



AMERICAN CHRONICLES

THE FUGITIVE CURE

Can slavery reenactments set us free?

BY JULIAN LUCAS

A gunshot echoed over starlit forest near the town of Marine on St. Croix, Minnesota. It was late October, already frigid, and chasers had pushed our group of ten fugitives to the edge of a lake. For a moment, we'd hesitated, shouts drawing closer as the black water winked, but the shot drove us all straight in. My legs went numb; Elyse, a high-school sophomore, exclaimed, "My God!" Submerged to the waist, I waded through marsh grass and lamp-light toward our conductor, who silently indicated the opposite bank. The Drinking Gourd shone overhead with exaggerated clarity. This was my third

Underground Railroad Reenactment.

An hour had elapsed by the time we crossed the lake: seven teens, two elementary-school teachers, one "abolitionist," and me. I had no idea where we were, only that it was about two hundred miles from Canada, where Justin Trudeau had just won reelection after a blackface scandal, and forty from the waters of Lake Minnetonka, in which Prince orders Apollonia to "purify" herself in "Purple Rain." As we stepped ashore, I thought of my enslaved forebears, wondering what they might make of our strange tribute.

"That's what you're concerned about,

your ChapStick?" Elyse chided Max, a blond boy in a blue hat and checkered Vans. His lip balm was ruined—as was my notebook—but the baby doll he'd sworn to carry North was dry. (Elyse dubbed him Mother Max.) The whispers stopped with the arrival of our conductor, who led us on a rough path uphill. I was still smarting from a branch to the forehead when he stopped to deliver the night's sixth lecture: "My name is Henry David Thoreau. This is Walden Pond."

For more than three decades, students have reenacted escapes on the Underground Railroad at schools, camps, churches, museums, and juvenile-correction centers across the United States. Millions have undergone an experience that can range from a board game to an immersive nightlong ordeal, complete with horseback-riding paddy rollers and an armed Harriet Tubman. One group's living-history lesson is another's exercise in leadership training, anti-racist therapy, or even behavioral reform. Many believe that Underground Railroad Reenactments, or U.G.R.R.s, have the power to morally transform American youth.

You might call it the fugitive cure. Though it's left an impression on everyone from Lena Dunham to Disney's former chairman Michael Eisner, the U.G.R.R. began in Minnesota, with a small organization currently known as the Kambui Education Initiative. Last fall, I flew to Minneapolis for the group's final reenactment of the year. It took place at Wilder Forest, a thousand-acre recreation area now home to the charter school River Grove. A forty-minute drive from the city, past horse farms and slivers of lake, it's rustic enough to pass for the nineteenth century, when St. Paul's real Underground Railroad spirited the captives of summering slaveholders through woods not far from these.

I took inventory of my fellow-participants in the school's cafeteria. To my left sat two white elementary-school teachers; on my right, four girls from a local arts program, three black and one Asian, laughed and gossiped. The final trio, two white boys and a black girl, were friends from high-school orchestra. After learning about the simulation from his father, Will invited Max and Elyse, who agreed to attend despite initially finding the idea "sketchy." When I asked if they'd studied slavery, they

Remembrance culture posits that we must not only honor history but relive it.

shook their heads. “We’re stuck in the Monroe Doctrine,” Elyse said sadly, as though personally stranded in 1823.

The orientation began near sunset, with the arrival of Chris Crutchfield. A gregarious Morehouse graduate with a neat mustache and a slightly beaverish smile, Crutchfield, fifty, began running U.G.R.R.s in the nineteen-eighties. Now he’s the program’s foremost evangelist, a passionate outdoorsman who teaches litigation at a local college and serves as a deputy director of the Ramsey County correctional department.

“Freedom is like air,” Crutchfield said, as we finished a breath-holding contest. “And, just like we’re swimming in a sea of air, we’re also swimming in a sea of freedom. It’s not completely free—just like the air isn’t completely clean—but the freedom we enjoy right now, compared to the freedom that enslaved Africans had, is unbelievable.”

Volunteers stood to dramatize moments in the lecture. Elyse represented a woman being auctioned; Max, a hunger striker force-fed on a slave-ship deck. We assembled in tight lines to approximate the Middle Passage, and Crutchfield illustrated the mortality rate by walking up and down the columns: “You’d be dead, you’d be dead—Julian, you’re dead.”

