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Title: Consuming Memories: Food and Childhood in Postbellum Plantation Memoirs and Reminiscences

Abstract: The nostalgia created by and within postbellum plantation memoirs and reminiscences has been little explored. By scrutinizing the usefulness of nostalgia as a lens through which to focus critical thinking on the construction, uses and maintenance of individual and collective memory, this article uses this genre of autobiographical life writing to outline assumptions about the Old South plantation imaginary, its kitchens and cooks, as well as the presentation of food and its preparation. By exploring the ways in which memories of food and happy childhood days were used to codify nostalgic forms of the antebellum era, the article contends that food played an important symbolic role in framing and reflecting power relations and patriarchal authority as the Old South gave way to the New.

Keywords: American South, Memoirs, Reminiscences, Nostalgia, Food, Childhood

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Consuming Memories: Food and Childhood in Postbellum Plantation Memoirs and Reminiscences

Introduction

Part valentine to the departed glories of Old South gentility, part obituary to plantation era paternalism, the memoirs and reminiscences penned by former plantation masters and mistresses fashioned a richly reassuring cultural memory of antebellum grandeur and slave fidelity throughout the late nineteenth century and beyond. Imagining their own obsolescence and anxious at the unraveling of taken-for-granted race and class hierarchies, these ageing members of the old planter aristocracy charted a narrative course through southern history in plotlines that rarely deviated across authors and publishing houses. Within this structure of retrospect, and to an extent greater than has been heretofore acknowledged, these memorial works create and consolidate a conspicuous nostalgia, one which oscillates between political and emotional strains to reveal nostalgia's reactionary conceit and empowering agency.

In such accounts, descriptions of the selfless munificence of the planter family, particularly on the plantation's red-letter days, remembered for their unstinted meals and gifts, seamlessly conjoin with images of smiling and satisfied slaves, the best possible remedy to northern censure and denigration of Old South days and ways. Tempting as it may be to see such discourses as faintly preposterous, as no more than a rhetorically potent propaganda strategy, such ways of thinking and feeling were incorporated into a temporal narrative of continuity that functioned as an individual and collective effort to shield social and cultural inheritances against charges of historical irrelevance and redundancy. In longing for a lost racial utopia, authors of plantation reminiscences routinely hyped the Old South of their childhoods and youth as a pastoral tranquility of grand plantation mansions, chivalrous planters, beautiful belles and happy, devoted slaves who, even after emancipation, doubted the promise of freedom. In these – and other, related – forms of Lost Cause writing, nostalgic sentimentalism for the antebellum South, in David Blight's words, became "a hard spell to break."¹

My particular contribution here is focused on why these autobiographical reveries to plantation life and lifestyle work so effortlessly towards descriptions of good food and good eating to encode memories of a vanished world, as guided by the racial realities of the Jim Crow South. In this way, I contextualize them, charting their intent, content and framing of an "imagined community" (to borrow Benedict

Anderson's phrase) in time and space, the Old South and the plantation home. By concentrating on the ways in which both were imagined, reinforced and sustained, I point to the privileging of memories of food as an attempt to support and promote a uniquely benevolent image of the plantation era South by recourse to historical structures of patriarchy and paternalism. This narration of an imagined past, written against a backdrop of military defeat, socio-political upheaval and economic decline, served as a counterpoint to postbellum uncertainties and anxiety over a way of life outdone by modernity's project of progress.

Exploring the consequences of these interrupting forces, I will argue, offer insight into the utility of nostalgia to insist on an idealized image of an irretrievable past. Amid fears that white patriarchal power was under threat, white southerners juxtaposed antebellum and postbellum ideas of paternalism in order to link black and white together in an attempt to recalibrate paternal authority in the post-emancipation South. Here I suggest food, as an important signifier of cultural transmission and power relations, played a significant role in the context of paternal relationships and thus in the childhood memories of nostalgic white southerners. Working with recent critical attention paid to nostalgia from across a rich variety of disciplines, plantation memoirs and reminiscences are approached critically yet sensitively to reveal more about the vagaries of nostalgic longing and for what these writings can tell us about the ways in which white children understood paternalism and its connection to master-slave relationships on the plantation, not least how nostalgia connects with cherished memories of food and the happy events that surrounded the rituals of consumption to lament the end of an era even as it proclaimed the advent of a new one.

Nostalgia, the lost cause and the “syrup of romanticism”

Originally a medical condition ascribed to adolescent Swiss soldiers serving abroad, the idea of nostalgia as a retrogressive malaise, sentimental, self-pitying and conservative, has been reevaluated in recent years by critics who have insisted on a more nuanced reading of the nostalgic mode. These studies, approaching their subject from a wide range of methodologies and questions, bridge disciplines such as history, anthropology, psychoanalysis, literary criticism and cultural studies.² Taken together, this burgeoning body of scholarly literature contributes to a far more detailed understanding of nostalgia's meaning(s) and deployment through which to analyze several key themes and debates, including how patterns of identity formation merge with prominent historical narratives. Crucial here, for many, is consideration of

nostalgia as a “symptomatic state of mind” according to anxieties and attitudes of the present, centered on the framing of personal and social identity amid widespread temporal discontinuities of experience.³

