

SHOW-ME AMBIGUITY: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF MISSOURI
CIVIL WAR REENACTMENT

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Introduction: Show Me the Civil War

Spending a summer in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, is enough to make just about any American think a little bit differently about the Civil War. The summer I spent in Gettysburg was a significant one for the Confederate flag, as well, as it was a popular topic of conversation in Gettysburg in the frenzied media wake of some high-profile events. Photographs of Dylann Roof—who was later convicted of murdering nine people at the Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston—surfaced soon after the shooting, showing him posing with, and waving the Confederate flag. Later that summer, the “Stars and Bars” flying outside the South Carolina statehouse finally came down, after a drawn-out controversy.

The Saturday after the flag was removed from the South Carolina statehouse grounds, I watched a parade of Civil War reenactors, both in Union Blue and Confederate Gray, carrying various versions of the Confederate flag in a display of solidarity: they marched South from the Gettysburg square in the middle of town to Pickett’s Charge Buffet on the edge of the battlefield. This parade of reenactors was not a commemoration in its stricter sense, intended to seriously remember a person or an event, but a performance in the context of the debates that the country was engaging in during that summer. Equipped with the detailed knowledge of how, by whom, where, and for what purpose each version of the Confederate flag was used, the performance insisted that there is a difference between what people think about the Confederate flag, and its “actual” meaning. Their public display was intended to ensure that the flag was taken seriously—and not erased.

The up-and-coming public historians in town working as interpretive interns for the National Park Service (NPS) shared their insights on this issue with me. These historians were also serious, experienced reenactors and living historians (although none of them participated in the parade, and they all spoke negatively about how the reenactors were using their status as historical authorities in a bizarre, hokey display through the streets of Gettysburg). There is a difference between the St. Andrew's Cross, the First National, and various other signifiers. Yes, “the Confederate flag” as it is conceptualized by many Americans does symbolize the Confederacy, and Slavery—there’s no way around it, they said. But there is not one “meaning” of “the flag,” and they wanted to prove it, through narratives full of details about individuals.

While I was interested in the debate over the symbol itself, what grabbed my attention was the reenactor-historian's approach to talking about the symbol through the methods employed by reenactment. The general consensus among this group of serious hobby reenactors (who were also aspiring to produce official versions of history for public consumption as NPS Rangers) was that reenactment offered them something that written history couldn't: an individual's story, gritty details, physical experience. Reenactment offered an alternative to their “day job” approach to history that they often used in their academic and professional lives. Big ideas such as Slavery, Economics, and Ideology were temporarily abandoned for the heaviness of wet wool coats, the smell of campfire, blistered heels, and aching shoulders from nights of sleeping on the cold, hard ground. Reenactment asks: who were those people? Those “Civil War Dead”—the thousands upon thousands of them—that we honor? They framed the war as a tragedy, experienced as much by individuals as by the nation.

Reenactment has a way of making the past about ethics. In its constant focus on the small details experienced by the individual, it zooms in on the ethical choices of the average human who lived through, or died in, the American Civil War. And, in doing so, it disrupts, complicates, and sometimes ignores the big ideas (like Slavery and the preservation of the Union) used to bring order to the war through a larger string of cause and effect. Reenactment places the individual within these larger ideas, within economic and ideological systems, and then asks questions about how the individual operated within them. What was it like to be an average soldier fighting the American Civil War? Was the cause of the average Confederate soldier bad? What would you have done? My reenactor friends in Pennsylvania seemed to have answers to questions that I had never even asked, or felt the particular need to ask. I suspect that my continued interest in these questions illustrates a successful realization of the typical reenactor and living historian's goal of education.

When I returned West to start graduate school in Missouri, haunted by the obsession over the trauma of Gettysburg, I found a different version of the Civil War and reenactment community that reflected some of those differences (type of warfare, geography, and interpretative emphasis). Civil War memory in Missouri (as I encountered it on a daily basis) tends to be lighthearted and humorous. In Missouri, presentation of a my Kansas driver's license will often result in playful and vague reference to the longstanding rivalry between the two states, perhaps specific enough to involve mentions of raids, and bushwhackers, and celebrated sports team rivalries now diminished by the University of Missouri's move from the Big Twelve Conference to the Southeastern Conference. This is not to say that the war is not commemorated through

more serious, formal methods and settings (such as state parks and monuments), only that my daily encounters with Civil War references tended to lack the weightiness of verbal references to the war that I was steeped in among residents in Gettysburg (largely due to the fact that the Gettysburg area is such a physical, visual reminder of a specific trauma, both for residents and for a broader American public as a high-profile NPS site). I found that in Missouri, the war was frequently and generally acknowledged, but the essential take-away I encountered was typically playful and celebratory rather than a recognition of serious trauma and moral transgression.

Besides the general variance in attitude that I observed, there are central historical differences often noted between the war “out East” and its counterpart on the frontier. The State Historical Society of Missouri-sponsored anthology of scholarship on the Civil War in Missouri (aptly titled *A Rough Business: Fighting the Civil War in Missouri*) emphasizes that the most well-known aspect of warfare in the state was its guerilla, terrorist-like characteristics (Piston 11). Its terroristic nature is one reason Civil War remains a popular subject among Missouri publishers, and the editorial staff of the *The Missouri Historical Review* told me that the war is the most-popular subject for article submissions even today.

Officially, the Missouri Division of Tourism has promoted an interpretation of the war that works to mediate this contradictory celebration and acknowledgement of historic terrorism, and also ambiguously approaches Missouri’s status as a border state with torn allegiance to Union and Confederate causes. For instance, a tourism promotional video from 2009 states that “the conflict over states’ rights and slavery led to a bloody guerilla war in which good guys were hard to find, and outlaws were celebrated as heroes,” and

advances the history of guerilla warfare in Missouri as a curious cultural resource closely connected to the likes of Confederate bushwhackers who became Wild West bandits and bank robbers, such as Jesse James and Cole Younger (Missouri's Civil War Bushwhackers & Outlaws). On one hand, typical Confederate veterans simply “fought for the Lost Cause and the memory of the Old South,” but more colorful characters, such as Bloody Bill Anderson, are “said to have worn a necklace of Yankee scalps into battle” (Missouri's Civil War Bushwhackers & Outlaws).

In another promotional video that outlines the central battles fought in Missouri, the Missouri Division of Tourism emphasizes that Missouri had plenty of battles, but that they were mostly small-scale engagements: “All across Missouri today, visitors can walk in the footsteps of the Soldiers, both blue and grey, who fought for the causes they believed in” (Missouri's Civil War Battlefields). After a general overview of Missouri's important battles, most of them “small but ferocious,” this video ends with Jefferson Barracks, which built a substantial military hospital to provide aid for soldiers on both sides. After fighting for opposing causes, they laid side by side as hospital patients suffering the wounds of warfare, and now they're buried together in the nearby Cemetery (Missouri's Civil War Battlefields). In short, the interpretation of the war offered by Missouri Division of Tourism emphasizes that the style of warfare was more brutal, that both Confederates and Union sympathizers were fighting for causes attached to their beliefs, and that perhaps it is the shared trauma of the war that is the ultimate unifier of Northern and Southern sympathies in Missouri.

Before understanding how reenactors in Missouri make sense of the war, and how reenactors represent the war in the light of these interpretive lenses, it's important to

understand how commemoration, or the call to publicly remember the war through solemnization or observance of the war, functions in general to make meaning out of the chaos and trauma of warfare. Such meaning making has been a continual process for Americans that takes place in various forums. As John Neff argues, "For the national government and all American citizens following the war, the commemoration of the war's dead provided the quintessential forum for engaging and, most important, expressing the war's meaning" (Neff 1). Commemoration aids in the understanding of loss "by attributing it to a greater purpose. The death of soldiers required axiomatically that their cause must have been worthy of such a high cost" (Neff 1). Commemoration of the war frequently occurs on battlefield sites operated by state parks and the National Park Service. In other contexts, artistic works such as Ken Burns' celebrated 1990 documentary miniseries *The Civil War*, have morphed into a kind of societal, communal remembrance for some segments of American society (Kreisler and Allred 225).

In another period of high-visibility and increased societal friction, Civil War Reenactment and commemoration of the war served as a forum to debate the meaning of the war and explore, or dismiss, its contemporary resonance. The Civil Rights Movement, which overlapped with the Centennial anniversaries of the war, contributed to a context in which emotions ran high, as America "began to reconcile the promises guaranteed by the Emancipation Proclamation and the fifteenth Amendment" (Allen 95). "The hobby," as reenactment is frequently referred to, had taken off in the 1950s, and in the context of centennial battle anniversaries of the 1960s, reenactment gained prominence as an element of commemoration, even as the war's meaning was hotly contested (Allen, 100). The "Lost Cause" narrative permeated popular thought during the 1960s, wherein the war

was framed as “a tragedy shared by both North and South, and that the most important memory of the war was the sense of common honor and valor fought for by soldiers on both sides—not emancipation or civil rights” (Allen 96).

In his analysis of the centennial commemoration of the Battle of Fort Sumter in 1961, Allen demonstrates how commemorating and interpreting the war is a continual challenge for public historians: how do we communally remember the war while we avoid making it a space for controversy? (Allen, 96). The South Carolina Civil War Centennial Commission (SCCWCC) officially promoted a rhetoric that unified the Southern and Northern causes under the common banner of American values: both sides fought for “human freedom, justice, and the dignity of the individual” (Allen 97). During the divisive context of the Civil Rights Movement, organizers wanted to frame the characters of the war as operating under a wider, unified American ethos. The SCCWCC promoted an interpretation of the war that used Lost Cause rhetoric, and officials continually emphasized that the centennial commemoration of the Battle of Fort Sumter should be about the shared good that came about through the war (Allen 102). In its emphasis on shared experiences, this interpretation circumvents blame, or condemnation of the Confederate cause as socially or morally irresponsible and works to legitimize the Confederate ethic, both on a large scale, as well as for the individual characters of the war (Allen 108). By making the war about shared experience and ultimate reunification, it sidesteps responsibility: no one seems to be susceptible to blame for these injustices. When race and continued inequality enters the debate, however, this interpretation of the war becomes harder to maintain. One such instance of this problem was when an African American New Jersey State Legislator was denied accommodations at a hotel in

Charleston in 1961, even though she was involved in official centennial commemoration planning (Allen 108).

