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historiography**

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# Rethinking (re)doing Historical re-enactment and/as historiography

Katherine M. Johnson

Despite academic protestations, re-enactment is a highly popular mode of public history, not only amongst hobbyists, but also in museums, official festivals, documentaries, movies and even school education programs. It is also, perhaps against our will, emerging in numerous academic fields as a salient (albeit problematic) topic of analysis. Particularly amongst historians, however, it remains on the fringe, held at arm's length, the charismatic, but troubled (and troubling) distant relative. This article questions academic preconceptions regarding re-enactment, reinterpreting the participatory, performative and embodied aspects of the practice as areas of significant potential, a way of learning through doing. In what ways should/could we understand such embodied sources? How might the potential of re-enactment as a form of historiography be assessed through academic theory? What possibilities might such affective methodologies offer for learning about the past? The increasingly interdisciplinary nature of academia encourages us to utilise other theoretical and methodological approaches in this endeavour. I do so by first briefly examining the (potentially productive) tensions between archival, academic history and other modes of historical inquiry, considering what traditions of the discipline may be affecting our attitudes toward other, less "scholarly" modes. Bringing historiography, anthropology, philosophy and performance studies theory into communication, I then examine the Jane Austen Festival Australia as an ethnographic case study.

**Keywords:** re-enactment, living history, historiography, affective history, embodied, somatic, Jane Austen.

‘Many historians recoil reflexively from the idea of reenactment as either an irretrievably comical eccentricity or ‘dangerous tosh’. Greg Dening’s oft-quoted dismissal of the entire movement [...] hangs in the air like Damocles’ sword over the head of any historian willing to at least begin by taking it seriously.’

Paul Pickering (2010, 122)

‘If reenactment is to gain legitimacy as a historical genre it will thus be necessary to do for reenactment what has been done for other forms of history writing [...] This will involve disambiguating experience and understanding and determining the extent to which affect can indeed be considered evidentiary.’

Vanessa Agnew (2007, 309)

We can read history, watch history and even, at times, witness history unfolding, but can we *experience* history? Re-enactors frequently justify their claims to a unique historiography by the experiential nature of living history, a quality, they suggest, that archival study lacks.

Their approach to the past has elicited mixed responses in academia, ranging from outright

denunciation, to cautious consideration of how we might begin to approach a form of historical enquiry that appears to diverge so markedly from our own.<sup>1</sup> Chief amongst the criticisms (and there have been many) are those regarding re-enactment's most intrinsic notion – that experience can function epistemologically and that it can, in some way, connect the present with the past. How can re-enactment invoke a collective, authentic experience of the past, when we understand experience to be individual, subjective and contextually specific? How can re-enactors claim to be practicing a legitimate, educative methodology when the techniques through which they represent the past are overtly theatrical, somatic and affective?<sup>2</sup> These are valid, important questions, and yet we need to consider the possibility that our responses to these issues reflect as much on our own biases as they do the re-enactors'. Activities like re-enactment prompt us to consider how they reflect and effect the writing and reception of history now and in the future. This paper assesses the potential of re-enactment as an embodied, performative methodology; one that is challenging us to readdress what we consider to be history – and who we acknowledge as historians.

In our dedication to the archive, historians often overlook bodily, performative traditions of history, particularly those arising within the so called Western cultures. Although various schools and movements within the discipline have introduced new approaches, history remains a relatively traditional branch of academia. As Raphael Samuel argues:

History, in the hands of the professional historian, is apt to present itself as an esoteric form of knowledge. It fetishizes archive-based research, as it has done ever since the Rankean revolution – or counter-revolution – in scholarship. ([1994] 2012, 3)

Post-structuralist theorists have rigorously contested von Ranke's notion of objectivity, but, at least within Western historiography, the adherence to the archive remains, as does the tendency to concentrate on sanctioned, traditional subjects. The demarcation of what is (and is not) "real" history continues, and it is the few, rather than the majority, that break these

conventions. While the ethnographic turn in history facilitated the study of numerous Indigenous communities, many of which have a rich repertoire of bodily, performance-based histories, this interest rarely extends to embodied practices closer to home. Adherence to written history, to the exclusion of somatic, performative traditions, restricts the means to record (and create) history to an elite – a predominantly white, male elite (Connerton 1989; Roach 1996; Schneider 2011; Taylor 2003). This conservatism has led many researchers to ignore the potential of embodied ways of knowing. There are significant political/socio-historical issues involved in ignoring or denigrating embodied histories. Historians such as Natalie Zimmer Davis (1981) and Raphael Samuel ([1994] 2012) have criticised the tendency in traditional Western historiography to fixate on so called history making events (dominated by male agents), literally writing minorities out of history. Taylor encourages us to consider: ‘whose memories, whose trauma, “disappear” if only archival knowledge is valorised and granted permanence?’ (2003, 193).