Michael Kammen has argued that reactions and responses to unsettling change create an insatiable appetite for a stable past, however fictionalized or stylized the invention. In his masterly work of American cultural history *Mystic Chords of Memory*, Kammen suggests the “creative consequences of nostalgia” helped late nineteenth century Americans “to legitimize new political orders, rationalize the adjustment and perpetuation of old social hierarchies, and construct acceptable new systems of thought and values.”⁴ Thus the nostalgic drift provided comfort and reassurance, acting as supporting ballast to offset the changes borne of a rapidly modernizing, urban-industrial world. If the nostalgic experience is to be understood as a cultural, and chiefly narrated, type of retrospection, emotional and imaginative in its desire to heal “the scars of history” that temporal rupture inflicts, it connects us to personal identity as we (re)construct ourselves and our collective social experiences in relation to place, time and nation.⁵

In critical discourse on the Civil War’s aftermath and legacy, the capacity of nostalgia to reveal, maintain and encode the Lost Cause as one of the primary organizing principles of postbellum white southern memory has become increasingly recognized, if not entirely uncontested, in Civil War memory studies. With the fall of the Confederacy in 1865 and the onset of Reconstruction elite white southerners struggled to work their way through the emotional earthquake of defeat and unnerving political uncertainty as they witnessed previous worlds of ease, comfort and economic security give way to hardship, privation and financial ruin. Transforming military defeat into a cultural victory over competing memories of the war, these former patrician slave-owners, among others, paved the way for the invention of a ‘Golden Age’ in the region’s history and identity, dissolving contemporary anxieties and concerns with a sweet “syrup of romanticism,” not least the impact of Jim Crow upon African Americans and their responses to rising levels of racial violence and discrimination in the South.⁶ As James Cobb observes, this effort served to assure southern whites’ of their “grand communal heritage” and encouraged “them to unite in order to replicate the achievements and regain the stature that their society had enjoyed in the past.”⁷

As Susan Matt points out in her study of homesickness in American history, white southerners’ “sense of displacement” in the decades following the Civil War “was sometimes homesickness and was sometimes . . . nostalgia, for they longed for a lost era as much as a lost place.”⁸ Here Matt underscores the etymological complexity

of the two words, for the semantic shift of homesickness from a spatial to a temporal category is often understood as a response to the emergence of new medical awareness in anatomical, biological and pathological methods throughout the eighteenth century and beyond as well as an explanation for the seismic and destabilizing upheavals of modernity with the rise of the nation state. Challenging this periodization, Michael Roth, in “Dying of the Past,” has shown the persistence of clinical nostalgia among Parisians as late as the 1870s while in America, as Matt has demonstrated, nostalgia became a medical anachronism much later.⁹ The overlap between forms of nostalgic experience across distance and time should caution us against ahistoricism, for nostalgia as a wistfully bitter-sweet mode of thought and feeling is not how plantation memoirists, individually or collectively, would have used the word: that said, it is a useful lens through which to focus critical thinking on the Civil War’s aftermath and how that generation made and maintained their memories of the southern past.

With the plantation and the social codes and practices it perpetuated serving as the foundation stone of the white southern historical imaginary, the nostalgia that flowed from the pens of plantation memoirists was both for a South of yesterday, irretrievable and thus innately lost, and for specific qualities of plantation life and lifestyle, recalled with pleasure in old age, that ensured the romanticized childhood home lived on, if only in hazy memory. Focusing upon the experience of nostalgia and the act of recollection that accompanies it, Ann Colley writes, “One question that emerges from the nostalgic moment is how is it possible adequately to represent the longing that invariably accompanies the experience – more specifically, what kinds of images satisfactorily signify a yearning for something that is irrevocably absent?”¹⁰ For plantation memoirists, the answer lay in creatively rendered vignettes regarding plentiful, delicious food, a literary strategy that did as much to codify nostalgic forms of the Old South in experience and memory as recapture and raise these forms as the standard with which to measure the present and guide the future.

Kitchens, cooks and “wholesome, dainty and appetizing food”

Showpiece plantation houses of imposing architecture and bespoke furnishings situated on vast acreages, all of which were well-organized, balanced and congruous in design, adorn the pages of the plantation memorial genre. Outbuildings, including the freestanding kitchens and smokehouses that were the focal point of food preparation and cooking on the plantation, were arranged around the main house, often subservient to its lofty elevation: a hierarchical design for a hierarchical social

order, both of which demonstrated planters' authority over nature and society.¹¹ As Stephanie M. H. Camp has noted of the South's antebellum plantation landscape "space mattered," adding that geographies of place, boundaries and movement were crucial to how slavery was organized, enacted and controlled suitable to a system of paternalist governance.¹² As ostensible displays of affluence, position and splendor, the plantation ideal reaffirmed planter hegemony and bolstered the seeming permanence of the region's ruling class from the Old South into the New.

Writing in defense of master-slave relationships and in remembrance of "the sunny days of my childhood," R.Q. Mallard acknowledged that the arrangement of the outbuildings at Montevideo, a large rice and cotton plantation in Liberty County, Georgia, might appear peculiar but were nonetheless conveniently arranged and consistent with "the principle of placing everything as far as possible under the master's eye." Looking from the front door of the main house, a yellow clay smoke and meat house lay to the right, while to the left, "and in sight," was the kitchen, where the "natural genius" of the plantation's female cooks came together in the "production of wholesome, dainty and appetizing food."¹³ As architectural historian John Michael Vlach has argued, the physical separation of the kitchen from the plantation house also "established a clearer separation between those who served and those who were served." This "hardening of social boundaries" across the antebellum period, he explains, also "demanded clearer definitions of status, position, and authority."¹⁴

