Touching the Past: Materializing Time in Traumatic "Living History" Reenactments

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ABSTRACT

Many living history reenactors speak of "touching the past" in their performances. In nearly all instances, these profound experiences of intimate traffic with previous epochs and persons are brought about not through physical contact with historical artifacts but through deployments of replicas and props, including recently produced adornment, weaponry, vehicles, and tools. This essay explores the roles and functions of material reproductions or substitutes of historic artifacts in reenactment performances, and how these object-oriented practices often bring about powerful sensations of historic authenticity on the part of reenactors and their audiences. I give particular attention to the use of physical objects by those who seek to reenact traumatic events and experiences related to American histories of racial injustice, including experiences of slavery and Jim Crow racial violence.

The modern sign dreams of its predecessor, and would dearly love to rediscover an obligation in its reference to the real.

—Jean Baudrillard (1993, 51)

My title, "Touching the Past," is taken from a participant's commentary on a January 2011 reenacted slave auction.[1] To help mark the 150th anniversary of the start of the Civil War, a group of about seventy-five African American and white performers gathered on the front

I am grateful for the hospitality, generosity, and thoughtful commentaries of the many living history reenactors with whom I have worked over the past decade. This essay has also benefited from critical conversations and correspondence with J. Hope Amason, Angela de Silva, John Howell, Edward Linenthal, Joseph McGill, Richard Parmentier, Robert Paul, Ellen Schattschneider, Rosalind Shaw, Bradd Shore, Michael Silverstein, and Jane Taylor. I am also grateful for thoughtful commentaries by the reviewers for *Signs and Society*.

1. All ethnographic quotations are taken directly from field interviews and observations, as recorded in my field notes.

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steps of the old federal courthouse in downtown St. Louis, in front of about 600 onlookers. Under the direction of scholar-activist Angela de Silva, eleven African Americans playing the roles of enslaved persons were marched down the street, some wearing manacles, and slowly mounted the courthouse steps, where hundreds of persons of color had in fact been sold in auction during the first five decades of the nineteenth century. One by one, they stood upon a small wooden crate, or "block," as a white auctioneer "sold" them to the highest bidder. Soon afterward, I spoke to a twenty-year-old African American man I shall call Arthur about his experiences as he reenacted being sold. He remarked quietly,

> I can't explain it, something happened to me up there, standing on that block. I looked out there, and it wasn't just my eyes I was seeing through. I was seeing what somebody else saw, a long time ago, being torn away from everyone they loved. I felt what my ancestors must have gone through. . . . Up there on that same block, I guess you could say I was touching the past and, the past, well, it was touching me.

Alice, an African American woman in the audience, told me,

> You could see something happened up there, right as Arthur got up on the block. Before then, you could say he was acting, he was acting that part, struggling against his chains. And he was great, a great actor, I'd say. . . . But then, up there on that block, where so many terrible things had happened long ago, something happened to him. . . . You could see it, he got real still and quiet, like he was looking at something far, far away. . . . It was him, and it wasn't him. . . . Gives me chills, just talking about it.

Robert, a white man listening to our conversation, nodded emphatically and chimed in, "That's it. I could see that too, up there on that auction block. That's when I realized, this isn't just a play, isn't just a performance. This was real, this was something you just have to see to understand."[2]

I take these commentaries as my point of departure for exploring the meanings and efficacy of material objects used in living history reenactments of traumatic events in America's turbulent racial past, most notably slave auctions and lynchings. The performers and observers of the 2011 reenactment knew full well that the wooden crate upon which Arthur stood was a prop, a mundane object or replica that did not date to the time of slavery. Yet, in the context of

2. For a discussion of the 2011 St. Louis reenactment, see Auslander (2012).

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the reenactment scenario, this object became "the block," redolent of every space upon which enslaved African Americans had been sold and separated forcibly from loved ones during the 250 years of chattel slavery in America. The power and effectiveness of the performance, and of the pivotal material object of the block, was for these speakers signaled by two significant transformations. Standing on the block, Arthur himself experienced an internal subjective transition, from being in the here and now to being intimately bound to or co-present within a past historical epoch. Equally important, he was seen by others as undergoing a profound transformation while in intimate contact with this object. That visible interior transformation, which scrambled conventional distinctions between actor and role, was key to establishing the event as "real" for those who beheld it.

In approaching these intimate transactions between subjects and objects within the highly charged performance space of reenactment, it is helpful to consider Jean Baudrillard's (1993) assertion that a signal crisis of modernity lies in the general rupturing of productive symbolic exchange between the living and the dead, a matrix of circulation that was foundational to the cultural and spiritual life of premodern social formations. For Baudrillard, the loss of intimate exchange with ancestral beings is manifest in the distantiated relationship most modern persons have with broader processes of signification. The modern sign, he insists, has "only a designatory bond of symbolic obligation" (Baudrillard 1993, 51). Because of this absence, Baudrillard proposes, modern persons long for productive exchange with the dead, just as we long to reenter intimate realms of signification and to return to the prelinguistic domain of "the real" that is normally closed to us as adults: "The modern sign dreams of its predecessor, and would dearly love to rediscover an obligation in its reference to the real" (Baudrillard 1993, 51). This dream, for Baudrillard, is beyond fulfillment, as we are condemned to the regime of the simulacrum, providing only illusionary intimacy with the real.

