will materialize itself with the house being devoured by flames and later submerged by the waters of the marsh.

At this point of the narration, Page introduces what is probably the most terrifying and disturbing event of the whole story, that is to say, the intrusion into the haunted plantation. Until then, the I in charge of the narration explained how white children in the area like himself were too scared to come close to the haunted plantation. However, once he grew up into a young adult, the narrator admits he had also become more courageous and slightly less suspicious of ghosts: that is how his misadventure began, one day, while duck hunting.

> Often, as I watched with envious eyes the wild duck rise up over the dense trees that surrounded the place and cut straight for the deserted marshes in the horseshoe, I had had a longing to invade the mysterious domain, and crawl to the edge of No Haid Pawn and get a shot at the fowl that floated on its black surface; but something had always deterred me, and the long reaches of No Haid Pawn were left to the wild-fowl and the ghostly rowers. Finally, however, after a spell whose high temperature was rather suited to August than April, in desperation at my ill-luck I determined to *gratify my curiosity* and try No Haid Pawn. So one afternoon, without telling any one of my intention, I crossed the mysterious boundary and struck through the swamp for the unknown land. (Page 212, emphasis mine)

Starting from here, “No Haid Pawn”, too, presents an interesting example of what we could deem as a dark tourism experience. More specifically, although this haunted house is not a purposefully-constructed dark tourism site as commonly intended today (e.g. Myrtles Plantation), that is to say, with the aim of promising unforgettable, chilling experiences to its visitors, it can still be interpreted as such. On the contrary, the same cannot be said about the protagonist of the tale, who does not casually stumble upon the haunted house at all: as a matter of fact, his agency and purposefulness are never questioned.

The passage above, I believe, perfectly exemplifies the common mechanism at play when it comes to approaching places associated with mystery, violence and death: as is typical in some dark tourism experiences, visitors often feel the urge to test their own courage, and defy any warning sign – more or less figuratively – to prove they are more powerful than the perils of the dark site in question. Even more visibly than in “Jean Ah-Poquelin”, where Little White’s permanence into the dark plantation grounds is seemingly solved in a fairly limited time frame and with the acquisition of an important truth, “No Haid Pawn” blatantly shows the terrible repercussions of (willingly) trespassing into the dangerous space of the haunted house. As a matter of fact, what causes the misfortune of the swaggering visitor is his own fascination towards the mysterious and, most of all, his bold curiosity. His impudence, in the end, will backfire on him.

Let us notice once more how the young man in charge of the narration willingly – and thus paradoxically – chooses to venture and see what nobody else ever had the courage to come close to. The first indication that he is invading a territory that is supposed to stay hidden from prying eyes is the fact that there has remained only one path into the misty jungle surrounding No Haid Pawn, and that penetrating into such

wild and swampy forest actually requires physical strength. Throughout the recounting of the experience, the narrator does occasionally admit he was tempted to turn back, but his boldness prevailed and, in his words, “shame impelled me forward.” (Page 213). In the initial phase of his adventure, the reader has more and more the sensation that the character is unashamedly making himself brave in the eyes of the audience; indeed, he recounts that neither the realization that soon night would fall, nor the impending rain could make him desists from his aim: “[...] I was so much engrossed in the endeavor to get on that even then I took little note of it.” (Page 214). However, when darkness and the storm reach him, he ironically finds refuge in what he deems as the most dreaded, though sole, alternative: inside the house.

As he crosses the threshold, the character takes the decisive step into the otherworldly dimension of the haunted plantation. From then on, the narration takes the form of the typical ghost story, with the recognizable and recurring patterns of this genre. To begin with, the interior of the infamous haunted house he had always been instructed to stay away from presents the common features found in any other terror tale. Before his eyes appear a long hall with closed doors, black, moldy walls, broken windows and impervious stairs leading to the upper floor and to the dark basement. Not only this: the narrator hears suspicious noises like mysterious slammings, the incessant rain, and even some unexplainable footsteps. In this respect, the unfortunate intruder experiences nothing but the usual *behavior* of a haunted house, and with this term I suggest that the infested building can, indeed, be regarded as anthropomorphized. As a matter of fact,

> Haunted houses are active participants in the development of the narrative plot, especially in popular fiction, and exhibit malevolent intentions toward the humans who dare to enter them. Staircases twist and turn and trip human visitors, doors mysteriously appear and disappear or lock and unlock. The house

