

Dread Scott's *Slave Rebellion Reenactment*: Site, Time, Embodiment

Adrian Anagnost

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État des lieux de la « commémoration corrigée » en art public : quel avenir pour le monument ?

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Article abstract

En novembre 2019, l'artiste Dread Scott a réalisé *Slave Rebellion Reenactment*, une performance participative regroupant des artistes, des activistes et d'autres personnes d'origine afrodescendante mobilisées pour revivre la Révolte de La Nouvelle-Orléans de 1811. Cette reconstitution a permis de mettre en lumière des histoires moins connues de la résistance à l'esclavage dans les États-Unis d'avant la guerre de Sécession. Cet article examine l'événement sous l'angle d'une oeuvre commémorative in situ et soutient que la diffusion d'images sur les réseaux sociaux fait partie intégrante de la reconstitution. Exploitant l'idée du « monument performatif » de Mechtild Widrich, de la carnavalisation du temps de Tavia Nyong'o et d'autres théories de la commémoration et de la performance, l'article montre que *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* propose une commémoration tel un processus qui se déploie dans le temps, produisant et tirant de l'oubli des histoires in situ à plusieurs facettes.

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Adrian Anagnost, an art historian of modern and contemporary art in the Americas, holds the Jessie J. Poesch Assistant Professorship in Art History at Tulane University's Newcomb Art Department.
—aanagnos@tulane.edu

*Sul-ma said some come off the ships
walked with many
Turned the horizon grey*
— Kristina Kay Robinson¹

New Orleans, Louisiana, is a majority Black city but until very recently its public monuments and memorials largely commemorated histories of white supremacy. For most of the city's history, statues honoring figures of the Confederacy, slaveholders, and anti-Black militia members outnumbered official monuments to Black historical figures and memorials marking the history of slavery, emancipation, and civil rights in New Orleans.² A major shift in the city's monumental landscape began in the late 2010s, when white supremacist violence spurred many U.S. states and municipalities to scrutinize public symbols linked to the history of white supremacy and slavery in the United States. An inflection point arrived with the 2015 murder of Black churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina, by a white supremacist who displayed the Confederate flag on his social media and enjoyed visiting slavery-related historical sites.³ The overt racism of this violence sparked a wave of self-examination among Southern cities, including New Orleans.⁴

As a result, on the night of April 24, 2017, under the watch of New Orleans Police Department snipers posted on nearby rooftops, masked workers removed a monument commemorating the 1874 Battle of Liberty Place, an attempted white supremacist coup against New Orleans' interracial Reconstruction-era government.⁵ The following month, the City of New Orleans removed three major Confederate monuments: general Robert E. Lee from a prominent traffic circle along the famed St. Charles Avenue streetcar route, general P.G.T. Beauregard from a high plinth at the edge of the city's largest park, and president Jefferson Davis from a swathe of neutral ground (the New Orleans term for a grassy street median). In summer 2020, protestors with no official authorization ripped a monument to slaveholder John McDonogh from its base in front of City Hall and threw it into the Mississippi River. These statues' plinths remain empty, with perpetually changing graffiti and interventions offering new readings of their legacies.

What comes, then, after the monuments fall?⁶ Artist Dread Scott has presented one response to this question, with his participatory performance

Figure 1. Documentation of *Slave Rebellion Reenactment*, a community performance initiated by Dread Scott outside New Orleans, November 8, 2019. Photo courtesy the artist and Antenna Works.

Figure 2 (opposite). Instagram images of *Slave Rebellion Reenactment*, November 8–9, 2019.



Figure 3. Detail of F. Saucier, *Carte particulière du cours du fleuve St. Louis depuis le village sauvage jusqu' au dessous du Detour aux Anglois, des lacs Pontchartrain & Maurepas & des rivieres & Bayouc qui y aboutissent (1749)*, Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, Louisiana: European Explorations and the Louisiana Purchase. The rebels began on the bank opposite the “Quartier des Allemandes” (German Coast label, and traveled eastward along the Mississippi River towards New Orleans. They were turned back around the point where the map reads Cannelbrulé. The city of New Orleans is marked by a pink rectangle. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2003623383/>

1. Kristina Kay Robinson, "Maryam's Refrain," *Nights of Measure* (Atlanta: Burnaway, 2020), 24, excerpted at <https://burnaway.org/nights-of-measure-kristina-kay-robinson>.

2. Many of these markers were constructed between the 1870s and 1910s, a period during which the city was majority white. There are few public markers of the history of slavery in the New Orleans area. A set of plaques has recently been installed through grassroots efforts by groups such as the New Orleans Committee to Erect Historic Markers on the Slave Trade, co-chaired by historian Freddi Williams Evans. Faimon A. Roberts, III, "Efforts Underway to Mark New Orleans Sites Where Slaves Were Bought and Sold," *NOLA.com*, May 5, 2018, https://www.nola.com/news/article_8b417385-az2f-5975-8791-451cc0bfdc76.html. Many reckonings with sites related to the history of slavery have taken the form of temporary events or exhibitions, i.e., the Historic New Orleans Collection's 2015 exhibition *Purchased Lives: The American Slave Trade from 1808 to 1865*, which mapped key sites around New Orleans. In rural Louisiana, the Whitney Plantation centralizes the experience of enslaved children through oral history narratives, in the context of a historical house museum. See Ana Lucia Araujo, *Slavery in the Age of Memory: Engaging the Past* (New York, Bloomsbury, 2020), 55–60.

3. Neely Tucker and Peter Holley, "Dylann Roof's Eerie Tour of American Slavery at Its Beginning, Middle and End," *The Washington Post*, July 1, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/07/01/dylann-roofs-erie-tour-of-american-slavery-at-its-beginning-middle-and-end/>.

4. Natalie Dessens argues that the unequal effects of Hurricane Katrina on Black New Orleanians was also a major impetus for public memorials to the history of slavery. Nathalie Dessens, "Staging Slavery in Post-Katrina New Orleans: Crisis as Shock Therapy?" *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 9–12.