Under certain conditions, modern living history reenactments offer participants and observers the promise of coming into direct, intimate contact with past persons and past epochs, "touching the past" through sensual contact with physical objects that stand in for historical artifacts. Material elements used in historical reenactments are in nearly all instances divorced from the cult of physical authenticity that predominates in museums; although many serious reenactors may own an actual rifle, saber, or uniform dating to the Civil War era, they will hardly ever use these artifacts during battle reenactments. Nonetheless, the replica objects used in reenactment may have enormous emotional

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valence and ritual potency. They serve as what structural anthropologists have long termed *structural operators*, allowing for dynamic exchange between the present and the past, and between the living and the dead. At the same time, these objects may serve as tangible barometers of what we might call *emotional authenticity*, helping to create a ritual performative field of affective transformation, aiding in (*a*) interior subjective experiences of being in the past and (*b*) the visible manifestation of "real" emotive states by the performers, which are seen as collapsing the conventional distinction between role and actor. Reenactments are manifestly simulations, yet under some cases they seem to move beyond Baudrillard's characterization of the simulacrum as they summon up earlier conditions of ritual exchange within archaic life-giving economies.

Preludes: Reenacting Slave Auctions in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

To make sense of the enigmatic emotional and ritual efficacy of these replicated objects, it is helpful to return to the mid-nineteenth-century antecedents of modern reenacted slave auctions. The first reenacted slave auctions in the historical record took place during the late antebellum period, performed by abolitionist minister Henry Ward Beecher from 1848 to 1860 in New York.[3] Beecher, often termed the most popular Protestant minister of nineteenth-century America, was fond of dramatic acts in church that blurred the lines between reality and performance. He famously purchased the manacles with which John Brown had been bound, then trampled them in church. His most notable ritualized performances were a series of mock or reenacted slave auctions, held from his pulpit. The first was an 1848 church service at the Tabernacle Church on Broadway in New York City, at which he raised money for the redemption of the Edmonson sisters, two light-skinned mixed-race women who were threatened, under complex legal circumstances, with sale into slavery. Beecher, playing the role of a southern auctioneer, extemporized a reenacted slave auction from the pulpit, raising $2,200 from the assembled congregants to secure their freedom.[4] Like Beecher's many subsequent reenacted auctions, the event was subject to considerable criticism; among other things, these performances directly funneled money to slave owners and slave traders and cast vulnerable young woman in the decidedly disturbing position of being "sold" in a public setting in front of a white audience. Nonetheless, the events received

3. Accounts of Beecher's fictive auctions include Beecher and Scoville (1891); Hills (2006, 108–9); Fox (2007).

4. These reenacted auctions have been criticized for being limited to light-skinned, mixed-race women and their children. See Fox (2007).

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enormous attention and, like the famous novel by Rev. Beecher's sister Harriet Beecher Stowe, helped mobilize antislavery sentiment throughout the North.

The most famous of these mock auctions took place on February 5, 1860, at Beecher's Plymouth Congregational Church in Brooklyn, when he put up for "sale" a light-skinned nine-year-old enslaved girl known as Sally Maria Diggs, or Pinky, raising her $900 purchase price from the congregation. As in the other reenacted slave auctions he staged, Rev. Beecher intimated that were she not redeemed, Pinky would be sold into a life of sexual slavery; by helping to free her, he explained, the faithful had the opportunity to free themselves, saving their eternal souls from the state of sin.

This nationally discussed event, as it happened, centered on a physical object that was to take on multiple valencies over successive decades. During the "auction," the writer Rose Terry placed in the offering dish an opal-studded gold ring; after sufficient funds had been pledged to secure Pinky's freedom, Beecher lifted the ring and gave it to Pinky, stating, "Now remember this is your freedom ring." (In subsequent retellings, Beecher is said to have uttered the more dramatic phrase, "With this ring I wed thee to freedom.") The artist Eastman Johnson immortalized the scene in his 1860 oil painting, *Pinky Looking at Her Freedom Ring*, an image widely reproduced in print form.

Beecher later christened Pinky "Rose Ward" (a name honoring both Rose Terry and Beecher himself) and raised money for her education. Rose Ward, subsequently known as Mrs. James Hunt, graduated from Howard University and resided in Washington, DC. In 1927, she was invited back to Plymouth on the eightieth year of its founding. There, in a widely reported upon ceremony, she donated a gold ring back to the church. The ring is generally spoken of in the Plymouth congregation as "the ring" given by Rose Terry; there is considerable historical evidence, however, that Rose Ward lost the original ring decades earlier and that her 1927 gift to the church was a substitute. In any event, the gold ring and an associated bill of sale for the slave Pinky hang in Plymouth church to this day and are counted as the congregation's most treasured possessions.

Consider the complex trajectory of this object as it moved in and out of the performance stage of the mock auction. The ring begins as a monetary equivalent given to help redeem the Pinky from slavery. It is then revalued by Rev. Beecher as a memory token of the moment in which Pinky moves from slavery to freedom; in more romantic elaborations, it is the object through which the girl becomes "wedded" to freedom (and, by extension, to the white congregation who had redeemed her). In the Eastman Johnson images, the ring is pre-

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served as the focal point, upon which the freed girl's gaze and our own gaze converge. For all time, the ring she holds marks the moment of transition from slavery to freedom—by extension, within Protestant sensibilities, constituting the moral transformation of the sinner to a state of salvation. The newly freed girl even takes on the name of the ring's white donor and the white minister who placed it on her finger. The ring takes on further value in 1927 when the now elderly "freedwoman" travels back to Brooklyn to gift it (or its equivalent) back to the congregation in remembrance of Rev. Ward, thanking him and the congregation for having secured her freedom.

