

DREAD'S

IN 1811, SLAVES IN LOUISIANA STAGED THE LARGEST PLANTATION UPRISING IN U.S. HISTORY.

ARTIST **DREAD SCOTT** IS MOUNTING A PROVOCATIVE REENACTMENT TO ASK THE QUESTION: *WHAT IF THOSE REVOLUTIONARIES HAD SUCCEEDED?*

REBELLION

By JULIAN LUCAS

On a cloudy March afternoon, I climbed a levee in Montz, Louisiana, with the artist Dread Scott. The wind was whipping, and muddy water streamed through an open dam into the Bonnet Carré Spillway. The area, once home to sprawling riverfront plantations, is now dedicated to wildlife and recreation. But the day we visited, its hiking trails, off-road-vehicle courses, and historic cemeteries were under water. The crowns of submerged cypresses swayed in the current; across the spillway, the sprawl of Shell's Norco oil refinery floated like a mirage. A sign on the barbed wire fence read, "No Trespassing, U.S. Government Property."

Bonnet Carré hardly resembles the decorous greenswards of Gettysburg or Lexington. But this November, once its waters recede, Scott will lead some 500 costumed rebels over the spillway on foot and horseback in a reenactment of America's largest-ever slave revolt. Chanting "On to New Orleans" and "Freedom or death," they will retrace the little-known German Coast uprising of 1811 in a 26-mile march east along the Mississippi River, brandishing axes, muskets,

FREE THINKER

Dread Scott, photographed in Brooklyn. The artist derives his professional name from the 1857 Dred Scott decision, which ruled that black people were not U.S. citizens.



blunderbusses, and cane knives as they cut an anachronistic swath through the nearby industrial towns.

With a budget of more than \$1 million, the event promises an arresting combination of scope and spontaneity—part Cecil B. DeMille extravaganza, part flash mob. Beating drums, waving banners, and singing warlike anthems in English and Creole, the rebels will grow in number as they proceed, trailed by spectators and the film crew of Ghanaian-born British video artist John Akomfrah. The next morning, after a day's march and a late-night skirmish with volunteer U.S. dragoons, the procession will arrive in New Orleans, assembling in historic Congo Square. There, joined by musicians, Scott's Army of the Enslaved will celebrate a victory that, although it never was, might have changed history's course.

"The legacy of slavery," Dread Scott told me, "should be in the way and causing trouble." We were having coffee in the Brooklyn neighborhood where he lives with his wife, Jenny Polak, a fellow artist. Scott, unerringly polite but refreshingly profane, was brainstorming replacements for America's Confederate monuments. For New Orleans's Lee

Circle, where the rebel general's likeness came down in 2017, he suggested a giant statue of Toussaint Louverture, leader of the Haitian Revolution. Better still, Scott said, to leave Lee fallen in the street, blocking traffic for the next 15 years.

Scott, 54, is immediately convincing as canny rebel mastermind. Round spectacles and silvering frohawk plume accentuate his vaguely avian alertness—he is careful in conversation, but also quick, daring, and direct. Avowedly communist, Scott describes his work as "revolutionary art to propel history forward." Since the 1980s, his performances and installations have transformed familiar public spaces into assaultive mirrors of American injustice.

To protest the Patriot Act, he stocked public library shelves in Ithaca, New York, with "quarantined" books in Tyvek bags ostensibly sealed by the Department of Homeland Security. To condemn the fraud behind the 2008 financial crisis, he took to Wall Street with \$250 in cash and a Zippo lighter for a performance called *Money to Burn*, drawing amusement, derision, admonishment, and, ultimately, the NYPD.

For decades, police brutality has been central to Scott's art practice. His 1998 installation, *The Blue Wall of Violence*,

now on display at Space One Eleven in Birmingham, Alabama, consists of six silhouette targets with attached arm casts, each holding an innocuous object (a squeegee, a candy bar) that police shooters claimed to have mistaken for guns. Just in front of them, mechanized nightsticks intermittently strike a hollow coffin.

