

Chapter # Familiarity breeds content: shaping the nostalgic drift in postbellum plantation life-writing

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Abstract

This chapter explores postbellum plantation autobiographies and memoirs to reveal the ways in which a lifetime's memories are filtered and reframed, providing a mnemonic template upon which certain cultural assumptions about the Old South plantation imaginary are overlaid. The chapter opens with a brief discussion of how nostalgia creates identity continuity to offset circumstances of change and uncertainty, placing that discussion within the white South's account of its past in the aftermath of the American Civil War. Drawing on a rich, but largely unexplored, body of autobiographical writing by former slaveholders and their kin, it brings into focus the narration of the Civil War as a rift in the fabric of time. Underpinning this sense of historical discontinuity was a gnawing awareness among elite white southerners that the remembered past was receding. The chapter elaborates some of the assumptions underlying the image of the faithful slave in postbellum plantation life-writing. It argues that evocations of close affinities between paternal masters and loyal retainers, which are set uneasily against the backdrop of Jim Crow, were part of a rhetorical strategy designed by whites to outline a future for southern race relations that adhered to the hierarchical patterns of slavery. In such contexts, nostalgia is projected onto the receding past in an effort to forge cultural authenticity and identity, the discussion of which adds a new dimension to current debates around the Old South imaginary and its purveyors

First published in 1887, Susan Dabney Smedes's (1887, p. 3) *Memorials of a Southern Planter* was written so that her father's grandchildren could save for posterity "the memory and example of his life" as a slaveholding planter in Virginia and Mississippi during the antebellum period. "They will come to mature years in a time when slavery will be a thing of the past," wrote Smedes. "They will hear much of the wickedness of slavery and of slave-owners. I wish them to learn of a good master: of one who cared for his servants affectionately . . . and with a full sense of his responsibility. There were many like him." Smedes, a doughty defender of slavery as an institution, was asserting her determination to hand down her father's name untarnished, his reputation imperishable (Dabney, 1978, pp. 2-3; *Daily Times*, 1889, p. 8). Occupying an exalted place in the plantation calendar, Christmas on the Dabney's plantation made the point well. Smedes appropriated Christmas and its rituals and used them to celebrate her father's deeds of benevolence, his generosity of spirit evidenced in tokens of esteem and flattery distributed to his dependents. In one festive scene we encounter Dabney concocting eggnog for "his former overseer and other plain neighbours" and singing songs to servants and field hands, an intimate portrait of plantation community life in which social hierarchies are overcome by a "symbolic gesture of deference" to lower social classes (Smedes, 1887, p. 160; Nissenbaum, 1996, p. 264). The Old South Christmas is one example of the carefully designed literary strategies used by elite whites to elicit nostalgia for an imagined plantation community (Anderson, 2014). Moreover, the vignettes of plantation life celebrated by Smedes present a re-telling of those landscapes from which slavery is left only as memory with the intention of fostering an authentic, real, natural, and thus true formulation of the Old South. With this tactic, a stable, pre-industrial pastoral of faithful slaves and

harmonious race relations elides the traumatic history of slavery, shifting attention from the racial discrimination and violence of the Jim Crow era.

Beginning in the 1880s, members of the old planter elite published autobiographies, memoirs, and other reminiscences to describe their experiences of life on the plantation in slavery times, reaching its zenith during the first decade of the twentieth century. In addition to Susan Dabney Smedes, its authors include R.Q. Mallard, Letitia M. Burwell, John S. Wise, James Battle Avirett, Virginia Clay-Clopton, H.M. Hamill, Sara Agnes Rice Pryor, Eliza Ripley, J.G. Clinkscales, and Susan Bradford Eppes. Among other publishing houses, New York firms including Macmillan, Scribner's, Appleton, and Doubleday Page printed, marketed, and distributed books of plantation reminiscences to reading audiences across America, part of a regional literature, along with history and fiction, that contributed to the literary climate for a prelapsarian South (Cox, 2011, p. 108). Along with these houses, Confederate memorial groups promoted plantation memoirs and reminiscences to their memberships, contributing to the "popular and critical success" of the genre. Such was the deluge of these volumes by the turn of the century, fears were raised among authors and publishers about oversaturating the literary market (Gardner, 2004, pp. 130-31).