> and the ghosts that haunt it are partners in the supernatural assault upon humans who invade their domain. (Grider 144)

While he thought he was only going to seek shelter for a short time, the storm showed no sign of ceasing, and thus the daring young man found himself trapped in a room for the whole night. In spite of having now become seriously worried for his fate, he falls asleep. But shortly after, he says: "I was awakened by a very peculiar sound; it was like a distant call or halloo. Although I had been fast asleep a moment before, it startled me into a state of the highest attention." (Page 220-221). And it is from the window that he has a horrifying vision which confirms the old legend black slaves had always told him about: the ghosts of the dead rowed in the misty swamp in their coffins! Here, the terror pervading the story reaches a climax. In the room where he thought he would be somehow safe, he is, at last, reached by the figure which inhabited his and the other children's nightmares: the ghost of the evil Creole slave owner.

> [...] I was sensible when a door on the ground-floor was struck with a heavy thud. It was pitch-dark, but I heard the door pushed wide open, and as a string of fierce oaths, part English and part Creole French, floated up the dark stairway, muffled as if sworn through clinched teeth, I held my breath. I recalled the unknown tongue the ghostly murderer employed; and I knew that the murderer of No Haid Pawn had left his grave, and that his ghost was coming up that stair. I heard his step as it fell on the first stair heavily yet almost noiselessly. It was an unearthly sound—dull, like the tread of a bared foot, accompanied by the scraping sound of a body dragging. Step by step he came up the black stairway in the pitch darkness as steadily as if it were daytime, and he knew every step, accompanied by that sickening sound of dragging. There was a final pull up the last step, and a dull, heavy thud, as, with a strange, wild laugh, he flung his burden on the floor.
>
> For a moment there was not a sound, and then the awful silence and blackness were broken by a crash of thunder that seemed to tear the foundations asunder like a mighty earthquake, and the whole house, and the great swamp outside, were filled with a glare of vivid, blinding light. Directly in front of me, clutching in his upraised hand a long, keen, glittering knife, on whose blade a ball of fire seemed to play, stood a gigantic figure in the very flame of the lightning, and stretched at his feet lay, ghastly and bloody, a black and headless trunk.

I staggered to the door and, tripping, fell prostrate over the sill. (Page 222-224)

The human is finally found by the evil spirit of the infamous Creole master, who leaves his grave and threateningly approaches the room of the terrorized intruder by dragging the headless corpse of his victim up the staircase. When a flash of lightning casts some light on the dark room, the ghost appears in all of his monstrosity and gigantic body proportions.

The encounter with the evil spirit appeared from the start as the obvious conclusion of this horror tale. Indeed, as Grider explains, "readers know that any human foolish enough to enter one of these haunted houses will be the victim of supernatural or demented, evil-possessed villains." (156). The most emblematic feature of the horror story unmistakably materializes in Page's work, too, and confronts the readers with the harsh truth that the invasion of a haunted space cannot but result in a dangerous, and possibly deadly, situation. Even though, in the end, he was not killed, the bold young man did certainly end up being forever terrorized by the evil ghosts of the plantation as a result of his curiosity and, subsequently, transgression.

In conclusion, although Page presents a haunted plantation, this literary choice is different from that employed by Cable insofar as this is not aimed at discrediting the institution and the customs of slavery. Rather, the space of the plantation remains a locus amoenus in the heart of the Virginian writer, and remembered as a perfect and incorruptible utopia repository of old, traditional values of an aristocratic civilization. However, Page's Arcady is, indeed, threatened by evil spirits, an attack which symbolizes the struggling of the slave plantation against societal changes, and which probably signals their worthlessness (Mackethan 322) in Post-reconstruction times. In this respect, it might be possible to establish a connection between the malignant forces

of the spirits and abolitionists, whom Page himself mentions along the pages of his tale, and whom he sees as an actual threat to the system he was so fond of:

> No idea can be given at this date of the excitement occasioned in a quiet neighborhood in old times by the discovery of the mere presence of such characters as Abolitionists. It was as if the foundations of the whole social fabric were undermined. It was the sudden darkening of a shadow that always hung in the horizon. The slaves were in a large majority, and had they risen, though the final issue could not be doubted, the lives of every white on the plantations must have paid the forfeit. Whatever the right and wrong of slavery might have been, its existence demanded that no outside interference with it should be tolerated. So much was certain; self-preservation required this. (Page 210-211)