Besides the Lost Cause narrative that seeks to unify the meaning of the Civil War for both North and South under a clear-cut interpretation, in other contexts, the serious take-away from the war is presented as a trauma so profound that it is beyond real human comprehension. The real meaning of the war and its implications for society is neither easily accessed or easily communicated. Continually drawing attention to the vast destruction of the war, the late historian Charles Joyner tried to communicate just how *bad* the circumstances were: “Exact figures remain disputed...more than a half million Civil War Soldiers lie in graveyards from Pennsylvania to Mississippi, from the Carolinas to Texas, in graveyards at places like Antietam and Gettysburg and Manassas and Shiloh and Spottsylvania and Richmond and Vicksburg” (Joyner 27). In contrast to “Lost Cause” rhetoric, his interpretation of the war is one that unifies South and North, not under a common label of honor, but of trauma and moral transgression. Rather than treating the war as a situation where somehow brother fights brother for a mutual, honorable cause, Joyner frames this reality as illogical, almost so profound as to be beyond comprehension, As Joyner argued, the war can be organized as a tragedy of the Greek theatrical variety: The conflict claimed more American lives than “all America’s other wars combined, from the Revolution through the first five years of Vietnam” (Joyner, 27). More current numbers put the death count of the Civil War at around 750,000, on the battlefield, in camps, or in improvised hospitals (Fleming 66).

Joyner approached history as a complex web of interaction between external factors such as ideology and economic systems, and personal choice. The Civil War and its resonance in American memory may be simply too large to fully understand:

To understand the Civil War at all is to feel its great tragedy. Today the word tragedy is often used loosely. I mean more than the Civil War was sad...I intend the word at its deepest Aristotelian significance: the purgation by pity and terror of the most profound questions of human fate. The tragedy began not with the war itself, but with America's embrace of human slavery. Slavery was a deliberate choice of men who sought to reap what they did not themselves sow, men who sought greater returns than they could earn by the sweat of their own brows. Slavery – was the South's tragic flaw. Those who chose to adopt and to preserve slavery could no more escape responsibility for their choice than they could escape its consequences. (Joyner 29)

Since its origins, Civil War battle reenactment has been a tradition of reliving trauma; the impulse to re-embody the Civil War is no new, symptomatic aspect of “Generation X” and millennial desire to reconnect to an exaggerated or romanticized American past. The contemporary reenacting I approach has its origins in the actions of literal Civil War veterans, who would congregate and camp with their old gear to commemorate important battle anniversaries, even though they themselves had enacted the original events (Turner 123). As both Union and Confederate veterans of the Battle of Gettysburg themselves knew during the various landmark anniversaries within their lifetimes, the trauma of the war is not something to simply “revisit,” through formal ceremony. The men returned to those scarred pieces of earth to re-embody the trauma of the battle, even as their own bodies themselves displayed the disruption represented by the war, with loss of limb and ability.

The re-embodiment of reenactment—the taking on of historic roles, costumes, and objects—is strongly linked to reenactment's emphasis on questioning the ethical agency of historical characters. Mark Auslander has described the power placed on replicas of

historical objects used in reenactments, specifically their ability to seemingly transport participants back to moments of trauma in the American past (Auslander 161). Through his examination of mid-nineteenth century American slave auction and 20th century southern lynching reenactments, Auslander identifies replicated objects as what “structural anthropologists have long termed structural operators, allowing for dynamic exchange between the present and the past, and between the living and the dead” (Auslander 164). For participants, “these objects serve as tangible barometers of what we might call emotional authenticity, helping to create a ritual performance field of affective transformation, aiding in (a) interior subjective experiences of being in the past and (b) the visible manifestation of “real” emotive states by performers, which are seen as collapsing the conventional distinction between role and actor” (Auslander 164).

Again, Auslander’s study reveals a connection between reenactment and an ambivalence surrounding the ethical agency of historical characters. For instance, Auslander suggests that what participants learned from this experience was that they, too, were capable of being “swept away” by these historical roles (such as a leader of a lynch mob), as participants described “anger swelling up inside of me...So you could say part of me knew who I was, what I was doing, but part of me, I don't know, behind that mask, I don't know who that person was” (176). A similar ethical ambivalence, in which the reenactment places individuals at a moment in time where they are forced to respond to a complex web of larger, societal causes and effects framed as out of their control, occurs in the narratives delivered by Missouri Civil War reenactments, as I will describe in chapter one.

This obsession with making sense of the ethical agency of individual, anonymous

Civil War characters suggests another type of trauma (beyond the physical and perhaps even the psychological) sustained by the United States as a larger community in the wake of the Civil War. Joshua Daniel, in his exploration of Moral Injury as applied to recovery from the American Civil War, presents a type of individual and communal trauma that can occur when soldiers, after “committing or participating in acts that they understand to be morally repugnant,” fail to re-enter the larger civilian community after returning home (Daniel 151). As Daniel argues, if we see Civil War soldiers as sustainers of moral injuries which resulted from partaking in acts that violated their community-established moral agency or standards, then the Lost Cause rhetoric of unification presents a significant problem preventing communities trying to recover from the trauma of the war (Daniel 153).

Drawing on David Blight’s 2001 book *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in America*, Daniel points out that Lost Cause interpretations of the war “resulted in a problematic form of closure: Northern and Southern whites might have reconciled and even improved their relations over their shared spilled blood, but American whites and blacks did not” (Daniel 153). By using the Civil War as an example of failed recovery from Moral Injury, Daniel dances around the question: what happened to America as a result of this failure to reconcile these moral injuries? In Daniel’s estimation, interpretations of the war that fail to acknowledge its full devastation prevent psychological and spiritual recovery, which inflicts lasting implications for the moral life of the community (Daniel 168). If this Moral Injury to the community was never healed, in part because Lost Cause and reunification narratives did not allow for it, then it becomes a longstanding scar, since “Being a member of some community involves

ideally extending our individual lives to include past and future events that we do not personally experience but that we claim as our own and share with others, thereby aligning our moral self-constitution with the constitution of our moral community through memory and hope” (Daniel 156). Any kind of public acknowledgement of the war, including commemoration and reenactment in its various forms, involves an interpretation of the war, and speaks to what the community wants to say about itself. As such, to acknowledge a moral transgression of those we come from through such forums forces reflection on what qualities of that community may have led to such a transgression.

As opposed to other representations of the war, in reenactment’s unique orientation on the experience and perspective of the individual and the “small-scale” considerations of history, it creates an effective set of circumstances to position audiences and performers to think about the ethical choices of historical characters, or historic community members. With few exceptions, reenactment is not used to create a set of “happy” circumstances.¹ Rather, as Scott Magelssen points out in his book *Simming: Participatory Performance and the Making of Meaning*, participation in reenacted or “simulated” scenarios allows participants to “bear witness in some manner to past experiences and/or injustices” (Magelssen 5), where “participants learn by making choices within a bounded scenario and learn from the consequences of those choices” (Magelssen 6). What psychological, performative need would there be to re-think or re-

¹ Magelssen notes that some reenactment does take on an element of nostalgia for bygone days of positivity and simplicity, as in living history situations: “Much of what visitors find at living history museums is like this, even though the pasts they represent were fraught with complexity, injustice, suffering, and violence, which are often downplayed in the narrative—to the extent that a museum like Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia still comes off as a “Republican Disneyland” celebrating the white founding fathers, even though enslaved African Americans comprised over half the population of eighteenth-century Williamsburg” (15).

orientate a situation where good ethical choices available to historic community members were seen as clear-cut?

Reenactment, in various forms (some more performative than others), serves as a method for exploring ethically ambiguous situations. Its capacity to allow participants to explore the ethical choices of historic individuals is illustrated through a documentary film directed by David Evans. *My Nazi Legacy: What our Fathers Did* was aired in 2016 as part of the PBS television series *Independent Lens*. The film follows two men as they try to make sense of the fact that both of their fathers held powerful positions during the Nazi occupation of European countries, and chronicles their conversations as they sift through historical documents and visit important locations in the careers and lives of their fathers, engaging in impromptu reenactments along the way (*My Nazi Legacy*). The men take very different approaches to the apparent guilt of their fathers. One of them, Niklas Frank, “has no qualms about denouncing his father,” who had served as Germany’s chief jurist during its occupation of Poland and was executed after being convicted at the Nuremberg Trials. The other character is Horst von Wächter, who embraces ambiguity and refuses to declare his father’s guilt, in spite of strong evidence that he knowingly sanctioned the deaths of thousands of innocent people, insisting that “his father was a decent man caught up in an intolerable situation.” Wächter’s father “was never charged with his crimes.” A third character in the documentary, Philippe Sands, joins the two men on their journey and works as a kind of moderator at times, but also frequently teams up with Frank as he tries to convince Wächter of his father’s guilt. Sands, who wrote the script for the film, is a British law professor descended from Ukrainian Jews, some of whom died as a result of the actions of Frank and Wächter’s decisions (*My Nazi Legacy*).

The film engages with the need to return to a place, to find origins, and to look at details as a way to explore causes and effects. The men engage in reenactment-like, “simming” or participatory performance, where they act out scenes within the historical record, re-speaking and re-embodying incidents in the life of Wächter’s father. Their quest for answers shares historical reenactment’s obsession with details: this is the very spot that he stood, and here is the actual document, dated and signed. In doing so, they remove some of the differences (bodily, informational) between them and their ancestors. By putting Wächter in his father’s shoes, they prompt him to think about the perspective of his father and about his ethical choices in a way that is more intimate, more immediate.

