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Nostalgia and the Emotional Turn in Postbellum Plantation Memoirs

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Abstract

This article examines how white southern memoirists of the late nineteenth-century nostalgically constructed the Old South, using plantation life-writing to assert regional identity and historical distinctiveness after emancipation, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. These memoirs depict the antebellum plantation as a harmonious, orderly society characterized by racial stability, rigid class hierarchies, and prescribed gender roles. The article carefully explores how nostalgia shaped these depictions, transporting former enslavers and their families into a romanticized past that glossed over, or elided, the harsh realities of plantation era slavery. Central to these narratives is the image of the 'faithful slave,' particularly the Mammy figure, whose depiction reinforced paternalistic myths. Through these rhetorical strategies, plantation memoirists sought to create a vision of race relations rooted in an idealized past, one that could influence future interactions between white and Black southerners to ensure continued white dominance within southern society and culture.

Keywords

Lost Cause | Nostalgia | Old South | Plantation | Slavery

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Ah, through my heart, wild-thronging,
The old sweet memories come;
And I am sick with longing
For my plantation home.

Archibald Rutledge, "Nostalgia" (1940)

Of the numerous literary and intellectual forms into which former white slaveholders and their family members sought to embody their memories of the Old South, none has so consistently been overlooked – or ignored – in critical discussions of the Lost Cause than the memoir, the pages of which abound with nostalgia for the plantation and the socio-cultural codes it perpetuated.[1] Scores of published volumes leave little doubt as to the importance of the genre to the American literary marketplace from the late nineteenth-century through the early twentieth, a thriving enterprise among the country's leading publishing houses, leaving for posterity a sentimental portrait of antebellum plantation life and lifestyle artfully rendered in vignettes. This *oeuvre* includes, among others, texts such as: R.Q. Mallard's *Plantation Life before Emancipation* (1892); John S. Wise's, *The End of an Era* (1899); H.M. Hamill's *The Old South* (1904); and Susan Dabney Smedes's glowing panagyric on her late father's character in *Memorials of a Southern Planter*, first published in 1887 and reprinted several times in the course of the following quarter century, an exemplar of the genre which exhibits a thematic preoccupation with the pastoral and the vernacular within its plantation setting in antebellum Mississippi.

According to historian David Blight, this body of life-writing should be viewed within the context of a "burgeoning reminiscence industry" in the late nineteenth-century, part of a popular publishing trend that emerged alongside a public appetite for collections of personal Civil War memories, particularly veterans' accounts of army life and campaigns (Blight, 2001: 172).

Postbellum plantation memoirs offer a revealing glimpse into how former enslavers and other elites imagined themselves, drawing on their personal memories of everyday experiences, dialogue, and observations on plantations before the Civil War. These memories, selectively filtered and reframed to align with individual values and biases, highlight the profound influence of nostalgia in preserving a sense of continuity with the past. When disruptions in the present challenge one's sense of self, nostalgia emerges as a powerful force in constructing both personal and collective identities, reinforcing emotional connections to the past (Becker, 2023).

[1] Developed over many decades by ex-Confederate military and civilian leaders, the Lost Cause narrative weaved together several ideas and arguments – from a nostalgia celebration of the Old South to the claim that northern advantages in human power and resources determined the Confederacy's defeat in the Civil War. Advocates of the Lost Cause framed the war as a struggle over states' rights, rather than slavery, constructing a version of public memory that helped sustain white southerners' dominant position in the racial hierarchy. Recent scholarship includes Janney, 2013; Cook, 2017; Gannon, 2017; and Domby, 2020.

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Seminal texts on nostalgia, such as Fred Davis's *Yearning for Yesterday* (1979) and Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), offer profound insights into the complexities of nostalgic reaction, which is stimulated, they argue, by perceived, or felt, threats to continuity, and is located in a broader context of present fears and anxieties. Nostalgia, though it implies memory, is not merely an act of recall.

It is a type of remembering, or form of recollection, that "*uses the past* – falsely, accurately, or . . . in specially reconstructed ways," juxtaposing the "uncertainties and anxieties of the present with presumed verities and comforts of the . . . past," a dynamic that is, as Davis has suggested, nostalgia's "distinctive rhetorical signature" (Davis, 1979: 10-11, 141, 16). For Davis, nostalgia thrives on the "rude transitions rendered by history," on the "discontinuities and dislocations" that come with "untoward" or "intrusive" events such as war or other large-scale disasters (ibidem: 49, 103). Nostalgia, then, "acts to restore . . . a sense of sociohistoric continuity" across ruptures, reestablishes "meaningful links to the past," and serves as a means of "reaffirming identities" (ibidem: 104, 110, 107).

