Community Heritage Activism in the American South: Black Counter-reenactments as Mnemonic Restitution

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Abstract

This paper explores the use of counter-reenactment by Black community heritage organisations in the Deep South. By counter-reenactment, we refer to the creation and dissemination of a Black living history that challenges the white master-narrative of the regional past. In Sadiya Hartman's (2022, 85) terms, counter-reenactments 'redress' the suffering of historical Black bodies by 'counterinvesting in the [contemporary] body as a site of possibility'. These performances are commonly staged at sites of historic violence where tangible Black heritage has been erased. Using Miss Lou Heritage Group & Tours from Natchez, Mississippi, as a case study, we suggest that counter reenactments *rematerialise* African American history in a memorial landscape where Black experience is structurally invisibilised, enacting a form of 'mnemonic restitution' (Tillet, 2012) that resists the depleting effects of everyday racism, past and present.[1]

Key words: counter-reenactment, racism, civic estrangement, mnemonic restitution, right to a city, heritage activism, tangible heritage, intangible heritage.

Introduction

For African Americans campaigning for racial equity in the post-Civil rights era, heritage and tourism are key sites of mnemonic struggle for recognition and restitution. While much recent focus has been placed on the politics of national commemoration – most notably, around the opening of the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of African American History and Culture in 2016 – there remains a need to foreground Black heritage within communities of historical significance (Autry, 2017). Nowhere is this more evident than in the Deep South, where antebellum and civil war nostalgia retains a hegemonic hold on the region's state narratives and tourist industries. Black communities have long sought to 'access the levers of social and economic power' in order to reshape the heritage landscape (Allen, Lawhon and

[1] The authors would like to acknowledge Dr Jessica Rapson's participation in and contribution to this fieldwork, which was carried out in parallel with Bond and Rapson's broader research on the British Academy/Leverhulme Trust funded project, 'Processing Memory: Heritage, Industry and Environmental Racism in the American Gulf States'.

Pierce 2019, 1006), yet generations of cultural whitewashing have seen the systematic erasure of racialised geography and history within an environment that remains socially and economically segregated (McCann, 1999; Mitchell, 2003).

Despite the founding of numerous sites of Black memory (including African American and Civil Rights museums, and memorials to slavery and lynching) over the past 50 years, the tangible heritage of the Deep South still reflects – and projects – white supremacist ideologies. Plantation tourism is a lucrative industry, with many museums negating or romanticising the horrors of slavery. Although recent attempts at demonumentalisation have altered the topography of memory, Confederate statues continue to dominate public buildings and spaces across the region. To challenge this spatial hegemony, Black heritage practitioners have increasingly (re)turned to performative modes of remembrance. Through reenactments of slavery and lynchings, they have sought to rematerialise African American history in a memorial landscape where Black experience has been structurally invisibilised.

This paper explores the use of reenactment by Black community heritage organisations in the Deep South. In order to distinguish such practices from majority-white reenactments of, for example, famous Confederate Civil War battles, we define these performances as 'counter-reenactments'. By this we refer to the creation and dissemination of a Black living history that challenges the white master-narrative of the regional past. In Sadiya Hartman's (2022: 85) terms, counter-reenactments 'redress' the suffering of historical Black bodies by 'counterinvesting in the [contemporary] body as a site of possibility'. As we will see, counter-reenactments recall earlier forms of performative memory from the nineteenth and early-twentieth century, such as Festivals of Freedom and lynching plays. These precursors sought to reframe the recent past to promote African American community-building in the present. By contrast, contemporary counter-reenactments are intended to facilitate a critical rewriting of the *longue durée* of American racial history.

Using Miss Lou Heritage Group & Tours in Natchez, Mississippi as our case study, we contend that counter-reenactments have the potential to serve as a form of 'mnemonic restitution' (Tillet, 2012) that challenges the depleting effects of everyday racism, past and present. Through fieldwork and interviews with members of Miss Lou conducted in 2018 and 2019,[2] we argue that performing counter-reenactments at sites of historic injustice allows practitioners to

[2] Our data draws on two site visits to Natchez, Mississippi in 2018 and 2019. For the first visit, the researchers participated in Miss Lou's Forks of the Road tour and slavery auction reenactment. For the second visit, interviews were conducted with the Miss Lou team. Our research received ethical approval and interviewees agreed to waive anonymity for the publication of interview data. It should be noted that we come to this work with a positionality shaped by our cultural, ethnic, and disciplinary backgrounds. As two white, middle-class academics from the UK we embody the 'etic' perspective of outsider ethnographers. Much has been written about the relative 'merits and demerits of insider versus outsider' researchers (Naaeke et al., 201: 152), and it is not our intention to rehearse these debates here. However, we wish to note the importance of remaining reflexive to the cognitive and cultural biases and presumptions inherent to any subject position, as well as the position of relative privilege from which we are writing.

highlight how the legacies of slavery, segregation and lynching perpetuate ongoing forms of 'civic estrangement' (Tillet, 2012) for contemporary Black communities. In this respect, the work of Miss Lou, along with like-minded counter-reenactment groups, arguably constitutes a form of heritage activism that, in Henri Lefebvre's (1991) terms, seeks to assert the 'right to a city' for minoritized actors and audiences. Heritage activism is presently understudied and under-theorised, spanning as it does a range of disciplinary, professional, and sociopolitical contexts. We argue that there is a need to develop stronger conceptual foundations to make sense of the tensions and dynamics that exist across the wide range of groups, networks, and institutions practicing heritage activism. As the first publication relating to a much larger project on contemporary heritage activism in the United States, this article represents a nascent attempt to advance this work.[3]

Reenactment in Black performance memory

As Agnew et al. (2020) note, increased attention in the last decade has been paid to reenactment as an area of academic interest. While its roots lie in religious rituals, performative traditions, and forms of play which can be traced across diverse cultural and historical contexts for millennia, in the West today reenactment is most closely associated with the reconstruction of major historical events, such as the American Civil War and World War II battles, and with the recreation of living histories at museums and tourist attractions.