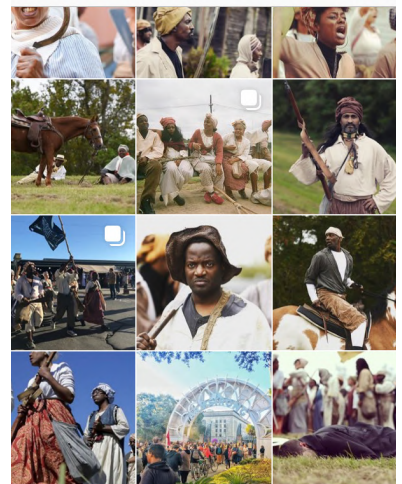
5. On the history of the Battle of Liberty Place monument, see Jelani Cobb, "The Battle Over Confederate Monuments in New Orleans," *The New Yorker*, May 12, 2017, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/the-battle-over-confederate-monuments-in-new-orleans>; and Chris Dier, "The History Surrounding New Orleans' Confederate Memorials," *chrisdier*.

artwork *Slave Rebellion Reenactment*. The most visible aspect of this project took place over two days in November 2019, when Scott led numerous New Orleanians and visitors to reenact an 1811 rebellion of enslaved Afro-descendent people. On November 8, 2019, the reenactors began repeating the rebels' march from upriver plantations towards the city of New Orleans. Wearing historically specific garments and carrying period appropriate weapons, they walked eastward along the Mississippi River. Their route followed a segment of Louisiana's so-called "Cancer Alley," a string of modern petrochemical plants constructed in predominantly lower income African American communities on the sites of former sugar plantations.⁷ Along the way, they chronicled their progress on social media. | figs. 1–2 |

In January 1811, the historical uprising had been subdued short of New Orleans by a hastily raised planters' militia, with the subsequent addition of forces summoned by the Orleans Territory governor and the U.S. military.⁸ On November 9, 2019, however, reenactors refuted this failure by performing a revisionist history. Re-imagining historical events—the violent subjugation of the historical revolt and its failure to reach New Orleans—the contemporary rebels triumphed with a parade through New Orleans' historic French Quarter and a final celebration at Congo Square.

Slave Rebellion Reenactment goes beyond a single event, proposing commemoration as a temporally distributed process that both produces and unearths layered histories of site.⁹ As a work of performance art, Scott's work combined aesthetic tropes drawn from historical reenactment, New Orleans' Black parading traditions, quasi-documentary photography, and social media. *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* deployed ephemerality and embodiment as site-specific aesthetic tactics, rooted in New Orleans' layered histories. Still, we should be wary of an essentializing view that would understand temporary and embodied modes of commemoration as particularly well-suited for addressing the history of Black agency in the face of enslavement. In lieu of a monument, Scott's work models alternative ways to commemorate histories of slavery and resistance in the U.S.: ephemeral, place-based, collective, and temporally layered. *Slave Rebellion Reenactment's* gathering of primarily Black bodies, in public space and on social media, temporally layered and rooted in site, was a re-performance that commemorated the past and conveyed the potentiality of Black organizing today.

< #SlaveRebellionReenact... ...



com, December 22, 2015, <https://chrisdier.com/2015/12/22/the-history-surrounding-new-orleans-confederate-memorials/>.

6. See LaVaughn Belle, Nicholas Galanin, Dell Upton, and Tsione Wolde-Michael, moderated by Tiffany Cain, "As the Statues Fall: A Conversation about Monuments and the Power of Memory," webinar sponsored by the Society of Black Archaeologists, the Cornell Institute of Archaeology and Material Studies, SAPIENS, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, July 23, 2020, <https://www.sapiens.org/archaeology/statues-falling/>.

7. See Craig E. Colten, "Making a Lemon Out of Lemonade: Louisiana's Petrochemical Corridor," in *Energy Capitals: Local Impact, Global Influence*, ed. Joseph A. Pratt, Martin V. Melosi, and Kathleen A. Brosnan (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014), 58–76; and Megan I. Gannon, "In Louisiana's 'Cancer Alley,' a Black Community Battles an Industry That Threatens Its Health—and History," *Popular Science*, November 17, 2020, <https://www.popsci.com/story/science/louisiana-formosa-chemical-construction-slave-cemetery/>.

8. "Bloody News," *New-York Gazette & General Advertiser*, February 15, 1811, 2. *The Connecticut Gazette* reported information from a January 14, 1811, edition of the *Courrier de la Louisiane*: "Gen. [Wade] Hampton... arrived with his troops, put the insurgents to flight, killed a number, and captured the Leaders. The alarm in New-Orleans was so great, that the Governor issued General Orders, placing the Militia of the city under arms." "From New-Orleans," *Connecticut Gazette* (New London), February 20, 1811, 2.

9. See also Adrian Anagnost and Mia Bagneris, "Sites of Memory: New Orleans and Place-based Histories in the Americas" (Proposal to the Mellon Foundation Sawyer Seminar Program, 2020).

10. The description of the rebels' diversity comes from "Frequently Asked Questions," *Slave Rebellion Reenactment*, <https://www.slave-revolt.com/about/frequently-asked-questions/>. Robert L. Paquette, "A Horde of Brigands? The Great Louisiana Slave Revolt of 1811 Reconsidered," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 85. Regarding the contemporary re-enactors, Dread Scott strongly desired (though did not mandate) that all participants (except for white "characters" such as slaveowners and

Site: Histories and Futurities

On Friday, November 8, 2019, *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* participants followed the historical path of the 1811 German Coast revolt, an uprising of enslaved people from several Louisiana Territory sugarcane plantations along the Mississippi River west of New Orleans. Like the historical rebels—"African, American, and Haitian-born; Creole, Congo, and Akan identified; French and English-speaking; and represent[ing] many religious and spiritual beliefs"—the predominantly African American re-enactors walked over twenty miles eastward towards New Orleans from upriver.¹⁰ | fig. 3 |

The *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* revived layered histories embedded in reenactment sites in and around New Orleans. Along the Louisiana Gulf Coast and Mississippi River Delta, we are on the land of the Chitimacha, Houma, and Chahta Yakni (Choctaw), here since before Europeans established settlements in the late seventeenth century.¹¹ In the 1690s, French traders began enslaving Chitimachas and other Indigenous people, and by at least 1709 there were also several enslaved Africans in the region—likely seized via trade with or plunder of Spanish entities in Florida and the Caribbean.¹² The early eighteenth-century Queen Anne's War and the War of Spanish Succession spurred French development of Gulf Coast forts at Mobile and New Orleans. In 1718 a few hundred French colonists formally founded New Orleans, locating the city along an Indigenous portage site that offered a favourable shortcut along the twisting Mississippi River.

Slave Rebellion Reenactment reinstated New Orleans within its regional nexus, and foregrounded the crucial—albeit often coerced—roles that African descendent people played in regional histories. The Gulf Coast slave trade began in earnest in 1719, barely one year after New Orleans was founded. In this year French traders forcibly brought enslaved Africans from West Africa's Bight of Benin to work on Louisiana plantations upriver of New Orleans—at first, mostly indigo; later, sugarcane and cotton.¹³ Enslavement of Africans and Afro-descendent people continued throughout the region's time as a Spanish colony, from the 1760s through 1803.¹⁴ In the 1790s technological advancements—an improved cotton gin and development of a commercial process for creating granulated sugar—spurred "intensified demand for slave labor in the region."¹⁵ Plantation slavery dominated Spanish Louisiana upriver of New Orleans, and the city itself was a key site for urban slavery in the United States. It was not uncommon for enslaved individuals, as well as planters and urban elites, to travel between upriver plantations and the city of New Orleans, potentially facilitating the planning of the 1811 German Coast revolt.¹⁶ The 1859 novel *Blake*, by Black abolitionist Martin Robison Delany, offered a fictionalized account of the German Coast revolt's "insurrectionary companions" who met in a house at Conti and Burgundy Streets in New Orleans, before they "effected a safe retreat to the respective plantations to which they belonged."¹⁷

The German Coast revolt took place at a fraught time in the history of New Orleans as an international hub and site of competing empires. In the 1790s there was already growing concern among Spanish colonial officials that

militia members) be people of colour, preferably of African descent. Dread Scott, discussion at the New Orleans Center for the Gulf South, New Orleans, L.A., August 30, 2017.