Reflecting a broader performative turn in scholarship, Greg Dening reconceptualised history not as a text to be read but rather as a performance that is created. Dening asserts that ‘History – the past transformed into words or paint or dance or play – is always a performance.’ And yet, the performative turn has not often directed us towards considering the actual performing of history in western culture, particularly within live performance practices such as recreational re-enactment. Supposedly, then, performativity is only acceptable on the page, or as a means of understanding other cultures. Although it was within a prominent school of thought within history that the ‘task of the historian’ was defined to be ‘to re-enact the past in [one’s] own mind’, it is historians who have most ardently protested (or ignored) the possibilities of recreational re-enactment as historiography (Collingwood, 1946). This reflects a broader rejection of the pedagogic possibilities of doing, stemming, perhaps, from the continued influence of the Cartesian gaze (the mind-body duality

perpetuated by Descartes, subordinating “doing” bodies to “thinking” minds).<sup>3</sup> Many amongst even the most progressive historians, who have rose from their armchairs and embraced ethnographic method and sometimes even imaginative and performative historiographies, have rigorously refuted the ability of those outside academia to do the same, particularly vilifying attempts to do so through bodily engagement [see, for example, Clendennin, 2006; Denning; 1992, Hirst 1996]. Even Denning, who embraces the theatricality of history, paints re-enactment as being overly simplistic, offensively illusionary and lacking in anything but detrimental effect in the search of what is “true” of the past:

I am not much for re-enactments. Re-enactments tend to hallucinate a past as merely the present in funny dress. They give modernity and fashion a fillip by making the past look quaint. They patronise the human condition in hind-sighted superiority. They remove the responsibility of remedying the present by distracted, unreflective search for details of a past whose remedying will make no difference. (1992, 4)

Of course, these critiques are in part accurate, and the problematic aspects of re-enactment must and have been discussed (see, for example: Agnew 2004, 2007; Agnew and Lamb (eds.) 2009; Brewer 2010; Cook 2004; Handler and Saxton 1988; McCalman 2004; McCalman and Pickering 2010). But such responses also reflect a patrolling of our borders and an anxiety about the rapidly shifting conception of history. Rebecca Schneider suggests that re-enactment is often dismissed as “merely theatrical” because of a prejudice against the theatrical and the bodily that continues to pervade academia (2011, 30; 213). The polarity of theatricality and truth is contested by Schneider, who perceives temporality, theatricality and authenticity as being inherently connected, with a permeability that, she believes, challenges many academics (6; 14). She critiques the notion that re-enactment is pervaded by a theatricality that overwhelms the past and detracts from its potential as a form of historiography (17-18; 30; 50), urging us to destabilise the binary between affective and analytical engagement by embracing and advancing the ‘affective turn’ in scholarship (35). Other scholars, such as Vanessa Agnew (2007, 299-300; 309) are also recognising the

significance of the notion of *affect* to understanding re-enactment and the need to evaluate its function and potential as part of re-enactment's methodology. While the majority of writers are from disciplines other than history, there are historians (including ones who had previously disparaged re-enactment) who are now broadening their perspective. Ian McCalman and Paul Pickering, for example, assert that 'taking reenactment seriously as a methodology is worth the risk' and that 'its potential is best explored through an interdisciplinary lens' (2010, 32). While continuing to be aware of the pitfalls, we need to acknowledge and rigorously engage with the role that public histories like re-enactment are playing in prying open the determined grip academic history has had on the claim to so called authentic representations of the past. Exposed to the action of performance-based histories such as re-enactment without, and academic discourse regarding emerging epistemologies within, we need to reconsider our stance on the former so as not to be left behind in the advance of the latter.

