

**“Give me back my Children!”:
Traumatic Reenactment and Tenuous Democratic Public Spheres**

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In recent years, we have seen an increasing number of reenactments of traumatic historical events related to slavery, race and power in American history. These include reenacted journeys of enslaved Africans across the Middle Passage as well as reenactments of slave auctions and lynchings. These events are often performed by multiracial amateur groups who see themselves as struggling against racial oppression by challenging dominant white versions of American history. One might expect that these performances of horrific history would deeply intensify distrust and animosity across lines of race and ethnicity. To be sure, internal conflicts do sometimes tear apart these reenactment groups, and external observers do at times denounce re-enactors for “unnecessarily dredging up the past.” Yet, these events often open up new lines of solidarity, collaboration and dialogue across racial and ethnic positions. This tendency towards inter-racial reciprocity is puzzling given that participants’ stated rationales for engaging in the reenactments usually vary according to race: white participants usually assert they are drawn to these practices out of an impulse towards historical accountability and reconciliation, while African Americans usually state their primary motivation is a desire to protect or save “our young African American men.” What is at stake in these disparate impulses, and why do these performance events nonetheless often lead to unexpected moments of profound dialogue and exchange across putative lines of race and difference?

In this essay, I briefly review the cultural history of “historical reenactments” and consider one 19th century prelude to present day traumatic reenactments. I then turn to three recent case studies, drawn from my fieldwork: first, the annual reenactment of a horrific 1946 mass lynching in Walton County, Georgia; second, the daily mounting of a “historical experience” of slavery in Selma, Alabama; and third, a reenacted slave auction in St. Louis, Missouri. All these events were deeply painful for participants and observers alike, yet all opened up highly dynamic zones for cross-racial conversation, exchange and reflection. All hold the promise, amidst great difficulty, of creating renewed microcosmic sites of democratic co-participation.

First, a few historical notes. Defined broadly, reenactment may be the oldest genre of human performance, long preceding the emergence of theater *per se*. Our early ancestors presumably reenacted remembered sequences of hunting and gathering and the foundational acts of ancestors and divinities. Nearly all ritual practice may be conceived of as a kind of reenactment, recreating prior ritual action as well as the putative activities of humans and sacral beings. Ritual dramas and masquerades organized by cultic associations in temple complexes and sacred landscapes were common throughout the ancient world, dynamically conjoining mythic pasts, seasonal cycles, and proximate experience.ⁱ Pilgrimage, among the most ancient of human ritual dramas, is predicated on the recreation of prior sacred journeys (including the celestial tracks of the moon and planets) and is often modeled on mytho-historical acts of mobility. The great cycles of Medieval passion and mystery plays sought to reenact (or to anticipate) for the faithful the great events of scripture, from Genesis to Doomsday. Devotional crucifixions, reenacting in visceral form Jesus' agony on the cross, have been performed for generations in varied sites.

However, since the end of World War II, "reenactment" has come to take on a particular set of meanings, associated with costumed performances in which persons, usually amateur, but sometimes paid staff, perform ostensibly historical happenings. Some of these performances claim to replicate specific historical events, such as historically documented battles, while other performances strive to evoke, in a more generic way, historical experience, by staging events that could have happened, even if they are not specifically documented in the historical record.

Often termed "living history", these undertakings have become increasingly prominent around the globe. Although modern reenactments undoubtedly have their foundations in ancient ritual processes, "reenactment" in its modern sense is nearly always understood as a secular phenomenon, pertaining more to history than to mythos.

The most prominent form of modern reenactment, the staging of U.S. Civil War battles, developed in the late 1950s and the early 1960s, as men who dressed in Civil War uniforms joined with the North-South Skirmish Association to stage battle reenactments on the occasion of their centennials.ⁱⁱ Scores of Civil War battle reenactments are now performed each year by thousands of re-enactors, viewed by tens of thousands of audience members and supported by a considerable artisan industry. Although most of the early re enactors were white, several African American reconstructed regiments, such as the Massachusetts 54th United States Colored Troops, regularly participate in these events. The reenactment phenomenon has proliferated globally to include the battles of the English Civil War, the American Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, World War I and World War II, as well as medieval and Viking combat and Royal Navy expeditions.