Close reading of plantation autobiographies and memoirs, of the sort focused on in this chapter, reveals the ways in which a lifetime's memories are filtered and reframed, providing a mnemonic template upon which certain cultural assumptions about the Old South plantation imaginary are overlaid. Approached thus, these self-representational texts serve to open significant research questions around their content, dissemination, and reception, as well as the pervasive potency of nostalgia that such narratives possess. For a number of critics, nostalgia plays a significant shaping role in constructions of the past, an emotional and political activity expressing the needs of the individuals or social groups whose interests it serves, often the economic and political elite. Aroused by a profound dissatisfaction and uneasiness with a changing present, these memory projects reaffirm and codify invented traditions, of which Eric Hobsbawm (1983, pp. 1-14) has written, and work to establish a sense of continuity with the past, authenticating and legitimating important values, norms, and customs. More recently, a growing body of scholarship has begun to draw attention to the ways in which nostalgia for the past underpins ideas of authenticity and identity, using a cross-disciplinary approach to highlight contexts for imaginings of home, place, and landscape created by temporal and spatial dislocation and distance (Williksen and Rapport, 2010).

In his important study of southern history in the years between Reconstruction and the turn of the twentieth century, Edward Ayers (1992, p. viii) describes the New South as an "anxious place," a land whose people, looking to a future haunted by ghosts of the past, scrambled to maintain a coherent sense of themselves. Retreat into nostalgic recollections of a happier past was a common response to the New South's "unsettling dynamism," not least in the pages of plantation autobiographies and memoirs (Blight, 2001, p. 222). Bemoaning the "energetic spirit of a new age," Mrs. N.B. De Saussure (1909, pp. 9-10) throughout her memoir *Old Plantation Days* repeatedly addresses "the South as it used

to be,” turning recollections of “happy plantation days” into tokens of “loving memory,” a legacy to future generations of southern whites from one “now passing away.” Like other postbellum plantation memoirists, De Saussure thus confronts the inevitable fading of things that manifest nostalgia for the Old South, presenting herself as an authentic voice of lived experience and memory, someone with “a true knowledge” of slavery days on the plantation, “whose life was spent amid those scenes.” De Saussure’s self-identity was rooted in the past, a legacy of history and memory.

Recent critical interventions into debates on southern autobiography and memoir draws attention to the ways in which male and female writers have used shared cultural and historical experiences to define and understand themselves. Challenging assumptions about “faulty or selective memories, conscious or subconscious agendas, or overly imaginative enhancements” that tend to frame scholarly inquiry into autobiography and memoir, John Inscoe (2011, p. 9) has explored the genre’s capacity to apprehend southern history and experience by those who lived it, helping us understand the social forces that have shaped southern identity and regional distinctiveness over time. While much has been written on the canonical works of southern autobiography, Inscoe’s principal focus, postbellum plantation life-writing remains under studied in the literature, but is no less important. All too easily dismissed because of their overt mawkishness and chauvinistic positions, autobiographies and memoirs by whites of antebellum times and the racial patterns of the plantation are worthy of serious study. There exists a need to improve knowledge of this sentimental *oeuvre*, one that has yet to overcome historians’ suspicion of the subjective operations of the human mind and the source material’s innate tendencies toward nostalgia. In particular, more attention needs to be given to the forms and functions nostalgia takes in response to change and transformation, to demonstrate the value of restoring nostalgia to a broader context of debates concerning understandings of the self and social identities.