11. Scott's invitation to participate singled out participants "of African and/or Indigenous descent." "How to Get Involved," *Slave Revolt*, <https://www.slave-revolt.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/howtogetinvolved-final.pdf>. It is not clear whether any Indigenous-identifying individuals participated in either the historical revolt or the contemporary reenactment, though see the mention of "an Indigenous brother" in Ra Malika Imhotep, "Playing as Rebels," *Burnaway*, February 18, 2020, <https://burnaway.org/magazine/srr-playing-as-rebels/>. In fact, historian Robert L. Paquette relates that news reports stated that, "Parish officials ... hired Indian trackers to pursue the black fugitives." Paquette, 76.

12. Helen Sophie Burton and F. Todd Smith Colonial, *Natchitoches: A Creole Community on the Louisiana-Texas Frontier* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 56–58. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 57–58, 182. See also chapter two of Albert Thrasher, "On to New Orleans": Louisiana's Heroic 1811 Slave Revolt (New Orleans: Cypress Press, 1996). For a more cautious interpretation of some of Thrasher's sources, see Nathan A. Buman, "Historiographical Examinations of the 1811 Slave Insurrection," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 53, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 330–333.

13. Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 10, 59–63; Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 66; and Mary Gehman, "The Role of Slaves and Free People of Color in the History of St. Charles Parish" (2017), St. Charles Parish Museum and Historical Association, <https://scphistory.org/role-slaves-free-people-color-scp/>.

14. Though not thoroughly enforced, Spanish law prohibited the trade of enslaved Indigenous people, and also allowed enslaved Black people to purchase their freedom. Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 336. On the coartación process of manumission and changing financial and legal aspects of

enslaved individuals were conspiring to revolt, perhaps with the support of free militiamen of colour from New Orleans.¹⁸ Such fearfulness became particularly potent during and after the Saint-Domingue Revolt/Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), a Black liberation struggle that propelled a multi-racial wave of exiles and refugees from the island of Saint-Domingue to New Orleans.¹⁹ In 1810, with the Orleans Territory now a part of the U.S., the population of New Orleans was roughly evenly divided among whites, Free People of Colour, and enslaved people of primarily African descent; roughly sixty-three percent of those Free People of Colour were recent immigrants from Saint-Domingue/Haiti.²⁰ It is unclear whether the Haitian Revolution actually provided a model for the German Coast rebels, or whether networks of solidarity did in fact emerge between Free People of Color in urban New Orleans and Black people enslaved on rural plantations. However, in early 1811 the Haitian Revolution would have been relatively fresh in the minds of many individuals in the Gulf South, especially among white planters who had been ejected from Saint-Domingue and immigrated to New Orleans. Popular white accounts of the German Coast revolt thus often blamed it on "brigands" from Saint-Domingue.²¹ Moreover, the German Coast revolt took place precisely as the US Congress deliberated whether the broader Orleans Territory (roughly present-day Louisiana) would enter the Union as a "slave state." The revolt was thus judiciously timed to occur at a moment when political control over the land was in transition.

Slave Rebellion Reenactment mapped the political implications of Black and mixed-race collectivity across New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region from this history into the present. The participants roughly traced the original rebels' path, where some of the rebels' own descendants still live today in a region adversely shaped by environmental injustice.²² The path of the German Coast revolt lies almost entirely within what is today a "Toxic Hotspot" zone of Louisiana's "Cancer Alley," a swathe of the Mississippi Riverbank riddled with chemical plants. The area, which is predominantly low income and largely African American, is characterized by high air toxicity and the nation's "highest airborne cancer risk," according to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency models.²³ In photos and discussion, Scott emphasized the intentionally "jarring disconnect seeing hundreds of black people with machetes and muskets dressed in nineteenth-century clothing" against the backdrop of petroleum plants.²⁴ The march was a layered mode of protest, simultaneously commemorating the emancipatory rebellion of 1811 and enacting contemporary activism against environmental racism inflicted upon low income Black communities today. | fig. 4 |

On November 9, 2019, the reenactment departed from the historical record, but continued implicating layered histories of site. Rather than performing the rebels' defeat and imprisonment or execution, the reenactment ended with a victorious revolt and a triumphant arrival in New Orleans' Congo Square, a key site for African American history across multiple eras. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Congo Square was a public space where enslaved and free Afro-descendent New Orleanians gathered

attaining freedom from enslavement in Spanish Louisiana, see Alejandro de la Fuente and Ariela J. Gross, *Becoming Free, Becoming Black: Race, Freedom, and Law in Cuba, Virginia, and Louisiana* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 114–123.

15. Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 73–78. Ann Patton Malone, *Sweet Chariot: Slave Family and Household Structure in Nineteenth-Century Louisiana* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 20–21. Department of Agriculture, Economics, Statistics, and Cooperatives Service, *A History of Sugar Marketing through 1974*, by Roy A. Ballinger, Agricultural Economic Report No. AER-382 (Washington, DC, 1978), 6, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=40540>.

16. De la Fuente and Gross, *Becoming Free*, 122–123; and Cécile Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans: Empire, Race, and the Making of a Slave Society* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 123–133. On the planning of the revolt, see Thrasher, 49.

17. Martin Robison Delany, *Blake; or, The Huts of America* (1859), ed. Jerome McGann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 108. Though Delany's book recounted an imagined, transatlantic Black

for socializing, dancing, and drumming, a foundational space for jazz and, more broadly, African American cultural expression.²⁵ Originally, Congo Square sat at the edge of the Tremé Plantation, an area that was subdivided into residential lots beginning in the 1790s, and incorporated into the city of New Orleans in 1810.²⁶ Land sales records show that many Free People of Colour (including a substantial number of women landowners) settled in the Tremé neighbourhood when it was first developed, paving the way for the area's continued role as a center for Black commercial and cultural life.²⁷ Yet the neighbourhood surrounding Congo Square is also emblematic of the precarious status of Black public space in United States cities. Tremé was subjected to ill-fated urban renewal in the late 1960s, when the construction of highway I-10 split the neighbourhood, potentially bringing benefits to suburban commuters, but destroying New Orleans' primary Black business district along Claiborne Avenue and undermining Tremé's cohesiveness.²⁸ As a belated conciliatory gesture, in 1980 the city established the area surrounding Congo Square as Louis Armstrong Park, in honor of the New Orleans jazz great.