There are an 'estimated one million Civil War reenactors in the United States' (Woolfork, 2009: 9). Historical reenactment has conventionally been considered a white cultural domain, most often associated with the nostalgic recreation of Confederate Civil War battles and the romantic lives of antebellum plantation owners.[4] Patricia G. Davis (2016) indicts such practices as contributing to a 'racially exclusive heritage narrative' (1), which 'symbolically annihilate[s] slavery while advancing hegemonic white-centred ideals of southern belonging' (21). In consequence, Lisa Woolfork (2009: 9–10) argues, 'many blacks [...] distrust Civil War reenacting, perhaps because of the predominant view among white reenactors that slavery had nothing or little to do with the war'. However, shared cultural and public forms of memory can represent an important means of stimulating Black collective consciousness. Buffalo soldier reenactments, for example, serve not only as stimuli for African Americans to rediscover marginalised histories but also as a form of resistant practice for challenging normative assumptions about heritage.

[3] Our wider fieldwork aims to map the dynamics of contemporary heritage activism through a series of US case studies, which span different organizational funding modes (private, grassroots, federal), geographic and socio-spatial locations (including urban, rural, and small-town sites), and political standpoints. Through site analysis, ethnographic fieldwork, and interviews with visitors, heritage practitioners, activists, and community members attention will be paid to how each case negotiates the need for democratic accountability from the local community, their sensitivity and adaptability to broader political contention cycles, and their model for seeking social change.

[4] Although there are comparatively few Black Civil War reenactors, specialist groups like the troupe who recreate scenes from the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts regiment do exist (Woolfork, 2009: 9).

The predominance of white reenactment in the contemporary American imagination masks a long history of Black performative memory dating back to the period of enslavement. Such traditions advance 'a multi-pronged strategy that engages discourses of space and place along with corporeality, interactive performance, and dialogue to present memories of the era that focus on its emancipationist vision' (Davis, 2016: 21). For example, Mitch Kachun (2003) has documented how Festivals of Freedom served as an important means of constructing civic counter-memory at a time when Black experiences were systematically marginalised in the American public sphere. First staged in northern states to celebrate the United States' outlawing of the Transatlantic slave trade, from 1808-1915 these festivals performed many cultural and political functions as a celebration of liberty, a vehicle for constructing a distinctively African American sense of identity, forums for collective education, and civil rights activism (Kachun, 2003: 2–3, 9).

On March 22, 1865, a few weeks before the end of the Civil War, a vast procession of newly emancipated men and women marched through Charleston, pulling an auction wagon advertising 'slaves for sale'. Behind them followed a hearse carrying the metaphorical body of slavery, bearing the inscription 'Slavery is Dead'. Mark Auslander (2014: 3) contends that, for audience and participants alike, this performance was intended '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'.

Against this backdrop, performance emerged as a primary means of African American memory-making for two central reasons: first, because it countered the symbolic and material erasure of Black lived experience from public spaces; second, because it permitted a reclamation of embodied agency from the 'scenes of subjection' (Hartman, 2022) to which the victims of racialised violence were submitted. As bell hooks (1995: 211) notes, '[t]hroughout African American history, performance has been crucial in the struggle for liberation, precisely because it has not required the material resources demanded by other art forms'. In Diana Taylor's (2007: 271) terms, embodied memory enables buried '[h]istories and trajectories [to] become visible through performance'. For Black communities in the late-nineteenth century, performance-making thus provided an important counter to the expanding mnemonic landscape of white supremacy, encapsulated by the burgeoning plantation tourism industry and the post-Reconstruction boom in Confederate monuments (Adams, 2007; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2019).

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In addition to subverting the symbolic violence of tangible white heritage, the reenactment of traumatic histories provided a means of exposing and resisting the material violence of slavery and lynching, both of which have been interpreted as fundamentally performative traumas. Detailing the 'obscene theatricality of the slave trade', Hartman (2022) argues that 'the crimes of slavery were not only witnessed but staged' (21-22). Through 'coerced spectacles [such as auction blocks and minstrel shows] orchestrated to encourage the trade in black flesh' (31), white publics could satiate their 'desire to don, occupy or possess blackness or the black body'

(29). In this context, performative forms of memory-making can be understood as a communal way of reclaiming embodied (and) mnemonic autonomy.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the NAACP was advocating theatre as an important forum for African American community-making. However, with the advent of Jim Crow, Black public gatherings became the target for racialised violence – exemplifying 'the kind of cultural self-affirmation that may very well beckon the mob' (Mitchell, 2011: 4). This combination of circumstances gave rise to the lynching play: a communal performance that was staged in private or semi-private settings. Between 1890 and 1930 – the period in which lynching was at its height in Southern states – these productions served as a way of countering the imagery of racial violence circulating in the (white) public sphere. They challenged the iconography of the silenced Black body, creating a forum in which African American communities could cultivate a sense of resilience – of *living with* rather than *dying from* lynching (Mitchell, 2011).

