

## Historionics: Neither Here Nor There with Historical Reality TV

Michelle Liu Carriger

“Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

—Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho*<sup>1</sup>

“I think we’re really in our ancestors’ shoes, but these shoes suck!” cries nine-year-old Conor Clune to the camera. Conor, his brother, sister, cousin, and parents comprise one of three families picked to live as homesteaders for the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) documentary *Frontier House*. The Clunes and their neighbors, the Brooks and Glenn families, spend five months living in an environment carefully prepared to replicate as closely as possible the conditions of settlers in Montana in 1883, with one notable exception: the cameras. The cameras are supposed to capture “what life was really like” for viewers of the miniseries, including house raising, milking cows in a freak June blizzard, bartering for supplies with the Chinese merchant, and holding a pioneer wedding.<sup>2</sup>

*Frontier House* and a host of other historical reality television (HRTV) shows purport to embody (literally) a unique and vitally important new perspective on the past by “putting the flesh on a small chapter of human history.”<sup>3</sup> Viewers are meant to apprehend history in a vicarious physical and emotional way, through the experiences of ordinary present day people placed in “the past.” The programs feature a reality TV/documentary format, painstaking facsimile replicas of historical environments, and the casting of regular contemporary people as the main subjects of the programs, relying on the dynamic of reenactment for their content. Reenactment has emerged since the 1970s as a preeminent format for

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**Michelle Liu Carriger** is a Ph.D. candidate at Brown University. She earned an M.A. in Theatre Studies from the University of Colorado, Boulder. Her ATHE debut panel paper (LGBT focus group) based on her master’s thesis project “Performers in the Audience: The Boulton and Park Case of 1870-71” won the Theory and Criticism focus group Graduate Student Award in 2005. Her essay “Consuming Culture: The Japanese Way of Tea in Performance” was published in 2009 in a volume entitled *Performance, Embodiment, and Cultural Memory* from Cambridge Scholars Press. An article on the Gothic Lolita fashion phenomenon is forthcoming from Interdisciplinary.net Press. She is currently at work on her dissertation on fashion and the bodily performance of gender, sexuality, and race in the mid-Victorian period. The British portion of her research is supported by a grant from the Paul Mellon Center for Studies in British Art.

popular history, evidenced by the burgeoning popularity of living history museums and amateur battle encampments, and for television programs like *America's Most Wanted* or *Unsolved Mysteries*. Despite (or perhaps because of) their popularity, the meaning and truth-value of historical reenactments are hotly contested.<sup>4</sup> To use an example related to HRTV, while John Diamond of London's *Sunday Times* writes, "I defy anyone to suggest a way of getting nearer to the reality of that life," Stephen Gapps, a historian-consultant on the Australian show *The Colony*, argues that the program "seemed more like 'how to live without toilet paper, TV and electricity' than how to experience early colonial Australia."<sup>5</sup> Many historians argue that HRTV's preoccupation with the physical hardship and psychological turmoil of unfamiliar situations is incompatible with a rigorous exploration of history. Historian Alexander Cook, a consultant-participant in *The Ship*, a 2002 BBC historical reality television reenactment that retraced part of Captain James Cook's 1770 voyage to Australia over six weeks in a replica ship, bemoans reenactment's "persistent tendency to privilege a visceral, emotional engagement with the past at the expense of a more analytical treatment."<sup>6</sup> Scholar Vanessa Agnew, another *Ship* participant<sup>7</sup> and coeditor of an academic book series on reenactment, has been a particularly vociferous critic of HRTV; she describes HRTV reenactment as part of a turn to "affective history" which she defines as "historical representation that both takes affect as its object and attempts to elicit affect."<sup>8</sup> She does not define affect but goes on to say that reenactment as a form of affective history "is less concerned with events, processes or structures than with the individual's physical and psychological experience." In psychology terminology, affect generally refers to the outward manifestation of feelings and emotions, as distinct from the conative (behavior) and the cognitive. In his preface to *The Affective Turn*, Michael Hardt writes that "affects refer equally to the body and the mind" involving "both reason and the passions."<sup>9</sup> Certainly, HRTV shows focus intently on participants' verbal and behavioral externalizations of bodily and emotional experience, on the minutiae of daily life, the emotions and physical travails of the participants, framing these aspects as the "true" untold facts of how the past must have been. All attempts to deal with affect must grapple with the indistinct boundaries between what constitutes the emotional and the affective and in the example of HRTV the line may be even fuzzier, since televisual hermeneutics rely on a faith that an individual's self-reportage and external affect can accurately represent internal feelings and emotions. In other words, HRTV's claim to truth-value comes precisely from an elision between emotion and feeling and its affective manifestation.