While most of Page's fiction reveals his blindness towards the sins of the past (Macketan 331), combined with a strenuous defense of the peculiar institution as a necessary component for the very existence of the antebellum South, in "No Haid Pawn" the author does offer a more disenchanted vision of his idealized society. As a matter of fact, Cuenca (134) argues that this is much more than a mere ghost story, for it discloses the cruelty inflicted upon slaves in the days of the peculiar institution. Page here appears conscious of the contradictions of slavery, and he seems to imply – very similarly to what Cable already demonstrated with the figure of Madame Lalaurie – that the system does allow the existence of evil masters who can act undisturbed and often punished thanks to social isolation and silence. Nonetheless, this is clearly not enough for him to condemn the institution on the whole, and overall, he has remained in the collective memory a Southern author nostalgic towards the romantic world of the antebellum plantation.

Despite everything, it might also be worth considering how Page's fiction could have transformed itself had it not been for the need to conform to certain literary conventions. Interestingly, Cuenca suggests that were it not for his decision to adapt to

the mainstream taste of his Northerner readership, Page could have possibly further developed the macabre details of the gothic motif he inaugurated in this frightful short story. However, either because he thought it was wiser to listen to his editors, or because he, too, genuinely preferred to convey a sugarcoated version of the South, he did not dare to delve deeper into horror fiction, besides "No Haid Pawn" (Cuenca 139).

Yet, while this hypothesis is intriguing, it does not appear entirely plausible for an author who devoted most of his literary work to the defense of an idealized world with no room whatsoever for horror, but only for peacefulness. Therefore, conceiving a narrative world so distant from his ideals would have been most likely impossible for Page.

3.5. "Po' Sandy": a supernatural and folkloric journey into the haunted plantation

The last Post-Reconstruction author I am going to delve into is Charles W. Chesnutt. In particular, I am going to analyze how he represents the haunted plantation in his short story "Po' Sandy", collected in *The Conjure Woman* (first published in 1899).

To have a better understanding of the peculiarities of his writing with respect to Cable and Page, it is necessary to consider his racial and social background, first of all. Indeed, differently from the two other writers seen so far, Chesnutt had African-American origins: his coming from a very specific socio-cultural context deeply impacted his vision of American history and, subsequently, his fiction. Although he could pass as white, he always identified himself as a person of color, and valued his lineage dearly. Born in 1858, Chesnutt experienced firsthand the abolition of slavery, but also the broken promise of a better future for the newly-freed race, and of all the

contradictions and obstacles of the Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction period in the South.

Chesnutt never surrendered to his fate as a second-class citizen, and from a young age he was determined to redeem himself and honor his people. He was lucky enough to have access to a higher education, and after completing his school years, he began his career as an educator in some schools in rural districts in North Carolina, in the hope of saving black people in socially disadvantaged conditions. While strongly believing in the power of education as a tool for black pupils to achieve a complete status of freedom, Chesnutt was also frustrated with the insufficient financial funds and attention these Southern black schools received from the nation, thereby undermining the success of their students in a life already impaired by racial prejudice, illiteracy and poverty. Despite all the difficulties, Chesnutt put his talent to good use, and he eventually established himself as a respected author.

3.5.1. Chesnutt's work between innovation and regionalist conventions

Needless to say, the peculiarity of Chesnutt's literary contribution has everything to do with his belonging to the black society of the late-nineteenth century: to begin with, his way into authorship revolutionized, in a certain way, the conventions of regionalist fiction, which had mostly been produced with a white, bourgeois audience in mind, and often with a black population as its object. Indeed, Brodhead observed that with this author

> [...] this form's frequent subject matter reverses its position and becomes not the distant object of someone else's literary attention but a property of the author himself. With Chesnutt, local color writing becomes the product of the so-called "colored"; and in this development the regionalist form again displays its peculiar function as a site of literary opportunity, a door through which groups

> traditionally barred from the literary realm have won access to that realm. (177-178)

Not only this: Chesnutt also overturned the genre for his dealing with his subject in a less superficial way than most of his contemporaries devoted to the same type of literary production. As already evidenced, the 1880s experienced a huge rise in terms of short stories of local color; these tales generally aimed at providing the public with picturesque depictions of culturally isolated or chronologically remote groups of society, and typically illuminated all of their peculiar traits such as dialects, manners, habits, etc. Often, this also helped the readers of the time imagine the racial differences of their immense country (Brodhead 177), in a period when very few could afford to travel. Chesnutt's contribution is crucial in this sense, because not only did he make large use of the black vernacular in "Po' Sandy" and in *The Conjure Woman* at large, but most importantly, he also managed to transform this dialect from a pejorative trait typically implying the cultural inferiority of African Americans into a valuable and marketable element of heritage (Brodhead 117) worthy of its own voice.

