

Whenever I read something written by Mark Auslander, I feel as if I have been at a rich intellectual banquet, where case studies to think about and think out from stick with me for a very long time. There is so much in this essay to comment on: for example, the diverse cultural functions of historical reenactment that make varied demands on the actor and the spectator, and the enduring need to make the dead significant, particularly—but certainly not only—in response to acts of racial violence. Let me offer a few comments on each of these issues.

I think we would be surprised by the number of Civil War reenactors—perhaps more on the Confederate side—who do not see what they do as a game, a contest. Although this is clearly an accurate characterization for much of the popular world of Civil War reenactment, I have talked to a number of reenactors for whom authenticity in dress, and in understanding the contextual detail of the battle they are reenacting, is a way of paying respect to their ancestors who fought. They understand full well that they are reenacting, that authenticity only takes them so far, but they also speak of a hope that in the experience, they can perhaps “touch” the past, use the experience as a kind of wormhole through which they can, for a moment, suspend the distance between them and those who fought. (I am less confident that there is any such gravitas among spectators, but I certainly could be wrong.)

The glorified spectacle of battle in the Civil War, what some have called our “Homeric period,” forgets more about the realities of war than it remembers, of course. Other Civil War reenactment does not go over so well. Some years ago, for example, a National Park Service interpreter at Gettysburg told me that public reaction to a field hospital exhibit, which included some unpleasant scenes (of course!) was, often negative: it was not in good taste, some people complained; it was something that would upset children, and so on. So the dark underbelly of the experience of war was an indigestible part of the story, something best left locked away, at least certainly kept invisible on the historic landscape.

Auslander has, for some years now, been actively engaged in thinking and writing about the increasing presence of sites of lynching on the nation’s historic landscape. It is stunning—and heartening to me—that this indigestible national story has been made visible through the work of a new generation of scholars and activists, and that sites like Moore’s Ford anchor painful and

passionate rituals of remembrance. The excavation and public presentation of such volatile stories can open wounds as well as help heal them, of course, but a forthright confrontation with the indigestible part of our national past is, to my mind, some evidence of a morally responsible engagement with that past.

And, as Auslander articulates so very well, it is not just an engagement with a faceless “past,” but a past populated with ghosts, with the presence of those—and their descendants—whose voices we hear demanding justice, asking that we remember that they were people whose lives were ended far too soon, whose deaths were consigned to oblivion out of shame and out of hate (the murder of memory). This essay is so very much about whose deaths “count,” and what are the means through which we resurrect the forgotten dead. As I read it, I thought about a hierarchy of death: private deaths—those that ripple to family and friends, but are not expected to become of public note—public deaths that don’t really count—think here of, for example, the deaths of the Branch Davidians in Waco some years ago, who were distanced from the rest of “us” because of rhetoric that described them as “brainwashed,” “cult members,” and so on. Their violent deaths did not count because they were not like us. (I think as well of the Jonestown dead, whose exclusion from and incorporation into the body of the country is brilliantly described in David Chidester’s *Salvation and Suicide: Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown*.) And then there are public deaths that are supposed to count. Those murdered in the Oklahoma City bombing, or in the 9/11 attacks, for example. Think of the contrast between the faceless dead of the children in Waco, and the iconic image of one-year-old Baylee Almon in the arms of Oklahoma City fireman Chris Fields: one a public death that does not count because for too many they were not fully human, the other, an iconic moment and prize-winning photographic image of a child of all of us.

Ritual expression at Moore’s Ford, as at so many other sites, demands a change in status for those murdered. They also must be among those whose deaths should count. Too, such ritual reminds us that there are far too many victims of violence who have found no one to represent their claim on our public memories.

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Indiana University, Bloomington,
July 24, 2012