

**“This thing, it happened then, but it is still happening”:
A Response to Mark Auslander**
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On my reading, the wager at the heart of Mark Auslander’s multifaceted engagement with the phenomenon of “traumatic reenactment” in “Give me back my children!': Traumatic Reenactment and Tenuous Democratic Public Spheres” is a version of the constructive orientation that W. E. B. DuBois implies in *Black Reconstruction* when he writes,

One is astonished in the study of history at the recurrence of the idea that evil must be forgotten, distorted, skimmed over...The difficulty, of course, with this philosophy is that history loses its value as an incentive and example; it paints perfect men and noble nations, but it does not tell the truth.¹

That is to say that I think there is a way in which Auslander’s argument reduplicates the memorial function of traumatic reenactment: just as the actors engaged in the events confront themselves and their auditors with the “incentive and example” of tremendous historical evils—as both a commentary on and a salvo against the enduring and fraught legacies of such episodes—Auslander deftly frames the phenomenon in a manner that extends to his readers both the disquiet that attends such remembering and the resultant invitation to conversation. Happy to accept, I want to offer, here, an account of my understanding of the argument’s contours and contents as well as a few points of friendly criticism.

Offering ethnographic readings of three contemporary traumatic reenactments—the annual representation of the Moore’s Ford lynching, Sister Afriye’s regular “experiential slavery tours,” and the singular reenactment of a slave auction on the steps of the very courthouse that hosted the Dred Scott trial—Auslander interprets the practice of staging grievous episodes of racial violence as a mode of ritual truth-telling that countermands “dominant white versions of American history” and conduces to “new lines of solidarity, collaboration and dialogue across racial and ethnic positions” (9, 1). Despite disparate rationales for participation amongst members of multiracial casts, the events, Auslander argues, facilitate moments of reflection, conversation, and catharsis that transcend the boundaries of social location. Indeed, what distinguishes traumatic reenactment from other modes of historical reenactment (representatively, Civil War battle reenactment) is precisely the creation of “highly dynamic zones for cross-racial conversation, exchange and reflection,” or “renewed microcosmic sites of democratic co-participation” (1).

Auslander’s attempt to understand precisely how and why traumatic reenactments “engender powerful civic conversations” (13) constitutes the article’s major narrative thread, and he marshals structuralist cultural analysis, ritual theory and history, and the observations of his field work in the service of this endeavor. Amongst these elements, I find the discussion of the March 22, 1865, procession in Charleston—the description of which constitutes Auslander’s prelude—particularly

¹ Quoted in David Williams, *A People’s History of the Civil War: Struggles for the Meaning of Freedom* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 10-11.

illuminating. As we see in both the newspaper account of the event and Auslander's analysis thereof, the spectacle balances mocking merriment with horrific content; it evinces the mourners'/revelers' cooptation of a scene under which they lately suffered; and it consists in the simultaneous presentation and deconstruction of a grave illusion. The coffin relocates or moors the scene in an emancipated (at least formally) present, and it assuages, to some degree, the traumatic potential of the illusion itself. A relevant precedent, I appreciate the care with which Auslander highlights the echoes of these elements in the contemporary cases. Notably, the procession's merriment prefigures the levity that facilitates the conversation Auslander prizes, and the coffin rhymes with the mollifying, lights-up moment in Sister Afriye's soul journey and with the undeparting wagon in the St. Louis reenactment.

