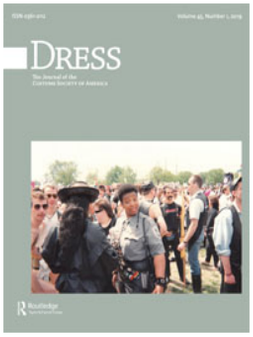

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Wearing History

Viola Johnson's Pin Sash and Mobile Archive

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Housed in a mobile library and archive, Viola Johnson's pin sash—a leather garment onto which hundreds of metal pins and buttons have been affixed—spotlights the terms of her expansive leathersexuality. Such a sexuality, for Johnson, is predicated on a notion of service that primarily manifests in the constant upkeep, revising, archiving, and presenting of leather history, primarily through the display and interpretation of her sash and library. After detailing the genesis and social milieu of the Carter/Johnson Leather Library and the significance of pins and buttons in leatherwear more generally, this article focuses on a button reading "The L.A.P.D. FREED the Slaves April 10, 1976." Initially made to protest the raid of a mock slave auction at the Mark IV bathhouse in Los Angeles, the button underscores the dyadic yet fungible terms of freedom and enslavement, and thus the relationships between sexual power play and non-consensual state violence.

Keywords Viola Johnson, leather, BDSM, Mark IV, archive, pin sash

This is the urgency: Live!
and have your blooming in the noise of the whirlwind.
—Gwendolyn Brooks

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AN ILLUSTRATION in the 1955 *Girl Scout Handbook* depicts two teenage girls examining a sash filled with badges (FIGURE 1). The girl wearing the sash looks down, her head bowed as she speaks to her companion. Lifting the sash away from her body with her right hand, she points with her thumb to a particular circular badge on the edge of her sash. Her fellow Girl Scout looks on, cradling a book in her arms. These two girls are from different troops (5 and 3), and this drawing, therefore, illustrates the benefits of inter-troop interaction, while underscoring a sense of individual accomplishment and pride. The drawing appears in a section of the handbook concerning the wearing of uniforms and special insignia with specific regulations concerning the construction and usage of the sash:

> ***The badge sash* is a four-inch band of Girl Scout cloth and is worn over the right shoulder and fastened on the left hip. If you wear a uniform with short sleeves or the alternate uniform, or if you have no uniform, you may wear your proficiency and rank badges on a badge sash.**[1]

The text goes on to say that proficiency badges, usually worn above the cuff of a long sleeve uniform, "show that you are prepared to use what you have learned to serve others as well as yourself."[2]

These lessons were not lost on Viola Johnson, who patterned her leather pin sash after the one she owned as a Girl Scout in Roselle, New Jersey, in the 1960s (FIGURES 2 and 3). The choice of the pin sash as a form for keeping and displaying pins, buttons, and badges tied to motorcycle clubs and leather groups, events, and titles is an innovation in leatherwear of Johnson's own devising.[3] Having no uniform equivalent in the gay male leather scene, Johnson's pin sash reflects both her past affiliation with the Girl Scouts of the USA, an organization that privileges uniform protocol as much as many leather communities, as well as her gendered difference from a (largely) gay male leather scene, who used leather and denim vests for the same purpose.

I use the term "leather" to name sexual and visual signifying practices that place an emphasis on overt power play—the demarcation of consensual roles, rules, and punishments within a sex scene. Other terms, such as sadomasochism, S&M, S/M, or BDSM, also are appropriate but have different histories.[4] Leather semiotically names not only to one of the defining materialities of kinky sexual dress but also avoids overly simplistic dyadic figurations of non-normative sexual practices, such as sadism/masochism, top/bottom, dominant/subservient, master/slave. Like many early leather writers, I also use leather in portmanteau construction (e.g., leatherfolks or leathergear) so as to connect leather to the term it modifies, whether that be a person, sexuality, or thing.[5]

FIGURE 1 Illustration, *Girl Scout Handbook: Intermediate Program* (1955).

1 Girl Scouts of the USA, *Girl Scout Handbook: Intermediate Program* (New York: GSUSA, 1955), 31.

2 Girl Scouts of the USA, *Girl Scout Handbook*, 81.

3 Viola Johnson, oral history with author, September 4, 2011. The interview was recorded during the Master/slave NorthEast Conference held at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Silver Spring, MD. The interview came at the end of three days spent researching and occasionally volunteering in the Carter/Johnson Library. The interview lasted approximately two hours, and Johnson's pin sash was physically present at the table to refer to and riff off of. As oral history is not a common tool in art history, my avowed discipline, my methodology for conducting this oral history was informed primarily by two sources: Marjorie Hunt's *Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide* and a pamphlet produced by the Oral History Project at the Leather Archives & Museum (LA&M) in Chicago, where one transcription of my oral history interview with Viola Johnson currently resides. The other resides in the Carter/Johnson Leather Library. Verbal permission to use the contents of the oral history in my dissertation and any subsequent publication was given to me by Viola Johnson after the oral history was taken. Accessible audio no longer exists due to digital obsolescence. Both Hunt and the LA&M pamphlet address oral histories as a community imperative providing pragmatic and theoretical tools when interviewing the "bearers of tradition," to use Hunt's evocative phrasing. Because of the nature of the interview covering sexual history and aspects of leather culture, the LA&M pamphlet was especially helpful in navigating some of the more particular aspects of interviewing a leather person—for example, ensuring that you are dressed "appropriately" for the interview, with respect to the display of club colors. Marjorie Hunt, *Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, 2003); Leather Archives & Museum Oral History Project, *Guidelines for Doing Oral History Interviews for the LA&M* (Chicago: Leather Archives and Museum, n.d.), <http://leatherarchives.org/pdf_files/ohbrochure.pdf>.

4 For more on leather etymologies, see Margot Weiss, "Note on Terminology," in *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), vi–xii.

5 See the collected writings in Mark Thompson, ed., *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice* (Boston: Alyson, 1991). For more on the key pieces of leather dress, see Hal Fischer, *Gay Semiotics* (San Francisco: NFS Press, 1978) and Larry Townsend, *The Leatherman's Handbook* (New York: Other Traveller, 1972), 79–101.

FIGURE 2 Viola Johnson (center) wearing her leather pin sash during the 1993 March on Washington. Photograph courtesy Viola Johnson.

FIGURE 3 Viola Johnson's pin sash on display at Northeast Master/slave Conference in Silver Spring, Maryland, 2011. Photograph courtesy the author.