Significantly, the ring or rings in question did not specifically purchase the girl's freedom in 1860, since the actual funds to redeem her had been previously secured by Rev. Beecher from wealthy congregation members. The valency of the original ring rests within the performance frame of the 1860 pseudoauction, in which all those assembled in the pews acted as if they were bidders at a southern slave auction. In that sense, Rose Terry's ring functioned as a condensed token materializing the entire process through which Pinky's freedom was obtained. The object thus remained entangled within the uncanny scenario of the reenacted auction, in which Pinky was dramatically presented as an enslaved person subject to the desires of a white collectivity—which held the power to choose her fate. In a poetic sense, although formally freed, Pinky remains "owned" by (or at least bound to) the white congregation who had purchased her from her previous master.

We might thus regard Mrs. Hunt's 1927 counterprestation (return gift) of a substitute ring back to the white congregation as more than simply a sentimental expression of gratitude. It may also have been an act, in part, of self-liberation, through which the mature woman finally freed herself of the intense weight of obligation imposed by the 1860 mock auction. In that event, after all, she was still treated as a slave, lacking all positive agency. (It is hard not to think of the famous Inuit proverb on the power of gifts to subordinate recipient to donor: "As whips make dogs, gifts make slaves.") In Maussian terms, Mrs. Hunt finally disentangled herself from the *hau* of the original ring gift by returning a comparable ring back to the congregation, within the same Brooklyn sanctuary where she had, so long ago, been "sold" within a reenacted auction. To be sure, like the reciprocated gifts explored by Mauss, Mrs. Hunt's returned ring did not shatter her relationship with the congregation, although it did, in nuanced ways, transform that relationship. A lifetime earlier, at least according to the standard mythic narrative, Rev. Beecher had "married" Pinky to her freedom and by extension to the congregation. After she returned the equivalent ring,

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Mrs. Hunt was no longer wedded to the congregation, but she was not divorced from them either.[5]

A polyvalent replicated material object also features prominently in the next reenacted slave auction in the historical record, which took place in the final days of the Civil War. On March 22, 1865, soon after the city of Charleston, South Carolina, had been liberated by Union forces, a vast procession of newly freed ex-slaves marched through the city to celebrate emancipation. The *Charleston Daily Courier* (newly "reconstructed" as a pro-Union and antislavery publication) reports that, behind a long parade of newly freed workingmen, came

> an auctioneer, mounted on a spring cart, accompanied by his driver with the auction bell and a number of "negroes for sale." Two colored women with their children were seated on the cart while the rest of "the gang to be sold" followed, their hands tied with ropes. As the procession moved along the auctioneer was calling out vigorously—"How much am I offered for this good cook." "She is an excellent cook; can make three kinds of mock turtle soup, from beef, fowls, or fish." Two hundred, three hundred and fifty; four hundred and so on until he had reached from twelve to fifteen hundred in "Confederate money." For good prime field hands or mechanics no lower bid would be entertained than from ten to twelve thousand dollars. The representative auctioneer acted his part well, and caused much merriment. (1865)

Why the impulse to reenact a slave auction at the very moment that freedom is being embraced? Why create a mock auction upon a cart, the very kind of vehicle that had long been used to transport captive African Americans? The engaging of the audience, lining the street, as bidders seems to occasion a kind of metamorphosis, transmuting a tragic all-too-recent memory into a dramatic and comedic vignette in which all can coparticipate.

It is striking that in this procession of artisans and tradesmen, the auction begins with a skilled cook, not a field hand. The grand parade wound its way through all quarters of Charleston, rich and poor, and was a process of staking claim to the city, assertively performing cosmopolitan emplacement within town, as opposed to the country plantation. Hence, a skilled cook is for sale. Might the particular dish she is skilled in preparing, "mock turtle soup," be of some significance? Does the capacity to deceive, to make things appear to be something other than what they are (beef, fowl, fish) signal a broader, vital

5. I am grateful to a reviewer for *Signs and Society* for this insightful formulation.

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ability to transmogrify? And if so, is performing one of the most horrific mise-en-scènes of enslavement, the selling away of a mother from her children, a necessary first step in the active process of making slavery itself untrue? Slavery is thus beheld, and produced, as a manifest fiction. Then, in turn, the "enslaved" mechanics and field hands can be sold raucously at inflated prices, in the Confederate currency that is now obsolete. Slavery, a living nightmare a few weeks earlier, is transmuted into a figure of absurd revelry that is emphatically past its time. (Presumably, selling slaves for Union greenbacks would not be so hilarious, at this moment.)

And yet, for all the laughter, it is clear that the scene was agonizing for many. Another newspaper reported on the African American auctioneer, who had himself been sold on the block in Charleston: "And so he went on imitating in sport the infernal traffic of which many of the spectators had been the living victims. Old women burst into tears as they saw this tableau, and forgetting that it was a mimic scene, shouted wildly, '*Give me back my children! Give me back my children!*'" (*New-York Daily Tribune* 1865). The spring cart was manifestly not a real auction block, and yet, as it approached older African American women, it viscerally summoned up the many actual blocks upon which their children had been sold away from them across the years, resulting in deep expressions of pain. Similar to the wooden crate in the 2011 St. Louis reenactment, the cart became "the block" that continues to haunt African American moral imaginations.