In emotionally-charged arguments, both Sands and Frank reveal their frustration towards Wächter and his reluctance to say definitively that his father was guilty. Wächter prefers to see his father as an ambiguous, complex character, whose actions originated within situations rather than individual ethical agency: all of the choices before him were less than ideal. He feels that there must be something he didn’t know about his father, something that can’t be known about his father now, or can’t be represented or accessed within the historical record. He remembers his father from childhood as a “good man,” or he carried all the signs of being a good man, at least. Wächter’s obstinate, stunned silence at the end of the film, as though his case has been spent, suggests that it takes more courage to admit the guilt of one’s ancestors and to place them in the category of “good” or “bad,” than to allow ourselves to see them ambiguously.

In *My Nazi Legacy*, the “shadow of inherited guilt, denial, and shame” is less removed by time than the shadow of the American Civil War. I suggest that in historical reenactment’s impetus to explore details and re-frame narratives in ways that allow for a

different ethical vision, it engages with a larger question of American character. After all, the United States as a larger entity is also engaged in the process of re-branding historical characters as “good” and “bad.” Andrew Jackson will no longer have the honor of being the face of the twenty dollar bill, because of his support of Slavery and forced relocation of Native American tribes (Calmes). And last year, student protests at the University of Missouri involved a literal re-labeling of the ethic of a significant American historical figure; students placed sticky notes all over the statue of Thomas Jefferson on the University of Missouri Columbia campus, labeling him “racist,” “slave-owner,” “rapist,” and simply “bad.” It is this larger context of re-labeling characters, and a Missouri wrought with the visible tension caused by police violence, governmental changes and social movements that I explore events related to the Civil War in Missouri. To what extent do Missouri Civil War reenactors engage with this impetus to label or re-label historic characters as belonging in the categories of “good” or “bad”?

In my investigation of these questions, the data I collected comes primarily from interviews with Missouri-based Civil War reenactors who are male and who are over 18 years of age. I met and approached these individuals on-site at various reenactment events in the region. After talking with a few Missouri-based Civil War reenactors informally and conceiving of this project, I highlighted several events to attend using the Missouri Civil War Reenactors Association Website (MCWRA Calendar of Events). The organization maintains a calendar of reenactment events throughout the region with brief descriptions of the type and scale of the reenactments.

The first reenactment event that I attended to conduct fieldwork was part of the Hermann Heritage Days in Hermann, Missouri, on September 17, 2016. This event was

framed as part of the town's celebration of its heritage, and became central to my understanding of how reenactments can work as interpretation of the war for community audiences. At this event, I interviewed several reenactors who were camped as both Union and Confederate soldiers, as well as individuals affiliated with the Historic Hermann Museum in order to better understand the historical and cultural context of the town. This event took the form of a typical reenactment weekend, with many participants arriving on Friday to set up camp and departing on Sunday.

Another key event that shaped my understanding of reenactments in the context of larger civic festivities was the Veterans Day celebration in Ottawa, Kansas, on November 5, 2016. As part of the event, which I discuss in more detail in the second chapter, a Civil War skirmish reenactment was staged in a City Park. This was staged as part of what is called a "timeline" event, where reenactors and living historians from various time periods (or, in this case, various wars or periods of Military history) set up their gear and often stage demonstrations for visitors. At this event, I also approached and interviewed Missouri-based Civil War reenactors, who composed many of the participants for the event in Ottawa (which is only about 40 miles from the Kansas-Missouri border).

I also engaged in participant observation at a larger-scale Civil War reenactment event in Prairie Grove, Arkansas, which took place over December 3-4, 2016, where I camped with a Union Kansas City-based reenactment group called the Missouri Irish Brigade. For those unfamiliar with a typical set-up at such events, the campsite and battlefield areas are often separated by substantial space; Confederate and Union camps are also separated. However, there is a third space frequented by both sides, and non-participant visitors to the camps as well, and that is the sutlers—or vendors—who sell

“authentic” or period-appropriate attire, accessories, historic books, knick-knacks, camp implements, etc.

The skirmish reenactments in Hermann and Ottawa are distinguished from the reenactment at Prairie Grove, partially because they occurred within the context of larger civic festivities, while Prairie Grove’s reenactment was the main attraction for visitors. This means that the commercial element (the presence of sutlers) of the reenactment was removed for the events in Hermann and Ottawa. The campsites were simply smaller, but all the essentials of the reenactment set-up were present: the quintessential a-frame canvas tents, and campfires. Campsites were embellished by the appropriate Civil War implements. Chief amongst these objects (from the perspective of an ethnographer looking for people who want to be interviewed) are wooden or canvas chairs where reenactors can sit around and chat. After all, reenactment is a “hobby,” or leisure activity.

Typically, interviews took place as reenactors were seated at their campsite, preparing or cleaning their gear and making conversation, often near a campfire. I was almost always pointed to or adopted by a talkative reenactor at these events. I didn’t push for information from those who didn’t want to talk, but most participants were eager to share insight about their hobby and their interpretations of history. Often, this meant that male reenactors were present as the most “available,” since female reenactors were frequently occupied with preparing food and taking care of children. This thesis focuses on the interpretations of history I received from male reenactors.

The groups with whom I spent time with and individuals with whom I spoke are not “hardcore” reenactors; they are family groups who sometimes allowed for “modern” implements (such as plastic containers to hold biscuits, or the occasional pair of black

sneakers when authentic brogans became unwearable) to make camp life a little bit more enjoyable. Additional insight was gleaned through phone and in-person interviews with reenactors. I have not changed the names of the reenactors whose words appear in this thesis, but in some cases the reenactors have chosen to remain anonymous. In those cases, I have assigned pseudonyms.

Civil War narratives and symbols are caught up in Missouri identities in subtle ways. At Prairie Grove, Arkansas, I had a passing conversation with a reenactor from Iowa. He was in a hurry to get somewhere, but he had heard from a friend that I was writing about the Civil War in Missouri. He insistently stopped me so that he could share this narrative, which he said would illustrate what he saw as a boiled-down version of what the Civil War means for Missouri: A young Harry S. Truman, after receiving a military promotion and a new uniform, visited his aunt's farm. The disturbed aunt reprimanded him and told him to never again visit her while wearing that color uniform—that it was a Federal uniform, and the family had been traumatized enough by the experience of the war, which was at that time only about 50 years earlier, that she could not accept her kin wearing the symbolism of the cruel enemy.

The story is buried in David McCullough's popular biography of Missouri's own president, simply titled *Truman*. The reenactor that I spoke to recounted the narrative, and then told me I could read about it in McCullough's book. After I looked it up, it struck me that he was astute to think that I should hear the story, and that it does encapsulate, in some ways, what I've also extrapolated about Missouri Civil War history as present and past. First, the war in Missouri seems to be framed as about trauma and remote farmsteads, about senseless strings of causes and effects, and lasting hard feelings. And

second, this informant's selected use of written history illustrates the close overlap of folk and written history that occurs in the context of reenactment. McCullough's version in his book mentions nothing of Harry Truman's aunt. After what Truman himself called "the biggest promotion I ever received," he went "for a weekend visit to the Young farm" in "his new dark blue dress uniform with its beautiful red piping on the sleeves" (McCullough 65). Instead, it's his grandmother, not his aunt, who, "could only think of Union soldiers" as he stepped through the door," and told him that "He was never to wear it again in her presence" (McCullough 65).

The narrative told by this reenactor relied on a such a rudimentary symbol (blue means union), that it is deceptive in its simplicity. The simple juxtaposition of Blue and Grey can carry quite the load of meaning. At National Military Park Civil War battlefield gift shops, one can buy a bumper sticker—half grey, half blue, unified by rifles crossing each other, to express the shared experience of the Civil War for all Americans. The Blue and Grey disunity is celebrated in Civil War themed restaurants where one can order hamburgers named after Union or Confederate generals, complete with little Union or Confederate flag toothpicks on top. But out here on the frontier, the division is not so simple.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I explore the transposition of Lost Cause rhetorical tropes into a context that is removed from the Deep South. While Lost Cause rhetoric, both historically and in contemporary reenactment contexts, has tended to promote a valorized view of Northern and Southern soldiers that fight for a common cause, ultimately unifying the country through American values, in my research I found that the rhetoric of unification through shared valor is inverted: instead of casting historic

characters as honorable and worthy, the narratives are populated with ambiguous, flawed, and ethically ambiguous characters as a result of the rugged nature of frontier life and society. In the second chapter, I consider the ambiguous characteristic of two reenactments in the region. I argue that these events demonstrate how reenactment is not always commemoration in a strict sense, and therefore must be understood in a different rhetorical light. Rather than commemorating the war, these community spectacles give a general nod to the Civil War without offering an immediate interpretation, ultimately complementing the ethically ambiguous rhetoric of the reenactors.

Chapter 1: “There’s no bad guys”

There is an often-cited maxim used to acknowledge the limitations of written history: *the winners write the textbooks*. After finishing a conversation with a Missouri Confederate Civil War reenactor—in which he insisted that the war was not about Slavery, and furthermore, that the South was not racist, and that there were no really good characters of the war—he topped off our exchange with the advice that I remember the wisdom from this maxim. Perhaps because of my status as a graduate student at the state’s high-profile, flagship university, Missouri reenactors tended to perform their folk history narratives as alternatives to “textbook” history. At times, I felt as though I were asked to play the role of a representative from the company who writes such history and distributes it to teachers and school kids. They also often rereferred to their interpretations not as alternative to “textbook” history, but alternative to “what you see on TV” or “Hollywood” history. I concluded that, for the most part, such terms are used interchangeably to refer to what reenactors perceive as the understanding of history by the average American citizen who is not a reenactor. Still, whether they learned what they know about history from a public high school teacher or a popular film, their knowledge does not encompass what one reenactor called “the little inside things,” or the gritty details about individuals and their objects.

Reenactment is a forum for interaction between these types of “textbook” or “Hollywood” history, and the particular folk history circulated among reenactors. I found that reenactors were particularly invested in their effort to re-frame or to re-orient history with me, as much as I asked about material culture, or performances, or personal

narratives. As Richard Dorson noted, “Any folklorist engaged in fieldwork will stumble upon this folk history, whether he is looking for it or not—and most often he is not” (Dorson 288). While Dorson argued that there is an essential contrast between official history and folk history, saying that “folk history has little in common with the elitist history that prevails in professional historical circles,” I found that reenactors portray past events without outright rejection of the conceptual framework of “elitist history,” but instead use a rhetoric that knowingly responds to the typical ordering of history. The folk history among reenactors exists in obvious conversation with formal history, sometimes responding directly to it, at times using it for rhetorical purposes, and at other times adopting older versions of “official” history that have influenced their belief. For instance, it is not uncommon for reenactors to verbally cite published books on historical subjects from many decades past, as well as more recent versions. Historical interpretive traditions collide in the context of reenactment.