By and large, costumed reenactments of atrocities associated with slavery and the Middle Passage began in the early 1990s. Most famously, in October 1994, Colonial Williamsburg presented, on a one time basis, a reenacted slave auction.ⁱⁱⁱ The reenactment was subject to national controversy and has not been repeated. However, less prominent auctions and events from the slave trade and slavery times are reenacted locally around the country – usually in the context of political protests or on college campuses.

Prelude: Charleston 1865

To begin to make sense of present-day racialized reenactments of historical injustice, it is helpful to consider a single enigmatic prelude, in which the tragic and the carnivalesque inter-mingled.

The place, Charleston, South Carolina. The day, March 22, 1865, soon after the city's liberation by Union forces, a few weeks before the end of the Civil War. A vast procession of newly freed ex-slaves marched through the city to celebrate emancipation, all carefully organized by trade. The *Charleston Courier* (newly "reconstructed" as a pro Union and anti-slavery publication) reports:

"After these came the 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. 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."

Following in the well-known tradition of American workingmen's parades, the procession can in part be understood as African Americans' advertisement for their skilled workforces in a post-slavery era.

Yet why the impulse to reenact a slave auction at the very moment that freedom is being embraced? 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 co-participate. 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 ability to transmogrify? And if so, is performing one of the most horrific *mise-en-scenes* of enslavement, the selling apart of a mother from her children, a necessary first step in the active process of making slavery itself un-true? 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.)

The auction wagon with the line of "slaves" was followed by a parallel assemblage, a wheeled hearse with black-clad mourners walking behind it. A moment after the drama of slavery 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 is sufficient; slavery needs 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.

And yet, for all the laughter, it is clear that the scene was agonizing for many. The *New-York Daily Tribune* (Tuesday, April 4, 1865) reported of 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!*"

As we shall see, this haunting refrain, "Give me back my children!" echoes across the generations, and continues to resonate in present day reenactments of racialized trauma.

With this prelude in mind, let us turn to the contemporary scene.

Although most present-day “living history” re-enactors insist their primary aim is to teach the public about history, I suggest they are also motivated by a pervasive, if often unarticulated, modern impulse to engage in symbolic exchange with the Dead. Here, I am mindful of Jean Baudrillard’s argument that one of the signal conditions of modernity is our diminished capacity to engage in meaningful, symbolic exchanges with the dead.^{iv} Under the conditions of what Michel Foucault terms the “biopolitical,” death has been so medicalized, neutralized, and disenchanting that we are deprived of being reciprocally linked to those who have passed away.^v And yet, Baudrillard suggests, we long for such reciprocity, to be bound in give and take with those who no longer dwell among us. Hence, our particular fascination with the victims of mass violence and catastrophe; the energies associated with the horrific conditions of their loss can be redirected towards new kinds of exchange relations between the living and the dead.

While this is especially true for the non-standard, traumatic reenactments we will discuss here, this tendency also characterizes mainstream civil war reenactments. Re-enactors at Gettysburg each July, for instance, at times report encountering spectral Confederate and Union soldiers for brief moments, or opening a tent flap to be confronted with a momentary glimpse of a battle field hospital. Modern historical reenactments cannot be understood as entirely secular events. Like medieval Mystery plays, modern “living history” performances catalyze complex slippages between different temporal epochs and spiritual registers.

Having said that, there are some important differences between various kinds of modern living history re-enactments. Most mainstream civil war reenactments, in which participants are overwhelmingly white, tend to **reconfirm** normative racial distinctions; their audiences are overwhelmingly white and the performances tend not to catalyze meaningful exchanges between whites and non-whites. In contrast, non-standard reenactments of racially traumatic events often do stimulate moving and unexpected cross-racial dialogue.

It is helpful to consider these contrasts in reference to Claude Levi-Strauss’ classic distinction between rites and games. In *The Science of the Concrete*, Levi Strauss notes that ritual is the predominant performance mode in archaic or premodern societies, whereas games are the favored performance activity in modern or industrial societies.^{vi} He proposes this is because ritual produces sameness out of fundamental difference, and is thus appropriate in small-scale societies predicated on fundamental distinction or opposition between moieties, lineages, clans or castes. Only through ritual can these dialectical tensions be sufficiently dramatized and resolved. In contrast, modern societies are in principle founded on the ideal of fundamental sameness between all social beings; thus the greatest pleasure is found in competitive games, which produce difference – or at least the artificial appearance of difference – by creating the temporary distinction between winners and losers.