With this in mind, this chapter is divided into two parts. The first part begins with a brief discussion of how nostalgia creates identity continuity to offset circumstances of change and uncertainty, placing that discussion within the white South’s account of its past in the aftermath of the Civil War. Drawing on a rich, but largely unexplored, body of autobiographical writing by former slaveholders and their kin, I then bring into focus the narration of the Civil War as a rift in the fabric of time, a temporal rupture that violently separated past from present. Underpinning this sense of historical discontinuity was a gnawing awareness among elite white southerners that the remembered past was fading from living memory. Autobiographies and memoirs of life on the plantation, written primarily to give such recollections a more permanent form, preserved the Old South in the aspic of nostalgia. In such a context, nostalgia is projected onto the receding past in articulation of narrative strategies and categories that forge cultural authenticity and identity, the discussion of which adds a new dimension to current debates around the Old South imaginary and its purveyors. The chapter’s second section explores some of the assumptions underlying the image of the faithful slave in postbellum plantation life-writing. Here I argue evocations of close affinities between paternal masters and loyal retainers who are content in their enslavement, set uneasily against the backdrop of Jim Crow, were part of a

rhetorical strategy designed by whites to outline a future for southern race relations that adhered to the hierarchical patterns of slavery. The nostalgic conceit, which abandons the present for the past, allies with the desire to retrieve – or revive – an earlier, presumably more authentic time.

Building on the seminal sociological work of Fred Davis (1979), recent critics have nuanced understanding on the lineaments of nostalgic experience, evocation, and reaction, paying detailed attention to why, how, and with what effect, nostalgia is employed by the individual and the group in the construction and maintenance of identity. As Nadia Atia and Jeremy Davies (2010, p. 184) argue, referencing Davis, “nostalgia serves as a negotiation between continuity and discontinuity: it insists on the bond between our present selves and a certain fragment of the past, but also on the force of our separation from what we have lost.” In this context, the identity dislocations produced by abrupt social change and upheaval, and their attending anxieties and uncertainties, as Davis (1979) identified, reveal some of the ways in which the timbre of nostalgia’s cognitive state acts as a compelling interpretive lens through which the past is viewed, filtered, and interpreted according to the needs of the present.

The nostalgic turn of white southerners after the Union’s defeat of the Confederacy in 1865 and efforts to memorialise and commemorate the Lost Cause has attracted considerable scholarly attention over the years, much of which focuses on the complex interplay between remembering and forgetting in themes of race, reunion, and reconciliation (Janney, 2013; Cook, 2017). This corpus of literature offers valuable insight into the rhetorical processes at work during the post-war years that shaped southern identities, histories, and narratives in important ways. These processes explain, in part, the burgeoning “reminiscence industry” of the late nineteenth century to which David Blight (2001, p. 166) refers. Accounts of the antebellum era by members of the old planter class regard the Civil War as a moment of temporal rupture, an epochal shift signalled by the dual transition from peacetime to wartime and back again. Ruined by war, humiliated by defeat, and insulted by Reconstruction’s radical Republican governments, southern whites turned eagerly to nostalgia for consolation, harking back to the good old days with “exaggerated tenderness” (Logan, 1950, p. 234). In his insightful history of southern identity, James Cobb (2005, pp. 73-74) rightly observes the Civil War and Reconstruction provided white southerners with a distinctive historical experience. Temporal lines were redrawn in the aftermath of the Civil War, which “fast-forwarded the antebellum southern order through the process of ageing and historical distancing,” and transformed the South prior to 1860 into the Old South, “frozen away in some distant corner of time and accessible only through the imagination.” Cut off from the present, the Old South became lost in time and, for that very reason, timeless – static, fixed, and immutable, “distance,” in Richard Gray’s (1986, p. 89) words, “could give a romantic blur to everything.”

In 1926, aged 80, Susan Bradford Eppes (1926, p. 13) published *Through Some Eventful Years*, an account of her upbringing in antebellum Leon County and the Florida cotton belt, a perspective shaped in the decades that followed the events the memoir attempts to explain. Her childhood and youth

on Pine Hill, her father's plantation, was "an era of 'House Parties,'" we are told, especially at Christmas time when "colored servitors, enough for every demand," readied, cooked, and served "all the luxuries of life." However, the Civil War "devastated" the region, hastening change with such "lightning-like rapidity" that white southerners "dared not look the future in the face." Old South civilisation, she concluded with sorrow, was "slowly but surely dying," emphasising a temporal dichotomy between "the traditions, the principles, [and] the customs of bygone days," an era "forever cherished," and the "dark days of Reconstruction" that followed. "Where once wealth abounded, poverty stalked, gaunt and bare" (Eppes, 1926, pp. 325, 340, 344, 370). Not even nostalgia was as good as it used to be.