For Agnew, however, such affects are categorically not to be associated with history or the past; she argues that the "body-based testimony" of TV reenactment "tells us more about the present self than the collective past," eventually going so far as to criticize reenactment for "eclipsing the past with its own theatricality."<sup>10</sup>

It is unclear in this critique whether Agnew means that *reenactment* is theatrical, or the *past* is theatrical, but, whichever, this sentence echoes both classic claims that the theatrical is inherently deceitful, and also the colloquial notion of “drama” as outsize behaviors inappropriate for “reality,” manifested in HRTV as the unruly participants upstaging the past with their “drama” of physical suffering and emotional distress. The perceived incommensurability of the living body with the past thus haunts HRTV’s version of history with the possibility that any mixing of living people with the past results in, as historian Greg Denning puts it, “merely the present in funny dress,” a stage farce.<sup>11</sup> Agnew, Cook, and Denning draw firm lines between present and past, reenactor and reenacted, suggesting that focus on the bodily furnishes the wrong kind of evidence, precluding the fulfillment of the shows’ claims to reveal what the past was “really” like. HRTV seems to have made a Faustian bargain with the theatre: history is made entertaining when “brought to life” by reenactors and lavish sets, as the taglines claim, but simultaneously, the critics argue it comes perilously close to losing its authenticity, its claim to a true representation of something that *really happened*, the one thing history must have to remain history.<sup>12</sup> Or, as Agnew puts it, “Reenactment’s collapsing of temporalities and its privileging of experience over event or structure—raise questions about its capacity to further historical understanding.”<sup>13</sup> With the prospect of failed “historical understanding” theatricality comes in. In Agnew’s formulation, the theatrical is the story that fails to resemble the past, offering instead a more bodily, more emotional story about late twentieth and early twenty-first century people and their travails in unfamiliar situations. Indeed, it may be that theatricality is intrinsically bound up with a certain kind of failure: Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait link theatricality to the “inevitable ‘failure’ of mimesis to produce a true likeness.”<sup>14</sup> The conundrum of reenactment’s theatricality activates a long, fraught history of thinking about performance that involves philosophers, theorists, and performance-makers. From Plato and Aristotle’s discussions of emotion and truth in representation to Bertolt Brecht’s and Augusto Boal’s critical attitudes toward empathetic emotional identification in theatre, the notions of truth, theatre, and affect are inextricably entwined in Western theatrical theory. However, as Agnew’s casual invocation of theatricality as the opposite of truth and the ally of emotion indicates, theatre criticism and performance theory have been largely unexamined in historians’ epistemological concerns about reenactment.

Gertrude Stein famously observed in her essay “Plays” that “the scene as depicted on the stage is almost always in syncopated time in relation to the emotion of anybody in the audience.”<sup>15</sup> Like syncopated beats, in reenactment the present and the past happen together, but without completely coinciding. Like the scene and the audience’s emotions, HRTV constitutes a space where multiple times collide, the results of which manifestly fail to resemble history as we usually think of it. What, though, might be instructive in this failure of “historical understanding”?

Rather than the flattening effect indicated by Agnew's notion of "collapsing temporalities," I argue that HRTV's constant oscillation of focus between now and then dramatizes a basic conundrum of historiography: can *we* substitute ourselves for *them* in an unbroken teleological chain or are they unthinkable, as post-structuralist historiographers like Michel Foucault, Joan Wallach Scott, and Keith Jenkins might argue, and Agnew, Cook, and others remind us?<sup>16</sup> What is at stake in surrogating living people for people from generations past? If the attempt is doomed to failure, what is there to be learned from repeated failures? And if failure is bound up with theatricality, what does theatricality have to teach us about the historical enterprise?

In this article I begin by exploring particular dynamics of HRTV, beginning with a consideration of how the formal and generic limits of HRTV contribute to a spatializing of time and participants' complicated temporal consciousnesses, culminating in the invocation of what I label a "third tense." Next, I examine the dynamic of affect, the bodily, and empathy in reenactment, ending with a concluding section considering the role of failure (which is perhaps to say theatricality) in the historical enterprise of reenactment. In the process of asking these questions about how HRTV works, I suggest that critics misplace their attention when they focus on truth-claims implying a binary opposition between past and present, fact and fiction, affect and truth. Rather than ending with the declaration that reenactment, and HRTV in particular, is wrong about the past, I begin with that claim and ask how affective engagement with the past functions, what HRTV offers to its viewers and participants, and whether there is a place for empathetic, "theatrical," and/or reenacted means of understanding the past.