At the same time, the performance appears to have offered a partial ritual solution to the painful sensations unleashed by the auction scenario. The *Charleston Daily Courier* (1865) continues: "Behind the auctioneer came a hearse, with the body of slavery, followed by the mourners all dressed in black. On the hearse were the following inscriptions: 'Slavery is Dead.' 'Who Owns Him.' 'No One.' 'Sumter Dug his Grave on the 13th of April, 1861.' This attracted a great deal of attention. The countenance of the mourners on this occasion exhibited much more joy than sadness." A moment after the drama of the sale of human chattel is summoned up, it needs to be put to rest, once and for all. One senses that no public reading of the Emancipation Proclamation by liberating white Union officers was sufficient; slavery needed to be conveyed to its final resting place on very particular terms, by means of conveyance controlled by free persons of color. (It seems likely that the hearse belonged to the Brown Society, an African American funerary organization.) The performative utterance written on the hearse, "Slavery is Dead," hammers home the point. The labor by African Americans to reenact, on their own, a funeral procession and burial

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of enslavement, centered on an empty coffin, appears to have constituted an important rite of self-liberation, transforming and closing off the disturbing scenario of the reenacted slave auction that preceded it. Simultaneously, the manifestly fictitious spectacle of the hearse, bearing a clearly fake coffin, serves to illustrate the fictive nature of the auction wagon that preceded it, further emphasizing that slavery is over and done with. The mock funeral in this respect is comparable to Mrs. Rose Ward Hunt's 1927 gift of the substitute ring back to the white Plymouth congregation, through which she freed herself, in a sense, of the disturbing scenario of the 1860 slave auction reenactment she had undergone as a child. Manifestly fictitious material objects, which in the context of traumatic reenactment may summon up the agony of earlier traumatic events, may also, under certain circumstances, redirect or sublimate those potent scenarios of anguish.

The Spectrum of Authenticity: Race and Material Culture in Civil War Reenactment

With these precedents in mind, let us turn to modern deployments of material objects in living history reenactments. I begin with a brief discussion of Civil War reenactments, which since the 1960s have emerged as the most popular practice of living history in the nation.

Modern Civil War reenactors locate themselves along a spectrum of authenticity, with reference to the degree of verisimilitude in the clothing, props, and accessories they use. The term *Farbs* refers somewhat derisively to those who have a casual attitude toward their adornment, at times wearing modern running shoes or smoking modern cigarettes while performing. "Mainstream" reenactors usually wear period-appropriate clothing that is visible to audiences but will wear modern underwear and break out of character when no audience members are present. "Hard core" or "authentic" reenactors strive to wear period-appropriate clothing, including woolen underclothes, eat period-appropriate food, use period-correct hair pomade, and stay immersed in character throughout an entire reenactment gathering.

The complexities of authentic attire are suggested by the prominent case of Lauren Cook Burgess, a woman reenactor who scrupulously devoted herself to cross-dressing as a Civil War infantryman. Although her attention to external detail was acknowledged to be commendable, she was prohibited from reenactments by supervising officials on the grounds that her biological sex rendered her participation to be inauthentic. She cited extensive historical evidence that some women actually had cross-dressed during the Civil War

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and served in combat; nonetheless, local administrators insisted that she had violated canons of historical verisimilitude, until they were overruled by superiors (Teitelman 2010, 73–77).

In most cases, the elaborate paraphernalia used by white Civil War reenactors builds up a prosthetic symbolic male white body, embedded in an archaic racialized gender system: the clothing and the tools normally intensify male whiteness. Thus, even if the outer appearance of the uniformed female reenactor is flawless, her participation is deemed unacceptable by most male reenactors.[6]

Objects as Structural Operators

Although many Civil War reenactments lack any direct or indirect reference to slavery, in recent years, a number of units have explicitly referenced histories of enslavement. This is especially true for the 54th and 55th Massachusetts all–African American regiments, in which members regularly expound to audiences on narratives of slavery and liberation.

In some cases, all-white regiments will perform with one or more African American reenactors, usually identified as a body servant, but sometimes referred to as a slave. In these contexts, a seemingly neutral object can become a disturbing staging ground dramatizing the master-slave relationship. Consider how the white reenactor Patrick Lewis finds himself deploying, in turn, a knapsack and a pair of gloves, in the presence of an African American colleague playing the role of his enslaved body servant, Emmanuel:

> As I was delivering a tactical talk and it came time to drop knapsacks I unslung mine and let it fall to the ground. Before I could finish my sentence and place it in the stack with the platoon's, Emmanuel had walked up—eyes down and hands folded—and moved it before I could say a word. I instantly knew that I had an opportunity to demonstrate the institution's cruelty here, and so I did not acknowledge his act, did not thank him for it, did not make eye contact, did not stop my talk. My own cruelty—even to make a teaching point to the audience—made me shudder inside. In another talk, as I paced up and down in front of the audience I took off my kid gloves and held them behind me for Emmanuel to take. Again without looking back, without saying a word, without acknowledging him in the least, I demanded his service and his loyalty. I

6. Some recent Civil War battle reenactments have permitted women combatants, so long as they can pass for male at a specified distance, such as ten yards.

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> denied him the choice of taking my gloves or not; I required that he did. And as I felt those gloves leave my hand, and as I continued my talk without missing a beat, I was sickened.[7]

The passage nicely illustrates Marx's classic insight in *Capital* (vol. 1) that property is not a relationship between persons and things but rather a relationship between persons, through things. The vignettes staged around these objects, in which the white performer studiously refuses to acknowledge verbally the labor of the "enslaved" body servant, powerfully encode the master-slave relationship. At the same time, the knapsack and gloves allow the white reenactor to undergo internal subjective moments of self-critical reflection ("made me shudder inside"). In his self-narration, he dramatizes the sensation of being split between the public performance and the internal revulsion over the role. The objects here function as structural operators, as go-betweens that mediate between his purported "real" internal self (the good person of conscience) and the evil master personae, rather as the auction wagon in 1865 Charleston mediated between the African American male performer and his role as a white slave auctioneer.

