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## Interpretive Vernacular: Pop Culture is a Language

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# Interpretive Vernacular: Pop Culture is a Language

## Abstract

I trust people who sound like me. I trust people who speak the same language as me. Part of this comes from a simple fact of understanding. I speak very little Spanish, even less French.

But I also speak other languages, and trust people who speak to me in those languages. [*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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# Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

[www.civilwarconnect.com](http://www.civilwarconnect.com)



## Interpretive Vernacular: Pop Culture is a Language

**THURSDAY, MARCH 15, 2012**

I trust people who sound like me. I trust people who speak the same language as me. Part of this comes from a simple fact of understanding. I speak very little Spanish, even less French.

But I also speak other languages, and trust people who speak to me in those languages.

First, I speak geek. I am an unrepentant lover of science fiction, native to personal computers since the era of the DOS prompt, frequent quoter of nerdy movies and television, admirer of the beautiful simplicity of physics and the amazing symmetry of maths. Geek is a second tongue for me.

I also speak the language of popular culture. Frankly, we all do to greater or lesser degrees. I know what *Mad Men* is all about. I 'get' a good number of the gags when Saturday Night Live lampoons MTV, BET or Lifetime. I have enough of a working knowledge of the *Twilight* series, *The Jersey Shore* and much of modern popular music to understand a passing reference to them (and know they hold no real interest for me).

But when I interpret, I am told to dress up my language. We struggle in the public history world with this awkward concept of 'agency voice.' We quake in fear at the concept that we as individuals speak in some mystical, disembodied voice on behalf of our agencies or institutions. But this gussying up our prose, this abandonment of a cultural vernacular for some perceived cultural high ground could be severely destroying our ability to communicate with a modern audience.

We can't speak to an audience in a language they don't understand. Speaking more slowly and louder doesn't work. Just because an audience might listen to Lady Gaga doesn't make them unable to understand, appreciate and come to care for large historical concepts and truths. Sometimes we need to speak in the very words our audiences share with each other, that *we share with each other* everyday.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYQhRCs9IHM&feature=player\\_embedded](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYQhRCs9IHM&feature=player_embedded)

From the folks who brought you *Too Late To Apologize*, the latest in vernacular public history.



So what might this look like? Simple: imagine if Lady Gaga performed a power-anthem to accompany the women's suffrage movement of the late 1910s...

This video is nothing new per say. Yet it is still powerful. Watch it ten times, twenty times, a hundred times. Each time you'll find another small, powerful detail. Did you

catch the note from the Senator's mother telling him, "Huzzah and vote for Suffrage"? Did you catch the doubt in the woman's eyes as she proudly declared she didn't need to vote? Did you notice how the protesters in front of the White House were a spot on match for the real women who stood there fighting for their rights? The piece is outrageously powerful, even on the hundredth viewing.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VaBCwwgrgoA&feature=player\\_embedded](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VaBCwwgrgoA&feature=player_embedded)

But it is only an evolution, not a revolution. It joins a long lineage of style and straight parody incorporating history and civics into a modern vernacular language. Who from my generation and the one preceding doesn't recognize the line, "[I'm just a Bill, Yes I'm only a Bill...](#)"? I learned the preamble to the Constitution [thanks to Schoolhouse Rock!](#) as well, and still need to hum the tune to keep the pieces in the right order in my mind. Even Schoolhouse Rock! took on Women's Suffrage, with another power anthem about gaining the right to vote.

How can we foster more creative ways of sharing the vast world of history with the public in the language *they speak* instead of the stilted and foreign voice we think our institutions should speak with? How can we reach an American public where they already are, instead of fruitlessly demanding of them that they try to understand a language they don't speak natively?

I'm not sure. But I think it looks something like a tribute to Lady Gaga featuring Thriller-esque suffragettes, a brooding Woodrow Wilson and a struggle for freedom embodied by men and women acting to make the world better. I think it looks like Ben Franklin wearing a mock AC/DC tee-shirt and shredding the guitar while Thomas Jefferson sings his grievances to the King. I think it speaks in the language of the modern world, the vernacular of the culture we live within. *That* history will gain far more traction than anything in 'agency voice' could ever hope to, I guarantee.