The Civil War shattered the plantation world as the old order had known it. Southern whites who figured that past as a Golden Age were particularly alert and sensitive to what was lost and irrecoverable, a verity evident in their life-writing and reluctant farewell to Old South civilisation. "These were the halcyon days of the South, gone never to return," claimed Frank Montgomery (1901, p. 20), a former cotton planter, in his *Reminiscences of a Mississippian in Peace and War*. Virginian H.M. Hamill (1904, pp. 6, 38), "born in and of the Old South," voiced his "abiding regret" that the plantation world of his childhood and youth was "gone forever." In her posthumously published *Social Life in Old New Orleans*, originally a series of newspaper articles which appeared in the city's *Times-Democrat*, Eliza Ripley (1912, pp. 263, 191) grieved over "days that are gone, never to be lived again," the end of a way of "life that died and was buried fifty years ago."

The envisioned nullification of the past, of an era that was "gone," caused both distress and dislocation, and gave rise to feelings of temporal rupture and fragmentation in numerous postbellum works of life-writing. In his memoir of plantation life in McIntosh County, Georgia, Edward J. Thomas (1923, p. 5) noted that he "lived in two distinct periods of our Southern history," for the Civil War "completely severed the grand old plantation life" from the "striving conditions that followed." Visiting Burleigh, the Dabney family plantation, after the war, a family friend likened scenes there to "an evil dream," remarking unhappily, "times are changed" (Smedes, 1887, p. 241). Edward Spann Hammond (Hammond, cited in Clay-Clopton, 1905, p. 212), son of the affluent coastal South Carolina planter James Henry Hammond, felt like he "had been in two worlds, and two existences, the old and the new . . . so thorough has been the upheaval and obliteration of the methods and surroundings of the past." Thus the Civil War was framed as a precipitous moment of fundamental rupture, split, and division, estranging the past from the present.

In accordance with Fred Davis's (1979, pp. 49, 102) assumption that "rude transitions rendered by history" can jar our being and mark our epochs, tropes of ruin inflect plantation memoirists' reading of the Civil War. In *My Day: Reminiscences of a Long Life*, Sara Pryor (1909, p. 273), wife of Congressman Roger A. Pryor, of Virginia, claimed she and her husband "found it almost impossible to take up our lives again" following the Civil War. "All the cords binding us to the past were severed, beyond the hope of reunion." Reunited at war's end, the Pryors "sat silently" looking out on war-ravaged Richmond, onto "a landscape marked here and there by chimneys standing sentinel over

blackened heaps,” where neighbours, now displaced, had once “made happy homes.” North Carolinian Mary Norcott Bryan ([1912], pp. 25-26) returned home at the end of the war to find Woodlawn, the family’s “beautiful and valued” home, “an abandoned plantation,” the slave cabins, barns, and outhouses dismantled, trees felled, and livestock scattered. One memoirist later summed up the situation thus: “The war was our undoing, our alpha and omega” (Winston, 1937, p. 5).

The presentation of “dreadful days” of “war and fire and famine” is juxtaposed with the sentimental portrayal of life on a South Carolina lowland plantation during the 1840s and 50s in De Saussure’s (1909, p. 10) *Old Plantation Days*, “the recollection of which causes my heart to throb again with youthful pleasure.” Written as a letter to a granddaughter raised in the North, De Saussure recounts the Old South’s “delightful open-hearted, open-handed way of living” as a rebuff to critiques of slavery, taking aim at *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Harriet Beecher Stowe’s anti-slavery novel (1909, pp. 53, 17). In his memoir, *The End of an Era*, J.S. Wise (1899, p. 77) also found “outrageous exaggerations” in Stowe’s novel, while James Battle Avirett (1901, p. 64) deemed it an “ignorant compend of anger, hatred and malice.” Unsurprisingly, postbellum plantation romancers rejected any counter-narratives that contested their claim to an authentic past, drawing inspiration from memories of lived experience and the nostalgia of reminiscence deepened with the passage of time. Elite white southerners’ stories of the southern past were more Uncle Remus than Uncle Tom.