By arriving at a triumphant conclusion, *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* reframed the layered history of Tremé/Congo Square/Louis Armstrong Park: a site of Black conviviality even in the midst of slavery, an eighteenth-century plantation, a free community of colour, a vibrant Black commercial area, a neighbourhood half-blighted by urban development, then officially dedicated to Black history, a site of gathering in times of crisis and celebration. As the “rebels” moved from the German Coast to Congo Square they moved from performing history to performing collectivity as a mode of imagining future social orders.



Figure 4. Dread Scott, *Slave Rebellion Reenactment*, arrival at Congo Square, New Orleans, November 9, 2019. Performance.

revolution, his account seems to draw on the precedent of the 1811 German Coast Revolt. See Jerome McGann, "Historical and Critical Notes," in Blake, 322.

18. De la Fuente and Gross, *Becoming Free*, 123. At least one uprising by enslaved Africans was quashed in 1791 near Pointe Coupee, about 125 miles upriver from New Orleans. Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 317–321.

19. In fact, as Nathalie Dessens explains, many Free People of Color "had to flee the island [Saint-Domingue] for allying politically with the whites against the slave rebels on several occasions during the revolution." Nathalie Dessens, "Louis Charles Roudanez, a Creole of Color of Saint-Domingue Descendant: Atlantic Reinterpretations of Nineteenth-Century New Orleans," *South Atlantic Review* 73, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 27.

20. Amy R. Sumpter, "Segregation of the Free People of Color and the Construction of Race in Antebellum New Orleans," *Southeastern Geographer* 48, no. 1 (May 2008): 22–23. Nathalie Dessens, "Louis Charles Roudanez," 30. Between 1791 and 1830, the population of Free People of Colour rose from roughly ten percent of the population of Louisiana to around twenty-four percent of the state's population, largely centered in the city of New Orleans. Elizabeth Fussell, "Constructing New Orleans, Constructing Race: A Population History of New Orleans," *The Journal of American History* 94, no. 3, Through the Eye of Katrina: The Past as Prologue? (December 2007): 848.

21. Paquette, 78–79, 84–85, 91.

22. On the persistence of familial lineages on the same Gulf Coast land across generations, see Robinson, "Down River Road."

23. See the map accompanying Dan Swenson, "Explore Louisiana's Chemical Corridor on this Two-page Newspaper Spread," *NOLA.com*, October 31, 2019, https://www.nola.com/news/environment/article_e9b3557c-fbef-11e9-adf4-ebc6314ab332.html. See Craig E. Colten, "Making a Lemon Out of Lemonade: Louisiana's Petrochemical Corridor," in *Energy Capitals: Local Impact, Global Influence*, ed. Joseph A. Pratt, Martin V. Melosi, and Kathleen A. Brosnan (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014), 58–76; Megan I. Gannon, "In Louisiana's 'Cancer Alley,' a Black Community Battles an Industry That Threatens Its Health—and History," *Popular Science*, November 17, 2020, <https://www.popsoci.com/story/>

Temporal Displacement

Slave Rebellion Reenactment occupied simultaneous and sometimes conflicting temporalities, disrupting ideas of historical progress to superimpose past, present, and future events, both real and imagined. To invoke historical verisimilitude, the re-enactors wore clothing that mimicked the shapes and textures of historical garments and armed themselves with "kai knives and sabers and sickles and muskets and blunderbusses and flags" to make history tangible.²⁹ The reenactment thus evoked the meticulous visual historicism of film or prestige television drama, just as the 1977 miniseries *Roots* and the 2014 film *Selma* used concrete visual details and imagined restagings to make Black and African American history vivid lived experience. The attention to minute details of material culture afforded these experiences—poorly documented in written records—the weight of historical research and scholarship. However, in contrast to the "hypercharged repetition" of "exactly right" Civil War reenactments, the *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* incorporated calculated anachronisms, such as modern sneakers peeping from below broadcloth, Scott's own architect glasses, and industrial infrastructure along the Mississippi River.³⁰ The work thus implicitly rebuked the fixed narratives of historic house performers or war re-enactors, which in the U.S. are commonly fixated on a "magnolias and moonlight" version of U.S. history that papers over racial violence, romanticizes white power, or simply ignores the lived experiences of Black Americans and Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island. As performance theorist Rebecca Schneider explains, "reenactment troubles linear temporality" and "suggest[s] that time may be touched, crossed, visited and revisited. ... [R]eenactments are more than 'mere' remembering but are in fact the ongoing event itself, negotiated through sometimes radically shifting affiliation with the past as the present."³¹ Scott's reenactment proposed just such a multi-temporal mode of historical commemoration and futurity. | figs. 5–6 |

Slave Rebellion Reenactment's temporality is suspended between the ephemerality of the performance and the duration of its organization and afterlife. Beginning around 2014, Scott and other organizers fundraised, recruited participants, collaborated with New Orleans non-profits to organize sewing circles to create costumes and props, involved researchers to clarify historical details, acquired event permissions, and discussed the work in public forums.³² "The heart of the project," Scott explained, "actually embodies this history in the formation of and the creation of the army of the enslaved. [Networking and planning the reenactment] is going to be done by word of mouth, mirroring the structure of how a slave revolt had to be assembled."³³ The centripetal process of organizing drew participating bodies inward, creating a collective that would become corporeal—for a time—at sites in and around New Orleans, and persist in online images thereafter.

The work's mediality contributed to this sense that *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* was tethered in space but unmoored in time. Though there was a small audience present, the event was mostly seen via photographs and videos in social media and journalistic venues. Yet rather than creating a sense of



Figure 5. Documentation of *Slave Rebellion Reenactment*, a community performance initiated by Dread Scott outside New Orleans, November 8, 2019. Photo Soul Brother, courtesy the artist and Antenna Works.



Figure 6. Ivan Massar. Rev. and Coretta King leading the March, Selma to Montgomery, 1965. Photo: Ivan Massar (www.ivanmassar.com) © all rights reserved.

science/louisiana-formosa-chemical-construction-slave-cemetery/; and Johnson, 102.

24. Brentin Mock, "The Slave Revolt Reenactment Taking Over New Orleans," *Bloomberg City-Lab*, November 7, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-11-07/how-a-slave-revolt-reenactment-came-to-new-orleans>.

25. See Freddi Williams Evans, *Congo Square: African Roots in New Orleans* (Lafayette, LA: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2011); and Nick Douglas, "Black History: Congo Square, New Orleans – the Heart of American Music," *Afropunk* (February 26, 2018), <https://afropunk.com/2018/02/black-history-congo-square-new-orleans-heart-american-music/>.

26. Roulhac Toledano and Mary Louise Christovich, *New Orleans Architecture*, vol. IV, Faubourg Tremé and the Bayou Road (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 1980), 15–16.