If food both nourishes and signifies, as one critic explains, food also distinguishes power. Even in the poverty stricken, economically depressed postwar South the provision of food, as well as its presentation, could still very clearly demarcate one's reputation and standing. This was especially true of the former planter class, many of whom adjusted to postbellum labor realities by embracing sharecropping and tenant farming. During the 1870s, to cite one illustrative example, George W. De Renne of Savannah's Wormsloe plantation routinely "used lavish meals to remind local citizens of his continued success, and took great pleasure in describing how he fed his guests." De Rennes' grandiose strawberry and champagne picnics and the spectacle of oyster lunches "sought to prove the durability of his family's wealth through ostentatious displays of food," at once a demonstration of an industrious, prolific plantation and an emblem of planter affluence and eminence within the community.¹⁵

Plantation memoirists certainly made a moral virtue out of antebellum planters' hospitableness and geniality, and provided many examples in their autobiographical writing to demonstrate planter friendliness, paternalism and

benevolence. Harking back to long-standing local traditions and formalities on Mississippi's antebellum plantations, Belle Kearney insisted: "There was a time honored social routine from which they [the planters] seldom varied; a decorous exchange of visits, elaborate dinings and other interchanges of dignified courtesies." Of antebellum banqueting traditions, Kearney maintained that "[e]very entertainment was punctilious, strongly suggestive of colonial gatherings," offering to *fin-de-siècle* readers of her 1900 memoir *A Slaveholder's Daughter* a sense of continuity, constancy and custom in the midst of transition and change.¹⁶ Moreover, receiving the hospitality of the planter's table was a vital ingredient in binding the region's ruling class together, especially on the social, intellectual and political issues of the day.¹⁷

Such depictions are important because of the way they endorse the class system of the antebellum South. In this triumphant image, plantation cooks, house servants and other enslaved peoples are entered into plantation reminiscences, and elsewhere in Lost Cause literature and rhetoric, as dutiful servitors who happily participate in white food habits in the kitchen and wait on the white family in the dining room. If these accounts gesture toward white paternalism to validate idealized race relations they work equally to underline black economic, social and political subservience to whites.

This imaginative space is perfectly invoked by the single illustration of slave cooks in the pages of postbellum planter narratives who are routinely lauded for the accomplishment of their culinary knowledge and skill. "The Virginia cook and the Virginia cooking of that time were the full realization of the dreams of epicures for centuries," insisted John S. Wise in his aptly named memoir *The End of an Era*.¹⁸ Recalling "those happy, free-from-care-days when our hospitable door, always open, brought so many interesting people among us," a South Carolina memoirist exalted the fame of the family cook, noting "her table is still remembered by everyone who sat around it."¹⁹ Recalling her early married life on an Arkansas plantation, Mary Polk Branch remembered Aunt Beck, her husband's nurse and cook, as someone who "believed in the efficacy of a good lunch, [and] would have one prepared in almost incredible time, ably assisted by the other servants." Whether fried chicken, cold ham, or lettuce salad, "these material comforts doubtless served me many a good turn," she enthused.²⁰

Plantation memoirists imagined a close, intimate relationship with their slaves, particularly those who prepared and served them food, binding them as children to black men and women. Examining the interplay between food and the politics of American identity, Doris Witt, in her study *Black Hunger*, suggests that white southerners' "nostalgia for dying dietary practices" also expressed "individual

and collective fears about threats to white patriarchal power in a volatile social order.”²¹ Planter narratives, tinged with nostalgia’s roseate hues, shun any emphasis on hardening social boundaries, segregation of space and imperious supervisory management: these white memoirs circumvent plantation paternalism’s inherent contradictions.

Food certainly played an important role in the context of slaveholder-slave relationships, particularly in the cooperation between masters and enslaved women who worked in the kitchens. Plantation cooks, who were usually well trained, worked creatively with local produce, available ingredients and spices to satisfy the demands of the planter’s table as well as vary the diets of their own families and friends. In slavery times plantation cooks often filched food to supplement their measly and monotonous rations, as did other enslaved peoples on the plantation.²² Contradicting the “boast of slaveholders” that their slaves were well provided for, Frederick Douglass recalled paltry monthly food allowances of tainted pork and poor quality fish for field-hands on Colonel Lloyd’s plantation in Maryland. As an adult slave living in Baltimore, Douglass remembered the “pitiless pinchings of hunger” that compelled him to “steal from the home larder” of his owners.²³

“The world of plenty, however, was never far away,” as cookbook author and culinary historian Jessica Harris has pointed out. “It existed in the Big House, where the master and his guests dined nightly on foods raised, processed, prepared, served, and cleaned up by the enslaved.” The plantation kitchen was a highly influential space, from where the cook (usually under the supervision of the mistress of the house) “fed the master’s family and often oversaw the feeding of all on the plantation.” In short, black cooks exerted a profound influence over southern – and, over time, American – foodways by transmitting the tastes of Africa to the planter’s dining room table, what Eugene Genovese called the “the culinary despotism of the quarters over the Big House.”²⁴

More recently, Rebecca Sharpless’s *Cooking in Other Women’s Kitchens* has offered a thorough examination of African American female cooks, shedding new light on how these women used domestic work to transition from plantation slavery to employment in southern towns and cities. Sharpless highlights the importance of allusions to a “lost fantasy of closeness between African Americans and whites” to postbellum formulations of nostalgia and power relations, demonstrating that images of deferential and cheerful servants were a fulcrum for shaping and directing white historical memory in ways that confirmed a “reassuring tie with the Old South in which cooks worked happily for whatever reward came their way.” Despite these pernicious stereotypes, and in face of discrimination and challenging working

conditions, African American cooks strained to affect some degree of control over their labour and lives, often employing forms of resistance and opposition to demonstrate their agency. For example, ‘pan toting’ – acquiring or pilfering left-over food or other unused scraps from white people’s kitchens – was a practice much in vogue during Jim Crow. Understood by most as a form of recompense for meager wages (to others a custom or charity), many black domestics, particularly cooks and maids, relied on these appropriations to feed their families.²⁵ As the racial order of the New South reinforced ideas of white supremacy and defined the parameters of working relationships, African American cooks used their skills and techniques within the spaces of the urban kitchen to meet the expectations, tastes and preferences of their employers and guests.