As David Blight (2001, p. 222) has shown, romanticised accounts of the plantation and its inhabitants offered white southerners and other Americans “emotional fuel and sustenance,” a counterpoint to the social and economic problems of the Gilded Age. Given Blight’s emphasis on Gilded Age insecurity, it is worth pointing out that many white northerners eagerly embraced the “idyll of the Old South’s plantation world” and its celebration of reunion and reconciliation in the North-South relationship. The nostalgic turn to the antebellum South during the late nineteenth century, at once celebrated a claimed authenticity and hailed a region carefully attuned to the pastoral traditions of pre-industrial America; “an unheroic age could now escape to an alternative universe,” one where traditional race, class, and gender hierarchies persisted (Blight, 2001, pp. 211, 222; Cox, 2011, pp. 3-5).

Received by critics as “faithful to fact” (*Congregationalist*, 1895, p. 527), *A Girl’s Life in Virginia Before the War*, by Letitia M. Burwell (1895, pp. 12-14), traces life in the Piedmont where the author’s distinguished ancestors, for nine generations, owned plantations. Bound in a light brown cloth with a cotton bud decoration on the front cover, the volume includes sixteen black-and-white illustrations depicting Old South scenes and settings by artists William A. McCullough and Jules Turcas. In one sketch, an elderly ex-slave, dressed in rags and carrying a walking stick, is seen talking to the mistress of the plantation, pleading to be taken in and looked after; it includes a strap line that reads: “I don’t want be free no mo.” The old man is directed to the plantation kitchen where he is given something to eat. Freedom after emancipation, as perceived within Burwell’s reminiscences, is

imagined as a “very dreadful and unfortunate condition of humanity.” By way of gratitude to the plantation mistress for her “kindly” offer of food and shelter, the freedman “entertained” the Burwell family with “pleasant reminiscences” of old times, occasionally offering a “sigh that the days of glory had departed.” Recounting the former slave’s personal reminiscences, which “had a certain charm,” Burwell observed a “mournful contrast between past and present” on the plantation and the relationships it fostered between both races, now irrevocably altered or altogether lost. As David Blight (2001, p. 286) put it succinctly, “white Southerners strove to convince themselves that emancipation had ruined an ideal in race relations.”

The illustration in Burwell’s sentimental volume illuminates several key themes in the faithful slave narrative, not least the assumption that slaves never really wanted to be set free. In *Dixie After the War*, Myrta Lockett Avary (1906, pp. 183-85) recalls the night her father, a Virginia planter, told his slaves that they were to be given freedom. Standing on the porch beside her father, Avary looked “out on the sea of uplifted black faces” as the momentous news was read by candlelight. “They listened silently” to their master’s words, we are told, trying to make sense of a unique historical moment. “Some wiped their eyes, and my father had tears in his,” wrote Avary. As the freedpeople passed before their old master, “one and all” stated their determination to stay on the plantation and carry on living and working as before. Ultimately, the impact and consequences of emancipation were far reaching, and fundamentally reshaped the region’s agricultural labour systems and working arrangements. Yet here was a smooth transition from slavery to freedom, a passionate advocacy of “white nobility, black humility, mutual obligations, faithful service, and the extended family unit – black and white” (Litwack, 1980, p. 192).