Four years of war, fought largely on southern soil, cost the lives of more than two hundred thousand Confederate soldiers, sailors, and civilians (and injured, and displaced, thousands more), left in ruins many natural and built environments, collapsed the region's economy with the end of slavery, upended political structures, and produced changes in the social and cultural life of white and Black southerners that had far-reaching consequences. For southern white elites, the fall of the Confederacy marked the end of a long-standing economic system that had ensured profit, prosperity, and privilege, shaping their families' way of life for generations.

Consider, for example, Margaret Devereux's *Plantation Sketches* (1906), in which she she reflects on the upheaval following emancipation and war, depicting this era as a time of crisis and threat to antebellum socio-cultural traditions – a shift that, she suggests, led "those whose hearts still cling to the 'Old South'" to "look sadly backward and sigh," an assessment shaped by her own experience as a daughter of a plantation owner in eastern North Carolina. Emphasizing the vagaries of history and memory to show how the Old South would soon "fade away into dimness," be "lost to sight," and therefore "live only in the memory of the few," Devereux determined "to rescue from oblivion" some of the "habits, thoughts, and feelings of the people who made our South what it was," drawing "upon actual events" to record, for her grandchildren, autobiographical "pen sketches of plantation life" to imply a connection with a nostalgically "faint" past (Devereux, 1906: ix).

Drawing on a sample of memoirs written by white southerners in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that depcit plantation-era slavery, I will address two key issues: first, how nostalgia, observed here as an emotional response to discontinuities imposed by fundamental change, carried white southerners to an idealized plantation imaginary, out of synchrony with the present; and second, how the depiction of the 'faithful slave,' a narrative device intended to venerate the

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antebellum era as a golden age in race relations, functioned as a framework for influencing and defining race relations in the South under Jim Crow.[2]

1. The phantoms of things that were

For many white southern memoirists of the 1880s and 1890s, the antbellum era represented a golden age in the region's history, with the plantation serving as its unifying emblem – a supposedly ideal society characterized by racial harmony, rigid class structures, and clearly defined gender roles. This nostalgic plantation imaginary stood in contrast to the segregation, violence, and legal restrictions that shaped the Jim Crow South. Assessing the ruination of his family home in Liberty County, Georgia, Charles C. Jones Jr., writing in 1882, reflected: "The entire region is strangely changed. It is peopled only with the phantoms of things that were, and present images are a mockery of the blessed idols once here enshrined" (Blight, 2001: 42).

According to historian Susan Matt, white southerners "longed for a lost era as much as a lost place," emphasizing their nostalgia for the past, and their homesickness for the physical landscapes associated with it (Matt, 2011: 104).

The "death" of the Old South marked "The End of an Era" in the words of John S. Wise in his 1899 memoir of that title. "Thus passed away the happy days of childhood," he reflected, acknowledging the force of historical change, "days unlike those which come to any boy anywhere nowadays, days belonging to a phase of civilization and a manner of life which are as extinct as if they had never existed" (Wise, 1899: 32, 48). At the end of the Civil War, Sallie Brock Putnam, who lived in Richmond, Virginia, observed: "We were left to muse on the mutability of human events, to glance mournfully backward on the Past, and to gaze with steady, cold, dead calmness on the altered Present" (Putnam, [1867]; rpt., 1996: 385). Here, the Civil War is understood as an event, or moment, of dramatic temporal rupture, one of those "rude transitions rendered by history" in Davis's words, signifying an epochal shift affectively experienced and deeply felt (Davis, 1979: 49).

For illustration, consider the language used by Eliza Ripley to describe her memories of wartime Louisiana in *Social Life in Old New Orleans* (1912): "In the rush of uncertain and un-looked for events, we could not plan any future, even one day ahead, so overwhelmed were we in mind and estate (not to mention body) with the strenuousness of the pitiful present" (Ripley, 1912: 264). Uncertain, overwhelmed, pitiful: these words highlight a sense of discontinuity and rupture in the present, a trait, feature, or characteristic aspect of the nostalgia mood, which seeks to reestablish continuity with the past. One reviewer, writing in *Vogue* (1913: 68), considered *Social Life in Old New Orleans* a "precious" book, "embalming for us a vanished social life" of fancy dress balls, French opera, and formal wear at weddings,

[2] Jim Crow was the system of state and local laws in the South that enforced racial segregation, requiring 'separate but equal' facilities for Black and white people in transportation, schooling, and other areas of public life.