Not surprisingly, material objects associated with slavery reenactment may occasion considerable anxiety for many whites, in part because they threaten to extend beyond the controlled framework of the reenactment scenario. Advertisements for slavery-associated props usually are marked by some sort of qualification. For example, the Irontree Works blacksmithing company, which produces shackles and manacles of various sorts, proclaims on its website: "The following items are for reenactment purposes *only*! When attempting to recreate the past, authentic props which may have negative connotations can be used to provide the desired effect of authenticity. These items are made for the express purposes of theatrical performance and historical recreation. Irontree Works cannot be held responsible for the misuse of these items."[8]

For many African American reenactors, manacles (generally avoided by white reenactors) function as structural operators, in ways that parallel the knapsack discussed above. Consider the Slave Dwelling Project, a multiyear initiative led by Joseph McGill, a professional historical interpreter who has regularly served as a reenactor within the 54th Massachusetts regiment. McGill's goal has been to spend a night sleeping within every extant slave residence in the

7. See http://bullyforbragg.blogspot.com/2008/09/co-aytch-recap.html.
8. See http://www.irontreeworks.com/reenactment_props.htm.

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nation, in part to call attention to the urgent need to preserve these long-neglected sites of cultural heritage. In this living history enterprise, the performers recall experiences of their enslaved ancestors, sleeping within the various structures that enslaved persons once resided.

McGill is sometimes accompanied by his friend James Terry, who usually sleeps with his hands bound in a pair of manacles that he believes probably date to the era of slavery. Terry recalls that the first time he slept in manacles was "the worst night of sleep in my life. . . . All night I'd sleep for 25 minutes or so, and then wake up, thinking about my ancestors and what they went through. . . . It was, it is, extremely uncomfortable. I don't know what else to say about it, except that as uncomfortable as I was my ancestors had it much, much worse. I had a sleeping bag to lie on, I didn't have the smell or the overcrowding, and I could get up in the morning and walk away."[9] The power of the manacles for Terry seems to rest in the way they repeatedly force him to awake and think about his ancestors, to feel something of what they felt. At the same, he is made aware of the contrast between his relatively mild experiences and their experiences of bodily degradation and unfreedom. Yet again, a material object has a double function, allowing the reenactor to touch the past intimately while catalyzing an awareness of the critical interior self that is distant from that past.

In a recent blog posting, McGill evocatively reports, "True to previous outings, James produced a pair of manacles in which he slept the entire evening, as a physical reminder of the conditions experienced by slaves during the Middle Passage and here in America during sale on the auction block and when punished for various crimes or indiscretions. With each shift during the evening the individual links sang out a metallic clank."[10] The "clank" may be read as an objective correlative to the internal transformations being undergone by the sleeper, who not only becomes close to his ancestors but externally registers that interior state, as the metal links themselves "sing."

Similarly, clothing worn by those who reenact being enslaved functions as a structural operator, helping move performers across different registers of time and experience. Many African American female slave reenactors report that they sew their own dresses, but then rip them in places, exchanging torn-out fabric patches with one another and sewing the new patches into the garment. The practice is held to emulate the conditions under which clothing was ac-

9. See http://www.scnow.com/news/local/article–7a192c24-a294-5ec9-8ef5-d93ef12a6bae.html.
10. See http://www.aboutourfreedom.com/2012/04/slave-dwelling-project-builds-momentum.html.

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quired during slavery time; a white mistress would cast off of a worn or torn garment, allowing a favored slave to mend it and wear it. Beyond this, the process of tearing and exchanging fabric pieces appears to have ritual dimensions. Allison, an experienced seamstress and reenactor, explains that she usually gathers with several friends to fabricate slave dresses:

> I don't like to do the ripping out alone. . . . It is a hard thing, that tearing. Makes me think of everything our ancestors went through. Not just getting hand-me-down torn clothes I mean, but knowing that anytime, any child could be ripped right out of the family, a wife could be torn away from her husband. That's why, you know, quilting is so important in our tradition, because you take clothing and such from young and old, from the ancestors, and then quilt everything all together. It was always a way of healing, you see. Binding up the family. . . . So you could say it's like that when we get together to make those slave dresses. We gather together as we're sewing and mending, and tear off the strips together, and share them, together. Like an old quilting bee. . . . Don't do all that alone, if I can help it.

Her friend Janet observes,

> So the dresses we make this way, when we wear them, they're not just costumes you should understand. . . . We made them together, we went through a lot to do that, laughing and crying. When I wear one of those dresses, sure, you can see its just modern cloth in there, but that isn't how it feels. We went through something together, and I'm wearing that, right up against my skin. . . . You could say, I'm walking with my ancestors, wearing a garment like that.

In Terence Turner's (1980) apt phrase, adornment functions cross-culturally as "the social skin," mediating between interior subjectivity and the external social and cultural universe. To operate upon the social skin is to alter one's relationship with other social beings. Such is the case for these reenactors' dresses: the ripping out of fabric swatches is redolent of remembered ruptures of the enslaved family. For this reason, Allison, Janet, and their circle prefer that the process of ripping and resewing takes place in the comforting presence of other African American women reenactors. The resulting patchwork garments, while made in many cases out of store-purchased fabric, have, through the processes of tearing and the bricolage of recombination, become iconic of the process of enslavement, as well as the processes through which enslaved

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women acted in concert to comfort one another during times of unspeakable distress. Each sewn patch, as it were, bears a tangible trace of the social circumstances of its creation, evoking the pain of separation and the healing touch of social solidarity in the distant slave past. In this respect, the dressmaking bears some resemblance to the "spatio-temporal transformations" undergone by the Gawa canoes of the Massim famously analyzed by Nancy Munn (1986): the labor processes through which the objects are fabricated condense the larger transformations that they will embody when ultimately used. To wear dresses fabricated in this way, actively touching the past, is to internalize the suffering and the strength of one's enslaved foremothers. Yet again, a replicated material element serves mimetically to summon up historical pain and to provide a partial solution to that reproduced experience of rupture.