Johnson related the origins of her pin sash to me during an oral history taken in 2011 at the Northeast Master/slave Conference in Silver Spring, Maryland:

Literally, my mother had my badge sash from when I was a little girl. So I took it over to a leathermaker, and asked him if he would duplicate it in leather. Which he did. I had one made in black leather trimmed in grey. And my club color was put there, just as it's centered here, and I started putting the pins on a pin sash. Well, some people thought this was the greatest thing going, some people thought it was amusing. The old leathermen went [looks askance and pauses] "Ok!" because it was enough to honor them without trying to copy them. Only a few women crawled out of the old rat holes at the same time. We in many ways honored the men, we knew our boundaries, we were on the bar stools, we just left early enough so that they knew we knew the proper protocols.[6]

At once deeply related to gay male signifying forms and marking a distinct departure from them, Johnson's pin sash evinces the continual "process of differentiation" that historian Joan Scott values in the labors of history writing.[7] Leather sashes would become a hallmark of pageant events such as International Mr. Leather but not until the early 1980s, well after Johnson had hers made.[8] On her sash Johnson collects and displays a heterogeneous assortment of discrete objects that themselves are repositories of histories of desire and difference. The hundreds of pins on Johnson's sash tell divergent histories, some directly experienced by Johnson and some not, often recalling specific people, events, or places.

Johnson's leather sash, and the larger mobile library to which it belongs, suggests an alternative to more sedentary archives and libraries—bringing the history of community to various events across the nation. I argue that by examining particular pins on Johnson's sash—in particular, a button reading "The L.A.P.D. FREED the Slaves April 10, 1976"—and siting this analysis in dialogue with Johnson's performative caretaking (service) and the historical resources housed in her travelling leather library, the delineations of gendered and racialized difference within gay and lesbian leather communities comes into sharp focus. In doing so, I wish to spotlight what I consider to be the terms of Johnson's expansive leathersexuality—a sexuality that includes the constant upkeep, revising, archiving, and presenting of leather history through her own autobiographical lens.

In this regard Johnson's pin sash serves as a mnemonic for both a general sense of leather history, as well as her own subjective experiences as a black leatherwoman, whose life in leather has been defined by the politics of intersectional identities.[9] But if these gendered and racialized differences embittered Johnson, one would never know it, perhaps because, as she reiterated to me many times during our interview, gay leathermen facilitated her leather consciousness, activating feelings of inclusion and validation.

Pins are ubiquitous in leather communities as a specific form of visual communication.[10] The practice developed out of the motorcycle clubs of the 1950s, whose members disseminated their group's identifying *colors* (a broad umbrella term including cloth patches, metal pins, banners, emblems, and decorative arrangements of studs on the backs of white denim or leather vests).[11] Some colors are event-specific, commemorating a conference or a run, a days-long excursion filled with socializing, ceremony, and contest. Examining a leatherperson's pins also is a way to assess their history of contacts, travels, and affiliations. As historian Robert Bienvenue succinctly puts it, "in a crowd of leathermen, one does a certain amount of reading from their vests and jackets."[12]

6 All quotes from Viola Johnson in this article, unless otherwise noted, are credited: Johnson, oral history with author, September 4, 2011.

7 Joan W. Scott, "After History?," in *Schools of Thought: Twenty-Five Years of Interpretive Social Science*, ed. Joan W. Scott and Debra Keates (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 95.

8 Begun in 1979, the International Mr. Leather (IML) contest emerged out of similar pageants conducted in Los Angeles and elsewhere (such as *The Advocate*'s Groovy Guy Contest). Winners typically won leathergear and other prizes. Starting in 1981, the winner would be given a title sash (the earliest ones made out of ribbon material or thin leather), which by 1985 became body-length, studded objects. For more on IML and its history, see Joseph W. Bean, *International Mr. Leather: 25 Years of Champions* (Chicago: Leather Archives & Museum, 2004).

9 The notion of intersectionality was first developed by gender and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw and has since been extrapolated by many others. Crenshaw was focused on the legal case of a black woman who was subject to multiple and intersecting *oppressions*—and over time the term has come to be understood as the intersecting *identities* of particular subjects. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1 (1989), 139–67. For an overview as to more recent permutations of the term, see Patricia Hills Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016). For the term's applicability to fashion discourse, see Susan B. Kaiser, *Fashion and Culture Studies* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 72–74.

10 Gayle Rubin, "The Valley of the Kings: Leathermen in San Francisco, 1960–1990" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1994), 301.

11 Robert Bienvenu, "The Development of Sadomasochism as a Cultural Style in the Twentieth-Century United States" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1998), 225.

12 Bienvenu, "The Development of Sadomasochism."

The concept of service is one that, for Johnson, begins with her time in the Girl Scouts and is eventually reified and transformed through her coming into her own leathersexuality. Girl Scouts recognize service—to country and others—as a key component of their Promise. Johnson's autobiography, *To Love, To Obey, To Serve: Diary of an Old Guard Slave*, which details her experiences as a black lesbian submissive, makes clear that the concept of service, albeit transplanted into the context of leathersexuality, remains for her the important guiding life principle.[13] As a self-described slave, Johnson's concept of service spans from the scene of sexual enactment to her duties as the custodian of the Carter/Johnson Leather Library and leather history more generally.[14] Such a broad definition encompasses service to her mistresses and to a general leather public. Indeed, the *Girl Scout Handbook* has much to say on the concept of service:

Have you ever thought that service is proof that you are important? It is citizenship in action. Service shows that you have grown up enough to think of someone besides yourself. Service is your way of making a contribution to your community. Service is being able to help someone else because of the skills you have learned.[15]

Enjoining the concept of a participatory national citizenship with an appeal to aid others, the *Girl Scout Handbook* entreats its young charges to occupy the beating heart of liberal Democracy. Johnson's pin sash, sited within her mobile library/archive, exemplifies how such a call can be repurposed and perverted without losing the affective charge of care that ostensibly undergirds it. Containing over 9,000 books, papers, magazines, posters, clothing, photos, and sex toys, the Carter/Johnson Leather Library's (named for Johnson and her long-time partner Jill Carter, and from here on shortened to C/JLL) primary purpose is to tour to LGBTQ and pansexual leather events across the country and provide attendees with access to the "collective history of various communities who have chosen to live and love differently."[16] Running and displaying her trove of personal and collected materials are an extension of Johnson's long-standing mission of service to others, tied indubitably to an expression of her leathersexuality, and has the potential to reformat the library and archive as a site where the logics of organization, collection, and display can be subsumed into the expansive circuits of pleasure so central to the psychological and physical mechanics of leathersex. Unlike the Leather Archives & Museum in Chicago, Johnson's library and pin sash are much less formalized, more improvisatory, and most importantly, mobile.[17]

I spent the weekend of the 2011 Northeast Master/slave conference in the C/JLL. It was not my first time in Johnson's library (I had met her previously at the 2008 Beyond Vanilla/Living in Leather Conference in Dallas, Texas, when I was just beginning my PhD research). For the 2011 visit, I was focused on Johnson's collection and the operations of the C/JLL—part of this was to understand the library through using it. As I was searching through various books and periodicals, I became, by default, the witness to a variety of activities (more below), which gave me the conception of the C/JLL as a social space within the conference—one where the focus was not on play or demonstrating particular techniques of leathersex but on the history of pansexual leather communities.