As Koritha Mitchell (2011: 195) contends:

> African Americans recognized lynching as a theatrical production, and when they engaged the mob's destructive power, black dramatists preferred the less corporeal evidence of testimony to the physical evidence with which they were surrounded. Black-authored lynching scripts direct the gaze away from the brutalized body, finding its representational capacity to be insufficient.

Rather than mimicking the perpetrator-perspective of lynching photographs or focusing on scenes of overt violence, these plays explored the impact lynching had on families *after* the events had taken place. In reframing lynching as a domestic affair, lynching plays – often written by women – offered a positive model of African American solidarity and love. This enabled audiences, meeting in homes or community spaces, to raise broader questions about identity and citizenship (13–15). In so doing, Mitchell asserts, the plays created an 'embodied practice of black belonging' (14) in which lynching's brutal performance of violence was undermined and recontextualised by depictions of Black humanity.

Performative memory practices thus sought to provide a way of materialising and marking silenced knowledge. They were often ad hoc and unrecorded, leaving behind an intangible heritage to be pieced together by researchers. As Mitchell (2011: 195) expands:

> Lynching dramatists and their allies left different kinds of evidence than historians typically hope to find in the wake of theatre practitioners. Often, there are no playbills, programs, or box office receipts. Yet even without such records to prove that lynching plays were performed, these scripts served black communities. This unique genre challenges us to re-evaluate our assumptions about what creates theatrical power and what counts as proof of the impact a production had on those who experienced it.

Unlike contemporary counter-reenactments of slavery and lynching, these productions did not speak to a distant history but sought to reexamine and recontextualise events from the recent past. However, as we shall see, they share with more recent practices a belief in the power of ‘bodily epistemology’ as ‘a representational strategy that collapses the boundaries between past and present to permit [...] more proximate knowledge of the past’ (Woolfork, 2009: 199), immediate or remote.

The institutionalisation of Black memory: from intangible to tangible heritage

Contemporary counter-reenactments occur within a very different socio-political context to their nineteenth and early-twentieth century predecessors. They sit alongside a range of professionalised vehicles for commemoration in an expanded Black heritage landscape, including Civil Rights centres, African American museums, and politically engaged sites of counter-memory, such as the Whitney Plantation in Louisiana and the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama.

This topography reflects the institutionalisation of Black cultural memory in the post-Civil Rights era, as exemplified by the Black Museums Movement – which, though originating in the early-twentieth century, found greater impetus from the1960s onwards. While intangible heritage traditions such as reenactments and lynching plays manifested a crucial part of the reserves of memory possessed by African Americans, the Museums Movement believed it necessary to challenge dominant white historical narratives by founding ‘legitimate’ – and permanent – Black heritage sites across the United States. In so doing, its advocates argued African American history would gain wider recognition while providing communities with an educational resource for celebrating Black achievement and promoting collective belonging.

Around one hundred African American museums were created between 1950 and 1980 (Autry, 2017: 56). Founders were often activists or organisers who provided *political* legitimacy for new museums within local communities; however, they usually lacked formal curatorial or historical training. Some of these spaces would gain institutional power that transcended their community base – notably the DuSable Museum in Chicago, and the Smithsonian-funded Anacostia Museum in Washington DC – but the majority remained locally-focused and implicitly separate from ‘official’ tourism or heritage narratives. Consequently, these museums often became collector-led passion projects, resulting in dense, uneven, and sometimes unwieldy collections lacking a coherent narrative. Moreover, their relative lack of funding or curatorial expertise saw many museums struggle to evolve institutionally or grow visitor engagement over time (Coleman and Moore, 2019).

Community museums defined much of the Black heritage landscape until the 1990s. With politicians and urban planners now regarding African American history as ‘an engine for economic development’ (Autry, 2017: 126), projects such as the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis and the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute saw institutions target a more diverse, multiracial audience, including international tourists. Though more professionalised, these museums nevertheless drew criticism for lacking community embeddedness and seeking mnemonic *resolution* rather than restitution (Autry, 2017: 132–134).

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These tensions speak to fundamental ambivalences regarding the purpose of Black heritage sites across the Deep South. While some recently opened spaces – notably, the TEP Center in New Orleans – seek to combine the social mission of community initiatives with the professionalism of post-Civil Rights era museums, there arguably remains a need for alterative Black heritage repertoires. In their desire to impose coherence upon a fragmented historical narrative, Robyn Autry (2017: 189) argues that both community and professional museums have struggled to capture the melancholic experience of mnemonic alienation. Accordingly, we suggest, heritage practitioners are increasingly turning to counter-reenactment as a visceral and affective means of rematerialising African American history at sites of racial trauma. We explore this contention in the following section through our case study, Miss Lou Heritage Group & Tours in Natchez, Mississippi.

Countering the antebellum narrative in Natchez: Miss Lou Heritage Group & Tours

Natchez is a small city, located on the Mississippi River. In the nineteenth century, it was the site of the second largest slave market in North America, known as the Forks of the Road. By the 1850s, the wealth generated from chattel slavery meant that Natchez had the most millionaires per capita in the United States (Miller, 2000). However, following the Civil War, the enduring dominance of 40 white families – known as the 'nabobs' – hindered the city's economic development. Throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, the nabobs were resolute in retaining the plantation economy on which Natchez's antebellum wealth was founded (using a labour system barely reconfigured in the transition from slavery to sharecropping), even buying up neighbouring land to prevent immigrant expansion (James, 1968). Yet by the 1930s, a combination of soil exhaustion and the city's exclusion from trade routes of the burgeoning railroad network, saw Natchez's economy fall into terminal decline.