### Third Tense and Televisual Time

Although there are many historical reality shows, I focus on the "History House" series, the most widely available series of HRTV programs in the United States, produced by Wall to Wall, a U.K.-based company that has made seven multi-part television programs for Britain's Channel Four and the U.S. Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). The first British program was *1900 House* (1999), followed by *1940s House* (2001), *Edwardian Country House* (2002, released as *Manor House* in the US), and *Regency House Party* (2004). Wall to Wall's U.S.-based shows are *Frontier House* (2002), *Colonial House* (2004, released as *Pioneer House* in the U.K.), and *Texas Ranch House* (2006). All the programs follow a similar formula of auditioning people who volunteer to spend from two to five months in environments carefully engineered to approximate as closely as possible certain places and times in history. Generally one or more families are chosen to be the center of each program. In *Manor House* and *Texas Ranch House* roughly equal time is given to the families and individuals participating in the show as domestic servants or ranch hands, respectively. In *Colonial House* and *Frontier House*, multiple families constitute a small community that must come

together to survive. The only program that does not feature at least one nuclear family is *Regency House Party*, which instead brings together five single men, five single women, and five older female chaperones along with a legion of servants and special guests.

Through their days participants are followed by camera people, frequently interviewed, and also encouraged to make use of video diary cameras with which they comment on their experiences. The voiceover informs us in *1900 House* that the video diary cameras discreetly installed in the house are “the only modern object allowed” so that “anytime day or night the family can keep a detailed log of their experiences or confess if they break the rules. These promise to reveal the true story of life in the 1900 house.” The diary cam reveals misdemeanors like the Clune women’s smuggled contraband makeup in *Frontier House* and forbidden shampoo in *1900 House*, and serves as a toy for participants to stage antics for the camera (horseplay in the Texas bunkhouse or midnight night-vision mouse tracking in the Brooks’s Montana cabin). The diary cam also provides a space for the most raw and emotional outpourings of overwhelmed reenactors, often including tears. Adrienne Clune muses that her first day on *Frontier House*, during which a runaway horse almost ran her down and they discovered their trail was washed out by spring runoff, was “a little more real than I had anticipated. A little more real than I had wanted to get.”

Scenes from the life of the house are interspersed with diary cam footage and participant interviews, unified by scholarly commentary that dispenses historical facts, fills narrative gaps in the simulated world, and assesses the historical accuracy of the participants’ behavior. *1900 House* participants were encouraged to use guides contemporary with their environment, like Casell’s *Book of the Household*, to help them learn how to behave appropriately for the period, but now most programs provide their participants with manuals (bound in period-looking materials) that instruct them in their historical roles. Each role is apparently constructed to be roughly analogous to the participant’s actual classed, raced, gendered identity—“the person he [or she] might have been 200 years ago,” as it is put by the *Regency House Party* narrator. Special guests are brought in to spur action or raise pertinent topics, such as interaction with Native Americans in *Colonial House* and *Texas Ranch House*, British imperialism in *Manor House*, or the gothic and romantic movements in *Regency House Party*. The U.S. programs—*Colonial House*, *Frontier House*, and *Texas Ranch House*—feature a sort of report card at the end of the program that evaluated how well the participants fulfilled their historical roles and whether or not their enterprises would have been successful. *Regency House Party* is loosely structured like a dating contest in which each participant is assigned a social position (like penniless countess, landed gentry, wealthy merchant’s daughter, or army captain) and is supposed to attempt to make a romantic match. These new additions both add to the sense of competition common to reality television and help

to articulate a division between modern-day and historically accurate behaviors. However, these structures do not seem particularly to alter participants' day-to-day actions and attitudes in comparison to the earlier shows; all the programs feature "rule-breaking" anachronistic attitudes and behaviors as well as participant claims to new empathetic understandings of the past.

Clearly, in proposing to substitute present-day people for the missing ones from the past, in placing cameras in meticulously designed recreations of historical environments, historical reality shows come to occupy a very complicated temporal position. Some writers expressly pit television against history, an attitude summed up by Mary Ann Doane's now-axiomatic statement that television "inhabits a moment of time and is then lost to memory. Television thrives on its own forgettability." Television's bad memory is associated with the pervasive trope of instantaneity, despite the fact that only a small fraction of television is actually broadcast live.<sup>17</sup> HRTV trades on "forgotten" and untelevised aspects of history—the body, "ordinary" people, daily life—and purports to bring us these things in a living form, if not a "live" one. HRTV then might be the epitome of televised history. It takes digital cameras and present day people to imbue various historical milieux with a sense of liveness in a curious amalgam of scholarly voiceover, reality show intrigue, adventure tourism bravado, and made-for-TV histrionics. In a sense, these programs are attempting to make history all over again so the cameras can catch it and bring it to viewers. In a style akin to the television news and many reality shows, participants are continuously interviewed, alternately participating in the experience of "living in the past" and acting as witnesses to the events that they themselves are helping to create.

