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Just Interpret to Me: Reflecting on NAI 2011

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Abstract

Last week saw Jake and I in St. Paul, Minnesota for the annual National Association for Interpretation workshop, a week long gathering of professional interpreters from around the nation. I'll guarantee that the next couple of weeks will be filled with recaps from both of us on what struck us the most during the conference. Our reactions ranged from "meh..." to "Dude!" [*excerpt*]

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Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 2011

Last week saw Jake and I in St. Paul, Minnesota for the annual National Association for Interpretation workshop, a week long gathering of professional interpreters from around the nation. I'll guarantee that the next couple of weeks will be filled with recaps from both of us on what struck us the most during the conference. Our reactions ranged from "meh..." to "Dude!"



To quote everyone's favorite viral video ["What does it mean?"](#)

from 1970 to today and a very quick visit to the site wherein the staff unlocked doors for us and described the types of programming they do for the public. We were talked at for about an hour on the craft of what they do at the site, but never shown that craft in action to judge for ourselves. Why is Fort Snelling important? Judging only by what we heard inside of the fort's walls, I'm not quite sure.

To be fair, this was only a symptom of a larger impulse which seemed to pervade the conference. Again and again, instead of proving by showing the bulk of the presenters tried to teach their skills by telling. Concept after concept flew by, with little to no actual examples of what works, no attempt to show how meanings can be forged. A convention center full of professional communicators often had a tough time communicating.

We protect our cultural landscapes and interpret them because we believe that the real, the true, the actual is one of the most potent tools. This is the fundamental ethic in interpretation: tie a story to a landscape (what the craft calls a "resource"). But as soon as we step in front of a PowerPoint projector, even interpreters seem to lose this core ethic. Instead of teaching through effective

I'm going to begin with one of the "meh..." moments. Friday found us on a field trip to Fort Snelling State Park and Historic Fort Snelling (operated by the Minnesota Historical Society). The fort sits high on the bluffs overlooking the waters of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers, dating originally to the 1820s. The fort has what seems to have been an amazing and vibrant history, filled with amazing national connections and deeply moving concepts.

Unfortunately, we did not hear that much about the meaning of that place when we toured the site. Our site visit consisted of watching the orientation video (a decent in-house production), a 35-minute PowerPoint presentation on the history of interpretation at the fort

examples, facilitating meanings for our audiences to show them new techniques for facilitating meanings, we begin blathering on about the craft endlessly. We read every word off of our slides and narrate endlessly to crowds quite visibly disengaged from what we are saying to them. We bore our audiences with theory the moment we are told they are interpreters. In short, for some reason we check our interpretive impulse at the door.

If we preach as a profession that interpretation is the most effective type of teaching, why not practice what we preach? Why not *show* how to interpret well through powerful examples of what is effective instead of simply *telling* how we think it might work?

Setting foot in an historic fort in Minnesota after flying nearly a thousand miles to get there, we were visitors last Friday. But the staff didn't see that. All we wanted was to see some effective programming that could help us feel why Fort Snelling was important. But the presenters didn't try to understand who their audience was and what they came to the site seeking. We weren't interpreters when we walked through the gates of that site; we were visitors. We came seeking meaning; we left unfulfilled. We walked away with no new tools in our toolboxes, only a vague understanding that Fort Snelling used to do first-person, living history interpretation and now no longer does.



How might the very different people who looked out of these very different windows have seen the world?

Just one of the amazingly provocative questions I was hoping would be asked of me at every turn but never was...

Jake leaned to me at one point during the day and said, "Remind me to never mention that I'm an interpreter to anyone when I visit a site. They immediately stop interpreting for you and just want to talk shop."

Jake, consider yourself reminded in spades.

So, what were the missed interpretive opportunities? Tune in next week when I'll try to give you the interpretive program I *didn't* receive at Fort Snelling. Just in time for Thanksgiving, I'll share with you the power of an historic landscape to show us the impacts of European colonization of the Americas. And it's a Civil War story to boot.