Today, local reporting cites Natchez's 70-mile proximity to the nearest interstate as the critical factor in the struggle to attract new business investment and resultant population decline (Campbell, 2018). Since 1990, the number of residents has shrunk by almost a third, including an 8 per cent drop between 2010 and 2020. In July 2023, the United States Census Bureau calculated the town's population of 13,812 residents as 62.2 per cent Black or African American, 33.8 per cent white, and 3.6 per cent mixed race. At 6.5 per cent, unemployment in Adams County is above the overall state rate, with; 29.9 percent of Natchez's broader metropolitan area living below the national poverty line (United States Census Bureau, 2024).

Nostalgia and yearning for the 'lost South' has long been characteristic of the wider region's post-Civil War identity, and in Natchez efforts to monetise this mythic past as a means of reviving the city's fortunes dates back to the 1920s. In 1927, the nabobs formed the Natchez Garden Club, ostensibly for the purpose of 'civic improvement' but specifically 'to preserve local architecture and landscape architecture' and the 'Old South' aesthetic they enshrined (Cox, 2011: 155). Eight years later, the Garden Club established the city's annual Spring Pilgrimage. In part an endeavour to increase tourism, the Pilgrimage featured tours of antebellum homes, a Confederate ball, and the 'Natchez Tableaux' – an amateur theatrical production depicting the city's pre-Civil War history. According to Karen Cox (2011: 155), the Pilgrimage 'offered tourists from all over the United States the opportunity to see the Old South as they had envisioned from music, radio, and other forms of popular culture'. This was, of course, Natchez 'as local whites sought to portray it' (Cox, 2011: 155). Helped in no small part by the contemporaneous popularity of the novel and film, *Gone With the Wind,* the Pilgrimage was hugely successful, attracting 50,000 tourists annually within five years of its establishment.

It is ironic that Natchez's veneration of its antebellum heritage was both implicated in the town's inability to modernise and identified as a solution to its resultant economic decline. This fetishisation of material preservation protected historical representations of white supremacy. What was preserved in the early-twentieth century remains intact today; what was erased – either through the relative absence of Black written histories or their violent destruction – remains invisibilised. This 'white logic' Tufuku Zuberi and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2008: 17) contend, 'grants eternal objectivity to the views of elite whites and condemns the views of non-whites to perpetual subjectivity'.

This is the mnemonic landscape the founders of Miss Lou grew up with. As recently as the 1990s, the city employed the slogan 'Come to Natchez, where the Old South still lives' (Ray, 2022). The profitably of the white nostalgia industry came at the expense of substantive public acknowledgement of Natchez's African American history, leaving Black residents further delegitimised and marginalised within the city's cultural and economic landscape. During the Civil Rights movement, Natchez was the site of significant turmoil: the city was the seat of the Mississippi headquarters of the Deacons for Defence and Justice (a militia of armed Black men who defended their communities against violence). It was also the target of car bombings by the Ku Klux Klan and the Citizens' Council, which took the life of civil rights activist, Wharlest Jackson. However, the city's Black heritage was seldom invoked through the local curriculum – a deficit only tempered by the founding of the Natchez Museum of African American History and Culture in 1991, which would become a venue for frequent school visits.

The Museum is in many ways typical of the local community initiatives described earlier: small and stacked with books and artifacts, with little curatorial narrative. Nevertheless, for the Miss Lou team, it represented a rare contrast to the antebellum narrative of the city, and it continues to serve as a meeting space and tour stop for the Group. As a teenager, the museum's sprawling archive inspired Miss Lou's founding director, Jeremy Houston, to further his knowledge and understanding of Natchez's African American history, allowing him to uncover what had been culturally obfuscated. Today, he says of the space:

> I believe I can go [to the Museum] 365 days [a year] and find new facts about Natchez and Black people. Like John Roy Lynch, he didn't even go to high school, elementary or nothing, but he became one of the most powerful politicians of his time, white or Black, and was born on a plantation, you know. So that's why those stories need to be told.

In his twenties, Houston's interest in Black history led him to a spell working as a guide for one of Natchez's largest antebellum tour groups, conducting tours of plantation homes. Houston felt that fellow tour guides were resolute in centring a white perspective and incurious about the potential of utilising local African American archives to enrich their historical knowledge. Increasingly disillusioned, he responded by instituting subversive acts of mnemonic redress:

> I used to work in Stanton Hall and Longwood, and on the days that the American Queen [a tourist paddle steamer] come, 'right', they will say, 'we want to dress up the women'. [...] They would dress up in hoop skirts and different things, and John would wear clothes like I guess Mr Stanton, rich white man, would wear. So they had something for me to wear, and I said 'man, I'm not putting that on when there was no black person wearing nothing like that round here in Natchez'. So I said, 'I've got some clothes that I'll wear, and I even have me a couple of chains with me!' And, you know, that lasted for a good two weeks until… 'well, you know, you don't have to bring the chains no more'…
>
> I went to the Historic Natchez Foundation, and they gave me the actual will that Frederick Stanton wrote himself. And for the 'property', he had a whole list of 20 slaves that were living at Stanton House: their names, and how much they were worth. So, I wrote them down, typed them up, put them in a little frame, and I put them in the house! At first, they were all cool, 'Yeah, yeah, put them in there, you can tell them about it on the tour'. [...] And I went there – the list of slaves [was] gone!