27. *Ibid.* On the historical settlement of Free People of Color in New Orleans, see Sumpter, 23–27.

28. On the history of Tremé, see Michael E. Crutcher, Jr., *Tremé: Race and Place in a New Orleans Neighborhood* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010). Laine Kaplan-Levenson, "'The Monster': Claiborne Avenue Before And After The Interstate," *wnno*, May 5, 2016, <https://www.wnno.org/post/monster-claiborne-avenue-and-after-interstate>.

29. Orr, Interview with Dread Scott, 925.

30. On the "hypercharged repetition" of Civil War reenactments, see Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2011), 14; and Colbert, Jones, and Vogel, 4.

31. Schneider, 30, 32.

32. Tori Bush, "Artist Asks 'Slaves' to March on New Orleans," *The Art Newspaper* 261, October 2014, 4.

33. Joey Orr, "Radical View of Freedom: An Interview with Dread Scott," *Journal of American Studies* 52 (2018): 925. On Scott's conviction that collective organizing was constitutive of the artwork, see Erik Johnson, "Slavery, Tourism, and Memory in New Orleans's 'Plantation Country,'" *Africa Today* 65, no. 4 (Summer 2019): 117. On the limitations of this method to expand beyond existing networks, and the potential to instead fall into patterns of "extractive art practices," see Kristina Kay Robinson, "Down River Road," *Burnaway*, February 18, 2020, <https://burnaway.org/>

geographically dispersed simultaneity, calculated compositions evoked other scenes to suggest that the event was being encountered in memory or historical document. *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* participants created imaginative, Instagrammable tableaux of the rebellion's more quotidian aspects, such as marchers' pauses to rest, sing, and dance along the way. Image filters maintained a palette of dark brown, tan, cream, rose, and pale blue, colors of period-dyed fabrics, a subdued tonal range evoking the historicism of sepia photographs. Figures often posed mid-action, like actors in a staged drama. Marching formations echoed heroic revolutionaries of mid-twentieth-century quasi-documentary photography, like images of Cuban revolutionaries or U.S. Civil Rights marchers. The lengthy march from the German Coast to New Orleans parallels the days-long Civil Rights marches from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, and Scott clearly meant for the *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* to evoke Civil Rights precedents regarding the politics of Black life and agency over public space in the U.S. Compositionally, such photographs show a line of people stretching into the background and paralleling a horizon line, with flags providing a visual transition between land and sky. Additionally, *Slave Rebellion Reenactment's* embodied tableaux were set against glimpses of the petrochemical industry, jarringly returning viewers' attention to contemporary inequities. | fig. 7 |

The November 2019 reenactment also disrupted historical narratives by creating a new imagined ending for the uprising. As the event concluded in the city of New Orleans—which the historical rebels never reached—Congo Square erupted into a commemoration-cum-rally. Onstage, a flow of re-enactors recited names of the rebellion's known leaders, musicians such as jazz trombonist Delfeayo Marsalis played, and Black maskers of New Orleans famed Mardi Gras Indians performed.³⁴ *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* thus resonated with the array of recurrent public rituals establishing Black representational space in New Orleans, including jazz funerals, processions of second line parades, and Mardi Gras parading and masking.³⁵ At the same time, the arrival at Congo Square resembled a political rally, with speakers linking historical events to present-day struggles. The imagined success of the revolt presented an optimistic vision of collective action against environmental degradation, police violence, and disinvestment in education—all disproportionately affecting Black communities.

Through the event and its images, *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* deployed multiple, sometimes conflicting temporalities: the historical time of the rebellion itself, the imagined time of the victorious rebellion and aftermath, the duration of the collective organizing, the two-day performative reenactment, the event's reverberations in social media images, and its echo in the perpetual repetitions of New Orleans parading traditions. The work thus embodied what performance theorist Tavia Nyong'o calls "historical memory as a cultural practice of the present," or a "carnivalizing of time" in which the introduction of fictional or anachronistic elements produces "antagonistic cooperation with the past."³⁶ *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* wove together layered strands of history and futurity to disrupt ideas of linear progress

Figure 7. *Slave Rebellion Reenactment, Congo Square, New Orleans, November 9, 2019.*
Photo: Bart Everson.



magazine/letter-from-new-orleans-down-river-road/.

34. New Orleans' Mardi Gras Indians are a Black masking group that originated in the late nineteenth century, but whose roots can be traced back to West African parading and masking traditions, their adaptation in the Caribbean, and their melding with Indigenous cultural tropes of Turtle Island. See Evans, *Congo Square*; Jeroen Dewulf, *From the Kingdom of Kongo to Congo Square: Kongo Dances and the Origins of the Mardi Gras Indians* (Lafayette, LA: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2017); and Shane Lief and John McCusker, *Jockomo: The Native Roots of Mardi Gras Indians* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2019).

35. On second lines, see Karen Celestan, *Freedom's Dance: Social, Aid and Pleasure Clubs in New Orleans* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2018); and Helen A. Regis, "Blackness and the Politics of Memory in the New Orleans Second Line," *American Ethnologist* 28, no. 4 (November 2001): 752–777.

36. Tavia Nyong'o, *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2009), 136. See also Anagnost and Bagneris, n.p.

37. Noel W. Anderson and Andrew Weiner, "A Questionnaire on Monuments," *October* 165 (Summer 2018): 8.

38. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26, Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring 1989): 7–24. James E. Young, *The*

and foreground Black agency. Taking inspiration from the historical rebels' covert and persistent planning, the reenactment erupted in New Orleans public space as a call to action on contemporary political and social issues. What if, the reenactors asked, the revolt had succeeded? Which present-day inequities might have been mitigated? Even as the reenactment participants continued to perform the historical characters of political revolutionaries, the entry into New Orleans and triumphant rally enacted contemporary celebration and political action.

Temporalities of the Disremembered

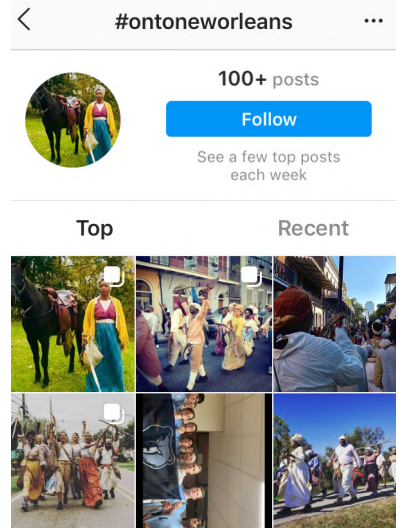
We see no monuments to the Middle Passage or the Tuskegee experiment; there are no genocide memorials on the Mall. ...Where are the monuments to systematic dispossession and subjugation, to the extinction of memory?