In terms of Levi-Strauss' model, the mainstream Civil War battle reenactments more closely resemble games than rituals. Civil War re-enactors often speak of these events in terms very similar to sporting events, noting the "team effort" required for each of the great gatherings. Although the re-fought battles staged in front of audiences nearly always follow the established historical "facts," many Civil War re-enactors emphasize that their favorite activity actually takes place "off stage." In private skirmishes after the crowds have left they re-fight the battle following the tactics of the period, but enabling officers and those in the ranks to take initiative and engage in novel strategies. Thus it is possible for the Confederacy to triumph at Gettysburg.

The non-standard, traumatic reenactments are rather different. For six years, I have been following the annual reenactment of the Moore's Ford lynching in Georgia, in which four young African Americans were brutally murdered in July 1946.^{vii} Since 2005 hundreds of people have gathered each year at several sites in Walton County to watch amateur performers reenact events associated with the lynching; rather like medieval passion play performers, the re-enactors move across a regional landscape, performing in sequence the events that led up to the actual martyrdom. At the culminating moment, around 6:00 p.m., a sedan arrives at the isolated bridge, carrying four African-American victims and a driver, playing the role of a local white farmer.

A group of re-enactors playing Klansmen emerges from the woods and wrestles the pleading victims out of the automobile and down the embankment, where they are repeatedly shot in front of the audience.

In 2005, the Klansmen were played by African American men wearing white masks (since all the white volunteers pulled out at the last moment). In subsequent years, Klansmen have been played primarily by white male and female activists and, occasionally, by African American women; the victims have always been played by African Americans.

The manifest rationale given by organizers for the annual reenactment is to encourage witnesses to come forward, to aid in the FBI's renewed investigation into the 1946 killings. Local African Americans believe they know the identities of at least three surviving white perpetrators, who routinely walk the streets of the county seat. The FBI's failure to solve this long-running "cold case", activists argue, prevents the entire nation from settling its accounts and moving forward to address the needs of its most vulnerable communities.

Other motivations for participating in the reenactment are frequently mentioned. White re-enactors explain they are drawn to participate by a sense of justice and solidarity and a faith in the power of love and cross racial reconciliation. Most African American re-enactors explain they are also drawn by personal and collective histories of pain; they

tend to reject conventional memorial practices that would, in their eyes, imply that the story of racial violence and injustice in America is “finished” or “closed.” They emphasize the incarceration and premature deaths of African American young men in the present day, arguing that the “lynching of black America” is a continuing, everyday fact of life.

In striking contrast to Civil War re-enactors, the African American lynching re-enactors refuse to wear historically “authentic” clothes or use period-appropriate props, as such acts would position the performance in a historic “past” rather than a continuously agonized present. Notes one participant, “This thing, it happened then, but it is still happening.”

These annual performances occasion complex and suggestive encounters with the dead; white and African American performers report uncanny dreams and visions of the departed. Many supporters of the re-enactment assert that the annual event enables close connections to those whom they have lost – not only to the Moore’s Ford lynching victims, but also to many other persons of color who had died in violence or of drug and alcohol abuse. One re-enactor, Barbara, explains she performs in memory of her son, gunned down at age nineteen in an urban drug buy gone bad. She honors his memory through his preserved bloodied shirt, which she takes to inner city schools to lecture on gang and black-on-black violence. In her words, “This reenactment lets us hold on... to those who can’t be held.”

Yet, for all the pain and divergent motivations for participation, the annual reenactment does open up important channels of dialogue among those who would not normally converse. For example, many of those who play Klansmen are in fact white women who identify themselves as gay, lesbian or queer; for many of the working-class African American participants, the rehearsals are the first time they have closely worked with persons who openly self-identify as non-heterosexual. In a working-class black community that is very averse to overt discussion of gay sexuality, these interactions are deeply challenging.

Yet, at the end of many rehearsals, participants do enter into thoughtful and open conversations with one another about their attitudes and backgrounds. Sometimes, this is mediated by humor: consider one African American woman after a rehearsal in which for two hours she had been shoved and manhandled by white lesbian women playing violent klansmen, screaming the n-word at her. As she buttoned up her coat and made her goodbyes, she turned to the white re-enactors, and playfully slipping into dialect, told them, “I just want y’all to know, ya’ll the bestest white supremacists I’ve ever had the pleasure of working with!” Everyone exploded with laughter.