For Houston, the tours' lack of historical rigour reflected wider resistance to integrating African American perspectives into Natchez's heritage narrative, which, by the early twenty-first century, was starting to look increasingly out of step with regional efforts to engage critically (if not always effectively) with the South's racial history.[5]

By 2016, Houston, along with Randy Minor and Shabila Adams, had decided to form his own company – Miss Lou Heritage Group & Tours – to detail the Black history of Natchez.[6] The Group learned from other counter-memorial initiatives; the opening of the Whitney Plantation (2014) provided a benchmark by foregrounding the history of slavery within a plantation narrative and landscape, inspiring Miss Lou to build a tour around key sites and events in Natchez's African American history. Initially, the plan was for all guides to be trained by the antebellum tour group Houston had previously worked for, allowing them to operate on an 'equal playing field'. However, Miss Lou's training was abruptly cancelled because the team were not paid-up

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[5] Along with the opening of Whitney Plantation in 2014, the early twenty first century saw the creation of the Mississippi Freedom Trail in 2011. Since then, Mississippi has rejuvenated its state museum, opening a new Civil Rights centre in 2018.

[6] 'Miss Lou' is a common abbreviation of 'Mississippi-Louisiana', marking Natchez's location on the border of the two states.

members of the Garden Club. Faced with this rejection by the gatekeepers of Natchez's white heritage, the Group decided that Miss Lou would be a fully independent operation.

Miss Lou and counter-reenactment

Estranged from the city's material heritage assets, Miss Lou turned to performative memory as a way of bringing Black history to life. They are far from alone in doing so. Since the 1990s, Auslander (2013, 2014) has documented a sharp increase in counter-reenactments that rematerialise the traumatic histories of Black America in Southern spaces. In October 1994, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation staged a slave auction, stirring national controversy about the ethics and limitations of living history traditions (Woolfork, 2009). Since 2005, African American and white re-enactors in Moore's Ford, Georgia, have gathered annually to recreate the lynching of two black couples in 1946 (Auslander, 2014). In 2010, African American filmmaker, scholar and activist, Angela de Silva, reproduced a slave auction in front of the courtroom in St Louis, Missouri, where the first Dred Scott trials were held in 1846. In Louisiana in 2019, hundreds of men and women marched 26 miles through winding levee walkways, suburban sprawl, and the historic streets of New Orleans. Led by the New York-based performance artist, Dred Scott, they dressed as participants of the largest uprising of enslaved people in American history, which took place in 1811 (Laughland, 2019).

Although she does not deploy our terminology, Woolfork (2009, 10) argues that throughout the United States today, counter-reenactments 'can be divided into three generic modes – ritual, historic, and immersion – each with its own conventions'. Ritual reenactments 'usually take place in a church setting or have distinctly spiritual activities' (10). In historical reenactments 'black men and women [...] regularly recreate scenes or tasks from slavery' (10). Immersion reenactments incorporate 'tourists, campers, and museum visitors [...] into an unpredictable experience for which they are unprepared' (11).

Miss Lou's activities fall into the latter two categories. The group offer two modes of counter-reenactment: the recreation of historic biographies, such as that of Adams' ancestor, Prince Abdulrahman Ibrahim (historical reenactment); and the restaging of a slave market at the Forks in the Road (immersion reenactment). Both are intended to counter the symbolic and material erasure of Black geography and history from Natchez's heritagescape. As Adams explains:

> [The Garden Club] have their houses and their fine china and this and that to tell their story. Most of what we have are stories, word of mouth, that's what we have, that's the way that we can get the story out. So, the reenactments is a 'showing the house' you know, that is our way of showing you those fine dishes. What you see visually over there, we can reenact it – show you from our side of it, because that's all we have![7]

[7] To illustrate the relative lack of Black material history, in 2007 the National Parks Service funded an archaeological dig of the Forks in the Road site in search of artefacts that could be included in the Forks

Such sentiments recall the differentiation Auslander (2013) draws between white Civil War reenactments and Black counter-reenactments of slavery and lynching. Whereas the former tend to fetishize *material* authenticity – items of clothing, architectural features, or physical possessions – the latter privilege *emotional* authenticity.

Adams' account of performing *Isabella and the Prince*, a play dedicated to Prince Abdulrahman Ibrahim, is testament to the affective power of historical counter-reenactments. Known as 'the prince among slaves' for his royal African heritage, Ibrahim was enslaved for nearly forty years in Adams County, Mississippi. Discussing her experience of recreating his story, Adams comments on the proximity she feels to her ancestors:

> Maybe this is how that person may have felt, you know, this is how that person may have reacted to what was happening to them at the time. So that's what I tried to portray when I'm reenacting.

Here, Adams exemplifies Woolfork's (2009: 118) claim that 'those who engage slave history through bodily performance [...] offer their own bodies as sites of historical knowledge and cultural figuration'. Minor, too, suggests that counter-reenactment facilitates the retrieval of disavowed experiences:

> [It's] important to get the history out of the unknown. We want this in the history books, but we have to make these people's voices heard and make these people mainly visible in a physical sense. So, we have to be those people.

Adams and Minor thus concur with Woolfork's (2009: 169) proposition that, through historical counter-reenactments, 'living bodies in the present somehow disseminate a more "real" history than a collection of historic objects' or books. Such sentiments subvert the implicit hierarchy that prioritises tangible above intangible heritage and, in so doing, further delegitimises minoritized pasts.