In order to move in that direction, let us turn to my fieldwork with the Jane Austen Festival Australia (JAFA). In the relative warmth of an Australian April in the "bush capital" Canberra, JAFA hosts its annual Jane Austen Festival. Held on parish grounds in buildings that would only be considered historic "down under", the festival celebrates all things Austen, with a particular emphasis on period dance and costume. For me, donning a Georgian style gown, learning to make a bonnet, fire a bow, write a Regency style letter and dance sets rather like those in the BBC's *Pride and Prejudice* was part of an ethnographic research project. For the participants and organisers, JAFA functions (as described on the Jane Austen Festival Australia website) as:

an annual celebration [...] where Austen and Napoleonic fans from all over Australia come and indulge themselves in everything Regency – including dancing, music, food, games, archery, fencing, theatre, promenades, grand balls, talks, workshops, costumes and books. [...] Small soirees, concerts, a costumed promenade, theatre,

archery, period games, fashion, food, lectures and of course LOTS of dancing feature over three days and four nights, plus there is an opportunity to attend a grand Jane Austen Ball!

The festival is an example of what I, and others, have referred to as romanticised, recreational re-enactment (Erisman 1998; Snow 2008). This style of re-enactment endeavours to (re)create a historical milieu, rather than re-enact specific events. The festival was initiated in 2008 by husband and wife Peter and Eliana<sup>4</sup>. Peter holds a PhD in History and runs a weekly historic dance group. He reconstructs, performs and teaches dance and music from the Renaissance, Baroque, Regency and Victorian eras, utilising primary source material. At the festival, Peter teaches Regency court and country dance workshops, calls the dances at the balls, and is one of the performers of the ‘period’ music, which he plays on numerous instruments.<sup>5</sup> Eliana works as a costumier, both professionally and as a hobby in the Australian Costumers’ Guild and runs many of the costuming workshops at the festival, ranging from quick and easy bonnets, to historically accurate period sewing techniques. Here, re-enactors and Austen enthusiasts can learn the skills to kit out their Regency wardrobe (and, of course, any other period/s of their choice). Skill acquisition – particularly through group learning and sharing of techniques – is a prominent feature of this style of re-enactment. As Eliana told us at one of the workshops, “that’s what we’re doing; we’re just trying to share what we know. Hopefully next year more people will come forward and share their skills.” It is not only practical skills that are shared, but also knowledge, via talks on numerous Regency and literary related topics. In 2014, there were three PhDs and two Professors amongst the speakers. The topics included: ‘Conservation and Storage’ (delivered by a member of staff from the National Museum of Australia); ‘Jane Austen’s Pelisse’ (presented by a former curator at the Museum of London); ‘Mansfield Park and Education’ (Dr Heather Neilson); ‘No Moral Effect on the Mind. Music and education in Mansfield Park’ (Dr Gillian Dooley); ‘The Genius of the Place: Mansfield Park and the improvement of the estate’

(Professor Christine Alexander) and ‘Mansfield Park and the Navigable World’ (Professor William Christie). Framed as lectures, these talks contradict portrayals of re-enactment as a purely somatic, theatrical endeavour, suggesting participants’ interest in so called intellectual as well as experiential areas of learning (see, for example, Agnew, Cook, McCalman 2004, 484).

It is not only that JAJFA facilitates opportunities for attendees to enhance both their cognitive knowledge and physical skills, but also, I would suggest, that a form of historical understanding is – or can be – engendered through some of the somatic activities. And not just through the aspects specifically framed as sites of learning. Something of epistemological significance is occurring through the experiential process of this practice, in moments of apparently purely affective engagement. Consider the way the organisers described their festival, above, and the emotive language they enlisted: ‘celebration’, ‘fans’, ‘indulge’ – this self-description does suggest a practice that embraces affect, aligning with conceptions of re-enactment as an affective methodology. In contrast to the prevalent academic perspective, however, this is an affective mode of engagement that is not, at least to the re-enactors’ perspective, divorced from intellectual inquiry. Re-enactment does not polarise these two modes of inquiry, instead interconnecting the intellectual and the physical as complementary and non-stratified facets of knowing. This emphasises the relevance of Agnew’s identification of the need to elucidate the relationship between affective experience and cognitive comprehension, in order to assess re-enactment as a form of historiography. To what extent can the experiential be epistemological?