“Sich a cookin’!”: Food, faithful slaves and the paternalistic ideal in plantation era life-writing

Let us now consider the ways in which the plantation autobiographical genre used memories of food to imagine the Old South. John Egerton and Marcie Cohen Ferris, among others, have given credence to the ways in which black and white southerners have underscored the importance and diversity of both local and state foodways to maintaining the distinctiveness of the region.²⁶ The artistry of food preparation, the fashions of sub-regional cooking styles, the customs and habits of eating and drinking, and the significance invested in particular articles and varieties of food have all been paid close attention in southern memoir, history and fiction. Descriptions of overloaded tables wheezing under the weight of provision and drinking vessels filled to overflowing pervade southern writing to tickle the taste buds and excite the mouth. Meats, vegetables, sauces, beverages and desserts are served up to readers in celebration of southern self-sufficiency and abundance of resource, as well as family, community and sense of place.

Images of gastronomical grandeur are especially prominent in the literature of the Lost Cause, wherein accounts of sumptuous dinners are used to underpin the apparent benevolence of the old planter patriarch towards his family, white and black, as well as legitimate the stratified social system of the antebellum South. In the postbellum plantation narrative genre, the conspicuous foregrounding of the Mammy as a conduit for white memory and nostalgia served to romanticize the plantation’s black labor workforce, not least of all the female cooks who prepared the food for the planter’s generous table. Rendering the dutiful Mammy stereotype so visibly also effectively masked the spatial divide between food preparation and its consumption –

that is, the hierarchical divide between kitchen and mansion house dining room. Challenging white southerners' nostalgia, black writers such as Frederick Douglass undermined images of the overloaded table as a signifier not of intrinsic elegance or refined culture but of slavery's avarice and exploitation of human toil.²⁷

The divergent ways in which food is used to delineate black and white representations of antebellum plantation life has not gone entirely unnoticed by critics. In their descriptions of "cuisine and civility, rich food and hospitality," Mary Titus observes, plantation memoirists habitually trumpeted scenes of "the groaning table of southern cuisine, heavily laden with baked, stewed, creamed and beaten burdens," a "triumphant image in a battle for the popular representation of the southern home . . . striving for control of 'the way it really was.'"²⁸ Recalling the bountiful largesse of plantation cuisine, recollections that effortlessly fostered images of home and childhood, plantation memoirists' nostalgia was all but irresistible: the tastes of the childhood home encapsulate nostalgia's hunger and thirst for yesterday. Yet plantation memoirists' nostalgia returns a rather blurred vision of the plantation home, a reconstruction that was as much imagined as a lost racial utopia of patriarchal race relations as an escapist idyll of plantations and faithful slaves. Thus these texts narrate not only happy social conditions but the unbreakable bond shared between master and slave during antebellum times, a counterpoint to Jim Crow era race relations and a gesture toward a retrospective justification of slavery that often minimized or erased completely slave resistance and rebellion focusing instead on slave obedience and wider white supremacist beliefs.

Some, like Mississippian Susan Dabney Smedes's *Memorials of a Southern Planter*, published in 1887 as a loving tribute to her father, Thomas Smith Gregory Dabney, that went through some eight editions by 1914, eschewed the word "slave" for "servant," insisting that the old planter's family enjoyed a very close relationship with their servants, particularly the household servants for whom they had "great affection," a feeling that was "warmly returned by the negroes." So "sacred" was the "bond between master and servant," insisted Smedes, that it was as "close as the tie of blood."²⁹

As Eugene Genovese has written, a "special sense of family shaped southern culture" that worked to foster "genuine elements of affection and intimacy" among slaveholders and their dependents.³⁰ Rebuffing any notion that enslaved peoples were chattel pieces of property, items bought and sold from the auction block, evocations of plantation era nostalgia insisted that the relationship of servants to their white masters, although clearly demarcated (that is, slaves knew 'their place'), was ultimately familial, as evidenced by the proliferation of phrases such as 'our people'

and ‘belonged to the family’ in Lost Cause writing. Thus the image of the dependable, dedicated slave proliferated, reaching its apogee in the 1930s with Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* and her tribute to slave fidelity through characters such as Pork and Mammy.

Smedes utilizes Mammy Harriet, “our faithful old nurse” as she is described in *Memorials*, guardian and nurturer of the Dabney children, as a spokesperson to eulogize plantation era paternalism, memories that are told in black dialect voice, a popular literary device of the time. Among other literatures of the Lost Cause, postbellum planter narratives often employed mammies as storehouses of white family history and genealogy, a tactic that deftly positioned the closeness of the master and his family to their workforce (“Mammy Harriet . . . sits by me as I write,” Smedes informs her readers, suggesting the memorial volume would be incomplete without her testimony). Just as antebellum southern whites assumed the happy and contented slave evidenced compassionate and responsible guardianship, postbellum planter narratives reinforced the premise, often using food to work themes of paternalism’s benevolence. Thus, in commentary characteristic of the genre, Mammy Harriet recalls slavery on Dabney’s cotton plantation: “‘We did live like princes, I can tell you. Sich a cookin’! sich a cookin’! We bile greens an’ eberything. We live good; we did that. We didn’t want for nothin’.” We are told that the old planter’s dependents enjoyed beef, mutton, pork, turkey, chicken, a variety of fish, an abundance of potatoes and vegetables, ice-cream, cakes and whiskey; those who fell ill were apparently nursed back to health on port wine and mutton-chops.³¹ Writing in many instances to reverse condemnatory abolitionist propaganda and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s damaging portrayal of the antebellum South and its ‘peculiar institution,’ many plantation memoirists joined with South Carolinian J.G. Clinkscales in portraying slavery’s “virtues” and the intrinsic worth of the master-slave relationship, an association cherished as “very strong and very beautiful.”³²