The Material Culture of the Moore's Ford Lynching Reenactment, 2005–12

The capacity of fictive objects to function as structural operators yields particularly ambiguous effects in the Moore's Ford lynching reenactment, performed annually in Walton County, Georgia, since 2005. The event commemorates the murder of four young African Americans in July 1946 by about fifteen armed white Klansmen on the banks of the Apalachee River at a crossing known as Moore's Ford. Since the mid-1990s, a multiracial group of activists in the region had sought without success to pressure the FBI to reopen a federal investigation into the deaths, one of the longest-running "cold cases" in American civil rights history. In March 2005, a senior civil rights leader visiting the site declared to local activists, "You really need to reenact this lynching," to mobilize public pressure over the case and to encourage surviving witnesses to come forth. Another activist at the time remarked, "White folks love their Civil War reenactments, which is mainly one big fantasy about the Lost Cause being so noble, so why not reenact some real history for a change?" Community activists rapidly organized a reenactment, which was put on amid much attention and controversy in late July 2005.[11]

In 2005, all local whites who had volunteered to reenact Klansmen backed out at the last minute, so African American volunteers rapidly needed to become "white" for the day. Some wore white masks and others wore white cloth coverings over their heads. They performed their assigned roles with great verve and skill, screaming out the N-word at their four victims as they am-

11. For a historical study of the Moore's Ford lynching, see Wexler (2003). For an analysis of the modern lynching reenactment, see Auslander (2010).

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bushed them from an automobile, mimed beating them, dragged them down a slope to the river bank, and then "shot" them in front of a large assembled crowd.

To this day, a number of the African American performers shudder as they recall the experience of wearing the white mask and "becoming" Klansmen. Jerome states,

> All my life I wondered how anyone could do something so ungodly, so terrible, as participate in a lynching. . . . Well, when I put on that mask, something strange happened, something terrible I could say, that taught me something. Something I wish I'd never learned. . . . You know, it is a terrible thing to say but being a Klan . . . it was kind of a rush. A thrill . . . we were shouting and screaming and beating on them all together, and there was a part of me that felt excited, felt so angry, felt like I could do anything . . . never knew I had that in me.

His fellow reenactor Morris nodded emphatically, adding,

> Maybe it was wearing that white mask, but we became so mean, so fast out there on the bridge that day. . . . We started out saying, well, this is a hard thing, but we have to do it, to show everyone what it was really like, to show the true wrongs that were done to our people. But then once it started, I felt—I can't explain it—I felt like, how dare these people, these [N-word], how dare they talk back to me. I won't stand for this. . . . And yeah, I felt that anger swelling up inside of me. . . . So you could say part of me knew who I was, what I was doing, but part of me, I don't know, behind that mask, I don't know who that person was.

All the men agreed that they would never again wear white masks in this way. Some report that they have been plagued by intermittent nightmares about the reenactment.

In subsequent years, white men and women, primarily from the Atlanta area peace and justice community, have been recruited to play Klansmen. They have done this conscientiously, though at times with great reservations and with many qualifications. For example, just before the climax of the riverside reenactment in 2008, Arthur, a white man, tied a noose in a rope with consummate ease. He suddenly stepped out of character to explain to me that he had learned all this knot-tying as a boy in Jewish summer camp. He spoke to reassure me, and presumably himself, that this unsavory role centered on the disturbing object wasn't really who he is. As for Patrick Lewis,

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the Civil War reenactor quoted above, a potent replicated object catalyzes a statement of divided selfhood, differentiating the inner true self from the performed role.

In this light, it is striking that white reenactors always are careful to wear clothing that marks them as being in performance mode, such as an old-fashioned hat or a standardized white T-shirt. In contrast, the African American "victims" nearly always wear street clothes and make no attempt at donning period-appropriate adornment. As reenactor Roberta told me,

> The thing is, we shouldn't dress up like this only happened in the past, just in the past. This thing, it happened once, but it's still happening to our people, to our young people. It just isn't over, I mean.

In a similar vein, Alice, who sometimes plays one of the murdered women, states,

> I can't tell you all the pain I feel inside of me, knowing what happened to those poor souls that day. When I'm lying down there in the mud by the bridge, it's like no time has passed. This could happen to anyone, my brother, my son, my grandchildren. This thing, it happened then, but it's still happening.

A similar kind of bridging of the past is accomplished through the vehicle that each year delivers the reenactor-victims to their "deaths." In July 1946, a white farmer drove the four unsuspecting African American victims, seated in the rear of his sedan, to the bridge site where the vehicle was ambushed by the Klansmen. It is widely believed that the white farmer was a willing accomplice to the lynching.

Each year since 2005, the Atlanta-based middle-class sponsors of the reenactment have insisted that the automobile used should be an "authentic" vintage sedan of the 1930s, of the sort actually driven by the white farmer. Yet nearly every year, the local African American reenactors end up using a beloved 1977 Lincoln Town Car, owned by William, a local working-class activist. William, it is well known, got the Town Car from a white man years ago for $50 when it was up on blocks, and no one thought he would ever get it running. The vehicle's engine is perpetually troubled, and no one but Michael, a skilled fix-it man, can keep it operational through each reenactment.

Why use a mercurial 1977 Lincoln Town Car, when it would in principle be possible to borrow a smoothly running period-appropriate vintage automobile for the reenactment? In part, the appeal lies in the fact that while not a brand

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new vehicle, this is the kind of car that a local African American person might well still be driving. In that sense, its usage conveys the widely held local sentiment that the scourge of racial violence is not over and done with but is still a real and present danger to people of color.

