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Prescriptions of (Living) Historical Happiness: Gendered Performance and Racial Comfort in Reenactment

In the mid–twentieth century, historic forts, villages, and even presidents' mansions began reopening for business, allowing visitors to spend an afternoon at a specific time in the United States' past. Presenting themselves as a new, experiential way to learn about history, living history museums allow guests to engage with performers in period attire, participate in events like battle reenactments or early church services, and learn about historical American values. However, living history museums' inextricable ties to capitalism result in idealized and normalized presentations of early American happiness, editing their exhibits in order for visitors to feel comfortable even in the face of uncomfortable information. This manner of display can also act as a suggestion for visitors to seek a return to early social norms in order to achieve happiness in a contemporary setting.

The intersections between historical accuracy and visitor comfort are often tested at living history museums, specifically in presentations of issues relating to race and gender. In his landmark writing on living history museums, the scholar and critic Jay Anderson writes about the social possibilities of re-creation, saying that "with museums like this, any of the popular new social history themes could be interpreted: cultural ecology, enculturation, family, sex roles, function of material culture, and aging, to name a few" (298). Though Anderson's designation of social history as "popular" may read as dismissive, his exploration of the field is extremely

valuable because it leads Anderson to realize that living history teaches lessons on contemporary culture in addition to historical fact.

He writes that living history museums can "serve as a medium for acting out in a socially acceptable way behavior not commonly encountered in the contemporary world; for example, dressing up in armour and fighting with swords and shields" (291). Here, however, I must be critical of the solely visual connection he makes between battle reenactment and social norms. Though, as he implies, wearing a full suit of armor in a grocery store may be outside contemporary social expectations, the underlying norm of masculine-coded, recreational violence can be traced through both a re-created joust and a National Football League game. Living history museums can utilize historical activities like jousting—or, as is more common in American museums, Revolutionary or Civil War battle reenactments—to reinforce traditional gender roles as markers for happiness. The past "intrudes" on the present as historical gender stereotypes are often presented, as in a battle scene, without criticism or commentary on the part of the museum (291). Instead, visitors are left to make their own connections between viewed performances and their own lives.

The Closet of Reenactment: Gendered Expectations behind the Scenes

When viewers are treated to gendered roles in performance at living history museums, it is also important to consider the effects of those roles on the reenactors, who often do not create their own characters or choose their own costuming. The American studies critic and former historical reenactor Amy Tyson touches on her experiences with gendered criticism in reenactment in her piece "Men with Their Muskets and Me in My Bare Feet," which discusses her work at the Fort Snelling living history museum in Minnesota. After describing an incident in which she was criticized in a public locker room for a choice not to wear shoes that her supervisor deemed

historically inaccurate, Tyson began to investigate how feminine and masculine bodies (and work) were policed as presenters of history and how criticisms were often rooted in "notions of historical authenticity" (54).

"While women were subject to scrutiny about, say, sewing, cooking, and cleaning, men were most often scrutinized for their ability to march, fire muskets, be 'good soldiers,'—and to convincingly portray masculinity, in both its historic and present-day dimensions," Tyson writes ("Men" 43). The demand to act as a "real" eighteenth-century man or woman also bled into conversations between reenactors because the social norms were upheld behind the scenes. In interviews with men who worked at Fort Snelling, Tyson found that

> [i]n terms of material culture, it was not just booze and muskets that were grounds for assessing a fellow interpreter's masculinity in the men's locker room. In the men's locker room, there was a bell that a few of them would ring from time to time if a particularly attractive female visitor had been seen touring the fort on any given day. ("Men" 59)

This observation of forced heterosexuality is mirrored in Tyson's own experience, in which Tyson was criticized for walking arm in arm with another female reenactor during a parade, a gesture that she implies was interpreted as queer by a supervisor. In the narrative from the men's locker room and in her own chastisement, heterosexuality is enforced in both historical (in Tyson's case) and modern (in the locker room's) contexts. Here, the culture of living history works to direct its reenactors toward normative presentations of heterosexuality as the best way to achieve visitor and personal happiness: while Tyson was policed for projecting queerness to visitors, the men in the locker room were policed in regard to their individual sexualities. "Happiness involves a form of orientation," writes the feminist critic Sara Ahmed, continuing that "the very hope for happiness means we get directed in specific ways, as happiness is

assumed to follow from some life choices and not others" (54). By criticizing nonnormative presentations of gender and sexuality, living history enforces the idea that individuals must project and experience normative values to achieve happiness. In this way, normative gendered behavior and heterosexuality are not only internalized by reenactors but also sold to the public, who then experiences that policing secondhand.

Preserving Creature Comforts in Lessons on Slavery

In the United States, the idea of history as commodified through reenactment sites should be cause for some anxiety, especially in regard to the treatment of American participation in slavery. However, living history museums largely work to reframe this concern, eliciting comfort in their audiences (which, owing to the locations and costs of many museums, are often composed of mostly white-identifying guests). Because of their financial dependency on visitor admission fees, the sites often abandon Anderson's idea of living history as "both a fascinating and threatening experience," leaving behind the threatening aspect to elicit audience approval (291). In this way, living history museums begin to function as an exchange of goods and services, whereby visitors receive happiness or emotional comfort in return for the cost of admission. This economically influenced mode is harmful both to the visitors, who are allowed to resist an authentic learning experience, and to the reenactors themselves.