—Noel W. Anderson and Andrew Weiner³⁷

If *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* offers a form of revised commemoration, how is it distinct from conventional forms of memorialization? Writing some three decades ago, political scientist Pierre Nora diagnosed the memory boom as a process of collective reckoning with historical memory through memorials and monuments, literary and cinematic works, and public ceremonies. For Nora, who focused on modern France, and for historian James E. Young, whose discussion of "counter-monuments" focused on 1980s and 1990s Germany, this memory boom was fueled primarily by a post-wwii generation's openness to grappling with the Holocaust.³⁸ At the same time, as historian Jay Winter points out, globalization and post-Cold War national integration put to bed many state-led projects of national memory, clearing the way for the public proclamation of collective memories by regional groups and disenfranchised ethnic minorities.³⁹

In the Americas, the 1992 quincentennial of Christopher Columbus' landing in the Caribbean spurred parallel reevaluations of public

Figure 8. Instagram images of *Slave Rebellion Reenactment, New Orleans and surrounding region, November 8–9, 2019.*



commemoration. While some organizations treated the quincentennial as an opportunity to memorialize the origins of modern Western Hemisphere nations, many Indigenous, Afro-descendent, Latinx, and mixed-race individuals challenged narratives of “discovery” and “conquest,” protesting monuments and memorials that supported such narratives and offering their own takes on historical commemoration in the public sphere.⁴⁰ As Chicana muralist Judith F. Baca critiqued the “canon in the park” concept

of public art: “The purpose was to evoke a time past in which the ‘splendid triumphs’ and ‘struggles of our forefathers’ veered the course of history.... Never mind if as people of color they were not our forefathers, or even if the triumphs were often over our own people.”⁴¹ The 1990s also saw new attentiveness to remembering the history of slavery. In 1994, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) initiated “The Slave Route: Resistance, Liberty, Heritage,” a slate of efforts to educate people on these histories and preserve relevant sites and artifacts.⁴² Yet as writer Toni Morrison noted, those who perished during the Middle Passage were not simply forgotten, but “disremembered,” a term encompassing the aggressive absence of public memory around unnamed victims of the transatlantic slave trade and institutions of chattel slavery.⁴³

Over the following decades, these challenges to hegemonic histories did not spur the widespread creation of new sculptural monuments nor memorials to the history of slavery in the Americas, but rather new forms of ritual and public declarations of collective memory.⁴⁴ Writing in the wake of September 11, 2001, literary critic Andreas Huyssen explained this period’s paradoxical approach to monuments as evading fixed narratives in favor of affect and ephemerality: “Monumentalism of built space...continue[s] to be much maligned, but the notion of the monument as memorial or commemorative public event has witnessed a triumphal return.”⁴⁵ In the specific case of slavery, art historian Renée Ater explains that the “unsettled” quality of shame and antipathy associated with the historical enslavement of African Americans gives rise to memorializations in the form of speech acts (dialogues, apologies, reparations—or, at least, proposals for reparations) rather than weighty sculptural monuments.⁴⁶ Pragmatically, there may be limited patronage for large, expensive monuments to counter-hegemonic histories, since public monuments conventionally commemorate

Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). Focusing primarily on public works erected in 1990s Germany to commemorate the Holocaust of European Jews, Young’s exemplary notion of the counter-monument describes objects and sites that foreground absence, ruin, and the void, and that accrue visual markers of the passage of time. James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 28–30, 46–57.

39. Jay Winter, “The Memory Boom in Contemporary Historical Studies,” *Raritan* 21, no. (1) (June 2001): 53–54.

40. See Robin Cembalest, “Goodbye, Columbus?” *ARTnews* 91, no. 8 (October 1991): 104–109; Gary Putka “World May Not Be Flat, but Celebration For Columbus Sure Is—After 500 Years, Has Explorer Worn Out His Welcome? Native Americans Say Yes,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 9, 1992, A1; and James Axtell, “Columbian,” *Columbian Encounters: 1992–1995*, *The William and Mary Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (1995): 649–696.

41. Judith F. Baca, “Whose Monument Where? Public Art in a Many-Cultured Society,” in *Saber Es Poder/Interventions: Urban Revisions: Current Projects for the Public Realm* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994), n.p.

42. New Orleans’ Mardi Gras Indians are a Black masking group that originated in the late nineteenth century, but whose roots can be traced back to West African

parading and masking traditions, their adaptation in the Caribbean, and their melding with Indigenous cultural tropes of Turtle Island. See Evans, *Congo Square*; Jeroen Dewulf, *From the Kingdom of Kongo to Congo Square: Kongo Dances and the Origins of the Mardi Gras Indians* (Lafayette, LA: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2017); and Shane Lief and John McCusker, *Jockomo: The Native Roots of Mardi Gras Indians* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2019).

43. Angels Carabi, Interview with Toni Morrison, *Belles Lettres: A Review of Books by Women* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1994): 38. Alternately, historian Thomas C. Holt explained that he “borrowed the term ‘disremembered’ from a black sharecropper’s account of his life as told to Theodore Rosengarten in *All God’s Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York: Knopf, 1974).” Thomas C. Holt, “Legacies ‘Disremembered’: Re-reading Moments of Emancipation,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 160, no. 3 (2016): 253n12.

44. See Dessens, “Staging Slavery,” 1–19.

45. Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 31.

46. Renée Ater, “Slavery and Its Memory in Public Monuments,” *American Art* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 20–23.

47. The work is formed from Portuguese cork, untreated softwood and fsc spruce plywood, “bio” resin and epoxy, “Portland Stone,” and the occasional steel reinforcement. “*Fons Americanus* at the Tate Modern 2019,” Jesmonite.com, accessed November 15, 2020, <https://jesmonite.com/case-study/fons-americanus-at-the-tate-modern>; and “Still Running: Kara Walker’s Fountain Will Go Back on Show at Tate Modern Post-lockdown,” *The Art Newspaper*, June 24, 2020, accessed November 15, 2020, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/blog/still-running-kara-walker-s-fountain-to-go-back-on-show-at-tate-modern-post-lockdown>.

48. Dessens, “Staging Slavery,” 11.

49. Mechtild Widrich, *Performative Monuments: The Rematerialisation of Public Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 3.

50. *Ibid.*, 9.

histories of triumph or memorialize loss as heroic sacrifice, rather than acknowledge collective responsibility or guilt. Many efforts to memorialize counter-hegemonic histories of the Americas have remained, perhaps necessarily, performative or intangible as well as future-oriented.