While HRTV's debt to reality television is clear, it is also suspended between two standard modes of televised histories: the drama and the documentary. Unlike dramatic reenactments of the past that use actors and cinematic techniques of verisimilitude to encourage the viewer to adopt a "willing suspension of disbelief" toward the reality of what they are seeing on the screen, HRTV participants never pretend to be historical personages but rather constantly describe their feelings in a sort of "third tense" (as opposed to third person), freely mixing references to their TV lives with their "other" lives, which they often refer to as their "real," "modern," "twentieth" or "twenty-first century" lives. The demands of the time-travel experiment cause a doubling well known to theatre folk: the uneven convergence of "actor" and "character." The third tense to which participants resort (neither I nor you, neither now nor then) functions like Marvin Carlson's notion of "ghosting." Of a theatre context, he writes, "The recycled body of an actor, already a complex bearer of semiotic messages, will almost inevitably in a new role evoke the ghost or ghosts of previous roles."<sup>18</sup> This observation correlates in the case of the HRTV "actors" to the anachronistic "recycling" of modern day people into past roles; the incompleteness of the transformation from present to historical personage

and the resulting doubleness comprises a dizzying, anxiety-inducing prospect for participants and (apparently) critics. Miss Hopkins of *Regency House Party* tells the camera early on in the six-week filming, “I kind of want to be me but I’m not me, from the way I’m dressed and the surroundings and way people are talking to me.” Agnew schematizes the participants’ process of adapting to the past as a “conversion narrative”: “Reenactment’s central narrative is . . . one of conversion from ignorance to knowledge, individualism to sociability, resistance to compliance, and present to past.”<sup>19</sup> However, I see a far more ambivalent dynamic—the past and the filmic present never fully coincide, nor do they come to rest at a stable end point; rather, the reenactors’ multiple roles oscillate like the performative repetition Richard Schechner has called “not me, not not me.”<sup>20</sup> HRTV offers not the past and yet possibly not not the past.

The participants’ negotiations of temporal ambivalence condition the temporal schema established for viewers as well: we are not to imagine ourselves “live” at the original event or place as we are in television naturalistic dramas or “docudramas” like *Roots*, nor are we even encouraged to imagine the reenactment happening live. Rather, HRTV stages reenacted events without originals, captured as they happen, then subject to extensive commentary given by both the participants themselves and the narrator who informs us how their behavior compares to what is known of history. The editing process that cuts together events with participants’ own self-commentary and narrator intervention after the fact moves the action of the program into a televisual time, neither past nor present, but a mediated middle space of spatialized time. First, one moment in linear history has been seized and expanded into a three-dimensional environment, something “more” than a museum set, as Daru Rooke, the project curator for *1900 House*, explains to the camera, because everything has to function as a “real home” for a family. However, the moment, already doubled from a past “original” and the participants’ reenactment, is endlessly replicated as the participants rehash events in their interviews, the narrator comments on the likeness of the reenactment to the original, and the broadcast or DVD brings the scene to the viewer. A single time is thus refracted and multiplied into myriad locations, ostensibly (and perhaps ironically) in the name of making history graspable and “real.”

Using the interview/action format common to reality television and documentary procedures like the knowledgeable, ostensibly objective, disembodied voiceover, but never straying into the docudrama illusion that they are actually people in or from the past, the historical reality show juxtaposes not only the trappings of the past with people of the present but also the television forms of the docudrama, documentary, and reality show. The program thus sprawls across genres, temporality refracts across televisual space, and the participants’ failure to meld seamlessly into the past milieu leaves them open to accusations of fakery.

### The Theatrical Body

The bodies positioned as the shows' bearers of the "true" untold story of history are nonetheless identified as fake—"theatrical"—by Agnew, because of their failure to produce what she would call an accurate representation of history, one that "ought to make visible the ways in which events were imbued with meanings and investigate whose interests were served by those meanings."<sup>21</sup> The new "affective turn" in history does not, however, mean that history used to be more true: she writes, "Reenactment is not new—theatricalizing and sentimentalizing the past lie at the very foundations of modern historical thought."<sup>22</sup> Eliding reenactment with "theatricalizing" and "sentimentalizing" in this sentence, Agnew echoes a major thread of dramatic theory, reaching all the way back to Plato's two thousand year-old injunctions against theatre as removed from truth. To a certain extent, Aristotle rehabilitates theatre from Plato's dismissal precisely through appeal to its capacity to elicit and purge emotion by means of catharsis. However, the affective control of audiences through catharsis is precisely the aspect of *The Poetics* that Augusto Boal decries as coercive in *The Theatre of the Oppressed*. Boal and of course Bertolt Brecht have been two of the most important twentieth-century dramatic theorists to critique the coercive power of transmitted emotion via *Einfühlung* or empathy.