Dorson points out that folk oral tradition may in fact contribute to an accurate historical record, but like folklorist-historian Charles Joyner, I’m more interested in the underlying beliefs that these narratives reveal. What do the narratives say about the identity and perspective of their community? Putting historical accuracy, or the “straightforward truth of history” aside, what “subtle truths of fiction and poetry” are revealed through the stories that Missouri Civil War reenactors tell about the past? (Joyner 296). What are the themes that “the folk wish to talk about,” and why? (Dorson 287).

I initially started this investigation with a lingering question in the back of my mind. I was fascinated by Missouri’s status as a border state. I felt disoriented: is

Missouri the South, or something else? The state itself acknowledges this ambiguous characterization, citing various origins and meanings behind Missouri's official slogan: The Show-Me State. In one origin tale attached to the phrase, US Congressman Willard Duncan Vandiver gave a speech at a banquet in Philadelphia, in which he announced, "I come from a state that raises corn and cotton and cockleburs and Democrats, and frothy eloquence neither convinces nor satisfies me. I am from Missouri. You have got to show me" ("Why is Missouri Called the 'Show-Me' State?"). In other contexts, it represents the inability of Missourians to learn quickly, or the skeptical nature of the residents. Driving around the state, I thought it meant that I had to be shown if the people in that place considered themselves Southerners, or Midwesterners, at any given point. Such an ambiguity, or essential skepticism, is reflected in the re-framed narratives of my reenacting informants. In this chapter, I describe elements of Missouri reenactment that question the essential "goodness" or honorability of historical characters and instead position them as ethically ambiguous. Rather than a story populated with "good" characters, as appear in "Lost Cause" rhetoric, the rugged, unpolished nature of frontier life gives rise to characters, on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line.

One key premise of the Lost Cause narrative is that Southern soldiers displayed individual courage and honor. As Hays notes in her discussion of the rhetoric of Southern Monuments, "During the Reconstruction period, a new romanticized narrative about the war developed called the "Lost Cause" and was crafted primarily to aid in reconciling the physical and psychological damage over the Southern defeat... Through the rhetoric of the Lost Cause, the war was recast as a meaningful event filled with acts of heroism and bravery" and this helped to codify the vast devastation and innumerable casualties of war

(Hays 96). Daugbjerg points to Tony Horwitz's seminal *Confederates in the Attic* as revealing remnants of the Lost Cause narrative in "hardcore" Confederate reenacting, where the war was fought valiantly by the average, cavalier Southern citizen, for causes greater than the individual: "states' rights, republicanism, and Christianity" (Daugbjerg 732).

While at times the narrative of the Lost Cause tends to be seen as a unifying—where the moral, psychological, and physical injuries sustained by soldiers and communities are redeemed through the ultimate reunification of the country and American values—it also comments on ethics, since soldiers are fighting for their land and loved ones. Among the reenactors I spoke with in Missouri, this narrative mutates: rather than painting Missouri's rebels as particularly noble or honorable men, the motivation of these characters (both Bushwhacker or Confederate, and Federal) tends to be framed by reenactors as personal, rather than engaging in larger political or ideological causes. While my informants engaged with the themes of the larger Civil War, such as emancipation, preservation of the Union, and debates over general causes of the war, they also pointed frequently to incidents and themes specific to Missouri Civil War history in an effort to emphasize the varied individual motivations. The motivations of the Civil War soldier in Missouri are positioned as being removed, in some ways, from the larger, geo-political explanations for the war that are often engaged by the Lost Cause narrative.

For instance, one Missouri Union reenactor I spoke with at his campsite in Hermann pointed to the notorious Jesse James to explain the nature of the Civil War in Missouri: "In some instances in Missouri, it boiled down to families. I mean, look at the James family. And it became, in some respects, almost blood feuds carried out legally!"

Reenactors tend to illustrate how Missouri warfare was different from that of the larger war, in an effort to complicate what they see as common misconceptions among Americans. Missouri guerrilla warfare is presented as self-replicating violence that had its basis in individual or family revenge rather than Slavery or the ideals of the Confederacy. Often, Missouri citizens chose sides based not on their views on emancipation, but a concern more immediate or even primal than economics: “It’s like, some of the people joined a particular side because the Union Cavalry over there just ran through my uncle’s home, and it killed everyone there. I am now going to go against them...It was more revenge, rather than to sit there and say, ‘Oh I want to go protect slavery, or whatever.’ It was more of... you know.” Such Confederates, who, in that moment, pronounce “I am now against them” exemplify the impetus of Missouri reenactors to complicate the ethical agency of historical characters.

There are a number of more specific colorful characters inhabiting the landscape of the Missouri Civil War narratives, and they are illustrative of the ethic of the Missouri Confederate. One member of the 8th Missouri Confederate Cavalry (who currently lives near Leavenworth, Kansas) was eager to talk to me in Hermann, but jokingly gave the name “John Smith.” When I told him that I was a graduate student, he responded to my inquiries with a lighthearted tone, but positioned his arrangement of historical events in direct contrast to academic, official, or “textbook” history: “Oh...you’re in college. You’re not allowed to know like, true, actual history. You’re not allowed to learn true history. True history—[doesn’t] call the Bushwhackers and everybody like mass-murderers and Bloody Bill Anderson and Quantrill and all them people, Jesse James.” He cited typical reasons for engaging in the hobby, saying “You get a scenario. You get to

run, and gun, and play, and then you get to go camping. I got my youngest kids over there, too.” He also mentioned that the original reason he got involved in Cavalry portrayals is because he already had all the gear and know-how to deal with horses, and saw business potential in getting involved in historical films such as *Lincoln*. “In all honesty? We do movies and stuff, so this is our public service, so we get a tax write-off.”

The characters he referenced (Quantrill and his followers) appear in the most well-known (or even celebrated) incident of Civil War history in this region—the raid on Lawrence, Kansas, in 1863, led by the notorious opportunist—Quantrill. Recently, the incident has been framed as an act of terrorism, where a connection is made between the characters of the American past and contemporary international news-making terrorists, with the insane renegade Quantrill leading a gang of “teenage boys and maybe a little older. They were well-armed, violent and irrational” (Tanner). The raid on Lawrence continues to be used as a defining event and a way to talk about Kansas (and Missouri) identity. While in Lawrence the event is memorialized, the advertising for a tour that retraced Quantrill’s route to the Kansas border for the Cass County, Missouri, Historical Society stated that: “We would like to give special recognition to the descendants of the brave men who accompanied Quantrill throughout the war and especially during the trip to raid Lawrence” (Tanner).

According to Piston’s interpretation in the introduction of *A Rough Business:*

Fighting the Civil War in Missouri,

Popular legend portrays Quantrill’s infamous August revenge for the deaths of several women held prisoner by the Federals, women who died when the Kansas City jail housing them collapsed on August 13. Rumors immediately spread that the women had been deliberately killed, as the jail’s inmates included female kin of Quantrill’s notorious subordinates William Anderson, John McCorke, and Cole Younger. In a definitive work, Charles F. Harris sorts through the conflicting

evidence in his essay...Harris discusses the guerrilla war on the Kansas-Missouri border, where Union authorities, unable to catch the guerrillas, began arresting the women who supported them...Harris's research absolves the Federals of intentional harm and establishes the true cause of the collapse. (Piston 9)

In a State Historical Society of Missouri-endorsed article, Harris asserts that the longstanding "rumor" which developed soon after the event—that Federal authorities had undermined the structural integrity of the building in order to intentionally assassinate the women—could not be true, because "During this period it was simply unthinkable for men to intentionally harm women and children in warfare. Few examples exist of atrocities directed at women during the Civil War" (Harris 197). Furthermore, even if they did want to kill them, they could have found an easier method (e.g., poison, arson, etc.) than causing the building collapse (Piston 9). Harris surmises that the structural integrity of the building was compromised, but still "no report exists that determines the cause of the collapse" (Harris 198). This scholarly contribution is significant, according to Piston, because the Federals are absolved of blame. This is a direct response to folk beliefs that have been instrumental in conceptualizing the ethics of the Bushwhackers. Furthermore, a key piece of evidence that Harris points to involves the ethical agency of Federal authorities: they weren't "bad" enough to engage in killing treasonous womenfolk. They were upstanding gentleman.

In an alternative ordering of the narrative surrounding Quantrill's raid on Lawrence, my informant related his version of the same story:

Now, when the Redlegs and the Jayhawks came in, what really stirred up like the Burning of Lawrence, for instance. That was Quantrell that went in and killed every man able to hold a gun...he didn't touch the women, he didn't touch the children. The reason why is because the Jayhawkers would come in, they would steal the women and children from the plantations and from the cities, whatever, they would take them and kidnap them, basically. But this specific time they put them in jail and burned, collapsed the building. Killed all their, killed all their...I

mean. Say, if you were a guy, what would you do? Say, well, you specifically, say I came to your house. I raped your children, I raped your mom, killed your dad—what would you do? You'd let it go?

Definitely not. But the history books make them out to be these raunchy mass murderers, when in fact, if somebody came in my house and did that, I would kill everybody that looked like them.

I would go after the same clothes, the same – you got the same beard that looks like it? Everybody's dying, until they get me. Everybody's dying. That's exactly what they did. They're all in blue!

Rather than painting Missouri Confederates as particularly noble or honorable men, the motivation of these characters (both Bushwhacker and Federal) tends to be framed as personal rather than engaging in larger political or ideological causes. Furthermore, rather than acting out of chivalry or honor, these characters are either buffoon-like and illogical, or merely reacting after an extreme trauma. Characters are not particularly good or bad—only flawed, traumatized, and going berserk.