Auslander (2013: 164) suggests that restagings of forgotten histories like *Isabella and the Prince* 'create a ritual performance 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'. These techniques go against certain orthodoxies of memory studies, which resist representational practices that facilitate an overidentification with historical suffering. As Dominick LaCapra (2004, 65) argues, in contemporary memorial culture:

> Empathy is too often conflated with identification, especially with the victim, and this conflation leads to an idealization or even sacrilization of the victim as well as an often histrionic self-image as surrogate victim undergoing vicarious experience.

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of the Road memorial. Owing to the effects of ground disturbance from road building in the decades following the closure of the slave market, they found nothing (Ray, 2022).

However, rather than facilitate an uncritical identification with the past, we suggest that performative memory practices have the potential to catalyse what Carolyn Dean (2003: 98) describes as a 'disintegration of normative frameworks of likeness'.

This can perhaps be seen most clearly in the second form of counter-reenactment deployed by Miss Lou. The group take visitors to the Forks in the Road. The history of the site has only recently been commemorated, with the Miss Lou team instrumental in campaigning to have interpretation boards erected and chain links embedded in the earth. However, the scale of the market – and the lives affected by it – remain largely invisibilised. Against this lack of material heritage, the historical significance of the space is given power by the use of props such as chains and the shock value for the audience in being asked to participate in or witness the recreation of a historic trauma.

Once at the Forks of the Road, the Miss Lou guides compel tour guests to restage a slave auction. When we visited, a white visitor was designated as the enslaver and Minor as the enslaved person for sale. Emphasising the auratic power of deploying historical artifacts in counter-reenactments, Minor comments:

> The chains, we actually put them on and portray ourselves walking in, and because you have restricted movement, we give a descriptive physical idea of how a person would be travelling during that period.

Critics have raised concerns about the ethical implications of immersive counter-reenactments such as this. As Woolfork (2009: 11) notes:

> Many dismiss the notion of slavery immersion reenactments out-of-hand: slavery should not be a tourist diversion, nor can the experience of slavery be fully replicated. The most common objection concerns the current black experience: isn't contemporary life sufficiently challenging without returning to slavery, even in simulation?

However, Miss Lou see genuine pedagogical potential in their reenactment of the Forks in the Road slave market. As Houston comments of his white audiences:

> A lot question themselves. They question the very upbringing they had; like, 'Wow, so black people really went through this' [...] I've had a lot of them come up and apologise to me, saying 'I'm sorry for what white people did to your people' or, you know, bow, and do all type of things. [It makes me] satisfied, even more satisfied, because I wonder how many people at the Forks of the Road really cried when they were being brought there.

It is important to note that Miss Lou are not encouraging visitors to mistake themselves *as* enslaved or enslavers. Rather, they are evoking the image of the past to foreground its proximity to – but not its sameness with – the present. In so doing, their techniques generate in the visitor something akin to LaCapra's notion of empathic unsettlement. For LaCapra (2004: 78), empathic unsettlement famously involves a kind of virtual experience through which one 'puts oneself in the other's position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other's place'. It creates a 'middle voice', allowing the performer or audience member to 'compos[e] narratives that neither confuse one's position with the victim's nor seek facile uplift, harmonization, or closure' (LaCapra, 2004: 60).

The site-specific nature of the location is important here. Brigette Walters (2023: 393) suggests that in the jarring encounter between the immaterial past and the material present, counter-reenactments create 'glitches in the physical landscape that [...] reveal continuities in the political one.' As Auslander (2014: 5) remarks:

> Most African American reenactors explain that they are [...] 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 reenactors [of Moore's Ford, Georgia] refuse to wear historically 'authentic' clothes or use period-appropriate props, as such acts would position that performance in a historic 'past' rather than a continually agonized present.

Contemporary counter-enactments vary widely in their form and serve different immediate agendas: the organisers of the Moore's Ford lynching tableau hoped to encourage the FBI to reopen their investigation into the murders of Roger Malcom, Dorothy Dorsey, George Dorsey, and May Murray. The dramatization of St Louis's slave market was intended as a challenge to the local public celebrations of the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, which ignored the role that slavery played in igniting the conflict. Dred Scott's Louisiana march attempted to highlight how the ghosts of slavery endure in the racial injustices of the present. However, in each case, these counter-reenactments share certain similarities. They all rematerialise an image of historic suffering in a contemporary space from which its memory has disappeared. All function as both outward *and* inward-looking forms of commemoration: on the one hand, they seek to engage the broader public in challenging the exclusionary white master narrative of American history; on the other, they encourage Black community members to recognise and celebrate their own heritage. In so doing, they operate on multiple temporal levels: recreating historic injustices to foreground the degraded present and advocating for greater equity in the future.

Miss Lou and Black heritage *activism?*

Since its founding, the use of counter-reenactments has helped Miss Lou to attract a steady audience, drawing particularly on school and college visitors from inside and outside the region. However, efforts to engage directly with Natchez's Black residents have proved more challenging. The team see the relative lack of interest from the local community as reflecting the long shadow of segregation.[8] Adams recalled friends who had spotted her giving tours and reenactments around the city asking, 'What y'all doing up there, talking to those white people?'

Such questions, Miss Lou felt, were tied to a deeper malaise resulting from the marginalisation of Natchez's own place within African American history. As Minor commented:

> They don't *know*. Some people know about the Forks of the Road because you've got signs all over, [but] some don't even know where the [Natchez Museum of African American History and Culture] is. They don't even know about Richard Wright, Wharlest Jackson, or Charles Evans being in Natchez. All they know about is Martin Luther King.