The word empathy was coined by the British psychologist Edward Titchener in 1909 as a translation of the word *Einfühlung*.<sup>23</sup> Titchener wrote: "This tendency to feel oneself *into* a situation is called *empathy*—on the analogy of sympathy, which is feeling *together with another*."<sup>24</sup> These are the sorts of affective links and correspondences that happen in HRTV. There are three major connections forged: reenactors identify with personages of the past; viewers identify with reenactors; and via a chain of affective relations, viewers are supposed to identify with the past. While these relations intertwine and overlap, a power vector surfaces in such linkages. In an article from the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Gilda C. Parrella offers one way of separating out vectors of empathy by identifying two forms of empathy which she calls "projective" and "adoptive."<sup>25</sup> The formulations of Aristotle, Brecht, and Boal chart an adoptive empathy wherein, as Parrella puts it, "the object has its own identifiable nature and dominates the nature of the process."<sup>26</sup> That is, empathy causes the audience to be changed and assimilated to the object of observation. However, for reenactment critics like Agnew and Cook, the body that "eclipses" the past involves projective empathy (as in Titchener's formulation of "feeling oneself into a situation"), wherein the reenactor imposes her own feelings on the scene of the past. Hence, Agnew alleges that reenactment results in knowledge of the reenactor's "physical and psychological experience," which he has superimposed upon the past.<sup>27</sup>

Empathy forges samenesses between people, but, as Parrella describes, this is an ambivalent dynamic. Postmodern historians like Keith Jenkins might agree with Agnew in one respect: in *Rethinking History* Jenkins specifically takes on John



Stuart Mill's conception of liberal empathy, arguing that the attempt to "put oneself in another person's position" when making history results in a power dynamic that "bring[s] the people in the past (who were so different to us) under our control" by "mak[ing] them the same as us, propelled everywhere by rational calculation, liberal style."<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault evinces a similar skepticism in his article "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," stating, "Nothing in man—not even his body—is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men," so that "we must dismiss those tendencies that encourage the consoling play of recognitions."<sup>29</sup> Cook puts it most succinctly: "*We* can never be *Them*."<sup>30</sup>

So much then, it would seem, for empathy. As Brecht and Boal warned of theatre and as Agnew argues, reenactors occlude clear views of the past as past by taking their own embodied sensations and affective reactions as historical evidence. Certainly, HRTV taglines make this connection between contemporary reenactments and historical truths, claiming that *Texas Ranch House* will show us "how the West was done" or that *Colonial House*, *Frontier House*, and *1900 House* will reveal "what life was really like" in 1628, 1883, and 1900. Joyce Bowler makes a specifically empathetic claim to the *1900 House* diary cam when discussing her decision to stop wearing drawers; because she has found them to be such a hassle, she believes that no Victorian woman would actually have worn them, except perhaps on "special occasions." Similarly, after weeks on *Frontier House* twelve-year-old Erin Patton muses to the camera, "I think I was made to be born in 1883 I just got, like, mailed wrong or something."

Moments like Bowler's and Patton's reveal how empathy might result in what Agnew calls a "collapsing of temporalities." Bowler in particular takes her experiences on set to be interchangeable with that of the women of the past and makes a claim for those past people's behavior. In a sense, the reenactors colonize the past through their forays in spatialized time. That is, through entering the space of the past, finding it "empty" and establishing themselves, reenactors implicitly lay claim to the right to speak for the people who were there first, but who cannot speak to the camera. A complete empathetic identification between reenactors and their past personas would risk the liberal identification that insists the people of the past must be just like us. This would indeed be a dangerous historical representation—if that were what happened on screen.

However, the unfolding drama almost always problematizes rather than endorses the notion of an easy empathetic substitution. Rather than the teleological one-way "conversion narrative" described by Agnew, I see a much more complicated and confused temporality. After all, as plenty of critics have pointed out, what happens in front of the cameras is obviously not how the people of the past would have gone about their days; in one remarkable scene in *Texas Ranch House*, Mr. and Mrs. Cooke are having a disagreement over the running of the ranch (something

the voiceover reminds us would not have happened in 1867 as women would not expect an equal hand in running the family business). As the camera allows them to disappear into the house, we hear Mr. Cooke softly insisting, "Would you turn the mic off, please? You don't want to come off the way you're coming across right now" and, just before the microphone is indeed cut or the editors end the scene, Mrs. Cooke replies sarcastically, "Am I a bitch?" Moreover, the participants seem to have taken extreme umbrage at the clothing of the period, in the American programs in particular, which have tended to be more physically demanding. Indeed, clothing is perhaps one of the most effective means of impressing the circumstances of the past upon a modern body, and consequently becomes a point of major contention in all the programs. Without exception in *Colonial House*, *Frontier House*, and *Texas Ranch House*, participants have dispensed with most of their clothing, men often going shirtless and women in their shifts. According to Stephen Gapps, the participants of the Australian HRTV show *The Colony* were to be found in modern dungarees and boots, and synthetic materials, and the women chopped their period clothes into "halter-neck tops and short skirts."<sup>31</sup> In Joyce Bowler's experience of Victorian drawers, the power of the empathetic relation prevails over factual discrepancies, however, the audience is not allowed to forget that the preponderance of data suggests that Victorian women *did* wear drawers. I suggest that the use of third tense, televisual time, and the juxtaposition of scholarly voiceover preclude the viewer from confusing the reenactment with the reenacted.