Recently, I have noticed African American participants, after hearing fervent sermons denouncing gay marriage in church, quietly take aside their pastor and tell him,

“Reverend, I never thought I’d say this, but I’ve become convinced through these reenactments that gay people are doing God’s work here, and I just can’t see why decent people who love each other should be kept apart.”

To be sure, there are terribly difficult moments. For example, many cross-racial friendships between African American straight women and white feminist and gay women fell apart in the summer of 2008 over the divisive issues of abortion and reproductive rights.

It should be noted that many African American participants are convinced that one of the lynching victims, Dorothy Malcom, was pregnant at the time of her 1946 murder, and that the Klansmen ripped her fetus out of her uterus. (This belief, some have argued, is inspired by the 1918 lynching in Valdosta, Georgia, of Mary Turner, whose fetus really was cut out of her womb by the white killers.)^{viii}

In the 2007 reenactment at Moore’s Ford, a Klansman “cut out” and held aloft a doll representing the fetus, to cries of anguish from the watching crowd. One man in the audience called out, “White man the Devil.” Another said, “Wors’n the devil.” The next year, the white feminist activists insisted that this feature be stopped, since it was to their mind historically unsupported and, most important in their view, it was consistent with the anti-abortion position that the death of a fetus was worse than the death of an adult woman. At a planning meeting, white woman activists took the silence of their African American counterparts as signaling assent to their position that the doll should be eliminated.

Yet the night before the 2008 reenactment, several African American women made a doll out of stockings and then used the doll at the reenactment. A supportive white woman playing a Klansman “cut out” the doll out of Barbara’s dress. Just after the reenactment, Barbara, who had lost her nineteen year old son to gang violence, cradled the bloody doll and then placed it on the front of the car seat, facing forward. (Significantly, she did not place the doll in the back seats, where the lynching victims had sat; the lost child seems to reside in the interstitial status of hauntedness, uncannily hovering between full life and full death.)

Many white women activists felt betrayed by the re-appearance of the doll, and some withdrew from subsequent reenactments. Yet for those who remained in the network, this painful episode did give rise to some deeply meaningful conversations about reproductive rights among those on different sides of the pro-life/prochoice divide, no mean feat in the highly polarized climate of rural Georgia.

In any event, after each reenactment, participants and audience members gather in a church fellowship hall for dinner and wide-ranging conversation on issues of race, and justice in Walton County.

Selma, Alabama

Let us now turn to the Selma, Alabama case. Since 2005, a middle aged African American woman, who has taken the Afrocentric name Sister Afriye has led about five hundred experiential slavery tours, calling the sixty-minute piece, "*Soul Prints of our Our Ancestors and Ourselves.*" [Note the word play: embodying our ancestors, we leave behind the footprints or sole prints of our ancestors' souls.]

Sister Afriye attributes her calling to lead these tours to profound spiritual experiences she had while visiting the slave castles of coastal Ghana a decade ago. Until recently the dramatizations were staged inside of the Slavery and Civil War Museum, a community museum affiliated with the nearby National Voting Rights Museum, near the famous Edmund Pettus Bridge, where the Bloody Sunday confrontation between civil rights activists and Alabama State Troopers took place on March 7, 1965.

In most visits, Sister Afriye and her assistants yell at teens as they dismount from a tour bus, as if at Marine Boot Camp or a county jail. "Put your hands against the building, spread your legs!" The n-word is shouted at them repeatedly, as male and females are forced to line up in separate groups along the sidewalk, angrily threatened if they make eye contact with their guides. She shouts: "If I hear anyone else talking I'm gonna cut out your tongue." Cowered, the teens are ordered into the Museum building and are forced, in the darkness, into a large wooden model of a slave ship. Some of them are told to wail, as scenes of ocean waves are projected on the walls. Sister Afriye moves into prose poetry:

Can you imagine, being taken away from from your homeland, never to see your family

And to justify their madness they said you are a Godless people

Can you imagine being on the Middle Passage landing in the bottom of a slave ship

Perhaps you are chained to someone who has died, or in the process of dying

can you imagine lying not only in your own body waste but the body waste of so many others