Another Confederate reenactor, Michael, with the group Kelly's Irish Brigade, pointed to a similar ambivalence, and reminisced about bygone days when he first got started as a Civil War reenactor. He had been recruited by a friend to join the hobby in 1999, and was a performer for Rolla, Missouri's *Ozark Extravaganza*, where imagined Civil War battle scenarios were staged as entertainment for public consumption. He explained that the battle scenario was used as a way to complicate the assumptions made about the war by the public:

It was the same skit every time...We were a Confederate artillery unit... They would always come in, overrun us because, what happened was, our horses ended up getting killed, we were waiting for reinforcements to come in, so we get our gun out when the Union came across us...It was made up, yes—but we explained the thing about the history. They would ask...who thinks that the Confederates were the good guys? Or that they fought the good guys, or the bad guys, or whatever? There's no bad guys. It was brother against brother, cousin against cousin.

The blatant ambiguity of “there’s no bad guys” summarizes the interpretation of the ethic of Confederate and Union soldiers among these Missouri Civil War reenactors. They respond to conventional reasons for why men fought for the confederacy—states’ rights, protecting the Union, rejection or embrace of the institution of Slavery—and replace them with ethically ambiguous, or perhaps even laughable motivations. In this way, such narratives divert the emphasis off of *either* dominant idea of “what the war was about” (abolishing the institution of Slavery or States’ Rights and the preservation of the Constitution) and emphasize that a central meaning of the war is that it’s “about” individuals facing hard choices and experiencing trauma. While Turner suggests that “the cultural nostalgia for what was perceived as a ‘kinder, gentler,’ more wholesome time seems to be at the heart of many people’s affinity for reenacting and living history,” these Missouri reenactors emphasized how terrible and complicated things were for citizens during the Civil War (Turner 57). And while Turner and Handler and Saxton posit reenactment as a means to re-orient history into more coherent narratives, the narratives I encountered frame the experience of Civil War soldiers as largely disjunct and fragmented.

Another reenactor coming from the same unit, Kevin, who commands The 6th Missouri Confederate Cavalry, or Kelly’s Irish Brigade if they reenact dismounted, also emphasized the ambiguous motivations and allegiances of Missouri Civil War soldiers. The narrative of their own unit exemplifies this characteristic intention to put the motivations and allegiances that are seen as traditional up for reinterpretation. Kevin related the history of the group that his reenactment unit portrays: “Kelly’s Irish was formed in 1857 in Saint Louis. They were called the Washington Blues...They were a

Federal State Militia.” Kevin provided an overview of the battles and missions that the unit took part in, and then explained another important aspect of their history—that the unit started out as a part of the Federal State Militia, switched sides, and then later took an official oath of allegiance to fight for the Confederacy. Altering between referring to the original unit as “they” or “we,” Kevin also pointed out that the ambiguity of their loyalty and side-switching combined with the material and frontier circumstances in the region create a particularly complicated situation that disrupts the typical symbolism used to bring order to the Civil War: “They captured a piece at Wilson’s Creek. Went to Lexington. The Cav side went to Liberty or Blue Mills Landing (at the time, called Blue Mills Landing) and attacked the Third Iowa as they were coming down. We were still in our Federal Blues. Because in Missouri, you wore what you had. You brought your own gun. You weren’t supplied by the Military. You had whatever you had. So we were still in our Blues. Iowa unit was...their militia was grey, their uniform color. So you got the blue on the Confederate side fighting the gray on the Federal side. Kinda confusing.”

Confederates are not the only characters to be presented with motivations that are outside those related to the larger political and economic causes and incentives of the Civil War. Union soldiers are also framed as acting less out of values or even serious loyalty, and more out of happenstance, and instead are presented as ethically ambiguous, bordering on buffoon-like and illogical. For instance, a Confederate reenactor with the 8th Missouri Cavalry, Heath, who is in his early twenties, offered me what he called the “actual stories” of the Civil War in the East-Central region of Missouri and pointed out what was important for me to know about the history of the town. His father, who commands the 8th Missouri Confederate cavalry, grew up in Hermann. The Germans

who settled in Missouri tended toward abolition and fought on the side of the Union during the Civil War. The stories, which are connected to Hermann identity, are distinctly lighthearted and humorous, but one aspect of the humor relies on the contradiction between the weightiness of the Civil War, or the supposed seriousness of the historical agents associated with it, and the haphazardness of their actions as portrayed in the stories. In one story, the motivations for Germans joining the Union side boiled down to a mere language barrier rather than any loyalty to a cause. Their ethical agency is presented as almost non-existent.

I can give you the low-down. Hermann was a Union-centered town because the majority of the population was German, and like Dad was saying earlier...Franz Sigel was who they followed because he was a German and they could understand what he was saying. So when he made commands, they knew what he was saying. And when he made speeches or talks, they spread the word, because Germans knew what he said and they spread the word, and that's who they were fighting for. It wasn't really for...you know. They were German and he was German, so they were Blue, because that's their German-speaking friend's side. Very few of the Germans fought South because they couldn't understand what they were saying. And I don't know if you've been deep into the South, but some of them boys are hard to understand!

This local focus of Heath's humorous story of Civil War Hermann, and its impetus to present the characters as confused and bumbling new citizens suddenly required to take action in the context of a definitive, historical American moment works as a challenge to state-sponsored magnification of the same German Federal allegiance. The choices of the characters in the story, which could be framed as valiant (joining the Union Army and fighting for the Abolitionist cause) are mere happenstance. Out here in Missouri, the conception of Union (or Confederate) allegiances as having to do with large-scale ideologies (rejection or preservation of Slavery and the Union, or even "Lost Cause" valor) gives way to the frontier setting. By pointing to the origins of German

Federal allegiance as being the result of a language barrier, the story works as a type of “petit narrative” that illustrates how perspective shifts can be used to relocate focus off of “broad historical shifts and issues of geo-political power” (West 4). In this narrative, what is important is the language being used to communicate among the Germans in Missouri, rather than the pro-Union message that was being circulated in this group. The larger incentives and ideological connections that may have contributed to motivations among this group give way to more immediate and ethically ambiguous motivations.

In another humorous story, Hermann is the site for an exchange between bumbling, frustrated Confederate raiders and the old German men of the town. Again, the humor relies in part on the contrast between the seriousness of the Civil War and how individual incidents played out in a specific Missouri small town, with its idiosyncratic characters and circumstances. Hermann itself as a location, and its citizens’ motivations and actions, are removed from the central themes of the Civil War:

The town was essentially undefended. Their men had all joined the war effort, so they were away probably fighting for the Union. And like I said, I don’t know names very well, but a Confederate convoy of horses and men were across the river, and they were gonna cross the river and take the town. Well, before they did, a certain number of older men who had stayed back to take care of the women here in Hermann, found an old Revolutionary war cannon. And, they took that gun, and they fired it from this big bluff over here. And from the other hills, and they moved it around. And they made it look like the town had a defense! And so these Confederates, because they thought the town was reinforced with cannons and gunfire and stuff, they went 30 miles out of the way to come in on the other side, and when they came in on the other side, all they found was old guys and women! With one gun! And they were so embarrassed about it, they took that gun and threw it in the river, which later was actually uncovered, and is now sitting at the top of the hill at the courthouse.

Instead of the Confederates facing the Union army, they come across a bunch of old men and women civilians. They realize the eccentricity of the events and respond with embarrassment. Furthermore, their motivations are whimsical and their actions are

almost rendered senseless or purposeless beyond the present circumstances. In a further description of the town's history, Heath explained that even the love of alcohol is a legitimate motivator for an action with serious consequences: "Usually, when they came through, they would burn towns. But, the Hermann myth of it is, because it was a wine town, all these big wineries around here...And so, the theory behind it is all the Confederates got drunk and decided not to burn the town."

Again, these narratives, in the context of reenactment, emphasize not the morality of any given cause, but engage in the act of "zooming in" on particular instances in order to demonstrate, or even make light of, a breakdown of larger themes of the war. The characters are neither particularly good or bad, only human. As journalist Jesse Dukes points out, "reenactors are mostly concerned with details" (Dukes 104). Such an emphasis on the individual is a consistent feature across aspects of reenactment. Another principal way that reenactment achieves such a shift in emphasis is through experiential knowledge created through bodily interaction with material culture. As Heath explained of his practice, "We try to reenact what we've learned from those recordings in many ways, by everything from what they wore, to the tack that they used on the horses, to the tents, I mean, you're not going to get more realistic than this—you're wading around in mud." Hence, participants seek to come "to an understanding of history through attempting to know it from the perspective of the ordinary person's experience of it" (West 5). Heath continued his explanation of the type of experience they seek to simulate, and his description is distinctively gritty and unpleasant:

You know, they were camping every night, unless they were fighting a battle. They camped in all conditions. So, it wouldn't just be your happy-go-lucky dry field to lay down in the grass, too. You know, they had rough conditions. Their

boots rotted out, and their socks were wet, and they were miserable, but they still fought. And that's kind of how we do it.

Many scholars have commented on the typical reenactor's obsession with the details of the "authentic" objects that they use. While most of the reenactors I encountered in Missouri were not necessarily "hardcore" reenactors, they also point to the physical or bodily element of reenactment as offering something that written forms of history cannot. On several occasions during my time among reenactors, I was recruited to participate (most often in a distinctly non-serious manner) in a skirmish reenactment so that I could better understand what reenactment offers participants. Descriptions of the physical experience of reenactment, like the narratives that promote ethical ambiguity that I have described above, tend to point to how *bad* the experiences of Civil War soldiers were. For instance, another Union reenactor camped in Hermann explained that the experience of reenactment offers a way to add "more depth" to historical interpretations. He described what a "hands-on" reenactment experience could offer: "This is what it was like. Damn that thing's heavy! I mean, the tents we usually set up for one person, they'd pack six people into them...so, togetherness!" Essentially, the most fundamental bodily experiences of reenactment may be described by many as unpleasant.