HRTV reenactment both takes experience as ahistorical to the point that reenactors and viewers now should be able to stand in, but it also generates a recognition of difference in the repetition. *Regency House Party* chaperone Mrs. Rogers (still dressed in every required nineteenth-century wardrobe item) demonstrates a temporal awareness that, rather than collapsing, seems to vacillate: "I thought her behavior was unbelievable in both centuries," she complains of another participant. Far from being elided, the vacillation between likeness and difference between people now and the environment then is constantly demonstrated as the foregoing examples show. The participants' pervasive recourse to the "third tense," including their awareness of and reflexive comparison of now and then in their interactions with the camera, facilitates this awareness of the fractured temporalities of the "time travel experiment." Indeed, even watching people identify fully with their roles can be unnerving, as when the upstairs family in *Manor House* begin luxuriating in their roles as lords of a stately house with a score of servants to command. While HRTV very obviously does mingle past and present in an almost-unheard-of way, rather than mixing up now with then, the viewer witnesses her contemporaries struggle and fail to slip into the lifestyle of another time as often as they experience moments of empathetic synchronicity.

### Felicitous Failure

When Lady Devonport of *Regency House Party* writes a poem to a “poor caged lady,” she is inspired by her own experience of being unable go out to enjoy a misty early morning on the estate grounds because she is incapable of dressing herself in her Regency gown. She writes for the women who, she imagines, felt the same sense of restriction two hundred years ago. Her assumption about the women of the past, though, is clearly not verifiable through objective historical methods. Yet Lady Devonport *knows something* now that she hadn’t known before, and she attempts to share it with others through the televisual medium. It is not exactly something about the era of Jane Austen, but then it’s not *not* about the past either. The results of the attempt to connect with the past and the people of the past are shifting, multi-faceted, and certainly problematic engagements that trouble simple binaries between now and then, true and false, self and other.

Reenactors forge empathetic connections between the past and present; either an affect is transmitted from the past and reproduced (reenacted) in the reenactor or a reenactor generates affect upon confronting the past. Borders—between individuals, between past and present—are breached by affect and it becomes unclear whose voice, whose feeling, whose experience is being expressed. The origins of the affects in play are lost. Empathy destabilizes the autonomy of the reenactor; it trespasses the boundaries of then and now, one and other. Empathetic encounters help reveal the extent to which we are mutually constituted with others, past and present, and our environments.<sup>32</sup> The experience of reenactment does not necessarily involve the simple substitution of “We becoming Them.” The multiplicity of voices—reenactors and expert, disembodied narrator and visitors—juxtaposed in televisual time helps ensure the recognition that, as Joan Wallach Scott argues, experience cannot be taken as “an ‘irreducible’ ground for history.”<sup>33</sup> Reenactors forge bonds much more fraught, tenuous, and complicated with the people of the past by wearing their clothes, using their tools, and attempting to get along by their rules.

Rather than the clean separation between adoptive and projective empathies proposed by Parrella, I contend that the promise and peril of an affective engagement is in the fundamental uncertainty about the origins of empathetically shared affects. In the moment when the subjectivities of then and now get mixed up, true and false too are rendered unreliable, revealed to be entangled—not just entangled, but dissolved—suspended in solution. The history that had so much to lose from getting involved with theatre can perhaps only lose its old claim to objective truth, a mask post-structuralist historians like Foucault, de Certeau, Scott, and Jenkins have been tugging at for decades. Obviously, this doesn’t mean that reenactors can believe any thing they feel, but it does mean recognizing that the affective engagement that renders reenactment unreliable as “history” exists on a continuum with all history-making. As historian Gerald Herman writes, “the act of writing history is, of necessity, an act of imaginative creation.”<sup>34</sup>

In her book *Getting Medieval*, Carolyn Dinshaw describes her work as acting on a “queer historical impulse” that takes the “slippery,” “heterogenous, multiple, and fundamentally indeterminate” aspects of sex “as the condition, not the failure” of a queer history. This queer history makes “affective relations across time” by employing what Donna Haraway calls “partial connection.” This involves, Haraway writes, recognizing that “the knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another.”<sup>35</sup>

This queer, affective, shifting, partial connection is the kind of empathetic relation I see in HRTV. It is not a history based on certainties, but one that illustrates the slipperiness of the past, the things that escape objective history, and some of the ways that the past is with the present and plays on the present in syncopation. Cook is correct in asserting that HRTV “privileges a visceral, emotional engagement with the past” over other methods, and that these experiments in living do not furnish reenactors and historians with new facts of the variety valued by the classic “objective” historian. However, HRTV provides a venue to examine not only an unstable rapprochement of past and present, but also a means to work through the ongoing fascination that history holds for people from all walks of life, and a way to think through epistemologies of the body, sensation, and affect. Moreover, these inquiries into other modes of scholarship and other modalities of knowledge need not impinge on already established epistemologies. Instead, why not consider these affective methods as ways of knowing adjacent to and contiguous with traditional historical methods? The writing of history is itself, like reenactment, a representational practice. Reenactment and “affective history” might offer means of understanding the body, affects, and beliefs as factors in the making of representations about the past. Theatre and performance studies can offer to history a set of theories that treat these aspects as part of “truth”—as factors in the making of meaning.