Still, the emphasis was on uplift, the power of a courageous example to convert the hard-hearted to liberty’s cause. Crutchfield relayed the story of Eliza in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” a runaway who carries her infant across the thawing ice of the Ohio River, and whose bravery became a staple of nineteenth-century melodrama. Her real-life counterpart, he told us, inspired Stowe, whose novel, in turn, helped spark the Civil War. The moral force of one flight transformed America, and, through reenactment, might very well do so again: “It’s about one person deciding they want freedom, and inspiring the whole country to do the right thing.”

Identifying with fugitives is nothing new in America. “I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of dogs,” Walt Whitman wrote, in “Song of Myself.” D. H. Lawrence once described the country as a “vast republic of escaped slaves.” More recently, the runaway has emerged as the emblematic figure of a renovated na-

tional mythology, hero of a land that increasingly sees its Founding Fathers as settler-colonist génocidaires. In their stead rises a patriotism centered on slavery and abolition, and a campaign to set the country’s age-old freedom cult on a newly progressive footing.

“I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves,” Michelle Obama said at the Democratic National Convention in 2016. No words have better captured the movement to recognize slavery as the nation’s narrative cornerstone and its citizens’ most consequential inheritance. This America’s founding mother is Harriet Tubman—in the recent film “Harriet,” Cynthia Erivo’s Tubman leads black Union Army soldiers in a tableau that evokes Emanuel Leutze’s “Washington Crossing the Delaware”—and its year zero is 1619, when the first slave ships docked in Virginia. Last year, the *Times Magazine* proposed the date as the country’s birthday; in the opening essay, Nikole Hannah-Jones argued that enslaved people and their descendants were the true “perfecters of this democracy.”

“Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife,” John Dewey, a forerunner of today’s experiential educators, wrote. But how does one “teach” slavery as a matter of experience? The rise of remembrance culture created an imperative not only to honor but in some way to *relive*. What may have begun with the neo-slave narratives of the nineteen-seventies and eighties, like Octavia Butler’s “Kindred” and Toni Morrison’s “Beloved,” migrated to popular explorations of slavery’s afterlife. In 1993, the year Morrison won the Nobel Prize in Literature, Disney announced a ride, never completed, in which visitors would “feel what it was like to be a slave [and] to escape through the Underground Railroad.”

In the next decade, Colonial Williamsburg staged a slave auction; a replica of the *Amistad* set sail from Mystic Seaport; and the “experimental historian” Anthony Cohen had himself crated and shipped from Philadelphia to New York in homage to the antebellum fugitive Henry (Box) Brown. With financial backing from Oprah, Cincinnati constructed an imposing Underground Railroad Freedom Center that fronts the Ohio River. The National Park Service consecrated more than six hundred sites

in a coast-to-coast Underground Railroad “Network to Freedom.” In Maryland, Congress established a four-hundred-and-eighty-acre Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historical Park; Obama’s Treasury Department planned to put Tubman on the twenty-dollar bill.

By 2016, when Colson Whitehead’s “Underground Railroad” won the National Book Award for fiction, slave narratives had become inseparable from the fraught politics of commemoration. In one sly passage, the novel’s fugitive heroine finds a job on free soil as a “slave” in a museum diorama, raising the question of whom the slave-narrative renaissance really serves. Do fugitive lives belong to everyone, as models and martyrs of democracy? Or are they victims of appropriation, their stories warped by repetitive reconciliation myths and kitsch entertainment? Can “embodying” the past empower the living, or does it trivialize history and traumatize its inheritors?

Night had fallen by the time we stepped outside. We formed a line, tied on blindfolds, and placed our hands on one another’s shoulders, starting downhill through shallows of brittle leaves. “I want you to imagine that the year is 1840,” Crutchfield whispered. Imagine, he said, life on a plantation, the day before escaping, and the night. What would you take with you? Would you risk saying goodbye?

Soon Crutchfield was gone. When we removed our blindfolds, the building was nowhere in sight, only stars and trees. A man stepped from the shadows, calling us after him with the code words “friend of a friend.” Within minutes, slave hunters gave chase, rattling chains and shouting taunts from the darkness. Sprinting off through brambles, we dove for cover at our guide’s signal. I spent the next five minutes with burrs in my hair, trying to hide in a sapling’s underfed shadow.