The image of the loyal slave is ubiquitous in postbellum plantation autobiographies and memoirs, as it was in turn of the century novels, plays, minstrel shows, and popular songs. Many late nineteenth century literary immortalisers of the Old South had, of course, experienced plantation life and witnessed slavery as children. As Grace Elizabeth Hale (1998) and Jennifer Ritterhouse (2006) have demonstrated, childhood was the crucial formative period when southern whites learned racial difference, representation, and hierarchy. “I am no apologist for slavery,” wrote Eliza Ripley (1912, p. 192) in her memoir, “but we were born to it, grew up with it, lived with it, and it was our daily life.” Here identity connects with place, the plantation. It is a claim that relies on the sense of authenticity conveyed by lived experience, memory, and nostalgia. Such motifs accord with a broader sentimental ideology of childhood innocence, which, as Robin Bernstein (2011, p. 4) has argued, tended to reinforce white racial projects, making them “appear natural, inevitable, and therefore justified.” For romantic depictees of old plantation days, as Hale (1998, p. 54) explains, “desire for childhood innocence converged with a regional longing for racial harmony.”

During slavery, white children made regular visits to the slave quarters. Their after-the-fact nostalgia is signalled through recollections of children at play and other amusements in which whites and blacks interacted. Mary Ross Banks (1882, pp. 19-20), from a white upper-class background in

Georgia, recalled spending “some of the purest, happiest hours” learning “the best lessons of my life” from old Granny Sabra, whose “devotion” to the slaveholding family was “quite beautiful.” Victoria V. Clayton’s (1899, p. 23) *White and Black Under the Old Regime*, a collection of vignettes embracing plantation life on the banks of the Chattahoochie River, similarly delights in recounting childhood memories of visits and chats with the enslaved peoples on her father’s plantation. Letitia Burwell (1895, pp. 2-3), who enjoyed a gloriously privileged childhood, remembered regular outings to the slave cabins, located about a mile from the big house, “on which occasions no young princesses could have received from admiring subjects more adulation” than she and her sister received from their “dusky admirers.” That bonds of affection and mutual respect between whites and blacks ran deep, so imperfectly understood by those who had never experienced it, is stated explicitly by J.G. Clinkscales (1916, pp. 35-36) in his account of his plantation childhood which records playful scenes with Unc’ Essick, the plantation foreman, a “faithful slave,” a “patient teacher,” and a “colored gentleman.” For southern whites, such reciprocal friendships and cares, formed on plantation estates during slavery, marked a watershed in the history of southern race relations.

Raised on a rice plantation in Liberty County, Georgia, R.Q. Mallard (1892, p. vii) likened the attachments between master and slave to the “strength of the ties which connect dear kindred.” Mallard was keen for his reminiscences to be read as a blueprint for the future of race relations in the South, to “contribute to the restoration of the mutual relations of kindness and confidence characterising the old regime” that had been “sorely strained” by the “unhappy” trials of emancipation, war, and Reconstruction policies. For Mallard, a return to the best traditions of the master-slave relationship as it existed within a Christian plantation community would bring about more harmonious race relations in the postbellum era and solve the South’s race problem. These narrative spaces which accommodate portrayals of the master-slave dialectic, trading on assumptions of unbroken inheritances from the Old South, formulate a notion of authenticity that derives its legitimacy from some measure of imagined continuity between past and present.

Many plantation memoirists ventured similar testimony to elevate and embellish an institution that died with emancipation, animating a central tension between an authentic past – one that is anchored in its certainties – and a present that is deemed to be unmoored and off course. Writing of his memories on Alabama’s “great plantations, in their picturesque colors,” H.M. Hamill (1904, pp. 31-32) insisted that the state’s enslaved people were “well fed and clothed,” were “moderately worked,” and lived a “careless, heart-free life.” The enslaved population appeared to want for nothing. Hardship and suffering came with freedom. The “care-worn faces” of the “old-time negroes” told its own story, according to Hamill; for them, the half-century following emancipation was “full of heartache and worry,” freedom “had proven a cheat and a snare.” Antebellum days served as a model against which to contrast blacks “born and trained under slavery,” a group who “commands respect in the South today,” with “those who have known nothing but freedom,” an “unsatisfactory body of people generally.” Black men and women born and raised in slavery on the plantation, trustworthy, dignified, restrained,

“docile and reverent,” would “always” be “the friend of the Southern white gentleman and lady,” he claimed. Many southern whites held fast to the paternal ideal, convinced that the best elements of the old institution were the best hope for the continuance of racial order in the New South. By the turn of the century, however, this crisis of mastery had developed into a system of legalised racial segregation, voter disfranchisement, and endemic violence against blacks.

