

Tales From the Haunted South: Dark Tourism and Memories of Slavery From the Civil War Era

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Review

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Miles, Tiya *Tales from the Haunted South: Dark Tourism and Memories of Slavery from the Civil War Era*. University of North Carolina Press, \$24.95
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Haunted History and Public Memory

Paranormal investigation shows like *Ghost Hunters* are nearly a dime a dozen, and with the rise of these paranormal programs came a rise in interest in haunted history. Cities with antebellum pasts are now home to countless companies specializing in ghost tours, and plantations boast of haunted rooms and spectral sightings. Guides enthusiastically proclaim their site's unique haunting and the history that goes with it, often relying on the stories of enslaved black people. The tales appropriate African American history, misinterpreting the past for sale, and romanticizing and exploiting the lives of slaves for profit. In her book, *Tales from the Haunted South: Dark Tourism and Memories of Slavery from the Civil War Era*, Tiya Miles examines this popular form of tourism often pushed at plantations, urban houses, and cemeteries across the South.

During a visit to New Orleans, one tour guide warned Miles that ghosts could attach themselves to visitors and follow them home, a way Miles would later use to describe how her interest in haunted history and dark tourism started. *Tales from the Haunted South* is divided into three case studies of dark tourism in the South – the house of the infamous Madame LaLaurie in New Orleans, the Myrtles in St. Francisville, Louisiana, and the Sorrel-Weed House in Savannah - but it was the haunting of the Sorrel-Weed House that followed Miles home. The house boasts of being one of the most haunted in America thanks to its resident ghost, Molly, a young slave who had been cause having an affair with the master and was later found strangled in the carriage house. There are no records to support any of the claims made by and about the Sorrel-Weed House, at least none that came up in Miles's investigation, but it is nevertheless a story that has

pervaded public memory of the site.

The goal of Miles's research is not to prove or disprove the claims by haunted landmarks she visits, but rather to discuss how those stories effect how people today view the past. Dark tourism often relies on the most sensational and macabre parts of African American history, usually streaked with forbidden romances or voodoo to make these stories more exciting – and profitable. The Myrtles in Louisiana claims both a forbidden romance and voodoo magic with the stories of Chloe, a slave girl who had an affair with the master of the house, and Cleo, a voodoo priestess who failed to heal the master's children. In both cases, the women were murdered and now supposedly haunt the old house, roaming the grounds and playing tricks on the guests.

What these tourists are accepting as history, however, is at best highly stylized and embellished, and at worst completely made up. These stories largely leave out the realities of slavery – the imbalance of power in master-slave relationships, the constant threat of violence, the importance of race and religion - and instead feed the idea of the grand Old South, making the narrative of the antebellum and Civil War era South more palatable for modern-day - and in Miles's experience largely white - audiences.

While in New Orleans for a conference, Miles did manage to find time to go on a cemetery tour. Her tour guide, an older white woman, showed the group through three of New Orleans's famous cemeteries. Miles makes sure to make the distinction between this tour and the other tours highlighted in her book. Instead of ghost hunting equipment like the guides of haunted tours, this woman had invested in studying histories, architectural features, and care of cemeteries – information she passed on to her audience. She left more sensational stories and hauntings to other guides around the city. This tour contrasted starkly to the tour she took later during her conference stay, with its gris-gris bags and lengthy stop at Marie Laveau's alleged grave.

Miles connects African American history, fabled ideas of the antebellum South, and public memory as she dives into the idea of the haunted South. Her work is a fascinating look at how the ways in which we conceive and contend with these ghosts relates to the greater discussion of how we remember slavery.

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