One of Johnson's special skills is her making anyone visiting the C/JLL feel like the most important person in the room.[18] Many who know her call her "Mama Vi"—both on social media and in person. Reinforcing such kinship, Johnson responds in kind to many of her protégés, calling them her "kinklings." Currently, she is refashioning herself into "Grandmom," solidifying her position

13 Johnson, *To Love, To Obey, To Serve: Diary of an Old Guard Slave* (Fairfield, CT: Mystic Rose Books, 1999).

14 The beginnings of the C/JLL are recounted in Johnson's book; as she travels the nation judging leather contests, she notes how surprised she is with "how little the New Guard knows of its own history." Johnson, *To Love, To Obey, To Serve,* 328.

15 Girl Scouts of the USA, *Girl Scout Handbook*, 85–86.

16 "Homepage," Carter/Johnson Leather Library, accessed May 31, 2018, <http://www.leatherlibrary.org/home.html>.

17 The LA&M also travels to many of the events that the C/JLL does, but the LA&M's set-up when travelling is nowhere near as extensive as Johnson's.

18 This is a personal judgment, one based in my observations of folks entering, leaving, and browsing the stacks of Johnson's library.

as an elder within leather communities. When folks call Johnson "Mama" or "Grandmom," they collapse two related, yet distinct, operations of caregiving: the interpersonal and therapeutic support that Johnson offers and the care she gives the books, magazines, pins, and objects that enter into the collections of the C/JLL. Indeed, this is a collapse that is proposed by Johnson herself, as she lectures visitors about the care for historical artifacts and items (calling them "stuff"), as well as referring to herself variously as "Mom" and "Grandmom."

Book Burning? Never!: The Origins of the C/JLL

When Johnson brings the C/JLL to a leather event or conference, she usually gives an introduction speech at some point, and this event is open to all attendees. Slotted alongside demonstrations on knot-tying for bondage and spanking, Johnson's introduction recounts two comings out—her acceptance of her leathersexuality and her beginnings as a collector, librarian, and archivist.

The drive to collect and to thus preserve the visual and material culture of leather communities is fueled by Johnson's experience with libraries, most particularly her childhood public library in Roselle, New Jersey. She describes this place as a "safe space" and a home for social interactions:

When I was a kid, there was a little library in my town. The library in Roselle was open from nine to nine. Not only was it a wonderful space, but it was a safe space. We literally used to go to the library on Saturday, ride our bikes over at nine in the morning and not come home until well after dark. We all met there. We stayed there. We partied there, as long as the music wasn't loud, we could have our transistor radio. And if we needed something, a librarian went to get it. I once remember I was in fourth grade in Mrs. Henderson's class, and I had gone diving into Greek myths. A lot of them are written well over the head of a nine-year-old. I asked her for a copy of one of the myths, written so that I could understand it. Three weeks later it was there. It is what I have tried to do with [the C/JLL]. The intent is to recreate the library of my youth, kinky-style.

This gesture of generosity, perhaps embodied most clearly by the fond recounting of the librarian who fetches books that a patron most desires, is mitigated by another recollection of the Roselle Public Library:

History [is] my first love, black poetry [is] my second. So the preservation of history is very important to me, and it went from fact to anecdote because of one teacher that I had in eighth grade who said that history isn't a collection of dates, but a collection of people. Find out the story, and understand the meaning and the reason, and *then* you will understand history. By the end of that eighth-grade year they fired him. He talked about book burning and the danger of an idea. He made us read, in history class, *Farenheit 451* . . . as eighth graders! . . . It was one of the reasons he got fired. He made us think about the power of an idea, and how dangerous it was to have one face. . . . I can't remember if it was '69, '70, or '71, somewhere in there. There was a historical society that, with the permission of the library, burned *Huck Finn* . . . taking it out of the fact that for its time it showed an incredibly loving and understanding relationship. But "nigger" was in it. It's gotta go! Oooooh! The other one they burned was *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. And that safe space was defiled. . . . It was stuff that shouldn't have been read. Shouldn't be in a library, so let's destroy it. That safe space got defiled for me.

In this story Johnson keenly observes that the repression of ideas runs counter to liberal democracy, as emblematized by the material and symbolic violence of

book burning. Ray Bradbury's *Farenheit 451*, Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, and D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*—all contain, either in their narratives or their histories of reception, parallels to the cultural erasure that Johnson frets about: Bradbury's text literally concerns book burning and the continuing importance of history rendered through the possibility of traumatic loss; Twain's representations of blackness and the interracial intimacies of friendship between the book's two central characters have been a perennial flashpoint of censorship (one that Johnson perhaps reads too charitably); and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* also has been historically censored for its descriptions of non-normative, interclass sexual contact. It is this social and ideological performance of book burning that commences Johnson's drive to collect and preserve. The threat is not quite the death drive that Derrida sees as constitutive of the *mal d'archive* but something more communal—the ever-present possibility of cultural erasure.[19] Johnson's formative relationship to history, archive building, and books connects concepts of safety, trauma, and history to the public space of the library.

Yet the book burning outside the Roselle Public Library, an event that Johnson cites as a primary reason for her self-described "obsession" with collecting historic material, was not directly experienced by Johnson. Instead, Johnson encountered the charred remains of the book burning two days *after* the event and after a "four or five year" absence from Roselle. She was a witness not to the event itself but to its residue and the meanings in the wake of the event. Perhaps in the nexus between the material remains and the possibility of more book burnings in the future, Johnson was able to fully comprehend and appreciate the enormity of a certain kind of cultural loss. This was a key lesson she repeated often throughout our discussion of her pin sash and particular pins.