In this context, writers found it easy to retreat from worsening race relations within segregation to images that invoked a simpler, less complicated past. Lectures on plantation life and recitals of dialect stories set in a plantation setting were especially popular on the American lyceum and Chautauqua circuits during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of these narrations, which create tensions between authenticity and artifice, were published subsequently in literary magazines and edited collections. Martha Gielow’s (1898, 1902) dialect monologues, character sketches, and “darky” songs, performed in America and Britain and published as *Mammy’s Reminiscences and Other Sketches* and *Old Plantation Days*, were well received by the press. *The Atlanta Constitution* (1901, p. 9) considered Gielow’s portrayals of life in the slave quarters authentic and faithful accounts; “they are life photographs of the real thing, or, better still, pictures from out your own memory and experience.” Gielow, a figure almost forgotten today, began her public career as a reader of regional dialect stories written by Joel Chandler Harris (“Uncle Remus”) and Thomas Nelson Page (“Marse Chan”) before being persuaded to write of her own recollections growing up in Alabama’s Black Belt. Interestingly, Gielow (1898, pp. vii-viii) criticised the “grossly exaggerated and caricatured” image of blacks in minstrel shows and other productions that rendered the slaves “unrecognizable by those who knew and loved them.” Inspired by “actual happenings related to me by my own black Mammy,” Gielow’s “character sketches and jingles” presented “a correct and natural dramatic impersonation of the old-time Mammy and Daddy, the devoted foster parents to the children of the South.” If the use of dialect gave plantation autobiographies and other forms of reflective writing “a perceived authenticity,” then it also enhanced images of a bucolic South at a time when the Jim Crow system was expanding and racial violence increasing (Cox, 2011, p. 118).

Autobiographies and memoirs by former slaveholding planters and their families exhibit a conspicuous nostalgia for life on the southern plantation before the Civil War, especially the everyday personal relationships between the master class and the enslaved. Susan Dabney Smedes’s *Memorials of a Southern Planter*, for example, recalls the Old South of her childhood and youth in a series of evocatively rendered vignettes that sustain and support an idealised past of paternalistic race relations that emancipation and war either ended or considerably weakened. Smedes’s reconstruction of the Old South, of nostalgic reminiscences affectionately told, served as a primary vehicle through which plantation memoirists negotiated a sense of belonging in an era of transformative socio-political shifts. In short, memories were brought to bear in pursuit of an authentic regional identity, one that looked to the past for its sense of cultural distinctiveness.

Given nostalgia's major role in shaping, developing, and proliferating an authentic cultural memory of the Old South and the Lost Cause of the Confederacy, it is surprising that the topic has not received more attention from historians. Plantation autobiographies and memoirs, frequently dismissed as trite and inconsequential, are an important, though overlooked, category of Gilded Age writing projects that imagined a southern past of plantations and racial harmony. Seen, of course, through the optic of white experience, these narratives legitimated Jim Crow and justified white supremacy, ensuring blacks remained socially, politically, and economically subservient to the white ruling class. At the same time, many black writers challenged the nostalgic creed of the Lost Cause. Here the Old South and plantation era slavery is understood not in terms of loss, regret, and reverential memory but as a tragedy of American history, a history of oppression, suffering, and prejudice. However, for those southern whites who turned to antebellum times on the plantation, clinging to a version of the past imagined as authentic, one that sanctioned their racial privilege and power, the inclination of the nostalgic drift was to a vanished world of faithful slaves in devoted and lifelong service. Refuge was to be found in the long shadow of the Old South's sunset glow.

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