Can you imagine, all because of the color of your skin

Then, she comforts them,

Young people, if we had the opportunity to sit at our ancestors' feet and ask them would they do it all over again

they would say yes

they would say to you, you were worth every lash that we ever took

they would say to you that you are the ones that we have been waiting for

you are the ones that we have been waiting for

there is a seed of greatness inside of you, waiting for you to allow it to come forth

first you must know--

first you must be willing to embrace this history

Then she screams orders at them, in the voice of a slave trader, forcing them into a dark hallway. Often, Sister Afriye selects a few young people to serve as assistants, dominating and yelling at the rest of their group. She insists that a number of her assistants choose which one of their numbers are weak and should be “killed” off. Over the past five years, only one participant has told her that he would choose himself as the victim, in order to save the life of all his comrades. Sister Afriye is convinced that in making this extraordinarily brave choice this young African American man was, in her words, “guided by the old souls.”

In the most harrowing segment of the tour, within a dimly lit room, Sister Afriye brilliantly performs a range of white and black voices from slavery times, moving rapidly between varied accents, timbers and emotional states. On some days, she chooses to perform voices from a slave auction: “Please massah, you told me you wouldn’t sell my baby. Please, you promised!” “Shut your mouth you black bitch.” “Please, massah. I’ll die before you take my baby from me.” “Shut up you bitch, if you don’t stop screaming there won’t be a baby alive here anymore.” “Now, how much do I hear for this likely wench?” “I’ll give you three hundred dollars for that one.” “Four hundred!” “Sold!”

Then, when the agony seems almost unbearable, the lights are raised, and Sister Afriye begins to speak in a comforting voice as she moves participants into a concluding healing segment she calls “the Circle of Greatness” in an “African Healing Space.” She makes individual eye contact with each person, touching them on the arm or shoulder, and then asks them how they felt when the n-word was addressed to them. They tell her how terrible it made them feel: “I was angry.” “I felt ashamed.” “I felt dirty.” Then she asks how often they use the n-word in everyday life. The African American students usually confess they use it nearly every day in addressing fellow African Americans. Sister Afriye explains,

So you have learned, you must never, ever do that again. That word, that terrible word, is a slavery word. It was used to make us slaves, and so long as we use that word, we make ourselves slaves again. It is a word of hate, and we all have to learn to turn hate aside. So next time you want use that word, find a different one. Choose wisely with your words, and you will find your own road back to respect, back to dignity.

This road back to dignity, she emphasizes, is a matter of life or death, “especially for our young black men,” who are imperiled at every turn.

A Slave Auction: St. Louis

My final case also emerges out of African American critiques of standard white public history. Over the course of 2010, Angela De Silva, an African American scholar and community activist in St. Louis, Missouri, became convinced that planned local public commemorations of the 150th anniversary of the onset of the Civil War were systematically ignoring the significance of slavery in the conflict. “They were talking about tariffs, States’ rights, anything but slavery,” she sighed. She had in the past staged re-enactments of Underground Railroad escape episodes, and often performed a character of her own invention, an enslaved woman, at Civil War battle re-enactments and at public school events. But something more forceful, she felt, was now needed. She thus resolved to stage a dramatic slave auction on one of the most symbolically charged sites in the city, the steps of the historic courthouse across from the city’s famous Great Arch, the very courthouse where the initial Dred Scott trials had been held.

Eight other African American community members agreed to play slaves being auctioned off; more remarkably, Angela was able to convince sixty white citizens to perform as well, as sheriff deputies, bidders and abolitionist protesters. Of these whites, about thirty were committed Confederate re-enactors, who had rarely discussed or overtly acknowledged the painful history of slave auctions in the region. Yet, many noted that Angela and her fellow African American re-enactors had helped them out in the past by visiting reenacted Confederate battle camps in slave or “servant” costume, lending the proceedings an extra degree of verisimilitude. They thus felt honor-bound, they explained to me, to help out fellow members of the “reenactment community,” and to participate in Angela’s reenactment.

The white and African American participants gathered on a cold winter night in early January of this year in Angela’s home for a rehearsal. They carefully worked out how high the bids would go for each slave, as well as the order in which the enslaved would be sold and who would place each successful bid. Some whites decided to play abolitionist protesters, others wealthy planters seeking to buy house and field slaves. After a good deal of discussion, it was decided that those being auctioned would not passively accept their fates. One 20 year old African American man, Nathan, in the

Americorps jobs training program, stated he would actively strive to break his bonds. An older man developed his character to be a person who had been promised freedom by his late master. "I suppose to be free," he would repeatedly call out. A pair of women would play an elderly mother and her adult daughter, facing separation for the first time.