Like the book burning, many of the events commemorated on the pins attached to Johnson's pin sash were not experienced by Johnson directly. Instead, the pins were gifted to her or bought on online auction platforms such as eBay. Her experience of these events, in short, is transmitted second- or third-hand—and Johnson reperforms the role of the removed witness, or historian, as she relates these stories to others. The traumatic memory of the Roselle library book burning is foundational to the creation of the C/JLL, whose motto is "Never again landfill. Never again flames." Johnson directly correlates these words to a particular pin on her sash—an oblong horizontal red and gold pin, which simply reads "NEVER" (FIGURE 4). While Johnson was not able to recall the origin of the pin, she had clearly resignified it, enframing it within the mission of the C/JLL. Collecting, as a practice, is thus realized as the recuperation of losses, an important counterbalance to the resources disappeared through landfill, flame, or illness/the AIDS pandemic.

19 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

FIGURE 4 "NEVER" pin, n.d. Photograph courtesy Viola Johnson.

But if "never" indicates a negation at the heart of the archival project, the experience of being in the C/JLL is one of absolute affirmation. I have witnessed a variety of activities taking place in the C/JLL. For example, gifts are constantly given to Johnson, most commonly books and the occasional magazine, and, in this process, sometimes a trade of goods or services is negotiated. Once I witnessed a vesting ceremony in which a slave was formally welcomed and recognized as part of a Master's "family" through the gift of a studded vest.[20] That particular event had many of the trappings of a normative marriage ceremony—including a dedicated photographer and a ritual that ended with a kiss and clapping. Some visitors to the C/JLL recognize specific texts or people from their pasts and become visibly emotional—joyful, nostalgic, and/or mournful. Johnson once gave an especially stirring pep talk to a self-published author, looking him square in the eyes and telling him, "You don't get to fade away!" I have witnessed people gathered at reading tables, exchanging information, anecdotes, and tips on particular techniques. Dozens of leather authors have given talks and signed books for their public, often gifting Johnson a copy (if she did not already own one—and she usually did). Periodically, a pre-planning meeting for a panel convened around the C/JLL reading tables, and during the library's open hours, Johnson gave impromptu history lessons on a near-constant basis.

The C/JLL also is, importantly, a space set up and run by people of color. All the library assistants—members of Johnson's extended family, folks she calls sons and daughters—are people of color. In this regard, the C/JLL is an important intervention in leather communities whose coded language of Master/slave could serve to otherwise marginalize people of color; yet, within Johnson's library, people of color are the primary stewards of a rich array of historical source material and the very gatekeepers of knowledge. Each library assistant has a named role (e.g., "Robi, Prince of Pack-n-Load" or "Pulse, Technology Jinn"), but despite these ad hoc titles, everyone winds up doing a little of everything. Because the C/JLL is a mobile library, much of the packing, unpacking, set-up, space-planning, and off-site digitizing are performed collaboratively by Johnson with members of this extended family. The result is the creation of a multi-faceted and multi-functional space, one that affirms the place of women, people of color, and any visitor. The library mines the history of pansexual, gay, and lesbian leather communities as well as the affective relationships contemporary leathermen and women already have, or might yet have, to these materials. In this regard Johnson does not call herself a historian but rather a griot:

We opened the space as we always do, with an evocation to those whose stories we would share, to come and be with us. . . . In West African tradition, storyteller/griot is the second most honored person of the tribe. The griot/storyteller is charged with remembering the history of the tribe and sharing those stories with the generations to come.[21]

Johnson most clearly understands her role in the invocation of West African performatic figurations of the storyteller.[22] Her pin sash is one of the most significant objects in this regard, as one can point to nearly any pin on her sash, and this is enough for Johnson to launch into storytelling. Thus, the library and Johnson's personal effects—such as her pin sash—are not mute but rather animated by Johnson's presence, her ranconteurish delivery, and timing.

Memory and Material Culture: Reading Johnson's Pin Sash

During one introduction to the C/JLL, I watched as Johnson picked up her pin sash, heavy with hundreds of pins, to illustrate a particular point regarding memory and material

20 Many terms that have other, more generalized meanings are mobilized by those practicing leathersex. As part of the general terms for dyadic dominance and submission, "Master" and "slave" (with Master getting the honorific of a capital first letter) are rooted in the shared, asymmetrical cultural traumas of chattel slavery in the United States. Much more will be said about this at the end of the article. For many queer people, kinky people included, the concept of family is by necessity more expansive than a simply biologically determined definition of family (i.e., who you share genes with). Because of stigma, many queer people are exiled or otherwise psychologically cut off from their biological families—thus a language of "chosen family" is adopted as an alternative model of kinship. See Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) and Elizabeth Freeman, "Queer Belongings: Kinship Theory and Queer Theory," in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 295–314.

21 Johnson, "Floating World, A Personal Recollection," *The Carter/Johnson Leather Library Newsletter* 1, no. 8 (May 2012), <http://www.leatherlibrary.org/newsletter/Vol1/CJLL_Newsletter-VolIssue8.html>.

22 My use of the term "performatic" comes from performance studies scholar Diana Taylor's *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

culture. She gave the sash to a large, built leatherman, helping him to put it on. She continued without missing a beat:

Do me a favor, take a walk. Not only is he wearing my personal history, he is wearing evidence of the clubs that have called me friend. Clubs that don't exist anymore. He is wearing the personal friendship pins of men and women that have called me friend, many of whom are long since dead. He is the walking living embodiment of those memories, and in just walking around in my old stuff, he's doing what the Egyptians did: they said to speak the name of the dead is to let them live again. Every time it's touched, you touch a piece of your past and you share that story just by looking at it. That's what the shared experience is about. If I can give you no little gem other than a whole lot of good reading, which is what you're about to do, I need to make you understand the value of your own story. And part of that story is your stuff.

Johnson remembers the first pin that she gave as her own token—a small pin of the outline of the state of New Jersey. Gathered from tourist bureaus, Johnson appropriated this pin to denote herself, effectively collapsing her identity with where she grew up. In doing so, she was following established convention in leatherwear. Colors, patches, and pins often featured elements of flags, geographical outlines, or place-emblems. Pride of place, therefore, was worn on the vest, displayed on the banner, and reiterated in dozens of metal pins. The New Jersey state pin, if encountered by a person who did not know Johnson, might only be a generic signifier, indicating New Jersey broadly as a place. But to those who received the pin directly from Johnson, or who knew this to be Johnson's personal pin, the New Jersey pin would conjure Johnson specifically.