Another important aspect, as Andrews clarifies, is that readers of local color fiction expected realistic depictions of the unfamiliar that nonetheless emphasized only the positive aspects and the simplicity of that way of life (80-81). Chesnutt, instead, reverses this canon, and eludes the limit of conventional realism to show even the most tragic features of American society and history. The point is that Chesnutt, as a black author, did not refrain from expressing the harsh truth of slavery as other authors did, but he did so in a very specific, and almost delicate, way; in fact, behind the magic elements pervading his stories, such as black superstition and voodoo magic, he managed to conceal but at the same time convey all the suffering and the ugliness of the system.

In other words, as Farnsworth notes, he employed this strategy because he was well aware that he needed to be cautious in delivering such an important message to an audience possibly hostile and unwilling to see the problem: that is precisely why he "wrote stories deliberately contrived to condition or enlighten a white audience without forcing a direct emotional confrontation." (Farnsworth vii-viii).

With these premises, it is easy to understand why Chesnutt dealt with the concept of the haunted plantation in a different way from Cable and, especially, from Page. As a matter of fact, the black intellectual certainly did not aspire to glorify the customs of the Southern plantation: rather, he aimed at debunking the space which oppressed his ancestors for centuries, while still providing his readers with a folkloric journey into the antebellum South.

Although innovative in the depiction of the plantation, *The Conjure Woman* also presents itself with a quite conventional structure and with two very distinguishable – and diametrically opposed – masculine archetypes (Brodhead). John is "the thousandth incarnation of the well-spoken frame narrator who comes to a region from afar" (Brodhead 197) and he is in all respects the representative of the white, well-educated Northern society of mid and late-nineteenth century America; the fact that he followed the doctor's advice and moved to warmer North Carolina to improve his wife Annie's compromised health, for instance, was a common practice among the middle and upper class of his time and place (Brodhead 198). In truth, John is also easily identifiable as a carpetbagger, for his business strategies resemble those of the pioneering Northerners who aimed at taking advantage of the cheaper land and undeveloped labor of the postbellum South to their own profit.

In a similar but completely opposed way, Chesnutt accentuates the conventional characteristics of black Uncle Julius, who used to belong to master McAdoo in the days

of the peculiar institution, and who is now at the service of John and Annie as their coachman. The author depicts this character as a vernacular speaker with a heavy regional accent, and with a set of beliefs strictly connected to magic rather than science (Brodhead 198-199).

From the point of view of the narrative structure, the role of John respects the canonical conventions of other similar works and provides the frame level, and – theoretically – the authoritative voice; on the contrary, Uncle Julius intervenes to tell some stories that took place on that very same plantation in the years of slavery. Yet, the reader will immediately notice that he is constantly subject to John's skepticism. In fact, the powerful white man is always ready to discredit any of Uncle Julius's fantasy narrations, which he regards as pure fabrications. This scheme actually reminded me of something that Page, too, pointed out in "No Haid Pawn", that is to say, the fact that the superstitions circulating about the haunted plantation and its evil spirits were especially prevalent among the black slaves; on the contrary, whites tended to disregard such voices because they would find their answers on the supernatural in the Bible only.

As for John, his crusade against Uncle Julius's craftiness and extravagance began when he decided to purchase the plantation even though the black servant had warned him about the haunted character of the place, for a poisonous curse had fallen on the crops some time prior.

The dueling relationship between the two male figures actually needs to be addressed even further. John is not evil, nor has he ever been a slave master, but his coming from Ohio does not imply a progressive stance on emancipation, either. As a matter of fact, his minimizing and discrediting Uncle Julius's tellings actually represents most Northerners' lack of concern towards America's problematic past and present. In other words, John's behavior "is a hauntingly familiar projection of the white response

to America's racial problem." (Farnsworth xvii). In truth, we could even associate John with any other white master of the antebellum South: besides his limited sympathy, he does also replicate the same patronizing attitude towards slaves, a strategy which had been largely used in the past to evidence the benevolence of slave owners and, therefore, to condone the peculiar institution.