While camped with the Missouri Irish Brigade at Prairie Grove, Arkansas, a Union reenactor with the group explained that he sees the embodiment element of the hobby as doing the work of "preserving" history, "Because, without it—without an actual, 'this is what they wore, this is what they carried' you know, it's just an idea. It's just words. It's just a story." He then handed me his rifle and asked me to hold it for awhile, presumably with the knowledge that I would perceive the substantial weight of the rifle. "Hold that! The guys carried that, two, three, four years. And shot other

Americans with it! Infields, and Springfields have killed more Americans than any other gun made in the world. More Americans died in the Civil War—north and south combined—than any other war *combined*.” Again, physical interaction and role-play with the implements of the Civil War are also linked to the trauma of the war. In this way, the predominant element of embodiment involved in reenactment is complimentary to the narrative interpretive emphasis on the ethical ambiguity of Civil War soldiers.

Furthermore, “what they wore,” in many instances, is noted as indicative of their status as individuals. For instance, another Confederate reenactor camped with Kelly’s Irish Brigade at Hermann told me that he enjoys researching historic patterns and sewing his own clothing. He noted how personal the “uniform” of a soldier could be, describing how his research into an ancestor who served in the Battle of Lexington led him to uncover a letter that illustrates the personal, almost sentimental nature of the clothing that soldiers wore into battle: “He had written a letter home, asking his mom to send him some new shirts. And he described—I want dad’s old green shirt that he wore, and he described it in detail, the one with the notched collar. He said—I love that shirt. Would dad give it to me?...And so you would see a lot of variation in the collars and the cuffs, and so it was all personal.” As the reenactor narratives point to reasons why an individual would get involved with the Union or Confederate army, the clothing of his ancestor is distinct from that of the “textbook” or “Hollywood” history image of the Civil War soldier wearing strictly blue or grey, or at least a legitimate uniform. Instead, the ancestor of this reenactor is seen (through the letter) asking his mother for a hand-made item that is linked in some way to his family identity, or at least in memory to his father. Here again, the characters of the war are particularly individual and human.

Daugbjerg points out that historical reenactment often engages with an attraction to the “mythic common man” that motivates exploration of individual experiences of the war, through both research and interaction with material culture (Daugbjerg 727). What are the characteristics of the common man as presented by these reenactors? I suggest that he is one who is just doing the best he can under the circumstances dealt to him. The overwhelmingly negative and trying circumstances of psychological trauma leads these characters to join a gang and engage in senseless killing. Hillbilly-like characters take advantage of the war to indulge in blood feuds. Confused Germans are loyal to the German language, not Lincoln’s mission of justice. In some ways, the spatial shift to the Missouri frontier also works rhetorically to re-orient the war and contribute to this sense that the mythic common man cuts an ethically neutral figure. Out here on the frontier, human beings are acting out of instinct and desperation, not out of some sense of honor, democratic ideals, or loyalty to a larger cause.

In Jesse Dukes’s ethnographic article based on participant observation and interviews among Confederate reenactors at Gettysburg, he points to a potential motivator for reenactors that often floats just under the surface of the idea of “heritage,” both Union and Confederate. Demonstrating that historical reenactment tends to focus on small narratives and bodily details in a way that written history does not, he observes that “focusing on certain details makes it much easier to feel good about one’s Confederate heritage” (Dukes 104). As Dukes notes, “Generally, it drives white Southerners crazy to hear people claim that the Union army was fighting to end slavery. And for the most part, they’re correct; the Union army wasn’t fighting to end slavery. It was fighting to preserve the Union, and against the aristocratic culture of Southern oligarchs” (Dukes 100). When

you zoom in on historical “facts,” even the Great Emancipator, Lincoln himself, is a problematic figure. Ignoring the larger causes and effects of the war and instead focusing on individual predicaments, and ethical decision-making in the face of all-out warfare, is one way that the Missouri reenactors emphasized “details” and disengaged with the larger ethical questions raised by the Civil War.

But I’m also interested in Dukes’s phrase “to feel good about” one’s heritage. In an article from *The Bitter Southerner*, a feature-based website built around the concept of Southern tension, or “the strain between pride and shame,” the author S.E. Curtis theorizes new goals for reenactment. Instead of commemoration, a “progressive” Civil War reenactment practice should be about the feelings of trauma and loss:

Reenactors can work through the pain and loss their ancestors may have felt. White Southern reenactors may feel oppressed and conquered because their Confederate ancestors lost the war. At worst, their families have had to suffer through not only defeat, but also Reconstruction and 150 years of socioeconomic hardship. So they use an aesthetic means in the present to examine this past in the hope of creating a different future. In their minds, they are the underdogs. Through this kind of performance, they are yearning for catharsis and a change in outlook. (Curtis)

Curtis draws a distinction between an emerging reenactment that encompasses these goals and incorporates less-prominent narratives, and the type that is “concerned with political and social ideologies connected to the Confederacy and offer no apology for fighting for slavery or racism” (Curtis). His new, emerging strand of reenactment rejects, for the most part, the Lost Cause emphasis on honor and heroism, and instead promotes a broadening of “the scope of history, to include what was missing or glossed over—not only the violence against and degradation of African-Americans, but also of the lower classes. They do it not only to work through the trauma of their ancestry, but also for everyone else’s benefit” (Curtis). While the Lost Cause gives ethical power to the typical

foot soldier, this new type of reenactment creates more people on the bottom: people who were used as ploys to the economic system of Slavery for the benefit of elites.

Like this emerging brand of reenactment that Curtis puts forward, I find that Missouri reenactors want to create more space for such complexity and tension. They present what they perceive to have been “glossed over,” namely the spatial divide between the frontier warfare of Missouri and the comparable “Gentleman’s War” back East as well as the varied personal (or frivolous) reasons why individuals decided to join a given cause. And their narratives reject the simple categories of “good” and “bad” and thus offer less incentive to make ethical judgements about the characters as well as an invitation to re-examine the ways in which individuals responded to larger Northern and Southern causes and ideologies more closely. Or, as the Missouri Division of Tourism puts it, perhaps in the context of the American Civil War, “good guys were hard to find” (Missouri’s Civil War Bushwhackers & Outlaws). However, given that Missouri Civil War reenactment is an overwhelmingly white hobby, reenactments may provide a forum to rightly explore “glossed over” aspects of the American Civil War while at the same time failing to represent all of the characters present on the stage of the American mid-nineteenth century. To what extent does highlighting such “glossed over” aspects of Civil War history, which perhaps *are* deserving of a thorough reexamination, come at the expense of downplaying the trauma and reality of slavery? In the following chapter, I explore the ways in which such complication and ethical ambivalence are communicated to a regional audience through the performances of Missouri reenactors.

Chapter 2: “A typical battle scenario”

Within the context of high-profile public debates about the meaning of Confederate symbols, and in the Confederate flag parade down Baltimore Street in Gettysburg, described in the introduction, Civil War reenactors position themselves as symbolic gate-keepers. They acknowledge the contradiction between what the symbol currently means to so many Americans (Slavery and the cause of the Confederacy), and what it may have meant to historical characters who also used it. The parade communicates a relatively specific message that both Union and Confederate reenactors use this flag to educate people about the Civil War, not to promote the idea of slavery, and that they weren't going to cave to politically-correct pressure to stop using this symbol. However, not all spectacle-performances organized by reenactors deliver such a clear message to audiences. In this chapter, I describe and discuss two reenactment events that cannot be classified as strict commemoration of specific, historical events. Rather, the skirmish reenactments in Hermann, Missouri, and Ottawa, Kansas, serve a purpose more similar to that parade in Gettysburg, where an insertion of visual rhetoric and a general acknowledgement of the presence and contradictory nature of the Civil War become primary messages.

While it is tempting to approach reenactors as a group whose activities are isolated and exaggerated expressions of tensions existing among group members, reenactment events would not exist without their symbiotic relationship with audiences, which are often assembled for larger civic festivities. For instance, in his discussion of reenactment as a forum for participants to reaffirm traditional masculinity while

patriarchal structures are challenged in larger society, Hunt largely dismisses the rhetorical message of reenactment, arguing that “the principle reason why battles are enacted in front of an audience is not just for financial benefit or to educate, but because through public display, a leisure lifestyle is vindicated and legitimated. The bigger the audience the better” (475) However, because reenactment almost always includes an element of performance for community audiences who themselves willingly consume the performance and comment upon it, it is inappropriate to simply dismiss the message of such performances while focusing only on the beliefs and practices internal to the group. That is to say, I explore reenactment as a performance within a larger community context, not just a practice that exists for performers to navigate tensions and identities.

In his discussion of the origins of reenactment, Simon During breaks down various categories of “basic conceptual components” involved in various types of historical reenactment: “We can understand historical reenactments as syntheses of: (i) practices of commemoration, (ii) practices of mimesis or imitation, (iii) expressive collective performances, and (iv) specific relations to particular historical events (or genres of event)” (During 315). While many scholars approach historical reenactment as a serious effort at commemoration, at times (as with the Confederate parade I encountered in Gettysburg, as well as the reenactment events in Missouri that I will present in this chapter), reenactors engage more conspicuously with these other components of reenactment, namely mimesis (artistic replication of important characteristics) and expressive collective performance. Turner describes the reenactment situation as “a *simulacrum* of another time which interpenetrates ‘real time’ and in many cases succumbs to the necessities of effective theatric performance in that real time” (56).

In these performative contexts, reenactors attempt to mediate between the past and the present for audiences, not only for themselves.

In this chapter, I discuss two reenactment events that I classify as overt simulacrum, in that they are aware of their inability to convince the audience that what they are witnessing effectively represents the past. I argue that such events demonstrate how reenactment is not always commemoration in a strict sense, and therefore must be understood in a different rhetorical light that considers the experience of the audience. Rather than commemorating the war, these community spectacles give a general nod to the Civil War without offering a frank interpretation of the war, ultimately complementing the ethically ambiguous rhetoric of the reenactors.