Johnson was not the only person to carry and give out a personal pin; it is a practice she learned from another leatherman. When I asked her about one of the smallest and most abstract pins on her sash (FIGURE 5), she recounted that it was one of the first pins she was ever given:

God, somewhere in the [early] 80s, as the group that is now Threshold . . . long before it was Society of Janus South, when it was The Group. I had been given a few pins and had learned to exchange—someone gives you one you exchange one. . . . So Jill [Carter] and I moved to California, and the man that had actually founded The Group was a man named Billy Larkin. Wonderful man, Billy was Bob Hope's lead writer. He wanted something that would tell the world who he was, without telling the world who he was, . . . he designed this little pin. It is a top, and . . . it is a tush [bum].

FIGURE 5 Personal pin of Billy Larkin, ca. 1979. Photograph courtesy Viola Johnson.

Like the New Jersey pin, Larkin's personal emblem—a child's top—comes to mean one thing to a non-leather viewer, yet in the presence of someone attuned to the language of leathersexuality, the gestalt of the form can be apprehended as a double-entendre on dominant and submissive sexual positions. By relying on the multiplicity of the form's meanings, Larkin could wear his personal leather pin to work, in Hope's writing room, and have his sexuality at once displayed and also occluded to most he encountered. Such visual codings in fashion, at once revealing and concealing, are a central feature of twentieth-century LGBTQ visual cultures.[23]

At the leather events that the C/JLL travels to, a small selection of pins and buttons are frequently displayed in a box adjacent to Johnson's sash. These pins and buttons are some of Johnson's most prized possessions, and they crowd the interior of this small, glass-fronted box. She tells me that they are gathered in this box, away from the sash, because she is afraid of losing them. Some have previously been on her sash and were taken off in the intervening years, and others have only been in the box. Near the bottom of the display box is a black button with white lettering that reads, "The L.A.P.D. FREED the Slaves April 10, 1976" (FIGURES 6 and 7). The button commemorates a raid conducted by the Los Angeles Police Department on a "slave auction" held in the leather-friendly Mark IV bathhouse. The event was one in which people voluntarily auctioned themselves off to be a slave-for-a-day to the highest bidder. The auction functioned as a fundraiser for *Drummer* magazine, a national gay leather publication, and the Gay Community Services Center. The button, produced in the wake of LAPD's raid, sends up the sensationalism of local and national news media coverage, extolling, tongue firmly in cheek, the police department's great deed. Like the book burnings in front of the Roselle Public Library, it is not an event that Johnson was present for, and yet it is one she recognizes as important—too important to be on the pin sash itself. During our interview, Johnson reiterated that the events of the Mark IV raid revealed the processes through which leather communities became organized in the face of bogus and egregious actions on the part of law enforcement. She further indicated that the response to the Mark IV raid was prototypical for subsequent responses mobilized in the 1980s by UK

23 Valerie Steele, ed., *A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

FIGURE 6 Viola Johnson's pin box on display at NorthEast Master/slave Conference in Silver Spring, Maryland, 2011. Photograph courtesy of the author.

FIGURE 7 "The L.A.P.D. FREED the Slaves" button, 1976. Photograph courtesy the author.

pansexual leather communities in the wake of Operation Spanner, a large-scale bust of leatherfolks that resulted in the criminalization of sadomasochistic practice.[24]

I take this button to be emblematic, in that it reveals the stakes of the histories that Johnson collects, displays, and interprets on her body and in the C/JLL because the event it references revolves around the site where costuming and the slippery language of leather-sexuality coincide. The event to which the button refers also is emblematic in that it illustrates how community organizers—editors, clergy, parade directors, filmmakers, and artists—helped to define the visual terms by which leather communities would be seen and discussed, thereby situating them within larger LGBTQ, municipal, and national conversations. These representations often circle around contested meanings attached to dress, leveling critiques in sartorial languages of domination and submission—both in terms of the visual vocabulary of leathersexuality (chains and leather harnesses) as well as in the visual language of power central to a state enacting violence against LGBTQ leatherfolks (handcuffs and chains).

An Auction—An Emancipation

Coordinating the research conducted in the C/JLL with our discussion of the Mark IV raid button evinces the kind of reading that can occur with nearly any pin on Johnson's pin sash. In doing so, I hope to enter into the space of the storyteller/griot/history writer myself, recalling the outlines of a particular historical event, while also illuminating the subjective terms under which this event is understood within Johnson's biography and larger collecting, archiving, and writing practices.

The Mark IV, like many other bathhouses in Los Angeles and San Francisco, was essentially a private club. Those who entered paid a small fee for a membership, a locker or room, and a towel and were given access to the sauna and pool area, as well as rows of small rooms for fucking.[25] However, unlike other contemporaneous bathhouses, the Mark IV also maintained a dungeon and provided leather restraints (for an extra fee) to those patrons who required them. This made the Mark IV baths available to some of the sexual needs of the leathermen.

Sometimes the Mark IV baths played host to fundraising events for organizations such as the Gay Community Service Center or the Homophile Effort for Legal Protection (HELP). Institutions such as HELP were necessary because the LAPD, then under the management of Police Chief Ed Davis, was notorious for targeting gays and lesbians in public, semi-public, and private settings. A virulently homophobic man, Davis believed that gay people could transmit their gay germs to others, infecting them

24 For more on Operation Spanner, see "The History of the Spanner Case," accessed May 31, 2018, <http://www.spannertrust.org/documents/spannerhistory.asp>; Jeffrey Weeks, *Invented Moralities: Sexual Values in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1995); and William N. Eskridge Jr., *Gaylaw: Challenging the Apartheid of the Closet* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

25 In one of the continuing ironies of working on minority and stigmatized sexual populations who, consequently, are under ongoing surveillance, the most complete description of the bathhouse comes from the LAPD press release regarding the Mark IV raid: "Those attending were admitted to the Mark IV by presenting their ticket and being buzzed through two electronically controlled doors. Inside was a complex of rooms. There were 32 small cubicles, each containing a mattress. These locked from the inside, and many were occupied by two nude males. There was a larger room with mattresses on the floor to accommodate groups of men. A jail/dungeon occupied a portion of the premises. It was apparent that this facility was not hastily constructed for this event. It consisted of jaillike [sic] bars and had chains and handcuffs attached to the walls. On the floor was an apparatus commonly known as stocks. It was hinged and contained sufficient holes to contain four ankles, four wrists, and one head." Los Angeles Police Department, Press Release, April 11, 1976, 1–2. I use the word "fucking" because this is the preferred term within the community I am discussing. Using more polite phrasing ("sex" or "love-making") flattens the texture of this term, which is meant to poke propriety and index a certain raunchiness. Within leather communities "fucking" is used to describe a variety of practices—like "leather." I think it is important to include such language in my analysis here because to do otherwise is to insist that an analysis of leather communities submit to standards of verbal/discursive morality that do not hold within those communities—arguably contributing to those communities continuing stigmatization and occlusion from academic study.