Most viewers of HRTV recognize that girl-of-all-work Maura Finkelstein’s bid to become a cowboy and the Regency girls who chafe against their restrictions and finally break out in a raucous cross-dressing party do not have many recorded precedents. Their behaviors are conditioned not merely by the space of a past time, but by the odd conjunction of place and temporally displaced self. However, what is to be recognized by these exercises in the subjunctive? Is there a space to imagine the unrecorded through these what-if rehearsals? How can the people of the present be sure that the past doesn’t speak? What if we just haven’t been listening?

As Gertrude Stein observes of plays, historical reenactments strike uneasily syncopated rhythms, playing upon emotions as well as the standard themes of objective history. Rather than consider intolerable the mixing of the past, present, affective, and intellectual, I contend, as Stein writes of the play, that this is “a

combination and not a contradiction and it was something that makes one think endlessly” about reenactment as well as about plays. The past is spread unevenly across televisual time, and bodies themselves refract across the screen inviting complicated, anxious, and emotional relations between the reenactor and the past, the reenactor and the viewers, and the viewers and the past.

Maybe these affective historical connections must of necessity be “illegitimate,” unconfirmable, failed—but for all that they are a palpable part of people’s understandings of history and how they conceive of the past. And throughout all this, the actual people of the past remain stubbornly absent from this picture, replaced by modern day surrogates. Viewers are instead constantly informed often in contradictory ways about how those missing people would behave. While participants frequently voice how they think the people they are impersonating would feel, the voiceover announces which activities are consonant and which vary from known historical behaviors. In a perhaps melancholy way then, the narratives constantly dance around this persistent absence.

*Texas Ranch House* concludes, “In the end, all have failed in the face of history.” And of course there is no doubt. These fifteen twenty-first-century people did not behave as their 1867 role models would have. Their psyches are indelibly different; their forebears are resolutely missing. *1900 House*’s prop designer wryly comments of an oil lamp for the house: “It’s an original, but I’m the fake.” The designer seems to be acknowledging the impossibility of the task at hand. HRTV will always fail at the thing its genre names—“living history”—in the way that history is by definition about the not-present. But what is instructive about this persistent failure “in the face of history”? What can be learned about which parts of history that are truly unthinkable, which parts remain with the present and within the present, and why history remains an incredibly fraught but compelling enterprise—a ground shared by contentious parties of experts and laymen; a science and a passion, embodied, intellectual, and emotional?

Certainly, treating affective history seriously does not mean that any version of history is acceptable. Nor does it mean everyone can just pick one that feels good, as Vanessa Agnew does when she writes, “Reenactment’s emancipatory gesture is to allow participants to select their own past in reaction to a conflicted present.”<sup>36</sup> Neither does it mean capitulating to the objectivity claimed by HRTV taglines like “find out what it was really like” in 1628.<sup>37</sup> Rather, it entails recognizing affect as part of the historical enterprise and reenactment as an expression of an intense bond with the past that does not necessarily correspond to simple notions of true and false, authentic or “theatrical.” Scholars can apprehend, as Carlson puts it, the “inevitable slippage in all repetition but at the same time acknowledge . . . the congruence that still haunts the new performance.”<sup>38</sup> Experiments like historical reality television, necessarily unobjective, partial, messy, emotional and concerned with bodily experience, perhaps then can add to how we think of history through

dispassionate, reasoned, and analytic practices. It means embracing reenactment's ability, as Alexander Cook puts it, "to dramatize the extent to which our knowledge of history is the outcome of a fragile investigative procedure. It can illustrate the extent to which history is an open, rather than a closed, body of knowledge—but one that has a real relationship with passionate present concerns at an individual level."<sup>39</sup> It entails, as Samuel Beckett would have it, failing again and again, and failing better.