*Sitting in the garden around a table strewn with materials, needles, instructional pages and cups of tea, a group of ladies chat while sewing bonnets together in a workshop at JAJFA. Susie (a middle aged woman wearing a Regency day dress and bonnet) and I are talking about re-enactment as a way of learning about history. Susie doesn’t miss a stitch as she tells me, “the thing is, you learn about the period just by wearing the costumes, they really shape your movement.” I am about to ask how important the historical accuracy of the garment is, when she adds, “if you make the costumes how they actually made them, they work like clothes, not like costumes.”*



On the one hand, Susie's comments bring to mind Greg Denning's cutting critique of re-enactment for 'hallucinating the past as merely the present in funny dress' (1992, 4). Simplifying the past as something able to be encapsulated in a costume – no matter how historically accurate the garment may be – is problematic; a pretty dress does not a Regency lady make. On the other hand, while some re-enactors speak of moments of feeling as if they had been transported into the past (the research on Civil War re-enactment particularly submits this), Susie made no such claim – she suggested costumes can be worn as a learning aid, not a time travel device. Nor does she liken them to Mary Poppins' bag – Susie did not assert costumes carry links to all aspects of the past, but rather connects them specifically with clothing and movement: with material and embodied culture. The 'material turn' has pushed us toward considering the significance of material culture to history; the way it intersects with other cultural forms and the way it reflects and affects mores, customs and attitudes – the 'idea of material as evidence' (Rappaport 2008, 289; 293). This includes, of course, not only the literally material, such as costumes, but all objects – crockery, utensils, tools, jewellery, bric-a-brac etc. Similarly, the possibility of encountering the authentic through historical artefacts, and the practical insights that can be gained through these objects, have been well theorised (Deetz 1984). But these re-enactors' costumes were not originals from the period – they were (re)creations, at best. Many of the dresses worn by the attendants did not exactly replicate a particular period garment. And yet, some of these people had conducted extensive research in creating their garments – from reading books on Regency clothing, to inspecting the material, design and stitches of original garments at organised study tables at museums. While re-enactors' obsession with historical accuracy is often mocked in academia, something of the rigour academic historians value in our archival research reverberates in re-enactors' attention to historical accuracy in the items they create. Their dedication is particularly apparent in their costumes, or what some circles of re-

enactors refer to as ‘garb’ (Erisman 1998; Sparkis 1992). The research they undertake to create these costumes is, in many ways, similar to the research process of the academic historian, utilising, as described above, both primary and secondary source material, in the form of both written documents and verified artefacts. Re-enactor and public historian Stephen Gapps describes this research to (re)production process as ‘wearing the contents of your research as costume’ (2010, 52). Re-enactors may or may not be portraying the past as ‘merely the present in funny dress’, but so called serious re-enactors are pursuing historiographic research in order to do so – and learning about material culture (and what else besides?) in the process.

Living historians such as Gapps argue that authenticity is woven into the historical accuracy of objects – the garments, armour and various apparatuses they labour over. May there also be something authentic in the *process* of creating (and utilizing) these items? Discussing the Plimouth Plantation living history museum, Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett suggests that ‘authenticity is located not in the artifacts per se or in the models on which they are based, but in the methods by which they were made.’ Kirschenblatt-Gimblett further describes the (re)creating of historic objects as a ‘way of doing, which is a way of knowing, in a performance’ (1998, 196). This resonates with Diana Taylor’s notion of performance as an episteme – as a way of knowing through performance (2003, xvi). If we apply these notions to re-enactment, performing past cultures (by which I mean both the physical performing of historical activities, and the theatrical performativity created for and by these doings) may be perceived as a way of exploring history – or at least particular aspects of it (Johnson, 2014). I would suggest that authenticity resides not only in the process of *making*, but also in the experience of *employing* these items – as an experience as a participant-observer at Jafa particularly underlined for me.