with homosexuality.[26] In a response to an invitation to participate in the 1975 Christopher Street West Parade, Davis wrote to the organization's president: "As you no doubt expected, I am declining your invitation to participate in the celebration of 'GAY PRIDE WEEK. . . . I would much rather celebrate 'GAY CONVERSION WEEK.'"[27] Under Davis's tenure, the vice squad (a specialized unit of undercover cops enforcing moral/vice laws) zealously targeted gays, lesbians, leatherfolks, sex workers of all genders and orientations, as well as drug dealers. Such behavior earned him the nickname Crazy Ed amongst these targeted communities.[28]

On the evening of the slave auction, the LAPD officially—according to police testimony—assembled a team of sixty-five police and vice-squad officers to conduct the raid, but some of those present at the raid claimed (and later even the police department acknowledged) that the count approached closer to 105–108 policemen.[29] The LAPD set up command posts in a nearby park, on the roof of a neighboring building, and in a van on street level. At least four vice officers roamed inside the event, outfitted with leather gear rented from the costume department of Universal Studios.[30] That police relied on Hollywood costume departments to go undercover is indicative of both their resourcefulness and the movie studio's tacit complicity in their activities. One wonders what items, exactly, the police rented, and what or how much they knew about leather dress. A briefing of all personnel was held at 6 p.m. on April 10, 1976, and a quota of forty to fifty arrestees was established. The LAPD notified local news media of the impending raid and brought along a commercial photographer to document it. The raid included two buses to transport those arrested and two helicopters. Some reports maintain that arrestees were to be charged in accordance with nineteenth-century slavery laws, when essentially those arrested were charged with "pandering"—a law deployed by vice officers when targeting sex workers. Of the initial forty detained, only four were actually charged with pandering: John Embry (publisher of *Drummer*), Jeanne Barney (editor of *Drummer*), Val Martin (a porn star who served as emcee at the auction), and Doug Holliday.[31] Entrapment was a common procedure used by vice officers, and the Mark IV raid was not singular in this regard.[32] Police handcuffed the forty who they chose to arrest with nylon handcuffs, then a new carceral technology intended for riots, and paraded the arrested men and woman in front of television and newspaper media, ostensibly to humiliate and out those arrested. All of those detained during the raid sat in the police bus while the LAPD went through the baths, confiscating sex toys and paraphernalia. One Associated Press photograph shows a Los Angeles policeman holding shackles, as though they were foreign to his own profession.

In the following days, news stories of the Mark IV raid appeared on the front pages of local and national news outlets. Papers in California, New York, Texas, and Idaho all reported the event.[33] The *Orange County Register*, regarded as a conservative paper sympathetic to the motives of Police Chief Ed Davis's policies and politics, screamed the headline "Police Free Gay 'Slaves.'"[34] A month later *Drummer*'s cover featured the headline "Drummer goes to a Slave Auction" (FIGURE 8). A representation of the button reading "The L.A.P.D. Freed the Slaves, April 10, 1976" can be found inside the "o" of the word "Auction" in that headline. Inside, an article written by *Drummer*'s publisher, Embry, detailed the events of the night.[35] Further into the magazine, a page of cartoons drew attention and poked fun at the overlap of signs related to incarceration, slavery, and the LAPD. One of these cartoons shows two leathermen at an MGM Studio auction (FIGURE 9). The man at the information booth looks nervously at the two leather-clad men and iterates that no slaves from Ben-Hur are available—the joke being that they showed up to the wrong auction. Although the cartoon has no explicit references to the Mark IV, its inclusion speaks obliquely to differing deployments of slavery, as well as the Universal Studios costume department where LAPD officers outfitted themselves in preparation for the raid.

26 Susan Fraker and John Barnes, "California: Of Human Bondage," *Newsweek*, April 26, 1976, 35.

27 E. M. Davis (LAPD Chief of Police), letter to Sharon Cornelison (President, Christopher Street West Association), May 23, 1975, in "Christopher Street West Gay Pride Celebration," event program, 1976, ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives at the University of Southern California Libraries.

28 "'Free the Slaves' Benefit Show & Dance & Slave Auction," [event program] April 23, 1976, ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, Pat Rocco Collection.

29 "107 Officers Used in Mark IV Raid, Police Papers Reveal," *NewsWest*, June 25, 1976, 3.

30 "107 Officers Used in Mark IV Raid."

31 This felony charge eventually leveled against the defendants was connected to prostitution, rather than outdated laws on slavery.

32 James Spada, "I was a Gay Vice Cop," *Drummer* 2, no. 13 (1977), 6–8.

33 Fraker and Barnes, "California: Of Human Bondage," 35; "Mark IV Raid Receives Wide News Coverage Across Nation," *NewsWest*, April 30, 1976.

34 An image of *The Register* appears in John Embry, "Drummer Goes to a Slave Auction," *Drummer* 1, no. 6 (1976), 12–14.

35 Embry, "Drummer Goes to a Slave Auction."

FIGURE 8 The "L.A.P.D. Freed the Slaves" button can be seen in reproduction at the lower right. *Drummer* [cover] 1, no. 6, May/June 1976.