## Notes

1. Samuel Beckett, *Nohow On: Company III, Seen III Said, Worstword Ho: Three Novels* (New York: Grove P, 1995) 89.
2. Public Broadcasting Service. 30 May 2009 <http://www.pbs.org/>.
3. *The 1900 House*. Directed by Simon Shaw, et al. PBS Home Video. 1999.
4. I will confine myself primarily to discussing the criticism of HRTV as a reenactment form, but for critical approaches to other kinds of historical reenactment, see for example Scott Magelssen, *Living History Museums* (Scarecrow P, 2007); Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum* (Durham: Duke U P 1997); Mike Crang, "Magic Kingdom or Quixotic Quest for Authenticity?" *Annals of Tourism Research*, 23 (1996): 415-431; and Sven Lütticken, "An Arena in Which to Reenact," *Life, Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art* (Rotterdam: Witte de With, 2005).
5. "Wall to Wall - History House." 30 May 2009 <<http://www.walltowall.co.uk/>>. Stephen Gapps, "Adventures in 'The Colony': 'Big Brother' Meets 'Survivor' in Period Costume," *Film & History* 37.1 (2007).
6. Alexander Cook, "The Use and Abuse of Historical Reenactment: Thoughts on Recent Trends in Public History," *Criticism* 46.3 (2004): 490.
7. It is worth noting that Gapps, Cook, and Agnew were all consultant/participants in historical reality television shows produced by SBS (Australia's public broadcast network) and BBC, not Wall-to-Wall, the programs I have considered most closely. These authors offer exclusive "behind-the-scenes" information, but the details of the companies' and programs' practices may be different. I confine my analysis to a consideration of how these programs function as public history and try to use other authors' claims in the same way.
8. Vanessa Agnew, "History's Affective Turn: Historical Reenactment and Its Work in the Present," *Rethinking History* 11.3 (2007): 301.
9. Michael Hardt, "Forward: What Affects Are Good for," *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, ed. Patricia T. Clough (Durham: Duke U P, 2007) ix.
10. 304, Vanessa Agnew, "What is Reenactment? An Introduction" *Criticism* 46.3 (2004): 335.
11. qtd in Cook 488.
12. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett in Stephen Eddy Snow, *Performing the Pilgrims: A Study of Ethnohistorical Roleplaying at Plimoth Plantation* (Jackson: U P of Mississippi, 1993) xvi.
13. Agnew, "History's Affective Turn" 301.
14. Tracy C. Davis and Tom Postlewait, *Theatricality* (New York: Cambridge U P, 2003) 6.
15. Gertrude Stein, "Plays" *Theater of the Avant-Garde*, eds. Bert Cardullo and Robert Knopf (New Haven: Yale U P, 2001) 450.
16. See for example Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking History* (London: Routledge, 2003) or Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).
17. Mary Ann Doane, "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe," *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1990) 226. See also Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology," *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches—An Anthology*, ed. E. Kaplan (Frederick: U Publications of America, 1983).

18. Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2001) 8.
19. Agnew, "What is Reenactment?," *Criticism* 46.3 (2004): 330.
20. Richard Schechner, An Introduction, *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1985) 110-11.
21. Agnew, "What Is Reenactment?" 335.
22. Agnew, "Affective Turn" 301.
23. David Krasner, "Empathy and Theater," *Staging Philosophy*, ed. David Krasner and David Z. Saltz (Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 2006) 265.
24. qtd in Gilda C. Parrella, "Projection and Adoption: Toward a Clarification of the Concept of Empathy," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 57 (1971): 210. The process of empathy is itself a sort of reenactment: the body "replays" a feeling after having observed it outside itself. Lauren Wispé calls these "imaginal and mimetic capacities" while Titchener describes "imitative experiences" in the workings of empathy and memory (qtd in Krasner 265, Parrella 210).
25. 204-213. I have not been able to find many sources that try explicitly to make sense of empathy, so I rely on this 1971 article which addresses precisely one of the problems with the commonly held definition: that it makes it difficult to understand which party originates the empathetically shared feeling and who is the receiver.
26. 205.
27. Agnew, "What Is Reenactment?" 330.
28. Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (London: Routledge, 2003) 45.
29. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1977) 153.
30. Cook 489.
31. Gapps n.p.
32. Teresa Brennan's work on the transmission of affect may be of use here. Brennan's descriptions of people and the influence of their environments has major ramifications for studies of what one might learn from immersing oneself in a historic environment. See *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 2004).
33. Joan Wallach Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993) 402.
34. Gerald Herman, "Creating the Twenty-First Century 'Historian for all Seasons,'" *The Public Historian* 25.3 (2003): 95.
35. Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke U P, 1999) 1, 2, 14.
36. Agnew, "What is Reenactment?" 328.
37. *Colonial House*. It is important to note that the distinction I am making between the historical work enabled by HRTV and "traditional" analytical research is not one that the shows themselves necessarily recognize. The voiceover succumbs to monolithic pronouncements, like the claim that *1900 House* will enable us to "find out what it was really like" or these even more suspect lines from the introduction to *Texas Ranch House*: "Some things never change, like challenging authority and the battle of the sexes . . . ignited by a spark of modern feminism and fueled by a hearty dose of testosterone. Still, the meat of the programs and the most fascinating parts are not these simplistic declarations. Rather, the most important work and most gripping moments depict struggles that are indeed emotional and personal, but are also directly born of the place and the endeavor to engage physically and emotionally with the past.
38. Carlson 4.
39. Cook 494.