These sentiments feature prominently in the plantation narrative genre, routine in their emphasis of a seemingly ordered, peaceful and idyllic society. In describing the festivities in Washington D.C. during the decade before the Civil War, Virginia Clay’s 1904 memoir *A Belle of the Fifties* chronicles antebellum times through secession and war to the immediate aftermath of Confederate defeat. In a chapter entitled “The Departed Glories of the Southland,” Clay testifies to the importance of food to descriptions of antebellum plantation life, emphasizing the structured, hierarchical order in southern plantation homes as well as reinforcing the idealization of the antebellum South as a promised land, sanctified in heaven, of abundance and plenty. Clay’s glowing vision of the “domestic discipline in Southern

homes,” which was, we are told, “of an ideal order,” revealed the plantation’s exalted social standing as well as the commitment of that idealized home to the routines and practices of a domestic ideal. Moreover, a bounteous table confirmed white planter caste, as well as their allusions to aristocracy and the suggestion that Mother Nature blessed their social order. “Fruitful vineyards and gardens furnished our luxuries,” bragged Clay of her lavish antebellum lifestyle, recalling all those “old glories” that had “passed away.”³³ White southerners increasingly found refuge in an affective narrative of rural plenty and faithful slaves, a world of abundance and stability that historicized the southern past and with it the plantation as a natural form of society.

Southern whites also accentuated a continuity of loyalty in their homes from those blacks employed in post-emancipation domestic service, a reincarnation of Old South paternal relationships in the New. Grace Elizabeth Hale has described the ways in which upper- and middle-class white southerners “insisted on conflating the plantation household and the post-Reconstruction white home in order to ground their own cultural authority within the power . . . of the plantation-based planter class.” Pivotal to this “fiction of continuity,” as Hale puts it, were black servants, especially the Mammy, who came to both epitomize and obscure slavery. The linking of the postbellum white home with the antebellum household worked to conceal the “very real interdependence” of whites to their domestic labor force. “The white home served as a major site in the production of racial identity precisely because there this racial interdependence was both visible and denied.” Indeed, even the black Mammy, the time-honored emblem of racial and domestic relationships, integrated “all the evasions, confusions, and contradictions” of a white supremacist culture.³⁴

At the same time, the furtherance of a nutritional narrative of healthy race relations, the assertion that blacks were at last realizing the promise of freedom with the support of southern whites, was “aimed partly at the North,” as George M. Fredrickson has summarized, “where there were still lingering doubts about Southern racial policy.” However, by 1890, if not before, most northerners had come to believe that the South’s “new paternalism” would solve the region’s “negro problem.” By the end of the nineteenth century American culture was awash in nostalgia for the Old South; it expunged from memory abolitionist images of slavery’s cruelties and degradations, “and northerners tended to listen with approval every time a prominent Southerner spoke of the blacks in a spirit of tolerant benevolence that seemed to hark back to the happy days on the old plantation.”³⁵ Although the racial philosophy of New South paternalists was somewhat removed from the permissive custodianship of the Old South planter class, ideas of paternalistic benevolence were congenial to the claim of the South’s booster propagandists that a new social and economic era had

dawned. New South spokesmen such as Henry W. Grady and Richard H. Edmonds wooed northern investors with sanguine pronouncements on southern race relations and dependability of the region's labor force. This New South Creed, as Paul M. Gaston labelled it, fused together the alter egos of nostalgia and progress to create a powerful mythology that assured white southerners they could embrace the future without letting go of the past.³⁶

Food for thought: childhood, the “paradise of sweets” and the plantation imaginary

The savored memories of food and other culinary pleasures that southern whites reminisced about in their nostalgic accounts of youthful days on the old plantation can be viewed as an attempt to communicate a paternalist blueprint for the future of race relations shaped around images of nurture, harmony and affection, all of which were in danger of being undermined in an era of tremendous social, political and economic upheaval as the South was thrust into the modern age.

Mississippian Frank A. Montgomery recalled his boyhood in Jefferson County on a cotton plantation with nothing but affection. “I think looking back to that olden time the most delightful existence,” he exclaimed in his 1901 memoir *Reminiscences of a Mississippian in Peace and War*, written to portray the antebellum South of his childhood and laud the First Mississippi Cavalry in which he served during the Civil War. Montgomery specifically remembered the huge boiling pots that hung over the plantation kitchen fireplace as well as large skillets that were placed on hot coals for baking. “These were the days of hoe cakes, ash cakes and Johnnie cakes, and no such cooking has ever been done since, and it makes my mouth water now to think of it,” he recalled dreamily, lamenting their disappearance.³⁷

