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Durability as Performance

by Stephon Senegal

The story of a negro reenacting negro enslavement and negro rebellion should not be compelling to descendants of enslavers, it should possibly be alarming. A number of months ago, I participated in a reenactment of the 1811 Slave Rebellion Reenactment (SRR) in New Orleans Louisiana. The reenactment was organized by artist Dread Scott. In January of 1811, led by mulatto Charles Deslondes, an unlikely band of maroons and slaves rose to burn and pillage their way through the German Coast in southern Louisiana. The actual rebellion, the largest slave rebellion in the history of the United States, took place in the river parishes outside of New Orleans. The story concludes as many other such rebellions, but the exclusion of our stories of strength are part of what motivated Dread to bring this history to the forefront of the American consciousness. This art performance included period costuming and a twenty-six mile plus march that retraced the path of the rebels, inclusive of a musket battle or two with local white militia. Part performance and part film production, the project involved hundreds of reenactors in period specific clothing. Filmmaker John Akomfrah documented the reenactment.

In the middle of summer, a few months before we made history, I was introduced to Dread Scott. Upon hearing about this project, I could hardly contain my desire to participate. Colleagues who knew us both felt strongly that I should get involved. After that first conversation with him, my discussions with others about the project was essentially non-existent. The days and weeks before the rebellion were filled with what my friends consider typical. I would speak with them about my art practice, my travel and maybe my Krispy Kreme cravings, a guilty pleasure, but no talk of the rebellion. During an informal conversation with a close friend after the performance was complete, she asked a simple question: "Why didn't you tell me about this?". While considering her question, I realized that there were layers to my involvement, only some of which I can even speak about.

Let's start at the beginning or at least the beginning of my involvement. Before hearing about this project my practice has been evolving into one focused heavily on public art, specifically public art in marginalized communities of color. Both the objects I create and the service initiatives within my practice embody ideas of autonomy. Independence as an idea within a system built for control is on its own rebellious. The project conceived and executed by artist Dread Scott represented all the things that my practice championed, and I felt that my participation was mandatory. After our introduction and his brief excitement about my ability to ride horses, Dread explained the process of getting the costume prepared and the clandestine sewing circles. Though this project was public, and funded partially because of, I felt that Dread wanted to carry through the secretive nature of what a real rebellion might involve. Once involved, participants got communications privy only to the group. Nonetheless, I felt that I could take the clandestine elements of the project a bit further. I soon began conversations with certain members of my family. I only choose to communicate with those who in their lives had embodied what it may have took to have a successful rebellion. My core family consists of blue collar types, physical and from city folk perspective, downright country (with a veneer of polish). The cousins I spoke to were formerly incarcerated. As predicted, and without me giving them any instruction, neither of them told the others that I had asked, interestingly enough their actions were rebellion friendly. The actual rebellion in 1811 was primarily young men, so I asked primarily my male cousins (five total). One cousin made sure my costume was produced and she was also prepared to do the sewing for the other four. Nonetheless, their requests for a day off were denied and just like in the actual rebellion, though many were willing, only a few were able to make it out.

As I prepared to travel south from Brooklyn for the reenactment, I kept my reasons for travel under wraps. I met with Dread Scott a few times and we discussed my involvement. A major part of my participation was my ability to ride horses and access to a horse to ride. My horse would be provided by a close friend. As the dates neared after a number of logistical challenges, the training sessions began to be announced. During one of our conversations, Dread had mentioned something about shooting muskets, soon thereafter I began to get communications about training for combat maneuvers. I traveled to Louisiana undercover as a Southern University alumni or related institution attending the homecoming festivities. Some, not all, will understand. On the most festive day of the weekend, I snuck away to New Orleans from Baton Rouge to start the weapons training. Shooting a musket was very different from shooting a semi-automatic handgun but the thrill no less seductive. After training I returned to the celebration. There were many questions, all easily dismissed under the cover of loud music and processions of beautiful Black people dressed in their Sunday best unaware that an uprising was looming.

The beginning of the week involved more training and meetings, some in costume, some not. As the day of rebellion neared, the logistics of getting my horse from nearly two hundred miles away got complicated. I didn't want to alarm Dread any, so kept most of those details to myself. Either way, he thought it prudent to introduce me via text message to the other riders or at least the one in charge. Their leader took a long minute to return that message. He was a military veteran with considerable clout in the riding community. There had been others introduced to him as potential riders, he vetted everyone but aside from the riders in his crew, I was the only rider outside of that community allowed to ride. He said plainly on our first call, "I had to vet you homeboy". We connected thereafter and began to address the logistics of getting my horse to the area. Ultimately, in conjunction with other riders, a separate horse was put forth to ride only for the beginning scenes on Friday. I was tasked to go to the barn the night before to get acquainted with the horse I would ride. It was night, the barn was dimly lit. After a brief "hey" and "park over there" the owner prepared the saddle and said "he ready""go head get on". Without hesitation, I jumped on. Full disclosure, I had not ridden a horse in over two years, but rebellion requires quick adaptation. Funny enough, this horse amongst all the horses in the crew riding for the reenactment was the most aggressive and stubborn. A couple days before, the leader informed me that another rider had been thrown and was unable to participate in the project. Upon getting on, the horse immediately began to buck. I held on and was able calm him down and ride for a couple of hours. In the dark of night, as the warring Maroons of St. Malo, I had passed their unintended test and was ready for the rebellion.