Running through the forest at night is weirdly exhilarating. You end up playing hopscotch in the underbrush, and flailing at imagined obstacles like a startled cat. Eventually, you learn to cooperate. People offered hands and reassur-

ances. Sometimes, as in a game of telephone, whispered warnings raced down the line. Elyse held a branch as I walked under it. Will joined Max in his search for a lost hat. “The path we’re about to take, there is no path,” a conductor told us. We began to move as one.

The night was full of parables. A woman facing auction begged us to save her baby sister; Max volunteered (“Yeah, sure”), and a long silence passed before the girls reminded him to retrieve the doll. Another bondman confided that he helped fugitives as penance for betraying two young runaways who were subsequently killed. His story ended with an injunction to live respectfully in free territory: “They’re going to

be watching how you do your studies, how you respect your elders, how you respect each other. So, Africans, can y’all try to show others the right way?”

A barnside encounter with Lucretia Mott began with the Quaker abolitionist checking her privilege: “You must look at me and think, What does a white woman know? She’s never known the true horror injustice can bring. And I don’t.” Her tale of gender discrimination at the World Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840 was followed by the arrival of our pursuers. Mott ushered us into a crawl space, where we spent a few cramped minutes the way that Harriet Jacobs—who evaded capture in her grandmother’s attic—spent seven years.

We carried on from lamp to lamp, lesson to lesson, conductor to conductor. Tubman, a small, dreadlocked figure, addressed us in a Miles Davis rasp. “You might be tired, you might be cold,” she said. “But soon you’re going to be free.” She told the story of an elderly passenger who endangered the group by threatening to turn back. Tubman had persuaded him to keep going—at gunpoint.

For an earlier generation, Tubman was a grandmotherly singer of spirituals; now she’s a fierce young liberator. “She Came to Slay,” a recent illustrated biography by Erica Armstrong Dunbar, features a revolver-wielding Tubman on the cover; Ta-Nehisi Coates’s novel “The Water Dancer” endows her with a supernatural power that causes her to emit

green light. In “Harriet,” Erivo’s Tubman evolves from drowning refugee to crimson-robed equestrian savior, like a wilderness prophet who returns to deliver her people.

Our Tubman made us promise to leave no one behind. I paired up with the fourth-grade teacher, taking her by the hand as we repeated, “If you don’t get to freedom, I don’t get to freedom.”

The skits reminded me of Sunday school. I couldn’t help remembering that enslaved people rarely escaped; that those who did were usually captured; and that the Underground Railroad, more culturally popular than historically significant, often eclipses a more representative reality. The only known runaway in my lineage, Moses Lucas, didn’t rub shoulders with abolitionist luminaries on a self-discovery field trip. During the Civil War, he crossed the Rappahannock River, mustered into the Tenth U.S. Colored Infantry, and promptly fell too ill to fight.

My skepticism relented when, halfway through the evening, our group entered a clearing nearly as wide as Central Park. After the forest’s tangle, simply walking felt like becoming weightless. I looked up at the stars shining above Minnesota’s ten thousand lakes. The group slowed, drifted apart, and grew quiet. Once we reached the other side, I hardly noticed the dim silhouettes of parked cars and quonset huts; for an instant, our surroundings rose to the dignity of the past we presumed to reenact.

There are few happy meetings between black history and the romance of the American landscape. The Mississippi was slavery’s superhighway, Manifest Destiny was the original white flight, and the first recorded African-American to see the Pacific Ocean was William Clark’s slave, York. If the runaway endures, it might be as the first black citizen of our democratic sublime, seeker of a freedom that isn’t so much up North as somewhere within.

In 1998, a Minneapolis news station ran a segment on the creator of the Underground Railroad Reenactment. Night-vision footage of a van packed with blindfolded teens suggests a kidnapping. Riding shotgun is a wiry man with thick bifocals and a baseball cap fringed with mosquito netting, who stares out the window as they rumble



down a dirt road on a rural military base. His name is Kamau Kambui.

"You think our ancestors knew where they were going?" he says.

"No," the teens reply.

"That is the same feeling that I want you to have," he says. "You can read in a book what it feels like. You can see it on a video. But tonight you have the opportunity to *feel* the Underground Railroad."