Thus it is perhaps unsurprising that there exist so few memorials to the enslaved or monuments commemorating the history of slavery. Even Kara Walker’s recent enormous recent monumental sculptures referencing the history of slavery have been temporary. Walker’s 2014 sculpture *A Subtlety, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant*, was, in keeping with its elliptical reference to enslaved labour on sugarcane farms, made of sugar. *A Subtlety* was a three-story, nude, sphinx-like, crouching figure made from sugar with the face of a stereotypical Black “mammy,” accompanied by over a dozen life-sized children sculpted out of sugar or resin dripping with molasses. Walker situated the sculpture in a Domino Sugar factory poised at the crux of gentrification in Brooklyn, implicating the site in both historical and contemporary economic cycles. After the show, the sugar was discarded and the underlying framework recycled. For the 2019 Tate Modern Turbine Hall Commission, Walker created another massive, recyclable monument.⁴⁷ *Fons Americanus* evoked quintessential Baroque fountain with figures enacting an allegorical account of the transatlantic slave trade, and the facts and fictions of the Black Atlantic. Like Walker’s works, Scott’s *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* fits within a general tendency towards ephemeral commemoration of transatlantic slavery.

Yet where Walker’s ephemeral sculptures insist upon a temporary monumentality, *Slave Rebellion Reenactment*’s embodied processes of retrieval, recovery, and recording exemplify recent uses of re-articulation to memorialize the history of slavery and anti-Black violence in the Americas.⁴⁸ Art historian Mechtild Widrich has described such forms of memorialization as “performative monuments.” The performative monument can be a “temporally and physically distributed event,” that employs “strategies more familiar from ephemeral urban performance art than from monumental sculpture.”⁴⁹ For Widrich, the performative monument can involve the redeployment of conventionalized performative gestures, i.e., the protest march or political uprising, as a way to effect changes in social reality in the present.⁵⁰ In New Orleans, Black parading rituals are one set of conventionalized, performative gestures that can resonate with local audiences for the *Slave Rebellion Reenactment*.⁵¹ Moreover, as performance theorists Soyica Diggs Colbert, Douglas A. Jones, and Shane Vogel explain, with the particular approach of reenactment, “the past epoch is not figured as memory or artifact but as a material and affective present,” foregrounding the “persistence of the past in the present not as a repetition but as a continuation.”⁵² Resonant with carnival tradition of New Orleans, *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* is experienced as an unfolding across multiple times and media platforms, revivifying older layered histories while also producing new futurities of site.

Mediated Performance: The Social Body

Though it deployed the immediacy of bodies in procession, *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* also challenged the (questionable) primacy of corporeal commemoration.⁵³ The heavily photographed and video-recorded *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* dispersed performance and commemoration in time and space, insisting not on the primacy of the artist's body before the viewer, but on the presence of bodies as collectivities at historically weighted sites such as the German Coast and Congo Square. The event balanced a commitment to the particular layered histories and memories embedded in New Orleans and the surrounding region, with a visually discursive approach to commemoration.

Slave Rebellion Reenactment thus sought to avoid the pernicious dichotomy of distinctions between large-scale public monuments associated with previously dominant historical narratives, and counter-hegemonic memorializations as necessarily performative and social. This distinction is latent in Pierre Nora's notions of monumentalized history as a characteristically modern, secular mode that destroys a spontaneous, embodied, essentially pre-modern mode of memory.⁵⁴ A rational and objective history of (predominantly white and male) conquerors is materialized in statues that can—with more or less difficulty—be torn down or pulverized to dust. This mode is opposed to one in which the (formerly) disenfranchised embody living, breathing, corporeal historical memory in their very selves. This smacks of perniciously racialized and gendered distinctions between mind and body, as sociologist Tony Bennett has pointed out: a tendency “to ascribe racial identity to a shared memory rooted in the ancestral history of the body.”⁵⁵ To avoid this essentialism we cannot simply fill our public squares with a rotating cast of heavy marbles and bronzes of perpetually changing counter-hegemonic heroes. Nor is performance or the ephemeral monument an unproblematic solution.

Scott himself was wary of the potential for history to be located in specific, racialized bodies. He first considered the subject of Nat Turner's 1831 rebellion before deciding to center his project on the German Coast uprising. Scott was concerned that choosing the 1831 example would focus the rebellion on Nat Turner as a tragic hero whose character would likely be mapped onto the position of the artist himself. In contrast, the German Coast revolt offered a de-centered and polyvocal form of political action whose creators worked across lines of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, language, and national origin. Amid the increasingly virulent racial intolerance of the Trump years in the U.S., the 1811 revolt came to exemplify a historically diverse alliance against white supremacy that offered a potential model for contemporary collective action.

In the context of New Orleans, we must furthermore beware the determinism of racially-specific roles common to Mardi Gras and second line parading traditions, which often feature Black people performing syncretic cultural forms for both intimate communities and watchers, often whiter and wealthier.⁵⁶ As Tony Bennett points out, “In automatically preferring

51. On Mardi Gras Indians as “counter-monuments,” see Cynthia J. Becker, “Confederate Soldiers, Voodoo Queens, and Black Indians: Monuments and Counter-Monuments in New Orleans,” *de arte* 54, no. 2, *Troubling Histories: Public Art and Prejudice*, Vol 2 (2019): 53–58.

52. Soyica Diggs Colbert, Douglas A. Jones, and Shane Vogel, “Tidying up after Repetition,” in *Race and Performance after Repetition* (Durham, Nc: Duke University Press, 2020), 16.

53. Amelia Jones, “‘Presence’ in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation,” *Art Journal* 56, no. 4, *Performance Art: (Some) Theory and (Selected) Practice at the End of This Century* (Winter 1997): 13.

54. Nora, 7, 8, 12.

55. Tony Bennett, “Stored Virtue: Memory, the Body and the Evolutionary Museum,” in *Regimes of Memory*, ed. Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin (New York: Routledge, 2002), 40.

56. See, for example, Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 10–14, 18–24. For a parallel found in works by Brazilian artists Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Pape, see Adrian Anagnost, “Lygia Pape in Transit: Performing Site in 1960s–1970s Rio de Janeiro,” *ASAP/Journal* 2, no. 3 (September 2017): 536–540.

forms of remembering that are inscribed in the body or in the organic consciousness of a particular collectivity, these approaches diminish the political significance that ought properly to attach to the analysis of the different institutional and technological forms in which memory is socially organised.”⁵⁷ We should retain skepticism about performance as a spontaneous expression of collective memory by non-normative (often: non-white, non-male, non-hetero, non-cis) bodies.