While the Miss Lou team were resolutely proud of their achievements in redrawing the town's mnemonic landscape, each remained conscious of the realities of working in a city that offered few opportunities for younger people. By the time of our second visit to Natchez, Minor was negotiating reenactment bookings with a job based 380 miles away in Dallas. Houston's enthusiasm for the Miss Lou project was also tempered by the realities of longstanding socioeconomic decline:

> A lot of times younger people – white and black – they tell me, 'Man, I'm, thinking about leaving Natchez'… And you know what I tell them? Go. Trust me, give it about a year, I promise you that once you get to Texas, or Florida, or California and wherever else, you're gonna see life move a lot better. *[What keeps you here?]* Oh, just the tours and the ability to meet people like you all, but I do know in due time I gotta go too. You can only take so much before you gotta be sustainable and use your gift that God gave you. Better than just being stagnating here.

Such concerns were at the forefront of Miss Lou's efforts to expand their operations in the year following their establishment. With the help of contacts from the Mississippi Department of Health (MSDH), the team won development funding via a Health Impact Assessment foundation grant, the first of its kind to be awarded in the state. The project, 'From Heritage to Health', identified inclusive heritage as having the potential to improve African Americans' mental health and health-related quality of life. The funding aimed to promote the 'representation of lived experiences', by which through 'collective efficacy and counter narratives', the 'chronic historical trauma' caused by the 'daily indignities of structural racism' could be meaningfully addressed (MSDF, 2021: 9).

The MSDH grant provided funds for Miss Lou to broaden its range of counter-reenactments, establish regular local school visits, and play an active role in educational networks and community forums. In seeking to encourage local engagement in Natchez's Black history within a heritage landscape long dominated by the antebellum tourist industry, one might argue that

[8] Natchez's cultural landscape has taken a long time to desegregate. For example, Minor recalled that his cohort was the first to have a racially integrated high school prom in 2002.

the funding sought to secure 'a right to the city' for African American residents. Henri Lefebvre (1991) used this evocative term to argue that urban space should not be solely controlled by state or market forces, but shaped and governed by the citizens who inhabit it. Such ambitions speak to a wider literature on Black geographies which foregrounds the importance of creating counter-space for resisting the 'fundamentally and inescapably racialised' homogenisation and gentrification of urban space (McCann, 1999: 180; see also Mitchell, 2003; Schein, 2009; Neville et al., 2015; Allen et al., 2019).

In attempting to redress the cultural politics of representation within Natchez in this way, Miss Lou's activities share community-building ambitions with recent Black Lives Matter-inspired movements (Durham, 2023; Leyh, 2020). The Group's entrepreneurial ethos also complements the original aims and spirit of the Black Museums Movement, whose community spaces were largely run by activists-turned-curators and sought to carry the gains of the Civil Rights Movement into sustainable cultural outcomes.

Based on these affinities, Miss Lou's work could be seen to fall under Yifat Gutman and Jenny Wüstenberg's (2023: 5) definition of 'memory activism' as '*the strategic commemoration of a contested past to achieve mnemonic or political change by working outside state channels*' (italics in original). As Gutman and Wüstenberg expand, 'memory activists target memory as *the* crucial way of intervening in the process of societal change *from below*' (5). The use of counter-reenactment is concomitant with practices utilised by memory activists: as Kaitlin M. Murphy and Kerry Whigham (2023: 353) contend, memory activism 'is only real to the extent that it is [...] made manifest through the bodies of memory activists'. Brigette Walters (2023: 391) argues more explicitly that in 'cases where memory activists seek to foreground forgotten or obscured pasts, the practice of reenactment has proven a particularly useful tool'.

We would define 'heritage activism' as a sub-set of the wider category of memory activism, although it is far less developed in critical literature. As Ali Mozafarri and Tod Jones (2023: 20) note, 'there is a methodological weakness, if not a gap, in understanding and conceptualizing activism in heritage studies'. Clearly, this is an area that is ripe for further exploration, yet the nascent body of work that does exist exemplifies the concerns of this article. Contributing to Mozafarri and Jones' volume on *Heritage Movements in Asia*, Terence Chong (2019: 107) asserts that '[h]eritage activism is the struggle for recognition': to 'advocate for heritage, or to make meaning of the past, is to tell stories about ourselves in order to mark our civilizational lineage and anchor our place in the world'. Heritage activism is 'socially constructed and shaped by local histories, politics, and economics'; at its core 'are notions of self-worth, community, dignity, and identity' (107).

Though these concerns resonate closely with the aims of Miss Lou, in our interviews Houston and Minor were notably wary of self-identifying as activists. Certainly, this was not a label they volunteered when describing their work – and it was one they outright rejected when associated with politics specifically:

> **Interviewer:** Do you feel that you're, that you the work you do is a form of political activism? Would you consider yourself as activists in a way?
>
> **Houston:** Hmmm. I guess I'm one in a way, an activist in a way, but political activism? No, we just say, um…
>
> **Minor:** Community activism…?
>
> **Houston:** Yeah, community activism…
>
> **Minor:** Cuz we do more a lot more community relations related things than uh, political. We do no political things, y'know.

Community activism is a concept commonly embraced to describe grassroots organising in the post-Civil Rights era (Emejulu, 2016), though its application nevertheless tends to imply a subordinate role to that of elected state or federal representatives (Hope et al., 2019). As staunch non-partisans, it is perhaps telling that Minor and Houston retreated from their initial floating of the term later in the interview:

> **Interviewer:** So, you said you saw yourself maybe as community activists?
>
> **Houston:** Yeah man, since you're saying that…
>
> **Interviewer:** Am I saying that to you? Or do you prefer something different?
>
> **Minor:** Well, we don't try to put a title on it. We're just here to spread the message and educate these people.