“Authenticity” is the hot-button word among scholars writing about historical reenactment, and it is continually linked to the messages delivered and received through the practice. In their classic, often-cited article on reenactment, Richard Handler and William Saxton positioned authenticity as an individual process engaged by reenactors. Those who practice living history “seek to regain an authentic world, and to realize themselves in the process, through the simulation of historical worlds” (Handler and Saxton 243). While living history practitioners continue to define authenticity (expressed as an important element of the practice related to clothing, props, setting) as an accurate simulation of the historical event in question, “a second conception of authenticity, one that permeates living history but is not consciously understood by the practitioners as central to the task of historical simulation” exists, which implies a strong link between authenticity and “the privileged reality of individual experience” (Handler and Saxton, 242-243).

One key value of living history is that it can offer what formal, written history cannot—for the spectator, but moreover for the active participant. While formal, written history provides a vast linear representation of an official account, reenactment creates the semblance of coherence by centering on an individual historical character’s experience. And it doesn’t take much time spent among serious reenactors to realize how much participant enthusiasm for the hobby is wrapped up in the physical objects used in battle and encampment scenarios. Material culture and the concept of authenticity are often closely linked. Tony Horwitz’s celebrated *Confederates in the Attic*, perhaps the most famous piece of ethnographic writing approaching the reenactment community in the United States, describes even obsession with minute visual and olfactory “authenticity” which calls on reenactors to soak objects in urine to achieve particular coloring that they perceive as authentic (7). Furthermore, the perception of authenticity is often a primary concern for creators and performers of “historically accurate” productions and reenactment scenarios. But the precise definition of authenticity has been hard to pin down because of its deceptively concrete connection with absolute historical fact, while it also clearly relies on the subjective experience and knowledge of the audience.

When spectators are involved in historical performance (meaning that the reenactment is taking place as a public performance rather than a scenario staged only for the benefit and enjoyment of participants), the perception of authenticity hinges on the audience’s ability to understand that they are agreeing to watch an actor take on a character of a diseased person (real or imagined), with the simultaneous suspension of disbelief (Hughes 137). The performance allows us to shift between two different

realities; we know what we are witness to is fabricated, but we believe that it is somehow nevertheless “authentically” representative of the past. Both actors and spectators are keenly aware that it is impossible to recreate an actual historical moment, but through the performance and aesthetic engagement, the audience can feel connected to (or even absorbed into) a narrative and make it “feel” real (Hughes 146). Even though most of the responsibility for creating the semblance of authenticity rests with the audience, attribution of authenticity tends to be placed on the actors involved in historical representation (Hughes 146), and audiences must be invested enough to make this transaction occur. Putting the experience of authenticity aside (which, I argue, the skirmish reenactments I attended largely do in their willingness to incorporate non period-correct symbols), even more basically, audiences must be invested enough to simply be present at a reenactment and willing to take it seriously.

In a 2005 Essay entitled “Playing Rebels: Reenactment at Nostalgia and Defense of the Confederacy in the Battle of Aiken” James Farmer describes the community significance of an annual skirmish reenactment “between Union and Confederate cavalry fought in the streets of the town of Aiken” in South Carolina on February 11, 1865 (Farmer 50). Farmer’s sketch of the reenactment of the Battle of Aiken is useful in contextualizing the events that I will discuss, in part because he identifies some of the frequent characteristics of small-scale skirmish reenactments. He positions the battle of Aiken as a cavalry skirmish reenactment that is of a significantly smaller scale than some of the bigger, more famous battles (such as Gettysburg, Antietam, and Fredericksburg) (Farmer 50). The circumstances and organization of the event that he describes resembles the small-scale skirmishes I attended, noting that “such events generally are not intended

to replicate the actual battles on the same terrain and with the same numbers and variety of forces. Rather, they are somewhat generic recreations of military clashes featuring various levels of authenticity in tactics, attire, and behavior” (59). Furthermore, while the actual battle took place in the town, the skirmish reenactment takes place “on rural land a few miles away” (59).

The skirmish was one of the last Confederate triumphs and became an important event of the community’s history and identity. In a relatively rare instance of scholarly discussion of the relevance of a reenactment to a community audience, Farmer asserts that the annual skirmish became an important way that the community made visible and reinforced its perceived values and heritage. In its conception, the event was intended by organizers to exhibit a positive local heritage, where “By seeing, hearing, and smelling the ‘battle’ as it was staged in front of them, by examining the uniforms, weapons, equipment of the reenactors, and by mingling and talking with the men and women who became, for a time, the ancestors who fought to defend their homeland or supported those who did, the area’s citizens could appreciate more fully the heritage that was theirs” (Farmer 57).

While Farmer acknowledges the experience of the audience in his analysis of the battle of Aiken, he assumes that having an audience is a hindrance to authenticity as it is defined by reenactors (adherence to the historical record), and that “Being watched changes the whole reenactor experience, robbing it of one important aspect of authenticity, yet it is only through having an audience that Confederate reenactors can perform the function of making a public statement about the honor of the men, and the cause, they are replicating” (Farmer 50). At the same time, Farmer describes some of the

audience's actions during the performance: "...When the Yankees finally retreat toward their 'end zone' the audience cheers, and afterward some thank their defenders with 'y'all done good' and other words of praise" (62). In short, the reenactors and their community audience are in agreement about the meaning of the performance. He argues that the event exists because it illustrates "the increasing rage that some southern whites feel at the assault on their heritage but that they rarely have the opportunity to express publicly or in acceptable ways" (51), and the details he selects to portray the audience's general reaction suggest that they identify with this estimation of the reenactment's purpose.

In his quest to establish a rhetoric of spectacle that takes both messenger and audience into consideration, S. Michael Halloran explores the audience response at a New York State-sponsored ceremony to mark the 150th anniversary of the second Battle of Saratoga in October 1927. British forces were defeated during the original battle, which was marked as a turning-point in the Revolutionary War (5). The estimated number of attendees for the festivities surrounding this important battle is between 100,000 and 160,000 (Halloran 5). Halloran defines spectacle as "a public gathering of people who have come to witness some event and are self-consciously present to each other as well as to whatever it is that has brought them together" (5). Halloran points to a parade as a clear example of a spectacle, where audience members "become conscious of membership in what traditional rhetoric calls an audience, a gathering of people who may know nothing more of each other than that they have a common desire to see and hear something" (5).

The spectacle that Halloran describes (the battle reenactment and festivities surrounding the second Battle of Saratoga, a "pageant at Saratoga" that involved over

6,000 participants) was orchestrated so that participants could observe representations of the fighting that occurred on the piece of land, but also to communicate a story about immigration and the origins of democracy (Halloran 10). Yet, as Halloran points out “it’s not clear how much of this message was apparent to the audience,” since “Newspaper accounts focus heavily on the visible spectacle, especially the battle reenactment, with no mention of the verbal exchanges” that would have, perhaps, delivered the intended message to the audience (11). Halloran asks an important question of reenactment that is often neglected in scholarly writing on the subject: “What must it have been like to be in the throng of people who gathered at Bemis Heights (the actual site of the Battle of Saratoga) in October 1927?” (8). What message is being received, not transmitted, by a reenactment, and how might these messages be different? While an official purpose of a reenactment may be to commemorate an important or tragic event in a community’s past, to honor armed service members, or send any number of other messages, for the audience a reenactment may “devolve into a *spectacle* in the negative sense—an awkward or ridiculous performance, a fiasco” (Halloran 9).

How might the performances of Missouri regional Civil War reenactors reflect their rhetorical approach to the war that positions the characters as ethically ambiguous? Like the Confederate flag parade of Union and Rebel reenactors I observed in Gettysburg during the Summer of 2015, sometimes reenactors are performing not so much as to commemorate a specific event, but to render visible a more generalized idea that such symbols matter, and that Civil War history matters. In this way, reenactors serve as gatekeepers to Civil War memory and visual/material culture within a larger community context, taking on an element of pageantry and spectacle. Such types of performances

may be easy to dismiss as “farby,” or “inauthentic,” (and sometimes *are* dismissed by more “serious” or authenticity-centered reenactors). However, approaching these performances in a way that takes into account the rhetoric of the visual spectacle as it is experienced by audience members may lend insight into how they are functioning as mimesis and as expressive collective performance.

An instance of a Missouri reenactment event accomplishing such a rhetoric of representation rather than commemoration took place as part of the Hermann Heritage Days, an annual celebration and tourist draw for Hermann, Missouri, about 80 miles West of St. Louis. Hermann is a quaint German town in the heart of the state sitting at a population of around 2,500 people. For many, the town is a place to see old German barns, drink wine, shop for antiques, or get out of the city for a weekend. The immigrants tried to start a German state, an attempt especially fitting because the area bears a strong resemblance to the Rhineland. Recently, the Missouri Humanities Council launched a Heritage Tourism initiative intended to emphasize the region’s cultural resources within the varied context of the Show-Me state (Keeven-Franke). Over the weekend of September 17-18, 2016, several nondescript skirmish reenactments were staged as part of Hermann Heritage Days. The various events that took place throughout the weekend were advertised as part of the town’s celebrations of its heritage.

This year, one of the battle reenactments (all of them free for the public to attend) took place in an industrial park area outside of town, only a few minutes drive for spectators coming from the heart of Hermann, but about an hour and a half ride on horseback. Spectators mainly drove to the site and parked their cars in a nearby parking lot. Those reenactors who were not on horseback also drove their cars and assembled at

the site. This year, the festival occurred during a particularly muggy weekend. The ground was saturated, and horses and boots sank quickly through grass and into mud on the “battlefield” (a clearing about the size of a standard soccer field). The crowd of spectators gathered behind the thin white rope that had been put in place to create a boundary between the performance and spectator areas.

The reenactors took their places as the sun came out and brought a sudden rise in temperature. Taking the standpoint of spectators, the field was organized into three sections: in the performance space ahead, the Federal reenactors assembled in the distance to the left. The combination of Confederate cavalry and infantry was much nearer to spectators, and some on foot operated one prominent cannon. The third section was a section of the steep, partially wooded hill that lies just beyond the field. More confederate reenactors were assembled on the hill. The reenactment wasn't a particularly large event—there were about 100-150 reenactors total on both the Confederate and Union sides, including those who were portraying civilians, who camped in period clothing and tents but who did not partake in the battle scenario. I counted about fifty to seventy spectators.

