

02 22 2020

A Theatre for Rebellion

by Stephon Senegal

A day in February. The one month set aside to reminiscence, however briefly, about the free labor that built this country. I am not particularly inclined to indulge in the celebrations, but nonetheless, people see Black when they see me. I am an artist, part of my practice involves installing public art in marginalized Black and Brown neighborhoods. Today, it has me in a smallish Pennsylvanian city. As I exit my lodging for the week, a winter white has blanketed the streets from last night. I begin my walk. Car after car passes as I navigate snow and slush to avoid getting the Chucks soaked. To the left a truck pulls up. I pay it little attention until I realize it is following slowly and keeping pace. I give it some discrete inspection as its pulls ahead to the stop sign ahead and waits. And then I remember, I am behind enemy lines, and these boys in blue are the reminder. The difference between this moment and the ones before, I am beyond kneeling.

The American narrative has negro submission as a core tenet, but the story of Blackness was not that. The school books say one thing, but history and that tingle I get when officer friendly is talking reckless says something different. Exactly four months ago, I participated in a reenactment of a long-forgotten revolt. The 1811 Slave Rebellion in New Orleans Louisiana. It was an art performance reenacting the events of that uprising. If you are having trouble wrapping your head around that last sentence, simply imagine all the clumsy civil war reenactments that you have never attended but recall hearing about. Now, sit for a minute and imagine instead a stream of Black folk all dressed in 18th century Negro fashion flooding your streets swinging machetes, pistols, chanting and drumming. It was like that. A little over two hundred years ago, nearly five hundred Africans and Negroes pillaged the German Coast of New Orleans. They burned and fought through over twenty-five miles of swamp and wilderness to the city in search of freedom.

The reenactment was organized by artist Dread Scott and filmed by John Akomfrah. The reenactors were largely people of color aside from the white militia, water boys and errand runners. This reenactment was not a protest. I would describe it more like a dress rehearsal. Some question the notion of a present-day revolution. Understandable, all of the requisite pacifiers are in place, why would there be a need. Black folk have a whole month for themselves, some even have fancy jobs and titles. So, in some ways, many feel like, what's the point. Not going to address that. The trick though is that revolution is often narrowly defined. Revolution is not necessarily physical violence but can embody an existential shift of personhood or in the case of the Black community, nationhood. In summary, this reenactment is what that revolution looks like. It is a statement and recognition of our history that circumvents the school systems that ignore it. It is way of claiming the most robust parts of our identity without permission. It is our response to the trauma wrought by enslavement, bias municipal policies, the killing of our young and the imprisonment of our community. Short list. This was practice.

As I prepared to travel south from Brooklyn for the reenactment, I kept my reasons under wraps. I traveled to Louisiana a week early under the cover of Southern University's homecoming in Baton Rouge. Day one of the rebellion began at a nearby church. I was riding a horse for the opening scene. Full disclosure, I had not ridden a horse in over two years, but rebellion requires quick adaptation. The riders were ready, there demeanor had a calmness to it. The leaders amongst the riders were former military. The marchers however were amped. Chanting and screaming the numbers grew quickly as dawn began to bleed into the day. As it was back then, each wave of rebels was a surprise, many joined along the way during that cold January day. Those who began the rebellion had gotten word to some, but there was no way of knowing how many would come. Our reenactment was not much different. Dread had put this together well. As they began to gather, I was emboldened. Twenty, forty, eighty, two-hundred and there was still more to come. I could feel my place. In those moments I understood my why. The march began, I rode near the front. I played a Maroon in this battle. They were the primary looters and killers back in those days. Of the things that plantation owners did fear, they were one of the biggest.

Our numbers doubled as we approached the first plantation. The marchers rushed onto the plantation grounds ready to witness the killing and wounding of the Andry men. This was my job. I rode in hard, dismounted and quickly ran atop the porch machete in hand and struck. The reenacted slaying of a plantation owner complete, I retook my front position, musket in hand and began.

Twenty-eight contentious miles through the neighborhoods of St. Baptist Parish. The communities we traversed those two days were notorious for their contempt for people of color and many from the area had warning about marching through those 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. 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. We posed for photos and smiled where we could, for me, not once. We danced, we chanted, and we honored the largest rebellion in American history. I am from southern Louisiana. This project was personal, like the swamp Maroons and the revolutionaries of Hispaniola that found a new home in Louisiana, my family has embodied rebellion and the fight against systems that seek to contain us. This march gave voice to sacrifices of those before and served as a reminder of the vastness of the feat ahead.

As I continued walking down that Pennsylvanian street, those feelings from the reenactment began to surface. They pulled forward a little, then to the nearest stop sign and waited until I caught up and then did it again. I pondered their next move as I am sure they were trying to provoke mine. This game was not unfamiliar to me, but I am pretty sure they were ignorant of the mulatto Charles Deslondes as were the owners at the Brown, LaBranche and Andry plantations in 1811. School didn't teach them about the unlikely band of maroons and slaves that rose to burn and pillage their way through the German Coast in southern Louisiana. And how could they possibly know that the man they were following descended from those Maroons. Maybe they were looking for a chase, a duck into the alley ahead, but I had no intention to run. I neared the vehicle for the fourth time. Crossed the street behind the truck and began to walk to the driver's door. I figured if they would like a conversation, I would do the honors and kick things off. Maybe get a ride to my destination, save both parties four minutes. As I neared, the police vehicle drove off. Maybe they heard Jay when he said, "I think we pass kneeling".