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"Realize I Don't Want to be a Miser": Giving Up Power

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Abstract

Oftentimes, 'the visitor is sovereign' is used as a crib notes version of, "the customer is always right." That's not what it was intended to mean. That is a gross bastardization of the concept, in fact. David Larsen in *Meaningful Interpretation* characterizes it succinctly: "it is the audience that will ultimately decide if they've had a meaningful experience, connected emotionally and intellectually, and believe the place is worth caring about and for." [excerpt]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments

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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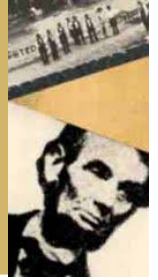
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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2012

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mr_uHJPUIO8&feature=player_embedded

Jake's [post on Tuesday](#) got some quick responses out on Facebook. One in particular pointed that Jake was getting at the heart of the concept of visitor sovereignty. I pushed back, and mulled over the idea later that night. What Jake and I have been describing is tied quite integrally to visitor sovereignty, but what the field sees that phrase meaning and what it was intended to mean are two things.

Oftentimes, 'the visitor is sovereign' is used as a crib notes version of, "the customer is always right." That's not what it was intended to mean. That is a gross bastardization of the concept, in fact. David Larsen in [Meaningful Interpretation](#) characterizes it succinctly: "it is the audience that will ultimately decide if they've had a meaningful experience, connected emotionally and intellectually, and believe the place is worth caring about and for."

We historical interpreters spend inordinate amounts of time amassing power in our lives. We seek out degrees in weird and idiosyncratic fields (like the Civil War). We get MAs and PhDs to dive even deeper into those worlds of detail. We become the expert on subjects and draw together all the disparate pieces of data into a small fiefdom of history we can control and lord over.

We work all our lives to gain experience at interpretation. We build a portfolio or a massive Federal resume so that we can apply for that one, perfect dream job. When we get there, we cram as much knowledge of that resource into our heads until we become lord and master of that story, able to call forth any fact to do our bidding at a whim. We know what that story means. We know best exactly what *you* should know about it.

Why do we amass power? Is it to become dictators over our special places? Do we learn everything about a battlefield or a historic house or a college campus because we want to act as the gatekeepers of history? "To learn this story," we might tell a visitor, "you must come through me. To understand this place, you must come to me."

When we have immense stores of knowledge, we have great power. We *can* act as gatekeepers, deciding which resource meanings visitors have access to and which stay locked away and hidden from view. We can become dictators of meaning, decreeing that a place should mean one thing and one thing only to anyone who passes through out gates.

One of the simplest things you can do when you have power is give it up. You can share it. Imagine if

every interpreter truly took to heart the mantra chanted by one of [Larsen's fictional characters 'Nedlit'](#) in his Interpretive Dialogue:

Meet visitors where they are and help them make personal connections to the resource. The visitor who wants to drink beer and the pilgrim on a quest both contribute to the park's survival. They can each come to care more about the place. It's that simple, and that difficult. It's difficult because it's easy to preach and fool yourself into thinking you are interpreting.

So, like the [Red Hot Chili Peppers say in their 1991 classic](#), you can, "give it away." You can collaboratively build meanings of a place, let a visitor explore a place. You can facilitate their conversation with the real stuff of history. But ultimately, they are the ones who need to speak and puzzle and wonder. They are the ones who need to dialogue with a place, not a human being. Give the visitor a voice. Give them the microphone you have worked so hard to earn. Give them that stage which your MA or PhD earned you. Share the spotlight and share the power. Give the visitor the power of their own voice, amplified by the microphone you've worked so hard to get your hands on. Because what good is power if you can't help people find meaning?

Nedlit, just before he leaves, mentions to his friend that she can't prove that a place is important. She can only, "create opportunities for people to realize it on their own." Interpreters cannot be dictators. They must not say that a place means one thing and only one thing. The beer drinker and the pilgrim will each find their own meaning in these places we naively call 'ours.'

In the end, "Interpreters are artists and teachers. They allow others to find their own meanings." Nedlit keenly reminds his friend that, "when you deal with meanings relevant to your audiences, you move people to care. You hold influence and power. You don't change all the attitudes you hope to, but you affect far more than you realize."

So... give it away. Give it away. Give it away now.



What meaning might the pilgrim find in this scene? What about the beer drinker? The answer should always be: "the one they needed to find today."