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while another commented that it presented a "glorified past," describing Ripley as a "praiser of her times," who, "with her strong memory," seemed inclined to "dwell in the past even more than is the wont of old age" (Villavaso, 1913: 433).

Historian James Cobb has written that white southerners' distinctive experiences with defeat in the Civil War and reconstruction by federal mandate not only shaped regional consciousness but also "fast-forwarded the antebellum southern order through the process of ageing and historical distancing," transforming the years prior to the Civil War into the 'Old South,' "frozen away in some distant corner of time and accessible only through the imagination" (Cobb, 2005: 73-74). Building on Cobb's insights concerning the construction, maintenance, and preservation of southern white identity in the postwar period, we might describe the imagined landscape of the Old South in the New as a search for the lost, nostalgic image of a world that once represented the future to a generation of plantation owners now fast fading, fashioned from a perspective already marked by distance.

Mrs. N.B. De Saussure's *Old Plantation Days* (1909), an account of life on a South Carolina lowland plantation by the Savannah River during the 1840s and 1850s, is underpinned by bewilderment, fear, and resentment at the rapidity of change, the submergence of the old by the new. Written in the style of a letter, from a white grandmother ("growing to be an old lady") to her granddaughter ("still too young to remember"), De Saussure's glimpses into the "old plantation days, now forever gone," committed to print and published at the request of friends, brought together "true knowledge" of "the South as it used to be" from someone "whose life was spent amid those scenes." In De Saussure's formulation, "memories are a legacy to the new generation from the old," to be handed down to posterity as history's "bare facts."

Noting the inevitable fading of things, while also lamenting the "energetic spirit of a new age," the author, writing from the perspective of "a generation now passing away," drew on experiences of the elite social world she had known in her adolescence, held "in loving memory," recollected fragments of the past that caused her "heart to throb again with youthful pleasure." De Saussure contrasts her nostalgia for "happy plantation days" with memories of General William T. Sherman's Union army, which laid ruin to the family home and adjacent lands, emphasizing a temporal dichotomy between the distant past and more recent times, distinguishing between "days that are no more" and "dreadful days of war and fire and famine" (De Saussure, 1909: 9-10). De Saussure's before-and-after division of time, a dividing line oft-drawn by the *fin-de-siècle* circle of southern plantation memoirists who faced economic, social, and political upheaval after the Civil War, is also, significantly, a select rhetorical strategy that evokes nostalgia for an imagined, idealized past, serving as a remedy for disaffection, disappointment, and disgust with the present.

For former enslavers and other members of the southern elite, military defeat and collapse in 1865, which marked the end of plantation slavery, not only disrupted the region's established economic system and necessitated new forms of labor arrangements and management, but also heralded profound changes in social relations during the post-emancipation era. Former enslavers had to navigate a transformed landscape where previously enslaved people sought autonomy and fair

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treatment. These changes were pivotal in reshaping the socio-economic fabric of the South, influencing both the immediate aftermath of the Civil War and the long-term evolution of southern society. That he had lived in "two distinct periods of our Southern history," before the Civil War and after, is a characteristic expression of lament in Edward J. Thomas's memoir, echoing anxieties from other members of his class about dislocation and disorientation, the connection back towards the "grand old plantation life" now "completely severed" from the "striving conditions that followed" (Thomas, 1923: 5). Thomas describes plantation life on the Georgia Tidewater, where his family owned several plantations, as "master and slave in its prettiest phase," referring to the more than one hundred enslaved individuals there as "our people" and insisting on an enslaver-enslaved relationship characterized by reciprocal obligation within a paternalistic system ("the interest of each was the concern of all"). He recalled in one nostalgic vignette of that period, how on "moonlight nights," enslaved men and women would sing while hand-grinding their corn, melodic "sweet chants" from a "happy people" that "frequently lulled me, when a boy, to sleep," expressing sorrow that "[n]ever more will such merry shouts be heard!" (ibidem: 8, 12). Yet, as Thomas claimed, the resilience of these relationships, formed in childhood, survived in the phase immediately following emancipation.