The teens are loosed into a forest. A chaser cracks a bullwhip in darkness; shoes disappear in thick mud, which a conductor claims is "full of snakes." The reporter praises the event as an opportunity for black kids to "live" their culture, identifying several participants as at-risk. They end the two-hour course pumping their arms to shouts of "Freedom!" In an accompanying interview, Kambui cuts an almost monastic figure, committed to his reenactments despite a diagnosis of terminal lymphoma. He credits the idea for the simulation to "a message from the ancestors." Within a year, he'd joined their company, succumbing to cancer at the age of fifty.

In 2015, shortly after finding this video, I flew to Minnesota to learn everything I could about Kamau Kambui. The first person I met was Crutchfield, who took over Kambui's U.G.R.R.s following his death, in 1998. We met at a sleek coffee shop in downtown St. Paul, but he quickly whisked me out the door with a declaration: "This is the wrong café. We have to go to the black café." Ten minutes later, we sat down at Golden Thyme, in St. Paul's historically black Rondo district. There Crutchfield seemed to know everyone, and everyone seemed to have known Kamau Kambui.

They described a perennially broke, ascetically disciplined bachelor who spent nearly all his time mentoring youths. Born Oliver Taylor in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1948, Kamau Sababu Kambui moved to North Minneapolis in the early nineteen-eighties, saying little about his previous endeavors but quickly making friends. "He was *fine*," Jackie, a friend of Crutchfield's, said. Valerie, a late-life girlfriend, added, "Kamau belonged to the community."

A teetotaling vegetarian with an unlikely passion for guns, he was rarely found in the tiny apartment where he used to store books in the oven. Instead, he ice-fished, rock climbed, quarter-

backed, roller-skated, and honed his marksmanship. Yamro Fields, the second-born of his seven children, compared him to Annie Oakley.

Kambui lectured on wild edibles and folk medicine; organized storytelling festivals and kayaking expeditions; intervened, often at the request of mothers, in the lives of wayward boys; and took city kids to the wilderness as an instructor for Outward Bound. "He had a real desire to lift up black boys and black girls," Crutchfield said. "You could drop him off with two hundred kids and some duct tape and some dental floss, and they'd have a great time."

The defining adventure of his own youth was a radical experiment in black self-determination. As an undergraduate at the University of Michigan, Kambui pledged allegiance to a Malcolm X-inspired secessionist movement called the Republic of New Afrika. The R.N.A. declared independence from the United States in March, 1968, laying claim to Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. Its founders

argued that these states were New Afrikan territory, earned through labor and long fought for by leaders like "our Generals Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vessey, Nat Turner and Harriet Tubman." Their slogan was "Free the Land!"

In 1971, Kambui left college and moved to Jackson, Mississippi. He canvassed farmers across the Delta for the R.N.A., seeking support for a secessionist plebiscite. In a memoir, the would-be nation's then president describes "pleasant, conscientious Kamau" as the leader of the organizing effort. He also notes the young man's remarkable gun collection, which soon came to the attention of federal authorities. Amid a violent crackdown on the R.N.A., Kambui was arrested for buying a firearm under his not-yet-legally-adopted name. He was sentenced to five years in federal prison.

Kambui remained a lifelong Afrocentrist, always reading and occasionally susceptible to outlandish theories about the ancient Egyptians. (One friend said that he believed Pharaoh Tutankhamun died in a glider accident.) Today, some would

likely call him a “hotep,” a put-down for esoterically inclined, masculinity-obsessed black men. But the figure he most revered was Harriet Tubman. He kept a jar of earth from her grave.

Kambui often claimed that a recurring dream about Tubman had inspired the Underground Railroad Reenactment, and that he had organized the first simulation after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968. The first U.G.R.R. I can confirm, however, took place in 1987, and may have drawn as much from “Go Down, Moses”—a 1963 episode of the historical anthology series “The Great Adventure,” starring Ruby Dee as Tubman—as from any dream. After simulations, Kambui sometimes screened the episode, which is a near-blueprint of the Kambui Initiative’s reenactments. Characters whisper “friend of a friend,” hide in a Quaker’s crawl space, smuggle a baby through a bog, and flee chasers in a climactic river crossing.

Early U.G.R.R.s were rudimentary. Sometimes Kambui would run the simulation as a one-man show; in other instances, slave catchers gave chase with firecrackers and squirt guns. At first, Kambui offered simulations through black youth-leadership programs, but around 1990 he took a job at Wilder Forest, then a nonprofit camp and retreat center. Wilder came with staff, land, activist inclinations, and thousands of yearly visitors; in the busy season, Kambui ran two or more reenactments a week.