Day one of the rebellion begins. I met the other riders at a nearby church and mounted the horse from the evening before to warm him up with a few canters and gallops. We start the slow march towards the first scene where the horse will be used. We meet the other marchers and begin toward the Andry plantation where the first slaveowner historically was killed. Part of my participation included violently attacking Manuel Andry (or the actor playing that part). Symbolically, the first blow. Practice is practice and is largely theoretical, and that day proved that. We had practiced the scene with only eight reenactors and without a horse. However, as the scene began, nearly one hundred reenactors rushed toward the plantation. In practice I approached the front of the plantation to confront the white owner maybe four seconds after they rushed to the back of the plantation and they appeared in the front twenty seconds later where the killing historically took place. As they began to enter in droves, I knew that I would have to wait to ensure that no one was trampled by the horse. Those twenty-four seconds came and went and as the last bit of reenactors entered the plantation grounds, I took off to the predetermined location. This horse was always ready to run, so it took very little to get him going, but so much more to slow him. I allowed him to over shoot the spot, knowing that it would take more time, but also make him easier to control for dismount. As I turned him the reenactors had already reached the porch, I dismounted and hastily tied him to the porch. I ran atop the porch machete in hand and struck. The reenactment of the slaying of a plantation owner complete, I retrieved my aggressive equine partner and rode him to the front of the plantation after surveying the front to ensure the coast was clear, all pretend of course. Once the crowd reconvened to march I returned the horse to the owner, so they could ride the remainder of the first day. I took my musket and began the march.

We marched twelve miles or so through the neighborhoods of St. Baptist Parish. These neighborhoods are notorious for their disdain for people of color and many from the area had covert warning for the choice of marching through these areas. Dread did not allow this to deter him. He insisted that we get as close as possible to the routes they used in 1811. Dread had considered the logistics with intent and forward thinking. There were several stops throughout the march to feed the reenactors and portable restrooms, the fancy ones. The food provided was also pretty lavish, both vegan and meat eaters were very satisfied, and the food seemed to be pretty tasty too. There was plenty fruit, plenty water. For me, however, I wanted to carry the details of what they would have experienced as far as I could. In that vein, I limited my water consumption to only eight ounces during the actual march on the first day and nothing on the second day, on both days I only ate once at the conclusion of the marching part and went to the restroom at the conclusion of each day. In those perilous two days in 1811, bathroom breaks would have provided fodder for the trackers and I imagine there would have been little to no access to fresh water. An overactive imagination maybe, but food would have likely been scarce, save for what was pillaged from burned and looted plantations. Full disclosure, I ate some bread pudding the first night of the march, some will understand.

Day one concluded with a battle against the American militia. In that battle we fired our muskets in three volleys and rushed the militia who scattered after the small skirmish. Many of the reenactors returned to their hotels or homes after the first night. A smaller number stayed at a local school that had been converted into the base for the two-day reenactment. They were provided cots and sleeping bags. I knew Dread's intention was to be as true to as possible to what they experienced in the eighteen hundreds. He intended to sleep outside. At approximately eleven the night of day one we trekked outdoors with a

sleeping bag and blanket. After locating a suitable patch of grass, we laid out our blankets on the damp grass and got comfortable. With no tent or cover and very little conversation, we laid there, tension and cold kept us both awake most of the night. At dawn we returned to the group and began day two.

My horse for day two was on the way, but rebellions tend to have their challenges. The trailer carrying the horse, Blondie is her name, lost its floor boards. In an effort to survive speeding eighty miles on the highway, she was able to place her hoofs on the edge of the board supports. Eventually the drivers realized that she was making more noise than usual and pulled over. She had avoided injury but was noticeably frightened by the ordeal. The drivers called frantically as they were still a considerable distance from the meet point. One of the riders, immediately took action and offered to go and retrieve her. We left and got her onto another trailer after some convincing and drove to the meet point. After some bonding, I mounted her and began the warming process in lieu of the long twelve-mile ride ahead. Mounted and ready we joined the other riders and began the ride with more than two hundred marchers close behind.

Throughout the march we were greeted by onlookers, black, white and indigenous. I suspect those against what we were doing simply stayed home aside from the police force who had no choice. They cheered, they clapped they were thankful. Many took photos and asked that we pose with them while many other asked to pet the horses. We danced, we chanted, and we honored the largest rebellion in American history. I am from southern Louisiana. I am a Senegal. There are three families of Senegals that I know in my home parish of Lafayette. None of us are related by blood, but all of our lineages can be traced to Senegambia, the region that presently encompasses Senegal, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, as well as portions of Mauritania, Mali, and Guinea. This project honored those who came before and those today who continue to sow revolution.