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Plunge into Shonash Ravine: Thinking 4th Dimensionally in Interpretation

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Abstract

This piece was written for NAI's annual workshop this coming fall, but not everyone will have the chance to be in Reno to hear my presentation come November. So, why not give you a sneak peak of what I'm planning on discussing in Nevada? [*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

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TUESDAY, AUGUST 20, 2013

This piece was written for NAI's annual workshop this coming fall, but not everyone will have the chance to be in Reno to hear my presentation come November. So, why not give you a sneak peak of what I'm planning on discussing in Nevada?

This piece was written by me at work, so it's firmly in the public domain. Adapt away, enjoy the read and share as often and wherever you'd like.

There is a moment in *Back to the Future III* where the transitive nature of time in that fictional universe becomes crystal clear. As the time-traveling DeLorean rolls to a stop in 1985, railroad crossing gates drop and the time machine passes a sign: "Eastwood Ravine."

The scene is the payoff for one of the movie's time-travel conundrums: the mutability of the past. Marty knew that same chasm as "Clayton Ravine." When Doc Brown and Marty McFly look at a map in 1885, they are befuddled by its label: "Shonash Ravine."

"Clayton Ravine was named after a teacher. They say she fell in there a hundred years ago." Marty tells Doc.

"A hundred years ago?" the ageless Brown exclaims, "That's this year!" The pair had just saved Clara Clayton, Hill Valley's new schoolteacher, from plunging into the ravine. The past was changed. Then, when Marty's time-machine plunged into Shonash Ravine, the locals of 1885 gave the gulch a new name: Eastwood Ravine, named after Marty's "Man with No Name" moniker.

Shonash Ravine is an intriguing case study in one landscape holding multiple realities. We all have Shonash Ravines in our special places, resources which we usually view from one distinct perspective, with one distinct event in mind.

When we begin to think fourth dimensionally, inspecting landscapes from multiple chronological viewpoints, they can become amazingly rich places which offer new, novel and amazingly powerful connections.



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“...the temporal junction point for the entire space-time continuum.”

For humans, time moves in one direction. Sir Arthur Eddington, the British collaborator who helped confirm Einstein's Theory of Relativity by photographing a magnificent eclipse from the island of Príncipe, coined the term, “time's arrow,” to describe the fluid motion of time as we march inexorably forward. Eddington's 1919 trip to Príncipe (just like Einstein's General Theory of Relativity which it helped to confirm) was all about discovering the nature of time and how physics can play havoc with what we perceive as fixed.

Light travels at a fixed speed in beams. We can simply see it.

But Eddington went further. Light, for Eddington, was the key to understanding fundamental laws of physics and grasping the nature of life, the universe and everything. As the photographs he took of a solar eclipse showed light from twinkling stars bending around the sun, their beams altered by its gravity, how the world works simultaneously fell apart and fell into place.

If light could be altered by gravity, it seemed like anything could. Maybe even time could be bent.

“Is there a problem with the earth's gravitational pull?”

Events have gravity as well, not in the physical sense, but in the metaphorical sense. Historic resources capture events in a physical format, much like Eddington's plates captured Einstein's theory in tangible form. When you look at a specific resources, there is usually one moment in time which drags you toward it.

For battlefields like Gettysburg, it is a few short hours of conflict. Focus draws down, pulls you toward the 1st, 2nd and 3rd of July, 1863. The gravity of over 100,000 men gathered in one place, tearing at each others' entrails, captures the imagination.

In the prison camp at Andersonville, Georgia, the bloodshed stretched-out as a streak across time, with nearly 13,000 men dying in about a year between 1864 and 1865. On the bloodiest soil of the American Civil War, those specific months molded a place forever.

On the tarmac at Moton Field in Tuskegee, Alabama, black pilots struggled for four years against two foes: cruel gravity and even more cruel human hatred. In the middle of the “Black Belt,” these men worked against raw American hatred as they attempted to defend the world against Nazi tyranny and Japanese imperial dominion.

Blood flowed across the pavement at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965. Bloody Sunday is the gravitational object, when protesters, still crusading against American hatred, christened that bridge with blood ejected from beaten bodies and bashed skulls. Those few minutes when Alabama State Police truncheons met activists' skulls hold the gravity of time.

“Marty, it's perfect, you're just not thinking fourth-dimensionally!”



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In Douglas Adams' immortal *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, the Hitchhiker's Guide notes that, "the whole fabric of the space-time continuum is not merely curved, it is in fact totally bent." That slang double-entendre is nowhere more present in our daily lives than in good, four-dimensional interpretation. What if we bent the universe of interpretation, intentionally looking at our special places from different chronological perspectives? Would the meanings still be there? Would new meanings appear?

What if we told visitors more than the story of two days in July? What if we also shared how, in the same landscape where soldiers marched wearing gray in 1863 fighting for a slaveholder's republic, men marched wearing white robes in 1927 for the preservation of the White Man's right to supremacy?

What if we told visitors more than the story of 1864-1865? What if we also shared how, for the black citizens of nearby Americus, Georgia, the prison site at Andersonville was not simply a horrid place, but one of celebration through the 20th century of the time when men died for their very freedom?

What if we told visitors more than the story of the 1940s? What if we also shared how white men in uniform marched out of Tuskegee, Alabama eighty-years before in a military crusade to hold bonds on black wrists, a racial war which still raged on as the airmen flew.

What if we told visitors more than the story of March 7, 1965 and blood on the pavement? What if we unwrapped the tale of Edmund Pettus himself, the Confederate General and slaveholder in whose name the iconic bridge of Civil Rights is named.

When events become four-dimensional, when we break the dictatorial bounds of the one specific historic period of significance, new meanings begin shaking loose. And those new meanings only serve to underline the original event.

"Well, good luck. For both our sakes. See you in the future."

On an island in the Atlantic Ocean just off of the Gold Coast of Africa, Sir Arthur Eddington took a simple photograph of the sun and helped propel mankind toward an understanding of how time, space and the universe are mutable and less concrete than we can imagine. The beam time's arrow, though it flows one direction, can be spun and shone on many different events. Man was making immense progress on that tiny, volcanic spit of land.

Centuries before, the island and its neighbor São Tomé were colonized by the Portuguese, allowing Eddington safe travel to the remote rock. The islands' chief function was as a way station for slaves on their journey to the new world. That tiny, volcanic spit of land was helping man, or at least man of

a certain color skin, to make immense progress in his universe.

As Eddington exposed his photographic plate, the slopes of São Tomé and Príncipe were still being worked by slaves, even in 1919. Man always seems to make immense progress at immense costs.