*On the night of the festival ball, my friend and I both wear Regency dress. My hired green satin and black lace gown, despite being designed for a far more ample bosomed woman than myself, is one of the most beautiful dresses I have ever worn. As we step through the entrance, the official town crier of Canberra greets us in period dialogue, requesting our names and titles so that he may announce us. The chatter amongst the candle-lit hall hushes as his authoritative voice rings out “Lady Melissa of Avalon and Lady Katherine of Victoria Park”. Trying not to shuffle or hunch, my friend and I enter to polite applause. Much to my relief, the next dance is called, and Melissa and I hurry to avail ourselves of refreshments. Sitting down, the tightness of my corset squeezes my ribcage, digging into my shoulder blades, forbidding me to slouch. My shoulders, accustomed to hunching over a computer, are forced to mimic the metal rods of my undergarments, straight and strong. My core muscles feel tense with the effort of sucking my stomach in, flinching from the corset’s constrictive grasp. Stomach in, shoulders back, fabric and steel combine to sculpt my body into a supposedly more feminine form. My eyes roam the room, noticing that there are other ladies not dancing, and that they too, are sitting or standing near the wall. A few of them are even embroidering! I feel a little conscious of our lack of partners – something that doesn’t usually bother me – and I hope we will be asked to dance. A young Indian man I met at a dance workshop approaches, apparently at ease in his waist coat, stockings and breeches. He offers his arm to me with mock ceremony: “shall we have the next dance?” With a refined gesture quite unlike my usual way of moving, I place my arm gently on his. As I go to stand, however, I forget to hold up my floor length dress, and stumble on its length. Hiding my embarrassment, I try to glide to the dance area in what are actually shuffling, truncated steps; the length and ease of my stride restricted by my gown. My very competent dance partner guides me*

*through a whirlwind of figure eights, balances, casts and assembles, weaving our way through and with dozens of other couples to the lively accompaniment of a piano, strings and pipe. At the end of three dizzying numbers, I collapse into a chair, where the stab of wire from my corset once again jolts me into rigid posture.*

My field experience converges with Susie's assertion, cited above, that 'you learn about the period just by wearing the costumes – they really shape your movement'. By (re)doing activities from past cultures – in this case, dancing steps they danced, sewing like they sewed (by hand, without velcro!) – re-enactors might develop an experiential *relation* to past bodies. The restrictive clasp of the corset and the encompassing length of the gown heightened my awareness of what I was wearing, and the way I moved with/in them. They impressed upon me the way clothing shapes not only the physical appearance of our bodies, but also the ways in which we can/not move. The consciousness of my bodily posture and motion was augmented by moving in a way I am not usually accustomed – in the *assemblés*, *dos-à-dos* and *rigadoons* of Regency dance, for which the style of dress I wore was designed. Phenomenologists have articulated the embodied nature of perception, recognising that our relationship with the world is primarily a sensual one – mediated by our senses – what Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls the primacy of perception (1964). This suggests that our experience of the world is shaped by the specificities of our bodies – colour vision through eyes at the front (rather than side) of our head, a limited yet refined range of hearing and smell, opposable thumbs that allow us to grip objects (without which, would humans have developed a writing system?) According to this understanding of perception, there is a 'common understanding of being, formulated through anatomical similarity between subjects, realized within a shared world' (Card 2011, 139). Dance historian Susan Leigh Foster draws on this notion to suggest that historical research can reanimate past bodies whose traces remain in our archives, creating 'a kind of stirring that connects past and present bodies.'

Through their research, historians can, she asserts, develop ‘an affiliation, based on a kind of kinesthetic [sic] empathy between living and dead but imagined bodies’ (1995, 7). Foster emphasises that this is not a mystical experience, but rather a very bodily one. ‘Rather than a transcendence of the body, it’s an awareness of moving with as well as in and through the body as one moves alongside other bodies.’ I have suggested that a similar (perhaps even more poignant) form of kinaesthetic empathy can be developed through embodied practice – in the case of re-enactment, by (re)doing activities and (re)creating similar experiences from the period being studied (Johnson, 2014). In a very practical and tangible way, that corset – and the experience of moving with/in it – gave me a (partial) embodied sense of (a particular class of) female bodies of the Regency past; of the way they were presented, how their movement may have been shaped by their clothing and how their clothing reflected the ways in which they were expected to move. This physical experience, coupled with the sensual experience of listening to period music on period instruments, tasting Regency flavours in Regency dishes and seeing other bodies clad in period clothing, invoked for me some sense, however small, of a Regency lady’s experience of being.