Though the *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* did not completely avoid this conundrum, the constructed nature of the work compelled participants and viewers to be cognizant of the process of commemoration. In keeping with a certain strand of performance art, the Friday, November 8, phase of the work was largely a performance for cameras, but one in which the fictionalization was overt, due to the disconnect between historical dress and props and the modern backdrops. As re-enactors progressed along the levees lining the Mississippi River upriver from New Orleans, journalists and a crew led by Black British filmmaker John Akomfrah imaged their progress. Critic William C. Anderson remarked that, “journalists scrambled to and fro hoping to catch the best shots of the reenactors... [Akomfrah’s crew] often had to wrangle press out of their way ... these moments seemed to reveal that capturing this march in a certain cinematic quality was a top priority.”⁵⁸ However, it was nearly impossible for photographers and videographers to create an image outside of time, since modern camera equipment, cars and roadway, and chemical plants frequently intruded. Moreover, one of the primary ways for people to “watch” the reenactment was through social media, making the mediation obvious. | fig. 8 |

As a continuous scroll or grid of images, the #SlaveRebellionReenactment hashtag and @slaverebellion Instagram account framed an accretion of images as itself a form of commemoration. Just as Amelia Jones explains performance art’s “dependence on documentation to attain symbolic status within the realm of culture,” and Mechtild Widrich sees photographic documentation as making the performative monument “durable,” *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* acquired a memorial weight not as a singular iconic tableau or monumental presence, but through the accretion of multiple images of the same event, created and disseminated via multiple individuals’ social media feeds.⁵⁹ This mediation enables us to recognize the constructedness of the image world in which *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* intervenes. The weapon-wielding, fashionably dressed Black re-enactors defied the overdetermined visual conventions of early U.S. history, of the antebellum South, of slavery and enslaved individuals. Participants’ bodies cannot, as performance theorist Kathy O’Dell explains, be understood in terms of immanent corporeality, but always already exist within the realm of the symbolic.⁶⁰ With images of Black and Brown bodies weighted by this symbolic register, particularly within a United States image world, we should be particularly sensitive to images of Black and Brown bodies as the focus of violence.⁶¹ In grappling with commemorating the actions and experiences of Black historical figures, historian Joan C. Scott points out, we should be

57. Bennett, 41.

58. William C. Anderson, “Marches Can Only Come and Go: The Reality of Dread Scott’s ‘Slave Rebellion,’” *Hyperallergic* (November 12, 2019), <https://hyperallergic.com/527964/marches-can-only-come-and-go-the-reality-of-dread-scotts-slave-rebellion/>; and Noah Simblist, “Dread Scott’s Struggle to Reclaim Collective Memory,” *Art in America* (June 30, 2020), <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/dread-scott-john-akomfrah-slave-rebellion-reenactment-reclaim-collective-memory-1202693023>.

59. Jones, “Presence,” 13.

60. Kathy O’Dell, “Toward a Theory of Performance Art: An Investigation of Its Sites” (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1992), 43–44, cited in Jones, “Presence,” 13.

61. See Michael Chaney,

“Mulatta Obscura: Camera Tactics and Linda Brent,” in *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, ed. Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 109–110; Selamawit D. Terrefe, “Antiblackness and the Politics of Pleasure” (presentation at Newcomb Institute, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA, October 25, 2019); and Kristina Kay Robinson, “The Darkroom in the Attic: Blackness and Visibility,” *Burnaway*, June 29, 2020, <https://burnaway.org/the-darkroom-in-the-attic-blackness-and-visibility>.

careful not to “tak[e] as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented and thus [to] naturaliz[e] their difference... Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one’s vision is structured—about language (or discourse) and history—[should not be] left aside.”⁶²

By relying on both live performance and mediation across social media, the *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* balanced Joan C. Scott’s call to value immanent, embodied, identity-specific experiences while also recognizing that experience itself is constructed. The reenactment compelled viewers to apprehend massed bodies as a mode of political power for those who are both overly noticed and regularly ignored while in plain sight. At the same time, Dread Scott’s recourse to archival materials (transcribed on the project website), John Akomfrah’s film, live historical reenactment, and the parafictional performance of triumphant rebels reimagining history, all contribute to understanding history itself as constructed. Seeing is not a transparent window onto historical truth, and even bodily presence (our own, or that of the participants) is an insufficient condition to understanding the workings of historical systems of ideology.⁶³ The genre of reenactment simultaneously insists upon the material presence of the “disremembered” and demonstrates that commemoration is never an unequivocal act.

Post-Revolutionary

The recent rise of empty plinths and counter-memorials has demonstrated growing recognition that monuments are not mute; nor does the removal of a statue neutralize the history of a site. As Frederick Douglass noted in 1883, “there are no bygones in the world and the past is not dead and cannot die.”⁶⁴ In the context of New Orleans’ changing cityscape and exurbs, Dread Scott’s 2019 *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* offered an alternative approach to commemoration, rooted in the performance of massed bodies and the creation of new sociabilities in urban and exurban space. In its process, a years-long development of networks, particularly involving arts workers of colour in New Orleans, *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* also pointed to new approaches to community engagement. Scott explaining that he wanted participation to grow organically, like the historical rebellion had—by word of mouth, via small cells of likeminded people who could continue working together afterward. Similarly, because the *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* participants moved across the Gulf Coast landscape, the work commemorated diachronic narratives rooted in a network of sites.

The work is thus not only revisionist history but a form of futurism. On Friday, the reenactors re-staged documented incidents and imagined their quotidian interstices as living tableaux. However, Saturday’s passage through New Orleans’ so-called French Quarter and into Congo Square broke with the historical record, rewriting the ending of the German Coast uprising into a more generic allegory, a form of political theatre. Across both parts of this two-act performance, in different genres and registers,

62. Joan C. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4. (Summer 1991): 776.

63. *Ibid.*, 778–779. In fact, some commentators complained that the event had become “primarily a vehicle for a documentary film shoot rather than a serious attempt to inform and engage local communities.” Jenny Jarvie, “In the Deep South, a Reenactment for the 21st Century,” *The Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2019-11-09/in-the-deep-south-a-re-enactment-for-the-21st-century>.

64. Frederick Douglass, *Speech on Emancipation Day*, Rochester, NY, Manuscript/Mixed Material, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mfd.24005/>.

the mediatic image was crucial. This gathering of artists, activists, and other Afro-descendent people was documented through live social media posts and footage taken by multiple film crews. In person, the work culminated in a rousing demonstration in the heart of New Orleans, a site the original rebels never reached.

Familiarity with local history and the experience of site is essential to the work's efficacy, both as an aesthetic intervention in urban space of New Orleans and as an intervention in contemporary politics. Scott had limited success in including local non-art world African American communities, showing the challenges in present-day organizing reliant on existing networks. Yet his efforts successfully instantiated a new collectivity, gathering Afro-descendent re-enactors and multiracial celebrants in Congo Square. As an expression of historical commemoration, the event was also a success, bringing attention to lesser-known histories of resistance to slavery in the antebellum United States. In tracing the path of rebels through low-income African American communities of Louisiana's Gulf Coast and choosing Congo Square as the culminating site for *Slave Rebellion Reenactment*, Scott invoked the potent symbolism of sites in which Black bodies have gathered since the earliest presence of Afro-descendant people in the region.

The work also successfully moved collectivity from social media to public space and back again in ways that parallel the organizing process of contemporary political activism—and the potential afterlife of protest photography for shifting public opinion. Moving across mediascapes, landscapes, and urban public space, the *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* ultimately affirmed the centrality of site for formulating a commemorative politics and asserting that Black lives have always mattered. ¶