

Jessica Adams, *Wounds of Returning: Race, Memory, and Property on the Postslavery Plantation*, 2007 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press)

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The author's description of this study as an 'eclectic, unconventional plantation tour' (15-16) probably best surmises *Wounds of Returning*, a highly original but often frustrating work on the spatial, cultural and ideological legacy of southern plantations since emancipation. Adams builds from a Lockean foundation concerning the connection between property and the individual to argue that race forms an integral part of the relationship between possession, property and personhood in the American south. Using a wide array of cultural and literary artefacts Adams assesses the ways in which plantation culture has been negotiated through film, music, literature and tourism. She contends that the plantation, both as a physical and ideological space, has cemented itself in contemporary southern society. Adams argues that the history of a slave past still inhabits even radically transformed plantation landscapes, 'inflicting new wounds and reopening old ones' (5).

The book's opening chapter explores how race and gender were negotiated in postbellum Louisiana. The author analyses texts by Kate Chopin, Grace King and Alice Dunbar alongside the infamous Storyville district in New Orleans, arguing that female sexuality 'destabilizes the relationship between race and property' (24) which still existed in the postbellum period. Chapters two and three address the position of the plantation as a site for cultural reproduction. Whilst chapter two largely adheres to Adams' original thesis through its discussion of plantation tourism in Louisiana, it is in chapter three where the direction of this study seems to falter. Adams opens with a note on lynching but quickly jumps to a discussion of Elvis and Graceland as the 'plantation home of the archetypal White Negro' (90) before moving on to the work of William Faulkner. Chapter four is perhaps the weakest chapter in the book, as Adams does not convincingly align her examination of Willa Cather and the 'southern frontier' with the work of the previous chapters. Narrative focus is somewhat regained in the final chapter, an intriguing assessment of the Louisiana State prison in Angola and its previous incarnation as a plantation.

Chapters three and four highlight most frequently the central weakness of Adams' study. Although the sheer variety of topics and subjects discussed by Adams is impressive, the scope of her research is too ambitious, which means that some of her conclusions are underdeveloped. At times *Wounds of Returning* veers towards self-indulgence, both in structure and style. Adams acknowledges a fellow scholar who's 'embrace of the poignancy of history showed me that scholarly work could be poetry' (ix), and this is indicative of her own lyrical style of writing. Whilst this makes *Wounds of Returning* an enjoyable read, it also means that Adams' arguments are not as concise or as clear as they could have been. At times her use of language makes it hard to separate insight from jargon, and this is not helped by her failure to sufficiently limit or explain the aims and purposes of each chapter in the introduction. Chapter one, for example, is broadly described as an examination of 'the plantation as a figure of memory that informs representations of women's bodies', whilst chapters two and three explore 'the physical spaces of plantation houses as they have become integrated into twentieth- and twenty-first century popular culture' (17). Such broad topics could easily be the focus on an entire book, yet Adams attempts to cram them into a single chapter before moving on to a different topic in another location. It seems ironic that the author criticises the role of heritage tourism and consumer culture in propagating a plantation legacy when the overwhelming sense one gets as a reader is that of a tourist on Adams' whirlwind tour of the south.

Wounds of Returning is at points an insightful and original take on the continuing impact of spatial and cultural legacies of the southern plantation. At other points it is a frustrating and

underdeveloped text that never fully reconciles its disparate strands of discussion into a cohesive central thread. One feels that with more stringent editing and a sharper research focus Adams could have produced a truly groundbreaking study. As it is, *Wounds of Returning* is an entertaining, if flawed, addition to the literature on Southern history and postbellum studies on race and gender.