Shortly after graduating from the University of Georgia, Thomas joined the Confederate army and served in the Fifth Georgia Cavalry for three years before being mustered out of service at war's end, returning home to McIntosh County (ibidem: 41, 43, 61; Harden, 1913: 711). On visiting 'Peru,' the plantation near Savannah where he grew up, Thomas found "a goodly number of our old slaves" had "come home" to work the land, heretofore dispersed when Union soldiers, under Sherman, occupied much of the region. "If I had been a king returning to his subjects, I could not have been more regally received," Thomas stated. The men raised Thomas aloft and carried him to the plantation house where the women, who had gathered at the front piazza, greeted "Mars' Ed" heartily, and arranged an entertaining supper among "old friends." Thomas's nostalgic avowal of emotional connection and supposed loyalty in these scenes, "not long after the war," when, he claims, formerly enslaved people still enjoyed "many of the comforts provided them by their masters," is implicitly contrasted with the reshaped southern racial order of the late nineteenth-century, and his grudging admission that, in these later years, "no such welcome" was possible. "The feelings of the old slaves for their master, and of the masters for their slaves, will never be understood by coming generations," he opined, at once mourning the erosion of durable bonds of attachment and capturing how many white southerners preferred to remember slavery, as an inherently benevolent institution of caring, Christian enslavers, and loving, life-long dependents (Thomas, 1923: 57-58).

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2. The ties that bind

By the late nineteenth-century, as Micki McElya (2007) and others have shown, American popular culture was saturated with representations of the 'faithful slave,' particularly the Mammy figure, in both print and performance. In the memoirs and reminiscences of white southerners, narratives of faithful enslaved people functioned as an ideological weapon to subvert accounts of plantation era slavery that focused on violence, oppression, and cruelty, a strategy that sought to delimit Black agency by recourse to an imagined past in which everyday experiences of enslavement were enmeshed in discourses of paternalism. The Mammy character, typically portrayed as a devoted Black caregiver to white children and loyal to white families, was used to romanticize slavery and reinforce racial hierarchies by implying that Black women found contentment in servitude.

In *Memorials of a Southern Planter*, for instance, Susan Dabney Smedes asserts that loyal domestic workers, such as Mammy Maria and Mammy Harriet – whose recollections, written in Black dialect to convey a sense of regional authenticity, form part of the volume – "had come to love the white family better than [their] own blood and race." Elaborating on her theme, Smedes maintained: "In no hands was the dignity of the family so safe as with negro slaves . . . . [T]hey greatly magnified the importance of their owners, and were readily affronted if aspersion of any sort were cast on their master's family," adding strikingly, that "they were all aristocrats by nature" (Smedes, 1887: 75, 163). Smedes's emphasis upon an aristocratic ideal – particularly her assertion that enslavers had not only the duty but the responsibility to instill good principles into enslaved people – has led some critics to interpret such views as a defense of white privilege, highlighting tensions between condescending self-congratulation on one hand, and genuine feelings of affection on the other (Fox-Genovese and Genovese, 2005: 117-18).

By recounting her life at Burleigh – the Dabney family's 4,000-acre plantation estate in Hinds County, Mississippi – Smedes created a platform to convey her belief in the "sacred and close" affinities between the races. Within this structure of retrospect, her father, Thomas, regarded his "ever favorite and trusted servants," who had been acquired through inheritance, with "great affection," a "feeling" that, we are told, was "warmly returned" by them. According to Smedes, the bond between the Dabney family and their enslaved people was so profound that when her father decided to leave his ancestral Tidewater estate for the Southwest in the mid-1830s, Mammy Harriet voluntarily chose to leave her husband – who was held in slavery by another Virginia planter – to accompany Dabney to Mississippi. "Without an exception," Smedes wrote, the plantation's household servants and field hands "determined to follow their beloved master and mistress" (Smedes, 1887: 47-49).

Another vignette recounts the passing of Mammy Harriet's elderly aunt, known to the family as Grannie Harriet. As the chief mourner, Smedes's father led the funeral procession down the road to the tree-shaded graveside, with his children following the coffin. "He ordered out the whole plantation, every one who could walk, and every man, woman, and child carried a torch." The "painful impression" made that

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day was not lost on Smedes, then only a child, who wished to be excused from attendance. "[B]ut the master seemed unapproachable in his grief, and I was afraid of incurring his displeasure if he should discover that I was unwilling to pay what he considered fitting respect to the memory of his trusted friend." Grannie Harriet, much missed in the years following her death, was, as Smedes put it, "ever treated as a member of the family." Smedes remembered that her father never missed an opportunity to sit down with "this aged servant," both "laughing and talking" a while, discussing "his plantation affairs as he did with no one else," trusting her judgment to be "so sound that he relied upon it" (ibidem: 61-62).