He began to incorporate horses, dogs, large casts of conductors, and, in one instance, a rented paddle steamer, which he transformed into a slave ship by blacking out the windows and carpeting the lower deck in straw. It was the second part of a three-day simulation for sixty black teens, which began at an ersatz African village, continued with real farm labor and a night escape, and ended with a mind trick: Kambui took participants to breakfast at a local restaurant, where, by prearrangement, white staff members denied them service.

“It was pure gold,” Karen McKinney, who played a slave trader on the boat, told me. Now a scholar of Biblical studies, and a longtime advocate of experiential learning, McKinney believes that, with the right instructor, “risky” simu-

lations can be pedagogically invaluable.

“Kamau was an action figure,” Melvin Carter III told me. Once among McKinney’s captives, and now St. Paul’s first African-American mayor, he remembers the experience as a crucial life lesson. When Carter and three friends staged a “rebellion,” refusing to stand for a slave auction, Kambui picked one of them up and threw him into the St. Croix River. Carter wrote down what he said next: “Fellas, I appreciate your resolve. But look around you. The women, children, and old folks you all love will need men like you to be strong enough to suffer whatever it takes to be around when they need protection. Don’t just take yourself out of the game for nothing.”

In Paul Beatty’s satirical novel “The Sellout,” the protagonist’s father is a practitioner of “Liberation Psychology,” who cultivates his son’s race consciousness through a variety of cruel, Pavlovian experiments. (The punch line is that his son grows up to own a slave and reestablish segregation in modern California, as a way to foster black solidarity.) With similar zeal, Kambui fixated on the contemporary notion that black adolescents faced a crisis of character. Amid the racist law-and-order panic of the nineteen-nineties, when Minneapolis was briefly known as “Murderapolis,” he volunteered with a Twin Cities group of black men called Save Our Sons (S.O.S.), which mentored local boys thought to have criminal proclivities. The founder was Melvin Carter, Jr., a St. Paul police sergeant and the father of the current mayor. U.G.R.R.s were “one of the keys to recapturing our youth,” Carter told me when we spoke at Golden Thyme. “You get these inner-city tough kids up in the woods and they cry like babies.”

Outdoor education has often served to forge collective identity. Lord Baden-Powell modelled the Boy Scouts on his experiences in the British Army. Twentieth-century American summer camps encouraged white middle-class kids to reenact “Indian” life in redface, as though to siphon some Native essence from the landscape. Perhaps, for Kambui, the U.G.R.R. was a black variation on the same ritual, a way of freeing the land by making young people feel free within it.

At the same time, Yamro described his father’s reenactments as a break with

his black-nationalist past: “He went from being a hard-core revolutionary to being a hard-core humanist, working with children of all races.”

At Wilder, Kambui introduced the U.G.R.R. to thousands. His increasingly diverse runaways ranged in age from four to seventy; they included local schoolkids, visiting outdoor instructors, and white-collar workers on corporate retreats. Kambui presented the simulation to journalists and at conferences. Underground Railroad Reenactments began to mushroom across the United States. They took place in Niagara, where costumed Tubmans hustled groups to Canada across the Whirlpool Rapids Bridge, and at Y.M.C.A.s from Ohio to Alabama. At Conner Prairie, a living-history museum in Indiana, they became so convincing that credulous participants have physically attacked actors.

It’s one of the marvels of America that an idea can begin with Malcolm X and land at Disney. In the early nineties, when the company’s executives wanted an Underground Railroad attraction for a planned American-history theme park, they called Kambui. He rejected the idea, and the park itself was soon abandoned following outrage in the national press. William Styron—whose 1967 novel, “The Confessions of Nat Turner,” once sparked its own slavery scandal—scoffed at Disney for believing that enslavement could be evoked through “virtual effects or virtual reality.”

Yet more than one fugitive had tried to do just that. William Wells Brown, an author and a former fugitive who wrote that slavery was unrepresentable, also travelled with a slavery-themed moving panorama, the Oculus Rift of its era. So did Henry (Box) Brown. A minister described Brown’s “Mirror of Slavery” as “admirably calculated to make an unfading impression upon the heart and memory, such as no lectures, books, or colloquial correspondence can produce, especially on the minds of children and young people.” Kambui, too, wondered how to reach the millions who would never attend his reenactments.