On the appointed morning, all the re-enactors gathered in the courthouse's conference room, where a park ranger reviewed the complex logistics of the event. There was a great deal of levity and joshing among the participants across racial lines. An African American man wearing manacles asked a white woman in a hoop skirt, "Now, remind me, am I supposed to be buying you or are you buying me? I just can't remember!" Loud guffaws ensued. James, a burly white blacksmith who rode with the Hell's Angels, joked wryly with the young Nathan: "Now, let me know if those manacles are tight enough. I can always make them tighter!"

In front of the courthouse, a multiracial crowd of hundreds had gathered, mainly alerted by local newspaper and television reports. The park ranger spoke through the PA system, explaining that Lynch's slave market really had been located a block up Broadway, and that the manacled slaves would be approaching from that direction. (*As in most reenactments, past and present tense were frequently intermingled*).

Meanwhile, in the overhang of a bank building, the nine "slaves" sheltered from the freezing wind. Two young children, who were to be sold, were reminded by the adults not to smile when on the block. The group agreed that they would softly sing the old spiritual, "Wade in the Water," as they processed down Broadway towards the courthouse, and utter cries of anguish. As they marched the white sheriff and his deputies pushed them along and told them to "quiet down." Photojournalists and TV crews circled round them as they walked. The crowd parted in awed silence as the slave coffle approached and mounted the court steps. The sheriff announced that the estate sale would proceed. The young man Nathan stopped struggling against his chains as prospective buyers opened up his mouth forcibly to examine his teeth. He then resisted forcefully once the bidding commenced. Once Nathan was sold, James the blacksmith marched him down to a waiting wagon on the street below. The children were brought forth, as the auctioneer called out in the sing song "tobacco style" of auctioneering. A white little girl standing near me in the crowd cried out. "Mommy, they are selling the children. Won't somebody stop this, mommy?" Her mother hugged her tight and whispered words of comfort to her. On the steps, an older woman wailed as she was torn from her daughter. One by one, the enslaved were sold off, some taken down to join Nathan, in the wagon.

By pre-arrangement, after a half hour an officer in 19th century uniform delivered a court order to the sheriff blocking the auction from proceeding. (Significantly, the organizers made sure the auction cessation took place before the wagon bearing those

sold could drive off.) As soon as the auction was called off, the young man Nathan, who had been the first “slave” to be sold was tightly and tearfully embraced by James the white blacksmith and by the white man who had “purchased” him. They joined the multiracial crowd streaming into the courthouse rotunda, for the morning’s final event, a community forum. The talking circle opened as one of the re-enactors, Victoria, brilliantly sang the old spiritual, “Lord, How Come me Here?”

For the next hour, several hundred community members engaged in a remarkably frank conversation about what they had all just experienced. Taking the wireless microphone one at a time, people talked about their pain at watching, or participating in, the spectacle of human beings sold as chattel. The conversation ranged from the far past to the immediate present, from the agonizing legacies of enslavement to the modern prison-industrial complex, to present-day crises in the public schools. Again and again, the conversation circled back to the challenges faced by young African American men, in the school system, in seeking working, in navigating the criminal justice system. Within moments, out of the darkest moments in American history, we all witnessed, in effect, the rebirth of democratic conversation.

We can now better appreciate why the performers in these three cases all insist that their enterprises, unlike those of white Civil War re-enactors, are “real,” and why these events engender powerful civic conversations. To begin with, these performers strive for what might be termed “emotional authenticity,” summoning up affective states of horror, fear, anguish and subjection. Beyond this, these mimetic practices have profound mystical or spiritual dimensions, qualities that the participants insist are missing from predominantly white Civil War reenactment. The organizers freely admit that they cannot ever truly know what the victims went through in harrowing times. Nonetheless, as Sister Afriye in *Selma* notes, “We have to try, we have to try to go back. And when we try, I do think we become open to forces beyond our understanding, that take us somewhere very deep.”

Alice, a fifteen-year-old African American young woman told me just after her tour with Sister Afriye, “Oh, that was real alright. I felt I was walking with my ancestors, for real.” Similarly, Natalie, the St. Louis woman who had led her fellow slaves in song during the procession to the auction steps explained she felt she had been, “literally, walking with my ancestors.”