Despite everything, Chesnutt also makes clear for the reader that it is actually – and finally – the black man who is in charge of an authoritative narration on slavery (Bauer 72), and not the white man. The role of black Uncle Julius, in fact, becomes that of educating the couple about the harsh truth of slavery, but also the audience at large. Annie and John, in fact, represent the white, Northern, and cultured class of readers of local color fiction Chesnutt was writing for. In entertaining them with the kind of picturesque tales this public craved, Chesnutt also hoped to foster important reflections among his contemporaries.

Through his conjure tales, Uncle Julius operates a kind of magic not only because he is able to transform material things, but also because he brings the past to life (Kotzin 72). Moreover, his function of storyteller as opposed to John and Annie's role of hearers reveals two very different modalities of dealing with narrations. White John and Annie essentially act as spectators: indeed, they "come from a world where stories are assumed to be written by other people and circulated in print, not collectively known and shared." (Brodhead 203); on the contrary, for black Uncle Julius the oral transmission of the many stories he knows is not merely leisure, but rather, an important act of preservation of his cultural heritage (Brodhead 199-200).

After a necessary premise aimed at clarifying Chesnutt's personality and, subsequently, his writing style, I will now analyze the text in more detail.

3.5.2. “Po’ Sandy”: a magical concealment of the horrors of slavery

“Po’ Sandy” is the second story of the collection *The Conjure Woman*, and is told after John and Annie have settled in what was a decaying plantation subject to neglect and raided during the Civil war, but which nonetheless appeared to them as the perfect location to grow grapes. Like the other tales in the collection, “Po’ Sandy” begins with John’s voice, with a tone that lets his perennial pride seep through, as if his role was to establish an authoritative context and a higher degree of credibility to the story.

John proceeds by presenting a little house on the North-East corner of his property, whose description may already indicate if not the haunted character of the plantation, definitely a condition of decadence. If, on the one hand, this might remind us of Cable’s and Page’s narrations, on the other hand it is also clear that Chesnutt is using subtler devices and a more fable-like atmosphere to convey the image of an infested locale. Indeed, although the author explicitly uses words such as decay and adjectives like rotting, and later mentions a “half-rotted corduroy road which traversed the swamp” (Chesnutt 39), he does not aim at reaching the level of horror attained by Cable and Page, and the overall impression is not that we should be frightened or awaiting an imminent tragedy like in the stories previously analyzed.

After this description, John informs the readers that the building in question used to serve as a schoolhouse in the years of slavery, and when his wife “for some occult reason” (Chesnutt 37) wanted him to build an additional kitchen in the backyard, he thought the best solution would be to demolish that decadent little house to obtain part of the wood he needed. Once at the sawmill to buy some additional lumber, the distinct sound of the saw causes old Julius to reminisce one more tale:

> “Ugh! but dat des do cuddle my blood!”

> "What 's the matter, Uncle Julius?" inquired my wife, who is of a very sympathetic turn of mind. " Does the noise affect your nerves ?"
> "No, Mis' Annie," replied the old man, with emotion, 'I ain' narvous; but dat saw, a-cuttin' en grindin' thoo dat stick er timber, en moanin', en groanin,' en sweekin', kyars my 'memb'ance back ter ole times, en 'min's me er po' Sandy." (Chesnutt 40)

That is how Uncle Julius, with his vernacular language, starts to recount to the white couple the ill-fated story of the poor Sandy. Sandy was a slave owned by Mars Marrabo, a white man living in a mansion across the swamp from Julius's plantation; Sandy proved to be so able at performing any task that everyone in the family appreciated him. However, this must not be read as a genuine love on the part of his owner, rather, "Po' Sandy" provides here a clear example of what slavery really looked like: in fact, this passage implicitly reveals that the more skilled the slave was, the more he was viewed as a valuable item (Brodhead 201). The merely materialistic attachment to Sandy should not be surprising, for it was nothing but the norm for slave-owning families which, however benevolent they were, were still exploiting human beings as if they were objects. It is worth noting that it is black Uncle Julius himself who problematizes this issue: "Sandy wuz a monst'us good nigger, en could do so many things erbout a plantation, en alluz 'ten' ter his wuk so well, dat wen Mars Marrabo's chilluns growed up en married off, dey all un 'em wanted dey daddy fer ter gin 'em Sandy fer a weddin' present." (Chesnutt 41). Thus, Mars Marrabo resolved to lend his precious Sandy to his children for a month at a time.