Reenactment sites' "whitewashing" of issues of race and slavery is also explored in Tyson's observations at Fort Snelling. Interviewing her fellow (mostly white) reenactors, Tyson questioned whether they brought up slavery during their shifts, and if so, under what circumstances. Though Snelling frequently used slave labor during its time as a military fort, the reenactors reported feeling conflicted about sharing that part of its history in case it made visitors feel uncomfortable. Rooms that historically held enslaved people were reframed as "servant's

quarters," leaving visitors to either ask for more information or receive none ("Crafting" 254). "We would just make people uncomfortable," she writes, quoting "Gavin," another reenactor, "so it's better just to mention, yes this really happened . . . and then we just try to move on to something else" (254). By allowing guests to opt out of information that may make them feel uncomfortable, like the existence of slave labor at a fort in the United States, the museum neglects the "historical authenticity" it used to excuse its policing of reenactors' gender presentation (Tyson, "Men" 54). Instead, an inaccurate presentation of nearly conflict-free historical happiness allows visitors satisfaction in their paid experience.

Even living history programs that focus on exposing the horrors of slavery often do so with customer comfort and happiness in mind, privileging a positive visitor experience over historical veracity. In the "Follow the North Star" program at the living history museum Connor Prairie in Fishers, Indiana, visitors pay an extra fee on top of admission to experience a physical re-creation of enslavement. In the simulation, staff members instruct visitors to embody escaped slaves on the Underground Railroad; they experience a mock-slave auction, meet several characters who help or impede their journey, and receive light verbal abuse (notably, no racial slurs are used). If "the experience becomes too intense," visitors are instructed to tie around their heads the white strip of cloth they have been given, in which case they will become as if invisible to performers and be allowed to simply observe (Tyson, "Crafting" 249). Afterward, museum guests are gathered to emotionally debrief with a staff member. This kind of role-playing experience, in which visitors have the privilege to opt out of emotional discomfort but still receive the customer satisfaction of empathizing with an experience other than their own, frames historical and social education as a wellness product. The reenactment becomes a self-

care practice as visitors congratulate themselves for reaching outside their own identity sphere in a socially acceptable (but still not emotionally strenuous) way.

In many cases, however, this audience comfort comes at the price of the happiness of historical reenactors, specifically African American actors representing enslaved people. For the reenactors, presenting slavery is an effortful rather than effortless experience and often requires a great deal of emotional labor, since they are required to perform happiness in their positions. This concept is exposed and explored in the *YouTube* Web series "Ask a Slave," a show starring the actress and former historical reenactor Azie Dungey as "Lizzie Mae," an enslaved housemaid in George Washington's house. "The following is based on real interactions I had while portraying a slave character at a popular historic site," says the text introducing Dungey's videos. "Names have been changed to protect the guilty" (Dungey, "Ask a Slave Ep 1" 00:00:00-05). In episode 3, titled "You Can't Make This Stuff Up," Lizzie is asked why she doesn't just "take the Underground Railroad," told that "slavery is a good industrial life," and criticized for not "organizing a union" if she wants to improve working conditions ("Ask a Slave Ep 3" 00:01:18, 1:58, 4:09). Though Dungey occasionally allows herself to become visibly frustrated in her videos as she reacts to these racist comments, it is clear that this response was not allowed during her actual work at the site (which, by way of the animated introduction, is strongly implied to be Mount Vernon). The expectation that she remain cheerful in the face of overtly racist or offensive lines of questioning correlates directly to her emotional labor; for the tourists to feel comfortable saying that Lizzie Mae must love working for such an important family, Dungey is required to hide her discomfort and produce an image of happiness instead.

Compensation for (Un)Happiness

The performative happiness required from reenactors exposes the expectation of living history museums to produce “reciprocal forms of aspiration (I am happy for you, I want you to be happy . . .)” through “forms of coercion” (Ahmed 91). Reenactors are expected to produce audience happiness, and their emotional labor is reimbursed, not by an increased salary, but by the idealized corporate thought that audience happiness will generate reenactor happiness. Of course, this economic discourse on happiness does not reflect lived experiences or compensate for the emotional labor performed by African American reenactors facing corporate-approved racism in the workplace. Similarly, preserving audience comfort regarding historical gender performance also is only possible at the cost of reenactor happiness through gendered criticism. Because living history museums rely on visitor attendance to function, their productions of historical happiness are framed to avoid audience discomfort at all costs, a choice that harms reenactors and promotes limiting and normative ideas of both historical and contemporary life. At living history museums, “ideas of happiness involve social as well as moral distinctions insofar as they rest on ideas of who is . . . capable of being happy,” and within the transactional nature of the museums, guests make themselves “capable” by paying the entrance fee (13). In return, they receive an affirming rather than challenging experience, resulting in a satisfactory transaction that reads in a capitalist society as “happiness.”

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