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Kirby Farrell

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Lisa Woolfork’s study “explores contemporary novels, films, performances, and reenactments that depict American slavery and its traumatic effects by invoking a time travel paradigm” (p. ###). Woolfork maintains that literary characters and live audiences can experience “the trauma of slavery” through imaginative “time travel” and rediscover their roots while honoring the suffering of ancestors (p. ###). To understand how people seek to ground identity and relate to the horrors of the past is a worthy project for criticism. This study is strongest when it looks at actual behavior, weakest when it plays up portentous terms such as time-travel and trauma.

Like the Holocaust, slavery is a kind of killing—social death, to use Orlando Patterson’s term. Slavery can be traumatic because the core experience of trauma is terror, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation. But trauma is an injury that is also an interpretation of an injury. Mind and body interact. No two individuals respond in the same way to traumatic stress; it may paralyze one person but trigger suicide or berserk rage in another.

Woolfork shrugs off the problem by claiming that for African Americans the trauma of slavery can be somehow “embodied” (p. ###). The concept remains fuzzy, as the author seems to be proposing “a distinctly African American trauma theory” (p. 8) by
implying unhelpful ideas of racial memory. While enslavement was beyond question traumatic for many victims, it is doubtful that literary characters and audiences at reenactments can relive that horror. And a good thing they cannot, since actual trauma can be shattering.

Woolfork is actually working with post-traumatic themes, and she uses the idea of traumatic slavery for didactic ends, “as a form of moral instruction or correction” (p. 13). She praises texts that use the vicarious shock and terror of enslavement to move audiences. “Moral instruction” can be contentious, however, as Woolfork notes in reporting on controversies surrounding reenactment at Colonial Williamsburg (p. ###). There is also the danger that shock can become trivialized and audiences desensitized.

People use shock and ideas about trauma in all sorts of ways: to explain feelings, to call for help, to demand justice or compensation, and so on. But use can be manipulative, as in the military exploitation of traumatic “shock and awe” to intimidate Iraqis, and resistance to it can be self-protective. Woolfork quotes a teenager who wisecracked to a Colonial Williamsburg reenacter that he must be “retarded” to dress up as a slave every day, arguing that the teenager was either “antagonistic (or possibly embarrassed)” (p. 134). But his sass could also be resistance to a culture of propaganda and commodified Disney World history. It could also be the self-protective reflex of a personality too vulnerable to manage the terrors lurking in history and in ourselves, among other possibilities.

The book’s core problem turns out to be not trauma but conflicted attitudes toward identity. Woolfork proposes that confrontation and shock can overcome people’s reluctance to identify with the slave past: “Talking with a slave character at a living
history museum, pouring a libation at a Middle Passage program, standing shoulder to shoulder with other blacks in a simulated slavehold . . . or being assigned the role of a fugitive slave during an immersion reenactment are all examples of bodily epistemology at work. These gestures are based on the premise that forcing visitors to imagine themselves into the perspective of slaves . . . may offer a more proximate and more complex interpretation of the slave past. Living history proponents frequently claim it is better to learn by ‘doing.’ I take this claim seriously” (p. 9).

While “learning by doing” can be educational, the need to “force” audiences to relive a unitary slave “perspective” raises doubts. As Woolfork acknowledges later, “living history . . . is open to interpretation and cannot be internalized” (p. 96). Still, she sympathizes with efforts such as Haile Gerima’s film *Sankofa*, which projects an African American “supermodel” named Mona back into slave-trading Ghana, where she is “stunned and chastened” (p. 43) by scenes of whipping, branding, rape, and a post-mortem caesarean delivery executed with a machete. The brutality is “nearly pornographic” (p. 40). Yet the critic approves of the cruel “reeducation of a black woman so corrupted by Western or European ideas that she cannot properly respect the sacred ground of the slave castle” (p. 43). The sexual prejudices and chauvinism in such a reading deserve analysis, and so does the assumption that “reeducation” through vicarious sadistic violence will make someone a better person.

In one interesting chapter (“Teach You a Lesson Boy”) this resistance is outright generational antagonism. Instead of inspiring solidarity, the slave past—and the 1960s civil rights struggle—meet scorn in the attitudes of hip-hop culture. Woolfork is understandably chagrined by hip-hop’s themes of self-aggrandizement and sadistic
dominance. What she almost sees, beyond the usual gender explanations, is the tragic insight of Ernest Becker’s *Escape from Evil* (1975): that humans strive to overcome our vulnerability by identifying with heroic mastery and killing off scapegoats associated with death and futility—including slavery and social death. Fantasies of violence and bling identify with masters, not “the slave past”—a behavior that cries out for further investigation.

Woolfork’s book is most insightful when it opens toward the real difficulties facing African Americans in an era when living standards and social justice are under stress. Insofar as she raises questions about how people adapt in a storm of shifting identities and boundaries, she is pointing to serious work that criticism can—and should—undertake.

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Short bio:
Kirby Farrell is Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. His books include *Post-Traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the 90’s* (CITY OF PUBLICATION, DATE); a variety of early modern studies; and several novels. His current project is “Berserk Style in American Culture.”