In one of these occasions, Sandy missed the opportunity to say goodbye to his wife for the last time, because Mars Marrabo decided to sell her to another owner when Sandy was temporarily away. Contrary to the belief that black people were inferior beings with no sensibility, the development of the story reveals that Sandy never recovered from the loss. To alleviate his pain and make his life on the plantation slightly

more bearable, he requests the help of the so-called conjure woman, who happens to be his second wife Tenie. In fact, Tenie has magical powers that allow her to transform Sandy into a tree so that he can remain forever rooted in the plantation and avoid the risk of being separated from his loved ones again, and claims: "I wisht I wuz a tree, er a stump, er a rock, er sump'n w'at could stay on de plantation fer a w'ile." (Chesnutt 45). His desire to give up his humanity is an extreme act of self-sacrifice in the name of love ties, which once again reverses the racist misconception in regard to slaves, and which makes him extremely human (Bauer 74-75).

As might be expected, when he realized that his most valuable asset had disappeared, Mars Marrabo set the dogs out to find him: Chesnutt includes some historical details and, like Page, hints at the reality of runaway slaves, but what is surprising here is the way in which he conveys to the reader even the most gruesome facts about slavery. This is probably the passage that best exemplifies Chesnutt's use of supernatural elements, rather than realism, to deliver the darkest facts behind the peculiar institution. Uncle Julius tells his audience that things do not go as expected, because when Tenie was away, the solid pine tree Sandy had been transformed into is cut to be turned into a kitchen: unfortunately, this is a metaphor that needs to be read as the terrible punishment that slaves had to endure when captured and brought back to the plantation.

By providing the scene of the cutting of the tree, Chesnutt is masterfully disguising a horrifying event, but at the same time, he is very clearly implying that the fate of runaway slaves like Sandy was mutilation and, eventually, killing. Through Uncle Julius's narration, in fact, readers realize that day after day, before being definitively taken down, the tree – or rather, Po' Sandy – had new cuts, scars and holes. With this knowledge, readers cannot but be creeped out in realizing that the tree was

felled with difficulty because Sandy was actually strenuously resisting while being killed. It is interesting to note that, although granting for the readers a safe distance from such evil, the author is nonetheless aiming at shaking the consciences of John and Annie, and of the public at large.

Upon her return, Tenie is distraught in finding out what happened to her beloved Sandy, and throws herself on the log, which metaphorically stands for his battered body, now being chopped into boards to build the kitchen. Regretfully, this raw image is meant to convey "the dehumanizing effect of slavery, a system that commodifies people and turns them into natural resources." (Fienberg qtd. in Kotzin 73). And it is in this circumstance that Chesnutt lets the ghost arise: in being once again transformed, but this time for Mars Marrabo's convenience, Sandy – now reduced to lumber for his master's new furniture – initiates his haunting of the plantation. As this passage states,

> "De noo kitchen Mars Marrabo buil' wuzn' much use, fer it hadn' be'n put up long befo' de niggers 'mence' ter notice quare things erbout it. Dey could hear sump'n moanin' en groanin' 'bout de kitchen in de night-time, en w'en de win' would blow dey could hear sump'n a-hollerin' en sweekin' lack it wuz in great pain en sufferin'. En it got so atter a wile dat it wuz all Mars Marrabo's wife could do ter git a 'oman ter stay in de kitchen in de daytime long ernuff ter do de cookin'; en dey wa'n't naer nigger on de plantation w'at would n' rudder take forty dan ter go 'bout dat kitchen atter dark, — dat is, 'cep'n' Tenie; [...] But somehow er 'nudder de niggers foun' out all erbout it, en dey all knowed de kitchen wuz ha'nted by Sandy's sperrit. (Chesnutt 57-58)

And even when Mars Marrabo took down the spirited kitchen and built the schoolhouse mentioned at the beginning of the tale, the ghost of Po' Sandy never ceased to make its presence clear through that same wood. Tenie, on her part, was considered crazy by her master, and continued to interact with what remained of Sandy. Eventually, she was found dead on the floor, finally reunited with her beloved husband.

Below this surface made bearable thanks to fantastic and almost fable-like elements, the story hides the slaves' immeasurable pain, both physical and emotional. In this respect, as Farnsworth noted, the world of the occult is a precious resource for the slaves because it is the only tool that allows them to really evade their terrible reality. However, the harsh truth is that "the white man's arbitrary power is stronger and more destructive than any goopher. The slave may call upon the trees, birds, animals, even the seasons to help him, but he has no ultimate defense against the master's legal and economic power. It determines life and death at the white man's whim." (Farnsworth xv-xvi).