Montgomery's use of the senses to reconstruct each magical mouthful of flatbread in his happy memories of life on the plantation is especially noteworthy. Here one might suggest that nostalgia “operates in accordance with its pathological etymology, whereby a fixation upon the taste, smell, or eating of particular foods associated with one's homeland is symptomatic of an incapacitating . . . condition” of longing.³⁸ These escapes into memory, tinged with the sad recognition of time fled, are routinely conjured up in the pages of plantation memoirs and reminiscences. Kentucky-born Eliza Ripley's anecdotal *Social Life in Old New Orleans: Being Recollections of My Girlhood*, published in 1912 and dedicated to “My Children and My Children's Children and to Their Children To Come,” invites further meditation on the painful realization of childhood lost; indeed, the first few chapters are focused

on the author's childhood days of which "only the sweet memory of them comes to me in my solitary day-dreams." Ripley's father, Judge Richard H. Chinn, moved his family to New Orleans when his daughter was three years old and her foreword invokes nostalgia's sense of loss at the disappearance of a way of life and with it her childhood. "Far more vivid than the twilight of the days in which I dwell," she writes, "there rises before my inner eye the vision, aglow in Southern sunshine, of the days that are gone, never to return, but which formed the early chapters of a life that has been lived, that can never be lived again." Ripley's nostalgia expressed itself in terms that spoke to good food and good eating, at least for a small child. Thus in the opening pages of her memoir we are introduced to an Italian fruit vendor selling bananas and oranges; "a quadroon woman" vends early morning coffee on Canal Street; recollections come back of crawfishing in street ditches; errands are run with her brother in the old French market; a memory returns of saving a picayune for a cup of coffee and a freshly baked dainty pastry at Manette's stall; a party at a friend's house is remembered fondly as are the "quantities of fig trees" that surround the ample grounds; and, finally, Ripley harks back to dance school, the songs from which, in her twilight years, brought back an almost irresistible urge "to march to lemonade and sponge cake." Remembering these cherished treats and lamenting their disappearance prompts the realization that one inevitably outgrows childhood. "Alack-a-day!" Ripley exclaimed: "Almost all of us have marched away."³⁹

Drawing on the memoirs, letters and diaries of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Europeans and Americans, Peter Fritzsche has explored experiences of rupture and discontinuity among people in this period, emphasizing a fundamental split between an irretrievable past and unsettling present. Within this "melancholic rendition of history," expressions of nostalgia for childhood lost "expressed the degree to which individuals constructed their own identities out of a sense of displacement," he writes.⁴⁰ Writing their stories against a background of war, defeat and Reconstruction, postbellum southern elites such as Eliza Ripley narrated a lifetime's memories to comprehend and understand the fragmenting trends of their age, a retrospection that acknowledged "the destruction of the antebellum dream in war" with the lost childhoods of these – and other – sentimental authors of the 1880s and 1890s.⁴¹

Nostalgia for childhood, ushered in as a pretty picture of the imagination that is at once perfect but unattainable, often tries to recapture paradise lost with memories of favorite foods and culinary contentment, evoking "warm feelings of pleasure, security, and even love as a child."⁴² In expressing nostalgia at the disappearance of the Old South many plantation memoirists turned to descriptions of

food and eating that they had enjoyed as children on the plantation estates of their parents. The nostalgia that bursts from the pages of Letitia M. Burwell's 1895 memoir is displayed in its country setting, a world of music, dancing, parties and weddings, a tranquil, picturesque landscape resurrected from the pastoral scenes of a pampered plantation childhood. A planter's daughter from Virginia, Burwell recalled her upbringing on Oaklands plantation in *A Girl's Life in Virginia before the War*, dedicated to her nieces and to bequeath to them "a record of plantation life as it was." Oaklands, she writes, "was famous for many things: its fine light-bread, its cinnamon cakes, its beat biscuit, its fricasseed chicken, its butter and cream, its wine-sauces, its plum-puddings, its fine horses, its beautiful meadows its sloping green hills, and . . . its refined and agreeable society collected from every part of our own State, and often from others."⁴³

Through a richly detailed, itemized listing of plantation dishes and delicacies, as luxurious as they are enticing, Burwell describes for her readers an antebellum Garden of Eden, a land of profusion and plenty available to all (including the plantation's one hundred slaves, whom, we are told, were so well provided for that they gifted "eggs, chestnuts, popcorn, walnuts, melons, apples, sweet potatoes, - all their 'cupboards' afforded, - with a generosity unbounded" to the white children). Recalling the apparent effortless with which "[e]very Virginia housewife knew how to compound all the various dishes in Mrs. Randolph's cookery book," Burwell rhapsodized that Virginia's plantation tables "were filled with every species of meat and vegetable to be found on a plantation, with every kind of cakes, jellies, blanc-mange to be concocted out of eggs, butter, and cream, besides and endless catalogue of preserves, sweetmeats, pickles, and condiments. So that in the matter of good living, both as to abundance and the manner of serving, a Virginia plantation could not be excelled," we are told.

Continuing with her glowing rendering of plantation gastronomy, Burwell went on:

"Time would fail me to dwell, as I should, upon the incomparable rice waffles, and beat biscuit, and muffins, and laplands, and marguerites, and flannel cakes, and French rolls, and velvet rolls, and lady's fingers constantly brought by relays of small servants, during breakfast, hot and hotter from the kitchen. Then the tea-waiters handed at night, with the beef tongue, the sliced ham, the grated cheese, the cold turkey, the dried venison, the loaf bread buttered hot, the batter cakes, the crackers, the quince marmalade, the wafers, - all pass in review before me."⁴⁴

Burwell ended her memoir by insisting on the inherent truth of the picture she had drawn. As intense as her nostalgia was to bid time return and resurrect her fairy-tale childhood in the Virginia countryside, Burwell's plea to the veracity of her memories was equally strong. Sensitive to forgetting, against the eradication of former lives lost, the past became the primary site where former selves could be remembered, the site where the former planter aristocrats of the Old South could remind themselves of their identities represented by and told in an appropriate narrative.