One of the most recognizable artworks of the Black Lives Matter era is the 2015 flag that Scott created in response to the killing of Walter Scott, fatally shot by a police officer during a routine traffic stop in South Carolina. Replicating a vintage banner from the NAACP's anti-lynching campaign, it updates the original—"A Man Was Lynched Yesterday"—with two words: "By Police." The next year, Scott raised the flag over New York's Jack Shainman Gallery amid protests over the killings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile. Its frank declaration captured the moment's bitter mix of outrage, exhaustion, and resolve. In 2017, the flag was acquired by the Whitney Museum of American Art.

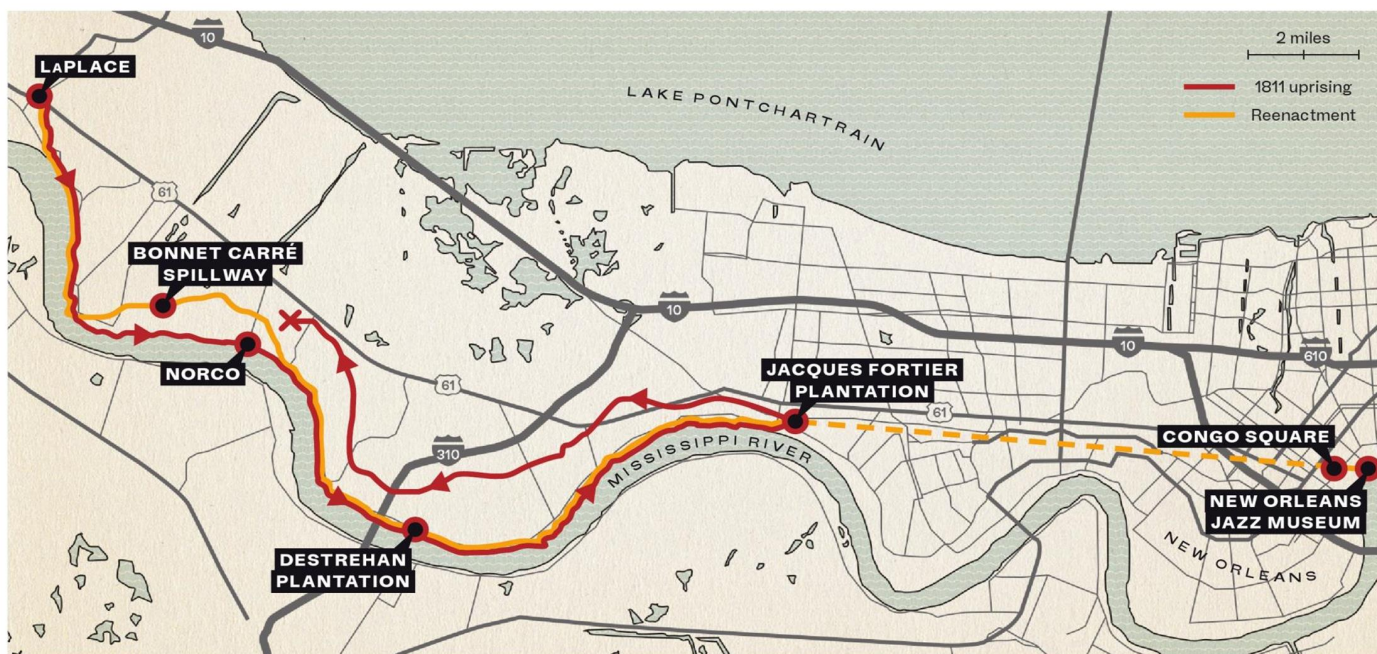
Slave Rebellion Reenactment is poised to be even more iconic. If it's just an "epic spectacle," Scott told me, "I'm good. If the people embodying this history have walked in the shoes of their ancestors, and thought about freedom and emancipation in new ways, that's enough." But in a state that has historically imprisoned more of its population than any other; a nation where today's family separations echo those at yesterday's slave auctions; and a world sleepwalking toward climate extinction, Scott also wants to revive the daring imagination of those who in January 1811 had, as he puts it, "the most radical vision of freedom on the North American continent."

Before taking his professional name—a one-letter subversion of the 1857 Dred Scott decision, which ruled that black people "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect"—Scott Tyler grew up in a middle-class Chicago family, playing *Dungeons & Dragons* and performing as a guitarist in a punk band, Fudge Tunnel. "I was fucking talentless," he said. But it didn't matter; it was punk. He was politicized early by the nuclear brinkmanship of the 1980s, the poverty and police repression endured by black communities on Chicago's South Side, and the sense of growing up in a society with no regard for his future.