The reaction of the couple to the legend of Sandy and Tenie is actually an important theme in itself, because it problematizes more clearly than ever the reception among white people of the darker side of slave history. When John resumes the narrative, he reports his wife's words: "Annie had listened to this gruesome narrative with strained attention. "What a system it was," she exclaimed, when Julius had finished, "under which such things were possible."" (Chesnutt 60). Annie's initial reaction seems to offer a glimpse of hope in this regard, for it shows her empathy and more predisposition than her husband to consider slavery as a brutal practice. On more than one occasion, indeed, she has proven to be sensitive and reflective, appreciative of Uncle Julius's effort to articulate the past, and emotionally close to him.

In this respect, when at the beginning of the tale she requested a new kitchen "for some occult reason" (Chesnutt 37), I was initially considering the hypothesis of this sentence being a clear connection between Annie and Uncle Julius's conjure world, also due to the fact that she was often more open to believing in the magic occurrences of the plantation.

Yet, as John mocks her for giving credit to Julius's tale, Annie does not stand her ground; interestingly, she abandons the possibility of the story being truthful, but not the dream of her kitchen, a request which she reconfirms at the end of the tale (though with lumber that does not come from Sandy). It appears, then, that the occult reason why she requested new furniture has actually everything to do with her wanting to "play out some Old South fantasy derived from the romantic plantation fiction [...], a popular genre in her day." (Bauer 74), and to follow the Southern fashion. This conclusion leaves a bitter taste in the mouth: regretfully, Chesnutt shows here that Annie is only apparently empathetic, and that she is actually not ready to fully receive Uncle Julius's message (Bauer 77). Upon realizing that the readership of his time was not yet ready enough to accept an uncomfortable aspect of their national past, and that he could not reach their consciences as much as he would have liked, Chesnutt gave up writing and returned to the practice of law.

In conclusion, Chesnutt was not entirely understood at that time, for most of his contemporaries regarded his regionalist fiction merely as a vicarious traveling experience into the unfamiliar, that is to say, as a form of leisure. In spite of this, Chesnutt's literary contributions are still remarkable for his courage in subverting traditional plantation literature. For him, the haunted plantation is functional to his narrating history through magical lenses, which at the same time conveys an unbearable load of realism. Being a black man himself, he tried to re-tell history on his own terms by giving his ancestors the voice that slavery had removed from them, and their dignity.

CONCLUSION

This thesis explored the space of haunted plantations in the American South as sites of dark tourism both today, as a materially viable experience, and in late-nineteenth century fiction, as an act of vicarious traveling.

In Chapter 1, I provided a theoretical explanation of dark tourism, and I evidenced some gaps in academic research revealing that the discipline has not yet been fully explored. In particular, little attention has been dedicated to the demand sustaining dark tourism, namely tourists' motivations and their mysterious fascination with locations associated with death, violence and suffering. I also observed that the interest for the macabre has a long, though not officially documented, history, and for this reason I suggested that instances of proto-dark tourism might be found well before the formal theorization of the discipline in 1996. I argued that reading gothic fiction, for example, could vicariously transport readers to alternative dimensions and could respond to their dark desire of evasion when tourism was not a democratized practice as is today.

In Chapter 2, I firstly investigated the reasons behind the popularity of ghost tours in the American South, a region still haunted by the scars of its traumatic slaveholding past. Secondly, I focused on an example of contemporary dark tourism in Myrtles Plantation, which is widely known as one of the most haunted places in the United States. I explained how this reconverted Southern plantation relies on a problematic re-interpretation of history that privileges the point of view of the former

white elites, and how it can be considered a dark tourism attraction, for it revolves around the hunting of the ghosts of slavery for the entertainment of visitors.

In Chapter 3, I offered specific examples of vicarious dark tourist experiences through fiction-reading by analyzing short stories from the Post-Reconstruction period by George Washington Cable, Thomas Nelson Page and Charles Waddell Chesnutt. These dark tales were set in haunted slave plantations in antebellum times, and satisfied the taste for the macabre manifested by late-nineteenth century readers by providing them with horrifying settings haunted by the tormented ghosts of slavery. I concluded that these tales can be considered the precursors of what we can today identify as dark plantation tourism.

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