For my part, the argument is most compelling in the articulation and pursuit of the critical suggestion that "a pervasive, if often unarticulated, modern impulse to engage in symbolic exchange with the Dead" (5) motivates the participants to whom Auslander introduces us. One function of the reenactments—to which both actors' claims to spectral contact with the souls of the historical persons or personages they represent and the intermingling of "past and present tense" in narrations of the spectacles attest—is to collapse the distance between then and now, and the fruits of this operation are manifold. The actors (and likely many spectators) claim and participate in a sympathetic kinship with the subjects they portray, thereby recognizing this history of violence as a personal and communal prehistory; they participate in the making-untrue of slavery, which begins with their ritual forebears' "performative utterance... 'Slavery is Dead'" (4); and they demonstrate the ongoing need to make-untrue slavery—a political claim for which there is perhaps no better emblem than the Moore's Ford reenactors' inattention to the costuming protocols of "living history." As Auslander rightly notes, the exclamation "Give me back my children!" is a rich metonymy for this multilayered dynamic—signifying both the agony and the potential that resides in the refusal of the injunction against "dredging up the past"—and the words of his interlocutors continually underline its manifest reality. The ambiguous referent of "those" in Barbara's haunting declaration that "this reenactment lets us hold on... to those who can't be held" exhumes, all at once, the unremembered victims of slavery, *de facto* slavery, and drug-related violence, and she and others join them in a deep communion that is oriented toward the future. Inasmuch as traumatic reenactment represents a politicization of the old Faulknerian dictum about the past, Auslander and his interlocutors make the compelling case that it likewise tends the spirit and the spirits. It proffers, Auslander writes, "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" (16).

In broad terms, I think Auslander's argument supports the central contention that "dredging up the past"—rather than leaving it buried—has been and can be the true path to civility, and much of his analysis is both astute and moving. In what follows, I would like to raise a few questions, consider

alternative interpretations of several episodes (as they are presented in the text), and suggest horizons for further thought.

First, and simply, there are a number of points in the argument at which I find myself wanting to know much more. For example, I wonder whether (and, if so, how) an engagement with the self-understanding of African American participants in Civil War battle reenactments—e.g. persons representing the Massachusetts 54th United States Colored Troops (see p. 2)—might modulate the critical terms by which Auslander distinguishes battle reenactments from “traumatic reenactments.”² Relatedly, by what cultural alchemy do Civil War battle reenactments forfeit (or reject) the “traumatic” label?³ My questions of this type suggest, at least to me, the success with which Auslander provokes readerly interest and richly rewarding avenues for further investigation, but I can imagine ways in which the answers might trouble parts of the critical apparatus Auslander employs.

Second, one facet of the critical apparatus that confuses matters for me is Auslander’s deployment of Levi-Strauss’s distinction between rituals and games. Auslander glosses the distinction as follows: whereas “ritual produces sameness out of fundamental difference,” games “produce difference—or at least the artificial appearance of difference—by creating the temporary distinction between winners and losers” (5). Based on his research, he concludes that “Civil War battle reenactments more closely resemble games than rituals,” whereas “the classic model of ritual is deeply compelling” where traumatic reenactments are concerned. This is because Civil War reenactors, presuming “fundamental sameness among their numbers,” “are drawn towards the model of the game, which produces the temporary differentiation of winners and losers.” Alternatively, “African Americans...are profoundly aware of the fundamental distinctions in status in American society,” so they participate in reenactment that “produces a degree of interracial solidarity among the performers” (14).⁴ My reading of the case studies, as presented in the article, suggests an alternative reading that might trouble this analytical distinction. To wit: it seems to me that one of the fundamental presuppositions of traumatic reenactors is that “the fundamental distinctions in status in American society” all too often go unrecognized, or are either willfully ignored or vehemently refused. Insofar as one of the outcomes of collapsing the distance between past and present is to dramatize, and thus make manifest, the endurance of racial and ethnic inequality, the traumatic reenactment, itself, obviates the unsettling, contemporary presence of “winners and losers”—even if it results, finally, in the *nisus* towards future solidarity and equality. I find the concluding contention

² On the matter of Civil War reenactors, another question I have concerns the point about “emotional authenticity” (see p. 13). If I read correctly, the traumatic reenactors impute the lack of “emotional authenticity” to battle reenactors, and I wonder how the latter group might respond to this charge.

³ *C.f.* Karen Koenig, “It was so much fun! I died of massive blood loss!” in *Rethinking Schools* 23 (Summer 2009): 64-7.