TRUE COLORS
Scott's 1988 Chicago artwork, *What Is the Proper Way to Display a US Flag?*, caused an uproar.

PAGE 126: ARTWORK © DREAD SCOTT. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST. PAGE 127: MAP BY JUSTIN PATRICK LONG. PAGES 128-29: ILLUSTRATIONS BY MONIKA GRIST-WERNER. COSTUME DESIGN BY ALISON L. PARKER (REENACTMENTS). ARTWORKS FROM THE COSTUME COUNCIL FUND (COSTUMES DE DIFFÉRENTS PAYS, "NÈGRES DE ST. DOMINGUE SE BATTANT AU BÂTON"). THE LOUISIANA STATE MUSEUM, NEW ORLEANS (L'AVEAU). THE YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART, PAUL WELLON COLLECTION (SEAMSTRESSES, ST. KITTS, CARRIBEAN)



TWO ROADS CONVERGE

This fall, costumed reenactors will retrace the route that rebel slaves took during the German Coast uprising of 1811. The projected path of the two-day march (yellow) will roughly follow the original (red); Scott's volunteers, possibly with spectators in tow, plan to continue on to New Orleans.

Scott likes to say that if Ronald Reagan made him a communist, Malcolm X and Chairman Mao made him a reader. Taking pictures at punk shows and learning to develop film in the darkroom of his father, a photographer, Scott discovered a visual talent that carried him to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC). Though drawn to public art through the murals of Diego Rivera and Black Arts Movement painters like William Walker, Scott found an outlet for his burgeoning radicalism in performance art and installations.

As a 24-year-old student, he exhibited *What Is the Proper Way to Display a US Flag?* at SAIC, draping a five-foot American flag across the floor under a photomontage about patriotism and protest. In order to answer the title question in a ledger, visitors had to decide whether or not to stand on the flag. Commenters filled more than 400 pages. But words were insufficient to contain the breadth and intensity of the reaction. While some Vietnam veterans supported the work, many others picketed, chanting, "The flag and the artist, hang them both high!" Scott and his mother received death threats. A unanimous United States Senate proposed anti-desecration legislation—later

invalidated by a Supreme Court decision to which Scott was party—with specific reference to the artist's work. The president, George H.W. Bush, offered a short review that the artist now features on his website: "Disgraceful."

For Scott, the hateful responses served a didactic purpose. The work aimed to offend, but aggrieved nationalists were not his audience; he was speaking to the casually patriotic, those reflexively attached, he believes, to an ideology they failed to scrutinize. What worthwhile values could America's "sacred symbol" represent if opening it to criticism elicited racial slurs and threats of lynching?

The exhibition was also an expression of solidarity with victims of state power. (At the time of the show, Chicago's South Side was being terrorized by Jon Burge, commander of a police precinct where hundreds of false confessions were extracted through torture.) Defying a police department threat to bring felony charges against anyone who set foot on the flag, victims of law enforcement brutality wrote some of the most supportive comments. "If black people had not been willing to offend," the artist told reporters, "we'd still be slaves today."

When Scott decided to reenact a slave rebellion, he had Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey in mind. Like most Americans, he had never heard of the 1811 uprising that erupted on the young country's frontier. The rebellion united a multinational group of enslaved people from Louisiana, the French Caribbean, and West African polities like Asante and Kongo against shared oppression. This motley yet determined force drove east along the Mississippi toward New Orleans, then a walled territorial capital where blacks outnumbered whites, runaway Maroons and hostile Spaniards haunted the borderland bayous, and the French Creole citizenry distrusted their greenhorn American governor. Led by two Africans, Kook and Quamana, and an enslaved overseer from Saint Domingue named Charles Deslondes, the insurgents toppled plantations like dominoes; as whites fled en masse to the capital, they left their land defenseless. It cannot be proved that this force planned to abolish slavery, as had their Haitian predecessors. But the historian Vincent Brown, a Harvard scholar who has written extensively on slave rebellions, told me it would be "a dereliction of historical duty" not to imagine their unrecorded aims.