This sort of “realness” places us more in the territory of **ritual** in its classic sense than that of games, and rather differs from the most mainstream Civil War reenactments. Consider, in this light, the utterance by a Moore’s Ford “victim” in 2008 as he lifted himself from the ground after the reenactment had concluded: “We come back to life,

we come back to life," he said with wonder in his voice. I have heard white civil war re-enactors who have just performed being dead joke as they stand up, caked in dirt, say: "Well, that was a good nap in the mud!" But I have never heard them use that tone of awe or the phrase "We come back to life." In a more self-conscious fashion, Sister Afriye's hour long dramatization is structured as a classic rite of passage: after a grueling trial in a highly liminal phase, the participants are integrated back into everyday life through the invocation of the wisdom of elders, enjoining them from uttering the n-word and urging them to practice kindness and self-respect.

Why might African American traumatic reenactments veer more towards ritual, while predominantly white Civil War reenactments tend more towards the ludic or game-like pole of the performance spectrum? Perhaps Levi Strauss' formulation is useful here. White males, who form the vast majority of Civil War re-enactors, start with the assumption of fundamental sameness among their numbers, given that whiteness has long been the unmarked, taken-for-granted racial norm in American society. Thus, they are drawn towards the model of the game, which produces the temporary differentiation of winners and losers. In contrast, African Americans, especially those who reflect long and hard on the history of violent injustice, are profoundly aware of the fundamental distinctions in status in American society, especially along the axis of race. Thus, the classic model of ritual is deeply compelling. In the multiracial Moore's Ford reenactments, the extraordinary visual mimetic staging of white on black violence ultimately produces a degree of interracial solidarity among the performers, culminating in the hugging between white and African American participants and the common partaking of a shared meal in the church fellowship hall at the day's conclusion. Intense weeping and hugs also characterize the conclusion of Sister Afriye's "Soul Prints of the Ancestors" tour and the St. Louis slave auction.

All these events generate intense mimetic encounters with dead personages who suffered unspeakable wrongs and whose existential status remains unresolved. Indeed participants often speak of these events as deeply "uncanny". Samantha, stepdaughter of one of the Moore's Ford lynching victims, maintains the annual reenactment summons up the restless souls of those who died at the river in 1946: she reports that on the eve of the 2008 performance, she encountered a huge buck which she took to be the tormented and unfixed soul of her late, lynched stepfather. Barbara, cradling the baby doll, speaks of the tangibly intangible presence of the dead woman she has portrayed, the murdered fetus, and of her own lost teenage son. A few minutes after the St Louis auction, Nathan told me that while he couldn't precisely recall what he had experienced on the block, he had felt "somebody else standing there with me." He elaborated, "I wasn't just looking down those courthouse steps with my own eyes. I was seeing right through the eyes of somebody who'd been right on these same steps before. ... I could feel his anger, his pain ... and I knew somebody dear to him had been torn away from him."

These diverse examples all suggest that within modern performance arenas oriented towards the re-staging of historical trauma, the classic problem of managing the unquiet dead remains central. The living must labor to help relocate the wandering interstitial dead – to help move them along towards their proper place.

Once again, Levi-Strauss' insights from the *Science of the Concrete* are germane. He cites the Fox Funeral Games, in which a team playing the Living cheats so that the team depicting the Dead always wins; thus, they convince the Dead of the manifest falsehood that it is better to be Dead and to stay forever on their side of the great divide. He writes, "For there is a truth universally acknowledged in archaic societies," which "resolutely sid[e] with the living," and that truth is: "death is a hard thing; sorrow is especially hard." It would appear that in contemporary society, especially in communities directly oriented towards historical injustice, this old truth is equally salient. In confronting the central existential enigmas of being and non-being, presence and absence, and pain and love, we turn once again to the ancient human repertoire of ritual mortuary and memorial practice, actively reproducing the Dead in order to reproduce ourselves as living social beings. The Dead are summoned up within complex performance spaces, and then they are sent back to their place so the living can get on with the business of living, remembering, and moving forward. Forms of masking, illusion, and unruly play are necessary to these multi-framed processes of merging and re-separating the Living and the Dead. The temporarily summoned-up presence of the dead, within intensified ritual space, can at times enforce solidarity among the living, cutting across conventional distinctions of caste and status.