In the early nineteen-nineties, Kambui met Rich Bergeron, a designer at the Minnesota Educational Computing Consortium, a civic-minded software company best known for the computer

game the Oregon Trail. A classroom cult classic, the program conveyed pioneer hardship through player frustration. Bergeron began to wonder if something similar could be done with fugitive escapes. He took a MECC team on one of Kambui's reënactments, and the eventual result was *Freedom!*, America's first computer game about slavery.

Beth Daniels was one of five programmers who worked on *Freedom!*, and, when I visited her home in Minneapolis, she showed me a computer older than I was: a squat, square Apple IIGS. The opening menu, framed by a pixel-art plantation tableau, appeared on the sixteen-color display. It was a surprisingly elegant image, evocative of Jacob Lawrence.

"Nowadays, we're used to talking about serious games," Daniels told me. "But that didn't exist in the nineties. We had no words for what we were creating."

Freedom!—which MECC billed as an educational simulation, not as a game—forced users to make their way across hostile territory without a map, uncertain whom they could trust, and dependent on clues like the North Star for orientation. Daniels is still proud of the "freedom font," which obscures place-names when the player-character cannot read. The first time I played, it took me seven tries and two hours to find freedom.

Kambui took an active advisory role in the program, and his influence is clear in the emphasis on wilderness survival. More fatefully, he pushed for period dialect and characters with a distinctly "African" look. The all-white team deferred to him.

In the fall of 1992, MECC shipped the simulation to one in every three school districts in the country. Controversy began building shortly thereafter. Minnesota's oldest black newspaper criticized characters' "exaggerated features" and "ignorant" speech ("I sees a runnin' look in yo' eyes," one says). The company announced plans for a dialect-free revision, but it was too late. Within months, *Freedom!* made national news following a high-profile protest at an Indiana school district; MECC recalled the product. "Slavery was not a game in our history," one parent declared. In January, 1993, the company instructed schools to return or destroy their copies.

The prestige of games has since risen. In 2013, a mass-market adventure called

Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry, which stars a ninja-like plantation liberator, won wide acclaim for grappling with enslavement. Meanwhile, *Freedom!* successors proliferate in schools and museums; Scholastic, National Geographic, and Cincinnati's Freedom Center all offer digital Underground Railroads. But, in a striking reversal, U.G.R.R.s, which had been gaining popularity in 1993, are now on the outs.

Among the reënactment narratives that participants have shared online, a common sentiment is incredulity. "Weird fever dream or did this happen???" a young woman wrote on Twitter, describing a "fucked up slavery LARP where all of us white children had to pretend to be slaves on a plantation."

Participants in other U.G.R.R.s report activities that began without warning, involved cages and screaming confrontations, or incorporated no discussion of race and American slavery. One teen told me about lying face down in wet grass for thirty minutes at Camp Joy, in

Ohio, waiting to be "sold off." Counselors yelled, told kids not to look them in the eyes, and substituted the words "pig" and "piggy" as racial slurs. (Camp Joy is run in partnership with the Cincinnati Police Department.) Complaints typically involve white adults "playing slavery" with black children, but the potential for trauma knows no color; in one local news broadcast, black reënactors at a Detroit church reduced several black fifth graders to sobs in an eldritch antebellum basement.

I don't remember my first U.G.R.R., but a childhood friend, who now works in education, told me that our third-grade class attended one at a camp in Pennsylvania. "You've probably repressed the memory," she said. Perhaps. Lena Dunham, however, remembers hers clearly. "What were we going to learn from being lashed together with our classmates and chased by a pony?" she wrote in her 2014 memoir. "Would we suddenly empathize, be able to fully imagine the experience of the American slave?"

Her skepticism was timely. A year

earlier, in 2013, the parents of a black student in Connecticut filed a human-rights complaint about a U.G.R.R. conducted by Nature's Classroom, which had incorporated the activity into outdoor retreats with hundreds of Northeastern middle and elementary schools. Their seventh-grade daughter described name-calling, make-believe cotton picking, and in-character threats to cut her Achilles tendon. "Scare the crap out of the group," reads one official script from the organization, which also calls for mock slave auctions and pantomimed railroad-gang labor. Her parents denounced the simulation on national television, and called it "sanctioned social and emotional abuse." Nature's Classroom suspended the program, though its director, John G. Santos, still defends it. (The organization "backed away for nothing but political reasons," he told me, while conceding that the reenactment's age barrier should have been higher.)