Armed planters and American dragoons massacred the rebels, driving those they couldn't capture or kill into the swamps. One year later, Louisiana joined the union, opening the Mississippi River Basin to a century of plantation slavery and genocidal conquest. By order of the governor, the rebels were tried and executed on the plantations they'd overthrown. Their decapitated heads were displayed on pikes along River Road.

Scott and I drove this route, beginning where the revolt first struck in present-day LaPlace in St. John the Baptist Parish. In 1811, the area was a mosaic of sugar plantations—long, narrow properties with mansions fronting the Mississippi and fields that stretched back to the bayous near Lake Pontchartrain. Now known as “cancer alley,” it is a patchwork of industrial towns known for poverty and pollution, where residents, many of whom are descendants of enslaved sugar workers, suffer from some of the highest rates of cancer in the country.

When Scott first visited the area, he didn't know what to expect. The drive from New Orleans passes over picturesque wetlands, but the towns are hardly daguerreotypes of the gallant South. We passed refinery drums, mobile homes beached on cinder blocks, and gated subdivisions. Our first stop was the city's only tribute to the rebellion—a single phrase (“major 1811 slave uprising organized here”) on a plaque commemorating the old Woodland Plantation, not far from a Domino's Pizza.

The few public reminders of the antebellum era take the form of tours at refurbished plantations. Visitors to estates like Destrehan, one of the plantations where the rebels were tried and executed, vicariously indulge in the sweet life of planter aristocrats. Destrehan does have a small exhibit acknowledging the uprising—arguably the most important event in the property's history—but it is housed in an outbuilding and omitted from the main tour. The focus is on period ambience, the furniture, clothes, and intimate passions of lordly patriarchs whom docents often refer to with avuncular affection. Mannequins, permanently engrossed in their domestic labors, are the most prominent representations of the enslaved. In 2015, domestic terrorist Dylann Roof took selfies with a similar display months before he shot nine black congregants at the Emanuel A.M.E. church in Charleston, South Carolina.

“Just imagine going to Auschwitz and hearing about the commandant and his difficulties,” Scott said as we passed the San Francisco Plantation, now a tourist attraction, in Garyville. “Nobody would accept that.” The big house sits squarely in the middle of an immense Marathon refinery. San Francisco, like many of the area's extant plantations, was renovated by big oil, and today its website advertises availability for weddings: “Imagine stepping back in time when sugarcane was king, and money didn't matter.”

If plantation tours screen the past behind a *cordon sanitaire*, Scott hopes the reenactment's route will highlight the disquieting continuity between Louisiana's plantation past and its petrochemical present. Downriver from LaPlace, we arrived in Norco, a company town largely developed by Royal Dutch Shell. In 1953, the oil giant displaced hundreds of black sharecroppers from their homes to clear the way for a refinery and a chemical plant. They were resettled on cheap land along the perimeter of the facility, a Louisiana Mordor of docks, drums, and catalytic cracking towers that dwarfs the surrounding residential blocks. Where captive laborers once boiled sugarcane under the lash, contemporary residents of “fenceline” communities endure noxious chemical emissions, deadly explosions, periodically unbreathable air, and declining real-estate prices. Surveying nearby houses and churches, Scott said that he'd like his work to communicate a message to residents: “The rebels of 1811 would have been fighting for people like you.”

Some of them, Scott hopes, will join him. *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* is not only an artwork but an experiment in social choreography. He envisions the march wending through work sites and residential neighborhoods like a parade, with onlookers invited to join, in the style of a New Orleans second line.

Many of the 1811 rebels were strangers, forced to organize in secret. Emulating their approach, Scott isn't specifically enlisting actors or hobbyists for his Army of the Enslaved—though he intends to pay every participant an honorarium. Instead, he has launched a clandestine recruitment process mirroring the original. His core cadre includes professors, poets, arts workers, and student activists. They will in turn canvass others, building a network that will fully