Equally important, the Lincoln Town Car has extensive associations with African American masculine coolness and bravado, and the 1970s are proudly remembered as a time of African American cultural renaissance. In the midst of all the reenacted horror, this particular vehicle allows local actors a degree of control, to some extent mitigating the scenario of unredeemed and unrequited victimhood being played out on the riverbank. This is all the more so given that the car is intimately associated with Michael, a deeply beloved character who is sometimes spoken of as the glue that holds together an often fractious community. As Norbert, one of the event's organizers, remarks with a smile,

> Well [William], you see. He's one of us. . . . He has kin all over the county. People know him and they know that car of his. This thing, this lynching, it burned a hole right into the soul of this county. . . . People see William's car, they just know this thing happened to real people, not somebody in the history books. It could happen again to anybody, if we don't hold together. . . . And when they see the car, they know, well, in spite of everything, we endured. We survived. We're still here.

At the same time, the car at times evokes the same kind of disturbing double consciousness that the auction block and the white masks have triggered, oscillating between black and white subject positions, as well as between the present and the past. William drove his car during the first reenactment, when all the Klansmen were played by local black men wearing white masks. He recalls,

> You know. I got that car off a white man. And driving the car that day I really had to think what a white man felt like, driving that car, taking our people to their deaths. Really made me think, you know? . . . Yeah, it was me driving that car, but looking out the windshield I was thinking, I was looking out, just like that white man was, thinking when I am gonna be able to unload these [N-word]? Where my buddies who gonna get this thing done?

Each year, the most controversial object in the reenactment is a small doll, carried under the chemise or dress of one of the female reenactors. Many local

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African Americans are convinced that one of the murdered women, Dorothy Dorsey, was seven months pregnant, and that a Klansman carved the fetus out of her uterus and held it aloft, before smashing it to death. Each year, at the reenactment's climax, a Klansman rips out a doll, covered in red paint or barbecue sauce to simulate blood, and holds it up. The effect is always electric. At the 2007 reenactment, as the doll was held aloft, I heard an African American audience member cry out in anguish, "White man the devil." Another commented, "Worse 'n the devil." White feminist reenactors have repeatedly critiqued the use of this doll, in part because they fear that excessive focus on the fetus plays into local antiabortion politics, and also out of concerns over the historical accuracy of the claim that Dorothy was pregnant at the time of her murder.

Nonetheless, African American women reenactors have insisted each year on retaining the doll, either buying a plastic doll or fabricating a figure out of panty hose. For many of the black female participants, the doll is the single most important feature of the entire day-long reenactment, epitomizing centuries of white crimes against women of color and their offspring.

Jane, who for two years played the pregnant Dorothy Dorsey, explains that she does this to honor the memory of her own son, who was slain on the streets of Atlanta some years ago in a black-on-black drug-related shooting:

> All this killing, this lynching, it haunts us still. That's why we need to be here, to bear witness, to remember. Otherwise the killing just keeps on going on.

Jane gives public lectures to African American youth on the dangers of intracommunity violence, pleading with young men to get themselves off the streets and out of gangs. She has encased Martin's bloodstained shirt in glass, along with his photographs, and carries this assemblage around to schools and community centers.

For Jane, the doll of the fetus is closely associated with her own lost son and with other lost children across the generations. She explains,

> Each time I carry the doll—I call him "Justice," you know, I remember carrying my son, I remember giving birth to him, and nursing him, and bringing him up. And I remember when I lost him. I can't ever forget that. But when I'm standing there in front of that firing squad, it's strange, I feel other children inside of me. Like I'm Dorothy standing there, thinking on her baby. And other mothers before her, all the way

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> back to slavery time. . . . All of us, all us strong black women, we're all standing there, with our babies, staring down that gun barrel.

Like Arthur on the block or the Klan reenactors wearing white masks, holding onto the doll propels Jane into multiple subject positions, straddling the present, the near past, and the distant past.

This potent object can also serve to bridge past, present, and future. At the conclusion of the 2010 reenactment, after she and the other victims had been "restored to life," Jane placed the doll on the front seat of the car, facing forward, so that photographers could have ready access to it. She did not place it on the back seat, where the lynching victims had sat, but up front, oriented toward a new future. The car and the doll, so deeply associated with unbearable histories of pain, thus offered at the day's close a way forward beyond the static position of timeless trauma, beyond abject victimhood toward redemption and rebirth.

Inversions: Auction Block and Slave Cart in St. Louis

Let us now return to the event with which we began, the January 2011 reenacted slave auction held on the steps of the historic St. Louis Federal Courthouse. After each person was sold, he or she was led, usually in shackles, down the stairs to a mule-drawn cart parked by the curb. The "slaves" were crowded into the cart, under the gaze of their new white "owners." Then, thirty minutes into the reenactment, a uniformed officer arrived to inform everyone that a federal judge had ordered the auction to be suspended. At that point, the reenactment was over, and all participants smiled and embraced one another. About seventy reenactors and three hundred audience members then filed into the courthouse's great rotunda for a remarkable hour-long open-microphone conversation about the emotions they had experienced during the reenactment and the possibilities of racial justice in modern America.

Earlier that morning, a US park ranger had told reenactors stationed down by the cart: "Be careful not to drive the cart off with the slaves in it. That would just be too terrible." I had the distinct impression that if the cart did drive off, its occupants would, in a mythopoetic sense, be forever frozen within the enslaved position in the tragic past, unable to return back to the present moment of freedom.