In 2016, after a similar incident in Michigan, the Y.M.C.A. insisted that its affiliates stop running slavery simulations. By 2018, the Southern Poverty Law Center had declared them "inappropriate for any student." A new consensus deemed U.G.R.R.s traumatic, trivializing, and, in the words of a former participant, "white culture."

The Kambui Initiative has so far escaped the backlash. Harriet Tubman never lost a passenger; Chris Crutchfield has never been sued. Of the several dozen people I've accompanied on my three Minnesota U.G.R.R.s, nearly all responded positively. The simulation has a perfect safety record and a solid reputation, and regularly features in local celebrations of Juneteenth. Alanna Galloway, a thirty-five-year-old union organizer who plays Harriet Tubman, told me that she frequently meets former participants around the Twin Cities, where, years ago, almost every summer camp included a reenactment: "I'll be in Target and somebody will come up to me and say, 'I remember you—you were Harriet Tubman on the Underground Railroad eight years ago.'"

For Galloway, who attended her first reenactment when she was twelve, U.G.R.R.s are a family tradition. Melvin Carter, Jr., is her father, and Melvin Carter III is her brother. Her husband is a longtime conductor; and her mother, a county official, is a former Tubman. The

Kambui Education Initiative's connection to the black community is clearly a factor in the program's longevity. Although Crutchfield and Galloway agree that reenactments need black instructors, they reject racial requirements for participants, stressing that flight from oppression is a universal experience. "No matter what color we are, people went through swamps for us," Crutchfield insists. "None of the black people who go through the program are slaves, either."

For Crutchfield, what's ideally "an enhanced night hike" should never devolve into a drama or a game. The experience is "challenge by choice." Nobody gets caught or is asked to simulate slave labor, and chasers are heard but never seen. In his view, a successful reenactment is a meditation on freedom and enslaved courage in the wilderness; it verges on prayer. "I'm a lawyer, I'm not a foo-foo sort of guy," he said. "But I feel like we tap into the spirits of our ancestors when we're out in the woods."

My own recent stint as a fugitive ended wholesomely enough. Emerging from the trail's most overgrown stretch, my companions and I were spurred into a final sprint by two gunshots. This time, it wasn't so alarming. Just ahead, our beaming conductors formed a circle around a man playing the djembe. "Freedom!" they cheered as we arrived in the clearing. We shouted it back in unison. A dazed giddiness reigned as the actors introduced themselves; "Lucretia Mott"



struggled to light a fire. Crutchfield told us how far we'd gone (three-quarters of a mile), how long we'd been out (an hour and forty-five minutes), and how much more difficult it had been for Harriet Tubman.

In "Underground Railroad Game," the brilliant Obie-winning satire written and performed by Jennifer Kidwell and Scott R. Sheppard, two teachers, one black and one white, run a U.G.R.R. in

a middle-school auditorium. Full of cringey infantilizing enthusiasm, "Teacher Caroline" and "Teacher Stuart" address audience members as students, dividing them into Union and Confederate teams who compete to liberate or recapture slave dolls. Their cornball rapport turns erotic. It climaxes in a scene of full-on sado-masochistic race play, sparked by the teachers' horny outrage over a student's racist graffiti. As the teachers exorcise national demons with rulers and orgasm control, the Underground Railroad, with all its integrationist optimism, derails into an abyss of slapstick violence and id.

Few still believe in the curative vision of the Underground Railroad, but the enslaved experience has rarely been more central to appraisals of contemporary America. Writers of the Afropessimist school increasingly recast black life within the psychosocial parameters of slavery, as though the ice bath of bondage might awaken us from post-racial dreams. In Jeremy O. Harris's "Slave Play," which debuted on Broadway in October, plantation life holds a mirror to the country's collective unconscious. Three frustrated interracial couples meet for "antebellum sexual performance therapy," a form of bedroom role play. The first two acts are comic, but the play ends on a solemn, almost ceremonial note: a black woman must revisit the violence suffered by her ancestors before she and her white British husband can "lie with grace."