While Miss Lou's heritage work may be understood as 'activist' in its ambitions, it is clear that the term carried unwanted baggage. Adams County is something of an electoral outlier in Mississippi, having voted Democrat in every Presidential election since 2000 (including 2024), yet this has arguably contributed to a sense of political disaffection for Houston and Minor. Throughout the interview, they were openly cynical towards the self-serving motivations of certain locally elected politicians, and dismissed the idea that federal interventions could impact the lived experience of racial inequality in the South. Such scepticism towards organised politics is rooted in a long official history of antipathy and apathy towards social justice. Though comfortable with the need to facilitate community change, Miss Lou's rejection of the very idea of the political reflects an ongoing disillusionment with the ideal of African American civic membership in the post-Civil Rights era.

This underscores what Salamishah Tillet (2012: 4) describes as 'a lingering DuBoisean two-ness' within many Black communities; 'while successfully gaining legal citizenship within the nation to which they, by birthright, should have access, post-civil rights African Americans [have become] simultaneously part of and tangential to the citizenry' (8). The result is a form of 'civic estrangement' – a 'protracted experience of disillusionment, mourning, and yearning' (9). For Tillet, civic estrangement is 'not just a haunting of the past but is also a reminder of the present-day racial inequalities that keep African American citizens in an indeterminate, unassimilable state as a racialized “Other”’ (9). It is fundamentally connected to the perpetuation of hegemonic commemorative discourses, and white supremacist master-narratives that ensure that Black citizens remain ‘marginalized or underrepresented in the civic myths, monuments, narratives, icons, creed, and images of the past that constitute, reproduce, and promote an American national identity’ (3).

Posited against this backdrop, one might see Miss Lou’s use of counter-reenactment and their participation in the MSDH grant as a form of ‘mnemonic restitution’ (Tillet, 2012: 9) that aims to ‘call the legitimacy of American civic myths into question, but also [to] reconfigure these civic markers in order to accommodate the constitutive sites of American history that the national memory has forgotten or excised’. As Houston notes, by acting as a corrective to the whitewashed story of history perpetuated by the Garden Club, Miss Lou are able to claim mnemonic autonomy: ‘that’s the most wonderful thing, you know, we are able to control our own story and we ain’t had to get no approval from them’.

Conclusion

Tillet (2012: 137–8) defines mnemonic restitution as ‘a way to lay claim to the nation through revising the historical record to include rather than excise slavery from the national consciousness and therefore fully recognise past and present African Americans in the civic myth and culture of the nation’. However, as Auslander makes clear, this is not work that should be carried out by and for Black actors and audiences alone. In contrast to ‘mainstream Civil war reenactments, in which participants are overwhelmingly white’ and ‘tend to reconfirm normative racial distinctions’, ‘nonstandard reenactments of racially traumatic events’ – such as counter-reenactments – have the potential to stimulate ‘moving and unexcepted cross-racial dialogue’ (Auslander, 2014: 4), ‘creating renewed microcosmic sites of democratic participation’ (1).

Of course, this remains an idealistic aim. But whether they identify as ‘activists’ or not, it is clear that the work of Miss Lou and other contemporary counter-reenactors is engaged in a politics of recognition – ‘the formal battle for equality that requires a revision of symbols and images’ and takes place ‘in aesthetic and cultural realms’ (Tillet, 2012: 9–10). As a central pillar of American cultural memory, heritage is a key site of this contestation.

For Miss Lou, the ability to foreground Black history for the Natchez community is inseparable from the need to significantly reshape the city’s heritage landscape for its visitors. To date, the polarisation of the city’s historical narrative has ultimately proved insurmountable. Miss Lou’s efforts to work with antebellum tourism groups on a joint Tableaux during Pilgrimage week resulted in an impasse over how Natchez’s history should be told. As Houston explains:

> The Natchez Tableaux is the same concept, same story, every exact year, but a couple of years ago they put Black people in for the first time – people like myself – but that caused uproar because they said, ‘oh, we're getting too much into the story now...'

As Melissa Hargrove (2009) observes in a comparable case study of Charleston, South Carolina, white-dominated heritage industries typically comprise multiple power agents – including county commissioners, preservation agents, and urban planners – responsible for maintaining a complex of planning boards, community coalitions, and distinct rules. When it comes to upholding a city's 'historic status' this matrix embodies the habitus of structural racism through its utilisation of an 'adaptable collection of techniques, references, and beliefs that operate in tandem to protect their collective interests and capital accumulation' (Hargrove, 2009: 101).

The pageantry of the Pilgrimage and its immaculately preserved antebellum mansions remain the centrepiece of Natchez's tourist industry. The upshot of this enduring hegemony is the ongoing struggle for recognition for Natchez's Black history in the city's spatial economy. Though recently brought under the control of the National Parks Service, the significance of the Forks of the Road site is presently tempered by the fact that the monument's design – a concrete paving slab comprising half-submerged slave chains in the middle of a road system – is not easily visible to passers-by. When asked what sort of template for a memorial the Miss Lou team would like to see replicated in Natchez, Houston's response was notably modest: a mural of famous African American residents akin to one that had recently been unveiled in nearby Port Gibson. The reason for such caution was made plain, namely that 'Natchez just can't get it together on what it wants to say'.

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