As witnesses to the destructive forces of the Civil War and observing the onset of New South modernity with unease, plantation memoirists harked back to the Old South of their childhoods, an imaginative escape to be sure but a safe, idyllic space that offered calm and reassurance from unsettling disorientations and dislocations. In these reconstructed spaces, the smells and tastes of childhood rush in and claim nostalgic expression and thought, often coupling them with rustic panoramas of plantation gardens and countryside scenery. Sara Rice Pryor's "earliest sensations" were of her girlhood and she delighted in recalling her enchanting Virginia upbringing at Cedar Grove and Shrubbery Hill plantations. She remembered "gardens – gardens everywhere; abloom with roses, lilies, violets, jonquils, flowering almond-trees . . . double-flowering peach trees [that] were . . . cherished for the beauty of their blossoms." In his study of childhood autobiography, *When the Grass Was Taller*, Richard Coe suggests that the "child's world is the world, not of mountains, but of molehills; primarily not of steppes and prairies, but quite specifically of gardens," the "small world of childhood," as he puts it, is recalled and detailed in all its splendid luminosity. Elsewhere on the Rice family plantations grew "orange and lemon trees" and a "gorgeous flowering pomegranate" along with many other varieties of colorful plants and flowers. Imagining herself back to an antebellum summer, Pryor pictured the "paradise of sweets" that met her senses. A "glistening veil" of dew covered over lilacs, snowballs, myrtles, syringas, tulips, pinks, and purple iris. "Did I not know that the fairies, riding on butterflies, had visited each one and painted it during the night?" she cooed. As she consigned her somnolent plantation garden scenes to memory, Pryor wailed: "Alas! neither you nor I can ever again – except in fancy – cool our lips with the dew-washed fruits of an 'old Virginia' garden." Figs that had fallen overnight, "bursting with scarlet sweetness," were always a temptation too far, she recalled. But no more. "Tell me not of your acrid grape-fruit, or far fetched orange, wherewithal to break the morning fast!" her readers are told. "I know of something better."⁴⁵

The nostalgic tone created by this interplay of food and scenery in postbellum

plantation reminiscences illustrates a falling away from Arcadia, from the full bloom of youth to withering old age: once things were perfect, but the contemporary world intrudes to remind us that things change, wane and fade from view. “For one thing, the moonlight as well as the sunlight shines brighter in our youth than in maturer age,” observed Thomas Nelson Page. “The great thing is not to despond even though the brilliancy be dimmed: in the new glitter one need not necessarily forget the old radiance,” he counselled.⁴⁶ Not only were the days sunnier, the breezes balmier, and the cotton whiter in the pages of plantation memorial literature but the language of nostalgia, dipped in the sentimentalism for childhood lost, is employed in the reconstruction of the antebellum landscape. The Old South vista, rich in color and scent, is described adoringly by one memoirist as a “land where the muscadine climbs and flavors the air with its luscious fruit; where the passion fruit trails its green leaves and purple and white blossoms, and across the fields of white and green, across the river and the forests of blue, blue mountains, bathed in sunlight or veiled in mist.” As Richard Gray has identified, passages such as these are noteworthy not for their “conventionality” but rather their “self-consciousness”; that is, the idea of “working with a prepared code” to map out a world of “arrangement, contrivance, [and] artifice.”⁴⁷

Whatever the motivation, the vibrant hues and perfumed fragrances of descriptions like the one above ultimately reinforce a picture of the plantation era South as a land of munificence, completely in harmony with the rhythms and vastness of the geographic landscape, an almost dream-like vision. The suggestion of boundless abundance is important. While the planter class undoubtedly “ate a much greater variety and . . . served a greater quantity of food” this did not equate to everyday festivals of gastronomic, elegant eating as Joe Gray Taylor has written. Rather, elegance was equated with abundance in the planter mindset.⁴⁸ Recalling grand plantation occasions and festive repasts plantation memoirists seemed determined to emphasize the best of both worlds: abundance and elegance.

Conclusion

In 1901 New York’s New Grafton Press published *Old Times in Dixie Land* by Caroline E. Merrick of Louisiana. As detailed in her memoir, Merrick grew up on her father’s plantation, Cottage Hall, in East Feliciana Parish. Upon her marriage in 1840 to Edwin T. Merrick, later a chief justice of Louisiana, Merrick was gifted a few “good domestics” by her father. Though she had “never coveted the ownership of many slaves,” Merrick readily acknowledged that her “comfort was greatly

promoted” by their possession, not least her cook “who had been for twelve years in training.” Like many other sentimental writers of the Lost Cause, Merrick imagined the friendly relations that masters enjoyed with their enslaved peoples, employing conversations with her cook, written in dialect, to showcase racial harmony and bonds of affection. “I’ll have dinner like yer wants it,” instructs the cook to her young mistress. “Jes’ read yer book an’ res’ easy till I sen’s it ter de dining-room.”⁴⁹ In their admiring presentation of the Old South these memorial works, encapsulated by Merrick’s sentimental vision, offer fragments of the past swathed in nostalgic sentiments that bolster, promote and foster impressions of slavery’s benignity and loving master-slave relationships.