The sacred and the profane can be difficult to disentangle. One overlooked dimension of slavery reenactment is its religious aura, from the stigmata of surrogate suffering to the pilgrim's desire to mark the passage of enslaved people through the landscape. At Ghana's Cape Coast Castle and Senegal's Gorée Island, visitors honor victims of the Middle Passage by stepping through Doors of No Return that frame the Atlantic. In Benin, a cycling route retraces the historic march from inland cities to the former slave port of Ouidah, where annual religious festivals draw visitors from across the African diaspora. Heritage tourism shades into ritual; for adherents of Brazilian Umbanda and Haitian vodou, embodying slavery can even constitute a form of worship, when spirits like Ogou Desalin—the deified form of the Haitian

revolutionary Jean-Jacques Dessalines—possess devotees.

In this company, Kambui, with his sui-generis spiritualism and his Tubman reliquary, looks less like a crank and more like a postmodern missionary. His rites of reënactment may no longer fly in a nation disenchanted with empathy, wary of appropriation, and hypervigilant about trauma. Yet remembrance culture has only gained momentum. Reënacting slavery remains an irresistible means of reenvisioning freedom.

A couple of weeks after leaving Minnesota, I simulate a very different journey out of slavery. From runaway, I've graduated to rebel: the gun is no longer behind me but in my hands. I thrust it skyward, where birds and the occasional camera drone flit, to the rhythm of our chant: "Freedom or Death!" This is Slave Rebellion Reënactment, a two-day, twenty-four-mile re-creation of Louisiana's 1811 German Coast Uprising. Our leader is the artist Dread Scott, a fifty-five-year-old iconoclast who has burned money on Wall Street and once, as a student, sparked a nationwide free-speech scandal by exhibiting the American flag on a gallery floor. Now he has organized a reënactment of the largest slave insurrection in the history of the United States.

A small army is on the move toward New Orleans. Banners fly over a narrow column of muskets, machetes, horseback riders, and outstretched smartphones, winding down a bike path on the levee between the Mississippi and River Road. The reënactment may be a spectacle, but it's also a social experiment, the army's diversity mirroring a rebellion whose leaders came from Louisiana, West Africa, and the Caribbean. I meet an elderly civil-rights activist from North Carolina, a schoolteacher from LaPlace, journalists, artists, professors, and a small contingent from Louisiana's indigenous nations. I stay up late learning the history of Black American Sign Language from a young interpreter; the next day, marching beside her girlfriend, she signs our chants of "On to New Orleans" and "*Liberté!*"

For some, like Wanda Sabir, an Oakland-based journalist who begins our march with a ceremonial pouring of libations, the reënactment is a way of

honoring the spirits of the enslaved. For others, like the aunt and uncle of Oscar Grant, an unarmed twenty-two-year-old who was killed by police at Oakland's Fruitvale Station in 2009, it's a way of connecting with previous generations of resistance. A few seem to be here simply for the novelty of the experience; one young woman, a New York City subway performer, tells jokes between landmarks.

My group follows a green flag appliquéd with the sword of Ogun, a spirit of West African origin venerated from Nigeria to Louisiana. We pass oil refineries, trailer parks, a steel mill, and a towering grain elevator funnelling rice into a cargo ship. In 1811, the surrounding land was blanketed with sugar plantations. The performance aims to demonstrate that the injustices of the present landscape—where poor communities have long waged battles against the polluters of "Cancer Alley"—are equally impermanent. Our chanting crescendoes as we approach Destrehan Plantation, where a tribunal of slaveholders sentenced several leaders of the uprising to death. It's now a tourist site and a wedding venue, thronged, on the day of our march, by visitors to an arts-and-crafts festival. Many of them stare. Reënactment can't change history, but it can alter the imaginary potential of a landscape.

The march ends in New Orleans's Congo Square, the Sunday gathering place where enslaved people once met to trade, worship, palaver, and create some of the first strains of African-American music. It now lies inside Louis Armstrong Park. Our column marches in under the broad archway, where a rebel with a bundle of burning sage wafts aromatic smoke. Jazz musicians play as four Mardi Gras Indians in sequined, purple-feathered bodysuits revel among a crowd of hundreds. The party, though meticulously planned, feels like something we have conjured. Onstage, a band plays Janelle Monáe's protest song "Hell You Talmbout" while reënactors take turns chanting the names of the martyrs of 1811. A poet addresses the army as though we were not only ourselves but the ancestors incarnate. "You who have returned," she says. "We have found you again in places we would have never imagined." And, by the strange laws of simulation, it is almost true. ♦