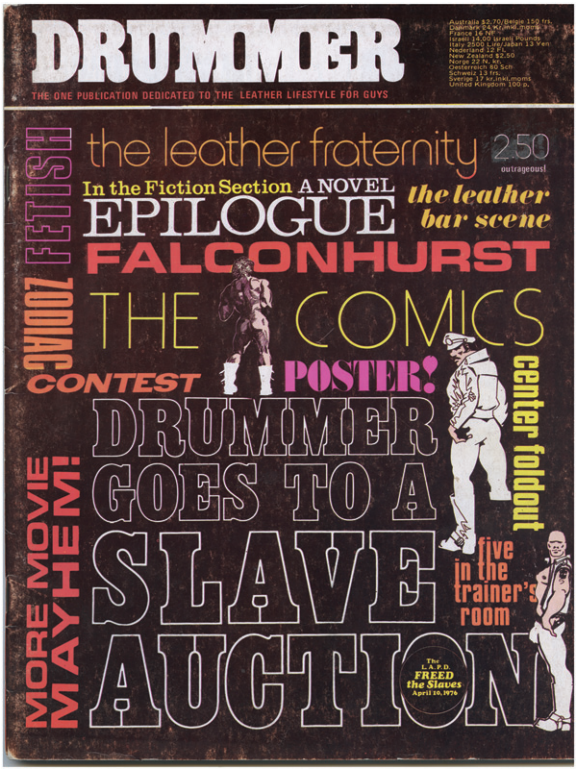
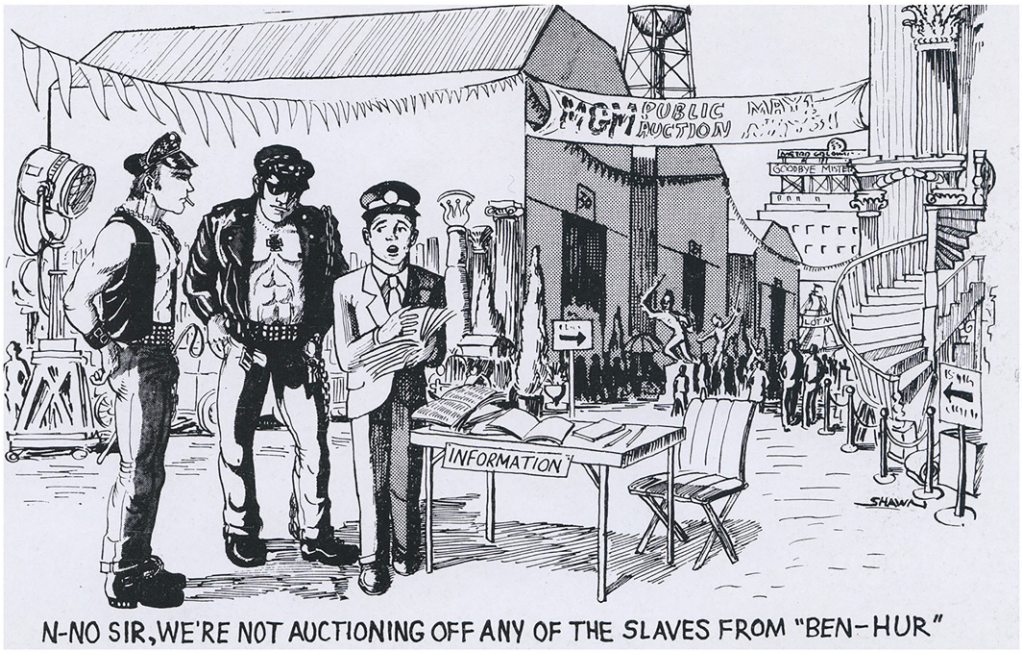


FIGURE 9 Shawn (Sean), "MGM Auction", *Drummer*, 1, no. 6, May/June 1976.



In the coming months, *Drummer* featured more cartoons that referenced the Mark IV raids, caustically reflecting the core issues of police power and brutality in marked opposition to consensual sadomasochistic practice and fashion. One depicts a leatherman in his home, which was being raided by two members of the LAPD. He informs them that just as they have been keeping files on him—archly pointing to the surveillance tactics of the LAPD—so, too, has he been keeping his own archive. Three uniforms hang in his closet, police uniforms from New York and Los Angeles, as well as an SS uniform. Besides acknowledging a persistent fetish within leathersex's signifying economy (uniforms of all kinds, including Nazi uniforms), the association of the repressive tactics of the LAPD with the genocidal behaviors of Nazis provides a forceful critique of authority. In another issue, *Drummer* published an interview with a gay vice officer, pairing that story with a how-to uniform guide, including locations where LAPD gear and clothing could be purchased.

Less than two weeks after the Mark IV raid, a second slave auction was held to raise money to pay for the legal fees accrued as a result of the raid. Pat Rocco emceed the event, along with Sharon Cornelison, president of the Christopher Street West parade. Trouper's Hall, a small venue used for community musicals and revues, hosted the event, which included an opening dance number entitled "Free the Slaves" and a skit called "Crazy Ed Goes to the Baths" (featuring "forty two [sic] faggots and a drag queen").[36] Some of the people directly involved in the legal proceedings defending the four arrested agreed to be auctioned off. Many of these people were not leathermen and so were participating in a form of sociality that was otherwise unfamiliar to them. Al Gordon, for example, who was chief legal counsel, and who, although straight, was a leading pro-bono lawyer to LA's gay community, was auctioned off with a large "slave" sign placed around his neck (he was purchased by his wife).[37] The Reverend Troy Perry, founder and leader of Metropolitan Community Church, hanged an effigy of Ed Davis in a performative exorcism of bigotry. Transgender activist Christine Jorgensen gave a rousing speech and wore a "Free the Slaves" button. Those who chose to be auctioned off arrived on stage through a "prison door" manned by a leatherwoman in police uniform, making direct reference to the incarceration of those arrested. Unlike the participants of the initial Mark IV slave auction, many of the people who produced and attended the Trouper's Hall slave auction were not leather community members.[38] They, however, played a vital role in formulating the leather community's response to the Mark IV raid, and their participation represents an alliance (even if only temporary) between leather communities and broader gay and lesbian political communities.[39]

The LAPD did not raid this second slave auction, partly because within the Los Angeles press the Mark IV raid had become a source of public outrage and ridicule. Letters sent to the editor of the *Los Angeles Times* by Angelinos expressed contempt for Davis's gross waste of time, energy, and money (estimated at $150,000) on the raid.[40] Some who complained wrote about a rape and murder that happened only blocks away from the site of the Mark IV raid while the police were busy arresting consenting adults.

Seen in this context, Johnson's "L.A.P.D. Freed the Slaves" button indicts the raiders, rather than promoting the aims of the raid. Another button and T-shirt produced at the same time reversed the joke, its text more succinct—"Free the Slaves"—demanding the LAPD free those who they had arrested. These two messages, "The L.A.P.D. Freed the Slaves," and "Free the Slaves," while seemingly contradictory, carry within them an implicit valuation of the otherwise burdensome language of chattel slavery. Produced specifically for the Trouper's Hall slave auction, these buttons and shirts were worn consistently by those present at the Mark IV arraignments and trials. Such accessories showed visible support for the release of the four persons ultimately tried and silently made fun of authority on authority's own turf, thereby structuring a community response around the first Mark IV slave auction.