⁴ I note both that the comparison counterpoises Civil War reenactors and African Americans—rather than traumatic reenactors—and that the language of “drawn towards” suggests that the participants consciously choose between the poles of Levi-Strauss’s analytical opposition.

that the operations of game and ritual coexist, in traumatic reenactment, in a chiasmatic relationship more accurately narrates my own impression.⁵

Third, while I think the expository discussion of ritual and the prehistory of modern reenactment nicely cues the argument's theoretical architecture, I would suggest an ancillary frame for consideration. Two observations: 1) traumatic reenactors' imputation of emotional inauthenticity to Civil War reenactors locates the former cohort's activities in the orbit of Civil War memory; 2) a striking feature of the consonances between the postwar procession and the contemporary reenactments here described is the troubling (and not unfounded) implication that the events of the intervening century and a half have proven insufficient in effecting the full and robust emancipation at which the procession's actors aim when they claim ownership of the process. In light of these two observations, I wager that Auslander could make productive use of the robust scholarship on Civil War memory (towards which my expository quotation of DuBois gestures). In other words, and acknowledging the constraints of the present publishing venue, the argument might benefit from an account of the cultural and political forces that have retarded, and that continue to inhibit, the robust and difficult reckoning that traumatic reenactment seeks to provoke on a broad scale. Working forward from my first observation, for example, Auslander could make productive use of the literature on the late-nineteenth century reunion culture that brokers postwar sectional reconciliation at the expense of black freedpersons: Civil War reenactors' focus on proper clothing and battlefield maneuvers is a legacy of a reconciliationist stratagem that bracketed discussion of the war's causes and stipulated the honor-conferring co-participation of Union and Confederate soldiers in martial activity as the proper locus of war memory. Canonically, most studies of Civil War memory cite the editorial policies of *Century* magazine's "Battles and Leaders of the Civil War" series as an influential technology of the cultural moment.⁶

Finally, I admit to having rather serious difficulties with squaring the second case study, concerning Sister Afriye's "experiential slave tours," with various aspects of the broader argument. 1) I do not see evidence of the style of conversation that the argument claims for traumatic reenactment generally. As quoted in the article, Sister Afriye narrates participants' understanding for them. Following the survey of participants' feelings relative to being addressed as "nigger" in the context of the slave ship, she says, "So you have learned, you must never, ever do that [address one another as 'nigger'] again" (11). The account of the tour reminded me of a Judgment or Hell House—haunted houses that function as evangelical Christian proselytization tools wherein tour-goers participate in a walk-through morality play about the ramifications associated with claiming, or

⁵ *C.f.* p. 16. Auslander describes the relationship as a "potent tension," and he furthers, "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."

⁶ *C.f.* Russell Duncan and David J. Klooster, "Introduction: Fighting and Writing the Civil War," in *Phantoms of a Blood-Stained Period: The Complete Civil War Writings of Ambrose Bierce*, ed. Duncan and Klooster (Amherst & Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002): 5-30; David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); "Topics of the Time: Battles and Leaders of the Civil War," *Century* 28 (October 1884): 943-44.

failing to claim, Christ as one's lord and savior. The tour follows the unconverted to hell—complete with moaning demons and a visit from Satan—and the saved to heaven, where Jesus “makes individual eye contact with each person, touching them on the arm or shoulder” (10). As with the slave tour, purveyors of these experiential plays hope to produce a highly structured and narrowly defined conversion experience that trades on the kind of odd contingency that structures Sister Afriye's “prose poetry”: if you will “embrace this history” and refrain from saying “nigger,” then the slaves on the Middle Passage will have been happy to have endured the trial (9-10). 2) Nor do I see evidence of interracial exchange: the dialogue resolutely implies a uniformly black audience. 3) The lesson of the slave tour—that young black persons not address one another as “nigger” because it is *unchangeably* a “terrible word...a slavery word...a word of hate” (11)—is fundamentally at odds with the wager that animates traumatic reenactment. Whereas traumatic reenactors represent and inhabit horrific historical episodes in hopes that they might resignify them thereby, Sister Afriye admits no such potential for the resignification and reclamation of the word “nigger” in and through oppositional use, and by way of its deployment in novel contexts. Moreover, the article's euphemistic substitution of “n-word” perhaps unwittingly echoes this conviction.

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