To be sure, the reenactments I have discussed here are nowhere near as refined or efficacious as the Fox mortuary process. They may be thought of as experimental consciousness or deep play, in which participants are trying to "figure out", through trial and error, how such terrible atrocities could have happened, so close to home. This potent tension between the hyper-structured logic of ritual and the improvisational ethos of play seems to catalyze the spirit of democratic exchange and co-participation. The multilayered experience of actively producing sameness out of dramatized difference, while also re-fashioning difference out of temporary unity, leaves many participants with a deep openness to intense discussion with those with whom they would not normally converse, along with an intense curiosity about near "others" in their own society.

As in so many other memorial complexes the world over, managing the trajectories of the unquiet dead requires trickery, illusion, spirit possession and other devices of the masquerade. Having said that, I wish to emphasize that these events are not precise reproductions of premodern masquerades. They are thoroughly immersed in the conventions of the cinematic and the televisual. Organizers expect that the performances will be subject to mass image reproduction and distribution, and stage tableaux that recall both still images and film strips. These events highlight the intimate

affinity between modern experiences of cinema and trauma, in which searing events are endlessly repeated, and yet never fully complete.

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes ponders the mystery of a photograph of a condemned man on the eve of his execution: "*he is dead, and he is going to die.*" Here perhaps is the enduring, seductive enigma of these modern racialized traumatic reenactments. In these uncanny spectacles, we come to apprehend, in disturbing intimacy, those who are dead and just about to die, those who murder and those who suffer, those who come back to life, and those forever consigned to the outer darkness. We are given a chance to move among the unspoken nightmare of our common history, and to be suspended somewhere, for an instant and an eternity, in that shadow zone that hovers between this home on earth and our dreamed-of eternal home – suspended between sleep, wakefulness and our buried lives.

Yet, for all their modern engagements, hovering over all these events is the agonized cry with which we began, uttered as the reenacted slave auction rolled by the Charleston crowd in March 1865: "*Bring me back my children! Bring me back my children!*" We behold in these varied dramatic vignettes an enduring plea for restoration, "to bring back" those taken away through slave sales, through lynching, through gang violence and imprisonment, and through other ruptures of kinship and community.

In these performances, then, we are offered the possibility of visceral encounters with our ancestors, across the lines of race, across the divides of slavery and freedom. We are also offered the opportunity to move our variegated progenitors back into another place and time. In so doing, we may paradoxically come to experience, in a nearly sublime fashion, ourselves as a community bound together, for all our difference, though common lineage and the shared quest for a productive future.

ⁱ Nielsen, Inge. *Cultic Theatres and Ritual Drama; A Study in Regional Development and Religious Interchange between East and West in Antiquity*. Aarhus University Press. 2002.

ⁱⁱ Turner, Rory. "Bloodless Battles: The Civil War Reenacted." *TDR* vol. 24, no. 4 (Winter 1990), pp. 123-136.

ⁱⁱⁱ Due to the intensity of protests by the local NAACP chapter no further auctions have been presented by Colonial Williamsburg since the 1994 event. In her detailed analysis of this episode, Lisa Woolmark argues that much of the local African American opposition to the auction was deeply gendered; senior male African American activists, she suggests, were offended that the auction was conceived of and planned by female African American professionals at Colonial Williamsburg. Woolfork, Lisa. *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture*. University of Illinois Press. 2009.

^{iv} Baudrillard, Jean. *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. Sage. 1993.

^v Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol.1: The Will to Knowledge. Penguin. 1988.

^{vi} Levi-Strauss, Claude. *The Savage Mind*. University of Chicago Press. 1966.

^{vii} For an extended analysis of the Moore's Ford annual reenactment please see: Auslander, Mark. "'Holding on to Those Who Can't be Held': Reenacting a Lynching at Moore's Ford, Georgia." *Southern Spaces* (November 2010):

<http://www.southernspaces.org/2010/holding-those-who-cant-be-held-reenacting-lynching-moores-ford-georgia>

^{viii} A detailed study of successive recountings of the Mary Turner story in art and literature is presented in Armstrong, Julie Buckner. *Mary Turner and the Memory of Lynching*. University of Georgia Press. 2011. Armstrong includes a discussion of the fetus excision in the Moore's Ford reenactment.