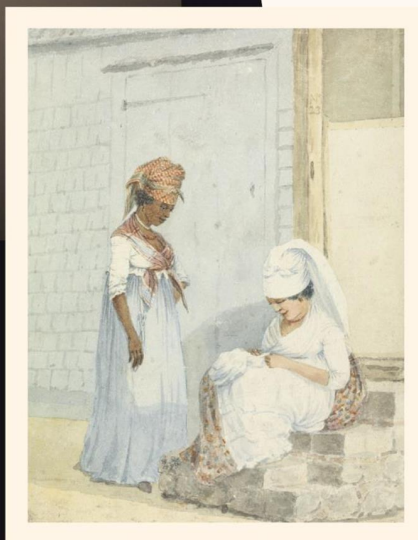
CONTINUED ON PAGE 144



PERIOD PIECES

Clockwise from top: a costume sketch for November's march; an illustration from Colonel Frey's *Côte occidentale d'Afrique*; examples of Senegalese dress by Auguste Racinet, from *Le Costume Historique*; 19th century voodoo legend Marie Laveau by F. Schneider's painting after a painting by G. Catlin.





COSTUME DRAMA

Clockwise from top center:
reenactor Denise Frazier;
cloth samples for a reenactor's regalia;
a contemporary sketch of a marcher's attire;
William Kay's *Seamstresses, St. Kitts, Carribean* [1798].



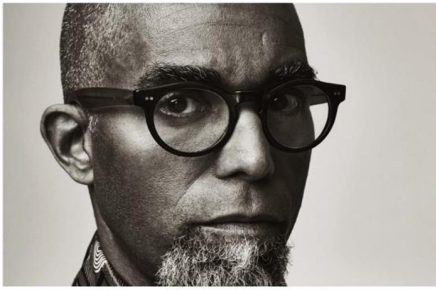
All year long, sewing circles have been finishing costumes in New Orleans.

ROLE MODELS

From left: reenactor Gianna Chachere; Labrousse's *Costumes de Différents Pays*, "Negres de St. Domingue se Battant au Bâton" [circa 1797]; reenactor Malcolm Suber.



Slave Revolt



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 128 assemble for the first time only a few weeks before the event; as he explained, “The less it is a Dread Scott project, the better.”

His ideal spectator is a commuter glimpsing the marchers from a car and thinking, These people look like they’re getting free. Others, no doubt, will see something more provoking—black people with weapons. The reenactment will take place in a state where the majority of white voters in the 1990s supported former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke in his bids to become senator and governor. It will end in a city where in 2016, arsonists firebombed the Lamborghini of a contractor hired to remove Confederate statues.

Scott is quick to say that his march is a performance, not a protest. But he knows that in a post-Charlottesville America, he cannot assume that every spectator will appreciate the difference. The artist stressed that he is taking precautions to ensure the safety of participants, working to secure police protection and official permits from the parishes the reenactors will pass through. There will be animal-drawn wagons for weary marchers, medical staff standing by, and cameras following the procession. Before the event, town-hall outreach sessions will allow River Parish residents to voice objections. Scott is confident that the dangers can be minimized.

Nevertheless, we seem to live in a nation increasingly unable to discern the line between representation and reality, a country where police saw Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old black boy playing with a toy gun in Cleveland, and shot him to death. Can it be trusted to let hundreds of black marchers play-act one of the most deep-seated nightmares of the American imagination? “I’m more concerned if we don’t do this than if we do,” Scott told me. “Artwork is not going to prevent another Tamir Rice. But without art and activism talking about freedom and emancipation from white supremacy, the status quo that is grinding up people’s lives will continue.”

Deslondres’s rebels came from a myriad of African nations; Scott’s represent a similar diversity of organizations in New Orleans’s arts, activist, and academic communities. I met several of them for a costume fitting at Antenna, a nonprofit gallery and arts space

on St. Claude Avenue in the Bywater that is helping to sponsor the reenactment. The gathering had the casually energized atmosphere of a campaign office. Scott circled the room taking pictures, wearing an 1811 New Orleans team tee designed for the project’s Kickstarter campaign. (The bulk of the budget will be supplied by grants from philanthropic nonprofits including the Open Society Foundations, the MAP Fund, VIA Art Fund, and A Blade of Grass.) Someone remarked that the outfits, researched by Scott’s costumers at the nonprofit RicRack Nola, seemed too upmarket for the enslaved. Should they even be wearing shoes? Scott demurred. Enslaved people, he said, were the country’s most valuable asset class; if you drive a Mercedes, you’re not going to ruin its treads. “Besides,” he added for good measure, “I’m sure they picked up some nice swag at the plantations they pillaged.”