For Smedes and other white southerners, the onset of the Civil War, coupled with Lincoln's decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, weakened bonds of close attachment – whether real or imagined – between enslaved individuals and their enslavers, marking a critical juncture in the region's race relations. R. Q. Mallard hoped that his reminiscences – originally a series of letters published in the *Southwestern Presbyterian* magazine, covering topics from the religious instruction of enslaved people to missionary work among them – would "contribute to the restoration of the mutual kindness and confidence" that characterized "the old regimé," a relationship soured by emancipation and further eroded by "the unhappy events immediately succeeding it" (Mallard, 1892: vii). Writing to "portray a civilization now obsolete," Mallard's *Plantation Life before Emancipation* (1892) recounts "the sunny days of my childhood and youth" in antebellum Georgia as the son of a "well-to-do" rice planter, presenting a series of personal vignettes that illustrate his friendships and intimacies with enslaved individuals – memories that, he reflects, "are of almost unmixed pleasure." Mallard's narrative is structured around childhood encounters with his "dusky little playmates," from exploring the plantation's cotton houses, to shooting bows and arrows and fishing in the river – Black and white interactions that, in his view, mirrored an ideal (ibidem: VI, 8-9, 19). "It is easy to see how such a life, in which white and black, with the due subordination of master and servant preserved, shared the same sports, contributed to the familiar and affectionate relations which so notoriously from childhood bound master and servant together" (ibidem: 28). Ultimately, Mallard advocated for renewing "the kindly feelings which bound together the two races in the olden time" as a response to the "deeply agitating" deterioration in race relations during the 1890s, which was driven by southern white anxieties over racial integration, as well as a concerted effort to suppress Black ambitions for education and property ownership.

If, as David Blight has observed, white southerners sought to reassure themselves that emancipation had "ruined an ideal in race relations," it also highlighted, for many defenders of the Old South, a stark contrast between African Americans born under slavery and those who were born free after the passage of the Reconstruction Amendments to the Constitution (Blight, 2001: 286). H.M. Hamill's 1904 memoir, *The Old South*, which sharpened arguments familiar to many apologists for plantation era slavery, pointedly insisted that emancipation had brought nothing but hardship and ignominy to the lives of formerly enslaved men and women. "[W]ell fed and clothed" and "moderately worked" prior to the war, their "careless, heart-free" lives had been

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supplanted by "heartache and worry," Hamill asserted, adding that freedom "had proven a cheat and a snare." According to Hamill, those "born and trained under slavery" were a group that "commands respect in the South to-day," whereas "those who have known nothing but freedom" ought to be regarded as generally an "unsatisfactory body of people." The "docile and reverent" men and women born and raised in bondage on the plantation were destined to "always" remain "the friend of the Southern white gentleman and lady" Hamill stated (Hamill, 1904: 31-32). Many southern whites extolled a paternalistic, structured, stable society, one governed by the rigid racial codes of the Old South, resolute in their belief that preserving traditional ways was the only viable path to maintaining racial order in the New South.

Many scholars have shown the importance of an antebellum mythos to white southerners by pointing out how a plantation imaginary was deployed and assembled in various modes of representation and rhetoric, a strategy that both hailed the legitimacy of a "changeless" past, "disrupted only by tragic war," and "helped whites to use nostalgia to validate opposition to black equality" during the late nineteenth-century (Baptist, 2002: 281). In this context, this article has paid close attention to life-writing, particularly the personal narratives of former slaveholders and their families, as a useful entry point into the critical discussion of the role that nostalgia, conspicuous in the genre, played in the construction of the Old South.

Often dismissed by critics as trite, trivial, and predictably tender, which may account for why so little scholarly attention has been paid to this category of Lost Cause apologia, these sentimental authors, whose autobiographical journeys intersect personal and historical memories, were important shapers of regional identity and distinctiveness in the years after the Civil War.

For white southerners fearful that the region's established social order had been shaken by war and its political aftermath, the Lost Cause not only celebrated traditional patriarchal and hierarchical structures of power based on race, class, and gender, but made them appear to be part of a 'golden age' of continuous time, and thus a fixed, fundamental, and inviolable part of southern history. Ruined by war, humiliated by defeat, and insulted by Reconstruction policies on race relations, southern whites turned eagerly towards the past for the consolations which nostalgia offered them.

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