But perhaps there was something equally enlightening in recognising the gap between embodied experiences – the recognition that when I ripped that corset off with relief, there was no social expectation for me to return to it, that the temporary sensation of having my ribs crushed, stomach forcibly held in, back rammed into a posture that felt unnaturally straight, is not, for me, an ongoing process that would eventually alter my physiognomy – and way of breathing – permanently. Similarly, in the moment I tripped on the dress – in that moment of failure – I understood something (however incomplete) of a Regency lady’s experience of being-in-the-world, because of the very gap between my way of moving and hers, moulded by the different aspects of our different cultures – in this case the material – literally. As dance historian Amanda Card elucidates, embodied knowledge derives not only

from experiences we align with, but also those we cannot recognise (2011, 140). The claimed fallibility of re-enactment as a public historiography largely hinges upon the impossibility of ever completely recreating an experience from the past (Brewer 2010; Handler and Saxton 1998). Experience is, after all, individual, contextual and specific. But does difference necessarily undermine authenticity? Schneider questions the dichotomy between divergence and authenticity, and her metaphor of re-enactment as ‘misquote’ – as not the event, but something akin to it – offers a way to understand the practice as not wrong, but rather ‘live’, an embrace of the dynamic ‘againness’ of performance (2011, 42). Art allows more ‘mistakes’ than academic history does, and, as Schneider insightfully recognises, sometimes it is in the disparity that something authentic can be found. (13). If there is knowledge to be gleaned from the gap between the (re)performance and its source, between our bodies and theirs, then those moments when re-enactment inevitably falls short of converging then and now (as it so frequently does) may offer significant moments of learning. Ian McCalman and Paul Pickering assert that if we accept ‘the fact that re-enacting can never fully capture what it might have felt like to be there’ we can ‘make a virtue of that shortcoming. The very element of unpredictability [...] can become a source of creative exchange with the past, provided it is frankly acknowledged’ (2010, 13). The pull of the thread, the jab of the corset, the trip of the dance offer the (analytic) doer a way into the has-been-done.

So is the knowledge acquired through re-enactment purely corporeal? According to post-phenomenological dance theory, embodied knowledge *can* generate cultural insight. This assertion is founded on the phenomenological notion of the interconnection between mind and body, and post-structuralist, ethnographic and performance theory on the interrelationship between body, society and culture. Norbert Elias recognised that the social value of and expectation for particular customs and behaviours are interconnected with the demonstration of these customs and behaviours *through* our bodies ([1939] 2000). Drawing

on Elias, Connerton enriched Foucault's concept of the body politic by recognising the agency of bodies, elucidating an interrelationship between material, ideological and embodied culture. Bodies are, he argued, 'socially constituted in the sense that [they are] culturally shaped in [their] actual practices and behaviour' (84). He suggests that people *embody* history via what he terms incorporating practices – activities through which we participate in and absorb culture. These concepts pave a path towards assessing the potential of re-enactment, through its (re)doing of cultural, bodily practices, to cultivate cultural connection and through this, historical understanding. Post-phenomenological philosophy on embodiment substantiates these notions. Jaana Parviainen, drawing on Levin, asserts:

the body is shaped by its society, our bodily way of being, with habits and routines, carries on the values and morality of society... We live in a social world, we inhabit this world, but the world also inhabits us.

In other words, we are all, as living, doing, experiencing bodies, shaped by and shaping bodily practices, and through this, cultural practices.<sup>6</sup> Parviainen draws on these ideas to suggest that 'as the gestures, postures and bodily attitudes of others gradually inhabit my own body, shaping me, I am absorbing cultural values... through my body and in my body' (1998, 27). Perhaps, then, re-enacting such 'gestures, postures and bodily attitudes' may allow one to evoke and absorb the cultural values which they seem to be so inextricably linked with? For, as dance theorist Cynthia Novack, argues: 'Culture is embodied [...] movement constitutes an ever-present reality in which we constantly participate [...] In these actions we participate in and reinforce culture, and we also create it (1990, 8). If culture is embodied, the practice of bodily activities from the past could potentially function as a way of partially accessing – or approaching – these cultures (Johnson, forthcoming). Re-enactors have described intense moments of felt historical connection (what civil war re-enactors term 'wargasm'), moments when they feel almost as if they really were in the past, that they actually were, for a moment, the historically inspired persona they perform. This can be

understood as the theatricality of re-enactment invoking a poignant and transitory affective response in the re-enactor, a suspension of disbelief and an embrace of the make believe of theatre. I suggest, however, that there may be a tangible, embodied empathy that is enhanced over time, through a layering of present bodies with the materials, movements and mannerisms of past bodies a la Judith Butler's notion of 'sedimented acts' (1988, 523) – the repeated, embodied enactments that create gender (and, I would argue, other cultural identities). In a similar vein, Greg Downy suggests that 'embodied knowledge can involve forms of material change to the body, an avenue in which past training becomes corporeal condition.' In his examination of Capoeira, Downy draws on Bourdieu's notion of habitus to emphasise that 'embodied knowledge shapes the subject. Practitioners repeatedly asserted that learning capoeira movements affected a person's kinaesthetic style, social interactions, and perceptions outside of the game' (23). Downy understands embodied knowledge as synonymous with Bourdieu's notion of habitus, what the latter defines as 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations' (1990, 53) and what Downey describes as 'history made flesh, a corporeal enculturation' (2010, S23). As Bourdieu expressed:

The body believes in what it plays at: it weeps if it mimes grief. It does not represent what it performs, it does not memorize the past, it enacts the past, Bringing it back to life. What is 'learned by body' is not something that one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is. (Bourdieu 1990, 73).

Re-enactors are not transporting themselves into the past, nor are they becoming a civil war soldier, a medieval knight or a Regency lady. Re-enactment may, however, facilitate an ongoing development of kinaesthetic empathy that not only alters the physicality of those re-enacting bodies, but also some of the culture embodied therein.



There is, as I have endeavoured to demonstrate here, something of epistemological value in the experience of re-enacting itself. Re-enactment's possibilities, however, do not dissipate its limitations, nor the problematic elements that others have noted. It is hardly surprising that re-enactors are enthusiastic about their practice, but for those who want to be "taken seriously", it would be prudent for them to channel their excitement towards methodological rigour and self-reflexive, constructive criticality.<sup>7</sup> If re-enactors were to complement their embodied knowledge with hermeneutic analysis – tacking between how embodied and cultural experiences parallel and how they diverge, what works and what fails, what they can relate to, and what they cannot – they could develop a deeper understanding of both past and present. But it is also important for us not to discredit a practice because of its somatic, performative approach and consider what implications – and perhaps even areas of potential enrichment – it could have for our own disciplines. As Paul Pickering states, 'despite its obvious pitfalls and dangers, there is much that a careful historian can learn about context, about material conditions, about possibility, from reenactment as a methodology' (2010, 126-7). It is pertinent for historians and scholars interested in history to analytically engage with other approaches to the past, particularly given the ever growing popularity and variety of such forms in the public sphere. Once again, a continual back and forthness – between application and reflection, theory and practice, endorsement and critique, may enable re-enactors and academic historians alike to negotiate the unstable ground of possibilities and pitfalls, to find the most solid way ahead.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> There are also a few practitioner-academics who attempt to bridge the gulf between their practice of re-enactment and their profession in academic history. Folklorist and living historian Jay Anderson, for example, is renowned for passionately advocating re-enactment as a valid and productive mode of history (1982) More recently, public historian and semi-

professional re-enactor Stephen Gapps has also written several pieces on re-enactment, drawing on his many years as a participant. (2007; 2010)

<sup>2</sup> ‘Affective history’ is emerging as a banner under which scholarly discussion of re-enactment is rallying. Deriving from the ‘affective turn’ in scholarship, it is being utilised in discussions on re-enactment to refer to what I conceive as its embodied, performative methods. See, for example Agnew 2007; MacCalman and Pickering (eds.) 2010; Schneider 2011.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on this topic, see: Okely 2007; Schneider 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Pseudonyms have been used.

<sup>5</sup> While I describe the dances taught as ‘Regency’, they were, of course, influenced by and sometimes borrowed from preceding periods and other countries, most prominently Scotland, France and Italy. As historian, dance reconstructionist and organiser of the festival, Peter, told us at one of the workshops: court, country and performance dances from numerous countries and decades were not isolated, self-constructed genres, but rather dynamic, interactive ensembles, skipping across the culturally porous barriers between classes, nations and temporalities.

<sup>6</sup> And yet, as Sally Ann Ness has recognized, phenomenologists would try to bracket off these cultural aspects of bodies in order to move closer to lived bodies, to the raw bodily experience. Post-phenomenology, particularly as it has developed in dance theory, however, asserts that the primacy of perception and *embodiment* are not subjects that should be removed from or used to negate cultural experience, but rather to connect with it (2004).

<sup>7</sup> Of course, for many re-enactors, their practice is primarily a hobby and/or community, and they may well suggest that academics are over-theorising it, or simply missing the point.

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