In focusing on these narratives of the Lost Cause, a genre that has remained surprisingly marginalized in social and intellectual histories of the Lost Cause, I have taken the idea of nostalgia as my point of departure, playing close attention to the ways in which it reconstructs, modifies and endows the past with meaning, significance and worth. I believe this nostalgic impulse, responding to personal needs and political desires, enabled white southerners to respond to defeat in war, escape Reconstruction, and navigate the socio-economic transformations that engulfed their region throughout the late nineteenth and beyond. In doing so the past – particularly the world of the plantation, a land of abundance and plenty – was romanticized as a golden age, creating a mood of nostalgia that occupied a critical role in the invention and maintenance of individual and collective identities in the post-Civil War South.

In outlining assumptions about the plantation imaginary, not least its kitchens and cooks, which underpin many white autobiographical accounts of a re-imagined antebellum past, I have shown that this presentation often assigned food and its preparation a symbolic role in framing postbellum power and race relations while presenting the Old South as the appropriate setting through which to demonstrate the commitment of the former planter class to the paternalistic ideal. It is this interplay, I argue, that makes these writings particularly important, especially if we are interested in how nostalgia enters individual and collective memory and also to further understanding of the potency and pervasiveness of nostalgia in the construction of the Lost Cause. In harking back to the South of their childhoods and youth, plantation memoirists successfully recaptured many familiarities of their long-ago selves, reliving, albeit briefly, vivid traces of lived experience, offering up to themselves in the autumn of their lives – and to their readers – one last, sweet sip of the summer wine: to their very simple recipe, just add nostalgia.

Endnotes

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- ¹ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 237. On plantation life writing, see Anderson, “Down Memory Lane.”
- ² For some of the relevant literature, see Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*; Lowenthal, *Past is a Foreign Country*; Ritivoi, *Yesterday’s Self*; Illbruck, *Nostalgia*.
- ³ Atia and Davies, “Nostalgia and the Shapes of History,” 182.
- ⁴ Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 295.
- ⁵ Fritzsche, “How Nostalgia Narrates Modernity,” 75.
- ⁶ Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 158.
- ⁷ Cobb, *Away Down South*, 74.
- ⁸ Matt, *Homesickness*, 104.
- ⁹ Roth, “Dying of the Past,”
- ¹⁰ Colley, *Nostalgia and Recollection*, 32.
- ¹¹ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 531-33.
- ¹² Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 4-6, 16-18, 65, 78-79.
- ¹³ Mallard, *Plantation Life*, 17-19.
- ¹⁴ Vlach, *Back of the Big House*, 43.
- ¹⁵ LeBlanc, “Food, Orality, and Nostalgia,” 246; Swanson, “Wormsloe’s Belly,” 60.
- ¹⁶ Kearney, *Slaveholder’s Daughter*, 2.
- ¹⁷ Taylor, *Eating, Drinking, and Visiting in the South*, 63.
- ¹⁸ Wise, *End of an Era*, 66.
- ¹⁹ De Saussure, *Old Plantation Days*, 56, 54.
- ²⁰ Branch, *Memoirs of a Southern Woman*, 18, 46.
- ²¹ Witt, *Black Hunger*, 56-57.
- ²² Joyner, *Down by the Riverside*, 78, 92-95, 106; Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 98, 159-61, 315; Wallach, *How America Eats*, 41.
- ²³ Douglass, *Life and Times*, 44-45, 98.
- ²⁴ Harris, *High on the Hog*, 102; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 543.
- ²⁵ Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women’s Kitchens*, xv, 74-77, 102.
- ²⁶ Egerton, *Southern Food*; Ferris, *Edible South*.
- ²⁷ For a snapshot of these themes see Titus, “Food,” 279-81.
- ²⁸ Titus, ““Groaning tables,”” 13.
- ²⁹ Smedes, *Memorials*, 47.
- ³⁰ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 74.

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- ³¹ Smedes, *Memorials*, 20, 53, 55-56, 58-59, 66; Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 102. On the image of the devoted slave in American culture see McElya, *Clinging to Mammy*. For analysis of the food the enslaved ate see Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 540-49.
- ³² Clinkscales, *On the Old Plantation*, foreword, 8-9.
- ³³ [Clay-Clopton], *Belle of the Fifties*, 211-12; Titus, “Groaning tables,” 14.
- ³⁴ Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 87-88.
- ³⁵ Fredrickson, *Black Image in the White Mind*, 208.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 210, 214-16; Gaston, *New South Creed*.
- ³⁷ Montgomery, *Reminiscences*, 19-20, 26.
- ³⁸ Hemmings, “Taste of Nostalgia,” 65.
- ³⁹ Ripley, *Social Life in Old New Orleans*, foreword, 3-6.
- ⁴⁰ Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present*, 158, 180.
- ⁴¹ Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 53.
- ⁴² LeBlanc, “Food, Orality, and Nostalgia for Childhood,” 245.
- ⁴³ Burwell, *Girl’s Life in Virginia*, dedication page, 71-72.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2-3, 39-41. The book to which Burwell refers is Randolph, *Virginia House-Wife*, an important and influential nineteenth century American cookbook. On this work see Egerton, *Southern Food*, 19; Ferris, *Edible South*, 87-88.
- ⁴⁵ Pryor, *My Day*, 2, 10-12; Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, 130.
- ⁴⁶ Page, *Red Rock*, ix.
- ⁴⁷ Loy, *Memories of the Sunny South*, 3-5; Gray, *Writing the South*, 79.
- ⁴⁸ Taylor, *Eating, Drinking, and Visiting in the South*, 53. See also Hilliard, *Hog Meat and Hoecake*, 54.
- ⁴⁹ Merrick, *Old Times in Dixie Land*, 17.

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