The moment the auction was "called off," the cart, which had for a half-hour served as an open-air slave pen, suddenly became a dramatic stage of exultation, joyful tears, and liberation from bondage. The cart, one might say, in-

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verted the ritual force of the auction block—the small stage that had fully initiated the reenactors into a deep performance mode, catalyzing a near-possession state for Arthur and others. The cart at the moment of the auction's cessation, in effect, brought forth the performers' release from their slave roles. Within this small vehicle, the reenactors marked their return to the present day as they embraced their comrades across racial lines.

I am reminded of the spring cart and the hearse in the 1865 Charleston emancipation parade. These vehicles also occasioned, in turn, levity, pain, and catharsis. Such is true, as well, for the Moore's Ford 1977 Lincoln Town Car, a vehicle that each year is the site of anguished performance at the climax of the reenactment and yet that, when the baby doll is afterward placed on the front seat, signals regeneration and the possibility of a productive future.

All these polyvocal objects accomplish symbolic work comparable to that performed by Mrs. Rose Ward Hunt's 1927 return gift of the gold ring to the Plymouth congregation in Brooklyn. Within the ritualized performance space of reenactment, each element—the ring, the hearse, the cart, the torn dress, the town car, the doll—initially embodies a primal scene of subjection. Yet in its final mise-en-scène, each object enables a significant rite of reversal, helping to free its bearer from the prisonhouse of an unjust past.

To be sure, neither object nor act stand alone in helping bring about these desired reversals and profound affective transformations. Actors may at times speak of a replicated object as having "done something," as if it had independent agency. Jane said of the doll,

> That baby doll, it did something to me, to all of us. Made us feel we were really there, at that terrible time, feeling what our people felt.

Yet, moments later, when I asked her if a store-bought doll could have had the same impact, she remarked,

> Well, it meant a lot to us that Alice, Amanda, and me, that we made the doll the night before, especially right after the white ladies said we couldn't have a doll. . . .We came together and just made it, putting all our love into it. So all day, carrying him under my blouse, I felt this was something real, some mother's real baby boy, that we were taking care of. . . . That's why the reenactment was so real this year, we did all that work together, the sisters did, in spite of everything.

It is important that both statements be understood as true for Jane and for her fellow reenactors. The doll did indeed at that moment bring about important

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effects. Yet, at the same time, those effects were made possible through the labor practices embedded in the doll, physically fabricated through the dedicated labor and love of women of color, and tended carefully through the day by Jane, culminating in her placing of the doll on the front seat of the Lincoln Town Car.[12]

Conclusion: Doubleness and the "Veil"

Let us review the varied forms of doubleness we have observed, in reference to evocative material objects deployed in historical reenactments of traumatic historical events. To begin with, participants and observers generally understand that the core physical elements used in reenactments are only replicas or simulations of older historical artifacts and that the original objects are stored away in museums or lost in time. Yet, at the same time, within the context of powerful reenactments, these evocative objects are experienced as possessing a profound kind of emotional authenticity: a mundane wooden crate becomes "*the* auction block," a modern whip becomes "*the* lash." The apprehension of this kind of authenticity depends, in turn, on a kind of doubled-affective impact of the reenactment scenario: the performer ought to undergo a profound interior transformation, in which she or he is moved back in time to an earlier mythohistoric moment of anguish, even as the actor in most instances retains at least partial awareness of the present moment. At the same time, the reenactor ought to be seen by external observers as undergoing this radical interior transformation: you could see, she wasn't just acting, she was really on that block, really losing her child. This imputed capacity to bridge different historical moments is closely bound up in the ways in which objects seem to move across conventional distinctions between the living and the dead, allowing, in many instances, the committed reenactor, as many put it, to "touch the past" and "walk with my ancestors." Finally, a general perception of authentic traumatic reenactment seems to revolve around a doubled capacity of core objects to convey simultaneously pain and release, agony and catharsis, trauma and transcendence.

These multiple forms of object-oriented doubleness may be productively related to the experience of "two-ness" famously characterized by W. E. B. Du Bois ([1903] 1987). To be African American, for Du Bois, is to experience a

12. The vast anthropological literature on the widely apprehended agency of material objects includes Marx on the commodity fetish in *Capital*, Mauss (1966) on the apparent motive force of the gift, Fraser (1922) on sympathetic magic, Gell (1998) on the fields of influence extended by aesthetic elements, and Parmentier (2002) on the imputed capacities of exchange media.

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curious kind of double consciousness, usually embedded within the normative subject position of American-ness and, yet at times, abruptly, to be brought up short, to be made painfully aware that one is, in the eyes of the majority, excluded or distanced from that mainstream stage. Appropriately, Du Bois explains the experience of double consciousness through the metaphor of a physical object, a "veil" that can unexpectedly and painfully fall across the eyes of the person, allowing him or her to see the world he had, moments ago, fully inhabited, and yet which is now only seen from a distance. Like many of the most powerful reenactment objects we have explored (the St. Louis slave cart, the hearse, the torn dress, Mrs. Hunt's golden ring), Du Bois's veil itself has ambiguous dimensions and consequences. On the one hand, the veil can be agonizing and alienating as it falls across one's eyes, wrenching one out of the normal social continuum, distorting how the dominant white social order views persons of color and how persons of color view themselves. On the other hand, life behind the veil can inspire creative work of the highest order, exemplified by the "Sorrow Songs," or Negro spirituals, with which Du Bois begins each chapter of *Souls of Black Folk*. Through performances centered on highly fraught material objects, modern traumatic reenactors have, in effect, simultaneously dramatized the enduring agony of the veil, and, through moving back and forth in time, proposed how the veil of two-ness might be cast off. Paradoxically, an object that most poignantly epitomizes the instant of rupture may also occasion moments of reprieve and transcendence.

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