Buttons like the one Johnson owns also were worn by supporters that year during an impromptu performance at the 1976 Gay Freedom Day Parade, briefly captured on film by director Pat Rocco for his documentary *We Were There* (1976). In this performative restaging of the Mark IV arrest, Barney and another man are cuffed and chained to two

36 "'Free the Slaves,'" [event program].

37 Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 217–18.

38 Lee Young, "Gay 'Spirit' Invoked by Raid, Court Action," *NewsWest*, April 30, 1976.

39 This was not an across-the-board response from gay/lesbian political communities—as one column in *Drummer* magazine discusses, "The Gay Rights chapter of the ACLU chose not to support the Mark IV case." It also condemns *The Advocate*, the direct competitor of *Drummer* publisher Embry's mainstream gay magazine, *The Alternate*, for using "the bust to divide and deride." "In Passing," *Drummer* 3, no. 20 (1977), 98.

40 "In Passing," *Drummer* 2, no. 15 (1977), 82; Herbert E Selwyn, et al., "Letters to the Times: Police Arrests at 'Slave Auction,'" *Los Angeles Times*, April 16, 1976.

LAPD-uniformed men, who are walking them down the street. Every few feet, the four performers stop, and the two policemen make out to the applause of those watching, puncturing the illusion a "perp walk" is taking place. Staged in front of a broader gay and lesbian community, but, perhaps more importantly, the actual LAPD security forces holding the sidelines of the parade, this performance powerfully reformulated abusive state-power relationships vis-à-vis the signifying sexual economy of leathersex, while also wryly suggesting that the LAPD's own form of sexual gratification is, in reality, the unwilling and wrongful imprisonment of others.

Race Play and Freedom

As a person of color and one who is invested in the terminologies of servitude and slavery—in both leather and black poetic contexts, the display of the button could be laden with potentially conflicting meanings for Johnson. Yet she privileges its intent to indict wrongful action on the part of the LAPD, and, in doing so, she also refuses to minimize slave auctions as an historical and shared cultural trauma.[41] Johnson has been a vocal proponent of the ways that terminologies of slavery can be productively negotiated within leather communities and particularly by people of color in submissive roles. In a column for *Black Leather in Color*, a magazine produced by and for leatherfolks of color, Johnson describes her own relationship to the terminology of slavery:

When I first tried to write this article I was having a lot of trouble with it. Sure my Mistress and I play with ethnic stereotypes. At times we don't just play with them, we stomp all over them. . . . I started to talk about the incredible S.S. fantasy that [Mistress] Mir and I had played out, and the conversation came to a screeching halt. My friends suddenly turned into the Sex Police. The berating barrage of "How could you actually do that," and "You must be kidding" coupled with "Are you nuts. Don't you have more pride than that?" was more than I could take.

I LOST IT!!!

What about all the other ethnocentric games we play? Even cop and speeder take on ethnic connotations if the fantasy place is in the south. [42]

Johnson's point here, in part, is that racial/ethnic play is more pervasive than in scenes where extreme race play seems more obvious, as she surmises that cop/speeder role-play could potentially be more racially charged in the present moment than US and global chattel slavery.

While it may not be surprising that a magazine dedicated to central concerns and erotic lives of leatherfolks of color would delve so deeply, and with such nuance, into this topic, it is also sadly unsurprising that leaders from the national publication of note for gay leatherfolks, *Drummer*, and those who attended the first slave auction, who were largely white, were reluctant to address the relationship of leather language of mastery and servitude to the history of chattel slavery. Despite their silence in directly addressing this topic, the traces of these conversations sometimes can be found in the pages of *Drummer*. In the initial reporting on the Mark IV raid for *Drummer* magazine, Embry notes that the money raised by the slave auction could be funneled to a charity of the slave's choosing, provided, "that it be a GAY charity—none of this 'Toys for Tots' shit that the Uncle Toms of the Leather crowd seem to be so fond of."[43] Making reference to a particularly racist, and romanticized, white projection of black slaves, Embry's comment belies what he otherwise failed to address with any criticality in his publication. Here Embry uses a racist taxonomy to pejoratively call out what would later be termed "homonormative" practices by gay leathermen.

Johnson's button clarifies a yawning absence regarding a critical race consciousness in the broader literature of leathersexuality, while also performing a rebuke of state-sanctioned violence and carceral authority. Paired with Johnson's own writings on the use of the terms of slavery in leathersex, the button becomes more than a mnemonic—a Proustian madeleine sheathed in leather. Instead, it speaks to the conditions of freedom promised under

41 For more on slave auctions and cultural trauma, see Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure*.

42 Johnson, "The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name: Playing With and Against Racial Stereotypes," *Black Leather in Color* (1994), 8–9. *Black Leather in Color* had a distribution of 3,000 in eighteen markets, ten "with the largest people of color demographics." "Fact Sheet," June 1, 1994, Collections of The Leather Archives & Museum. Johnson was a somewhat regular contributor to *Black Leather in Color*, and the magazine often directly addressed the language of slavery that sometimes accompanies leathersex.

43 Embry, "Drummer Goes to a Slave Auction," 12; The Kiwi Collective, "Race and Sex. . . . Who's Panicking?" *Black Leather in Color* (Fall/Winter 2000), 25–26.

liberal democracy and the many ways in which this freedom has been historically denied to sexual and racialized minorities.

The pin sash is a collection of people, to paraphrase Johnson's eighth-grade teacher, and places, and events. In displaying it, she is serving others—a radical intimacy of empowerment and relation. Johnson and her pin sash are mutually informing, creating a dynamic filled with extemporaneous riffing, well-rehearsed storytelling, and moments of profound silence, mourning, and amnesia. Johnson and her sash work in concert with one another, as well as upon one another. Within the context of the C/JLL, these moments of intimacy have the capacity to shift lived worlds and our notions of history in a manner that might not happen otherwise in a more official, sedentary archive or museum. One may be able to easily "read" Johnson through her pin sash, and the pin sash and the myriad objects fastened to it also have shaped Johnson's own leather consciousness. I have only discussed one of these pins/buttons in great detail, but Johnson's pin sash is ultimately a garment with multiple centers, with an organization that reflects the vying and multiple places where leather history might be enacted and understood.