Denise Frazier, a Tulane music scholar and assistant director of the New Orleans Center for the Gulf South, posed with a machete in a red head wrap and blue-striped chintz dress. The rebellion’s community outreach director, Malcolm Suber—a veteran academic, labor activist, and national figure in the Take Em Down NOLA campaign against monuments to slaveholders and segregationists—stood like da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man for the seamstress. In another corner of the room sat Imani Jacqueline Brown, at the time director of programs at Antenna. She compared Scott’s rebellion to “a spark in the wind setting little fires across the city.” All year long, sewing circles have been finishing costumes; volunteers have included everyone from retired nurses to undergraduates at Xavier University of Louisiana, where Ron Bechet, an artist and professor, is teaching a course on the uprising.

One of the first people Scott sought out in the city was Leon Waters, a local historian, docent, and activist who is also something like the chief archivist of the 1811 revolt. A New Orleans native and firebrand community advocate, Waters, in 1996, helped research and publish *On to New Orleans!*, the first book on the uprising. He also established Hidden History, an alternative tour company that he conceived after encountering—and picketing—a “slave exchange restaurant” in the French Quarter, where patrons ate their gumbo under whips and chains.

Sick of the opportunists who treat black history as a “stolen commodity,” Waters began leading tours on the rebellion and organizing commemorative annual marches in public schools. Those processions stopped after Hurricane Katrina, but Waters hopes that Scott’s reenactment might revive interest. It would be a bright spot in what Waters considers a shameful record of public history in New Orleans, marred by romanticism and distortion. “We want a much more scientific story,” he told me. “A

story about our resistance and a story that we’re still resisting oppression today.”

In many ways, the black American story—and slavery in particular—has never been more visible. A wave of films, books, television shows, prominent artworks, and ever-grander public institutions testify to a heritage regained: Maryland’s 125-mile Harriet Tubman Scenic Byway; Montgomery, Alabama’s National Memorial for Peace and Justice; and a runaway trend of fugitive-slave novels, from Colson Whitehead’s award-winning *The Underground Railroad*—soon to be adapted for television by Barry Jenkins—to Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *The Water Dancer* and Esi Edugyan’s Man Booker Prize-nominated *Washington Black*. Slavery remembrance has swelled to the dimensions of a civic religion. In the ziggurat-like National Museum of African American History and Culture, iron ballast bars from slave ships are enshrined like fragments of the true cross, while the recently discovered wreck of the *Clotilda*—America’s last slave ship—has prompted hopes for an Africatown, Alabama, tourist site on the order of colonial Jamestown.

Are these stirrings of a consequential reckoning or empty remnants of the Obama era’s Pyrrhic cultural victory? All the commemoration in the world won’t stop police shootings, pay reparations for slavery, or free today’s fugitive families from ICE detention. Symbolic change is not only untethered from lasting political power but evanescent in itself, like the Harriet Tubman 20-dollar bill recently “postponed” by the Trump Treasury. If she did appear on this America’s currency, who’s to say it wouldn’t be meaningless? After all, what use is a black Smithsonian on the National Mall with a white nationalist in the Oval Office?

There is, of course, a chancy alchemy by which cultural recognition really can change political reality. In June, when a congressional committee met to discuss reparations for slavery, one witness was Coates, whose 2014 essay “The Case for Reparations” brought the question into the political mainstream. The bill they considered cited not only scholarship but “popular culture markers” as evidence of the widely felt need to make amends.

Dread Scott’s *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* embodies a similar impulse, but the change it envisions is less concerned with society’s top-down moral repair than its radical reconstitution. A chimerical combination of artwork, community organizing, and protest, it resurrects the past to further egalitarian change in the present. What’s singular is that it is neither a solemn penance for American slavery nor a premature commemoration of achieved racial justice. Instead, Scott asks us to look upon an Army of the Enslaved that marched for freedom—against the United States—and celebrate their victory. What else could we imagine if we could imagine that? ■

DREAD'S REBELLION

VANITY FAIR | OCTOBER 2019



Reprinted from the Vanity Fair Archive

<https://archive.vanityfair.com/article/20191001063/print>



©2019 - VANITY FAIR ARCHIVE. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.