Another significant element of the spectacle and pageantry was the presence of a dozen other horses with riders carrying modern US flags. They assembled off of the main section of the battlefield, behind the lines on the confederate side several hundred feet back. Spectators at this particular skirmish reenactment did not receive much information about what they were doing there and what they represented, but their presence was significant (See Figure 1). The group was the *Stars N Steeds Equestrian Drill Team*, an all-female competitive and performing group based out of Willard, Missouri, which is

part of the Springfield Metropolitan Area. In another skirmish reenactment during the weekend, these equestrians portrayed, in historical costume, a historic all-girl Confederate group. The “Rhea County Spartans” based out of Rhea County, Tennessee, were portrayed in an imagined capturing scenario that evidently had nothing to do with actual Hermann history. Here, they appeared in more standard competition and performance regalia, with Western-style hats, shirts, and ties.



Figure 1. The Stars N Steeds Equestrian Drill Team in formation near a skirmish reenactment in Hermann. Photo by the author.

The skirmish appeared to begin somewhat slowly, with a few shots fired here and there and then increasing cannon blows, gunfire, movement of troops back and forth on the field, and finally a few reenactors taking hits and falling as wounded or dead.

Farmer's description of the Battle of Aiken illustrates the typical characteristics of the genre, which also depicts the spectacle and motion in this reenactment at Hermann: "The "battle" may be described as resembling a football game, with opposing forces lining up at opposite ends of a rectangular field..." (Farmer 61). Cavalry and infantry advance and retreat "in orderly fashion toward the enemy, firing in unison at the orders of their leaders...with little apparent effect, as few on either side are willing to go down until the skirmish nears its end" (60-62). Federal reenactors in the distance to the left appeared in formulated units, while the Confederate cavalry's formation in the foreground tended to look more malleable, since their motion was influenced by the horses they rode (see Figure 2). A few Confederates on foot operated a cannon that was situated close by the spectators, contributing impressive and sometimes startling booms.

As Halloran points out, the significance of a performance can "lie more in the fact and circumstances of their delivery than in their texts" (15). During the action, spectators felt free to comment on the performance with their family members and friends. There was an overall sense of tension and confusion as spectators attempted to interpret and extract the meaning of the performance. Perhaps because the action of the reenactment often seems drawn-out and spacious, spectators started making light of the situation with comments like "Why is everybody moving so slowly? This doesn't seem realistic" or "how come nobody's dead yet? When are people going to get shot? Isn't battle a lot more violent than this?" A handful of people did yell out the occasional "got em'!" or similar commentary when reenactors finally did start to "take hits" near the end of the battle. The



Figure 2. Confederate Cavalry reenactors prepare to start a skirmish reenactment in Hermann, while two children look on. Photo by the author.

audience experience of this skirmish reenactment was one in which they were interpreting and making the meaning as much as the performers, and their response seemed largely critical of the perceived lack of “realism” of the performance, rather than illustrative of a unified communal interpretation about the Confederate or Union cause.

Effectively breaking the fourth wall of the performance, finally, near the end of the battle scenario, a reenactor broke through this confusion with a voice of authority: as the action was coming to a close, David Plumber, who leads the 8th Missouri Confederate Cavalry, positioned himself on horseback right behind the white rope barrier and addressed the crowd. Portraying a Union soldier for this battle scenario, he donned the

quintessential dark blue Union wool uniform. The audience largely responded with attentiveness and with laughter to his explanation and announcement:

What you're seeing right now is the surrender of a unit. Basically, what you saw was the Confederate battery that was without its mule team. They were in Hermann looking for other mules and horses that were left behind by Sterling Price's party. They were caught by a contingent of Yanks that were following them up. They weren't even strengthened, armed, but they caught them napping....the patrol went out, they were caught, they wheeled out a gun and pretty much took them by force. A typical battle scenario like what would have been seen in the state of Missouri. As a matter of fact, if you don't know it, Missouri's ranked number two in the Civil War for the number of battles fought. Artillery pieces being fired....a lot of scenarios were fought in Hermann, this is just one. At 5:00 at Stone Hill Winery there's an infantry skirmish, at 7:00 at Riverside Park, down next to in front of the Hotel, there is a battle, an artillery battle. At 8:00 tonight, there is a period dance, and you are allowed to dance. And if you're cute, I want to dance with you, and guys, I'm not talking to you (audience laughter). We're going to drop the rope, we're going to let you come out here, look at the horses, weapons, ask any questions. Did you have a good time?

The audience laughed and applauded. A handful of spectators took up the invitation and approached the reenactors. As the crowd began to leave the site, the reenactment units marched out in formation (See Figure 3).

While Farmer seems to present a unified meaning for the community in the annual reenactment of the Battle of Aiken, the skirmish reenactments involved in the Hermann Heritage Days could not present such a unified meaning, and instead worked to present a more general and ambiguous representation and interpretation of the Civil War in Missouri. Rather than communicating a type of "nostalgia" for a specific cause or community values, in its ambiguity, its lack of specificity, its (inadvertent?) invitation



Figure 3. A reenactment unit marches away from the reenactment site after the performance. Photo by the author.

towards audience criticism, this performance functioned not so much as commemoration in the sense that it asked its audience to solemnly remember or observe a communal, historical event, but rather functioned as a spectacle whose meaning was largely ambivalent and generalized. David Plummer’s invitation to the audience was to interpret the performance as “A typical battle scenario like what would have been seen in the state of Missouri,” even if a similar event did actually occur in the historical record in that place (the town of Hermann).

It’s also important to note that during his announcement at the end of the battle, Plummer told jokes and promoted a light-hearted mood. Although the audience had just

witnessed a representation of a historical event that would have resulted in death, carnage, and trauma, they were invited to lightheartedness rather than serious reflection about the historical event's meaning for the past or present. Furthermore, the presence of the Stars N Steeds Equestrian Drill Team further complicated the meaning of the event, as they put on an impressive display of horsemanship and made the current US flag one of the prominent symbols present at the event. They still made an appearance at the skirmish reenactment, even though they were not involved in the action of the reenactment and they made no attempt at historical "accuracy." Their prominent display of the modern US flag lent the event an air of patriotism and civic festivity.

In short, the message of this performance was a relatively general acknowledgement that the Civil War happened, and in part, it took place in Hermann. Many reenactors I spoke with acknowledged that semi-fictional battle scenarios like the skirmish at Hermann served the purpose of attracting visitors to where real education could take place (in face-to-face conversation between audience members and reenactors). Yet in their hesitance, or inability, to encourage a serious commemoration and instead use their position as reenactors to present a mimesis of frontier Civil War battles, performances like this largely leave unchallenged status-quo interpretation of the Civil War among audience members. Audience members, coming from Hermann itself and attracted to Hermann as a tourist destination, brought their disparate interpretations and knowledge about the war to the performance. While reenactors may see their interpretation of the Civil War as contrary to dominant (textbook or pop culture) interpretations, such public performances fail to accomplish such a specific disruption of the status quo.

The mixing of Civil War symbols and characters with contemporary ones in the context of community performance is not a special characteristic specific to Hermann's reenactments. Another example where I encountered Civil War imagery mixing into a larger context of community pageantry was during a Veterans Day Celebration in Ottawa, Kansas. Ottawa, with a population sitting around 12,000, is about an hour's drive southwest of Downtown Kansas City, Missouri. Each year, on the Saturday before Veterans Day, there is a parade down Main Street. In conjunction with the parade, a "timeline" living history event occurs in a nearby park, where living historians and reenactors from various eras and wars display gear and weaponry and present artillery demonstrations for the public. The parade and reenactment in Ottawa had a definitive carnivalesque flair—WWII soldiers, and saloon girls in red velvet alike sat at picnic tables while eating chilidogs and making small talk. When I was at the event, it struck me that my "hardcore" reenactor friends back in Pennsylvania might have labeled this event as a whole new level of "farby," or "unauthentic."

A few hours before the scheduled reenactment, I sat down in front of the ATM on Main Street and watched the Veterans Day parade. Some spectators brought lawn chairs and lined them up on the sidewalk. There were the usual High School and Middle School marching bands, the ROTC, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, Shriners, and cheerleaders and ballerinas waving like Miss America while sitting on hay bales in pickup trucks. There were service men and women and the Franklin County Republican Party. There was also an "Oriental Band": Shriners in bright turbans circa Hollywood 1970. And one of them rode on top of a camel-mobile hooked up with a hose inside, so that the camel spit water all over Main Street and the audience laughed. There were red Cadillacs, and horses—

carrying Confederates, cowboys with grey hair and beards like Kurt Russell in a Western movie, and the Garnett Saddle Club, Inc. The final spectacle of the parade was the slow-moving, miniature ponies pulling full-grown men and women in little carriages.

There was a strong link between the parade and the subsequent living history/reenactment event in the park where the two-day “timeline” event was taking place. Immediately after the parade, many parade spectators made their way down to the park, where volunteers handed out printed schedules of the day’s events. I took a few minutes to peruse through the WWI and WWII reenactment camps before the main event: a Civil War skirmish that would take place in a partially-wooded area in the park. Spectators started to gather, although it wasn’t immediately clear where the reenactment would take place. The arena of the reenactment on that Saturday was about double the size of a soccer-field. Confederates on horseback and foot assembled to the right, and off in the distance to the left, we could see some troops in Union Blue. After a delay of about 10 minutes, a reenactor came out and addressed the crowd: “Whose car is parked out there by the Union troops? If we can find out who it belongs to, we would like to ask them to move it because it’s ruining our photo opportunities.” After a few more minutes, a reenactor on horseback came out and directed the spectators to where they should situate themselves to get the best view of the action. Everyone moved about a hundred yards to the left, towards the middle of the performance space. Tracing a line with his hand, he said “you all should keep behind these two trees, so that you don’t end up in the thick of it.”



Figure 4. Confederate and civilian (female) reenactors participate in the Ottawa Veterans Day Parade while community members watch. Photo by the author.

Finally, a Union reenactor on horseback approached the crowd and delivered some brief historical context, explaining that after the Battle of Westport (which took place in Kansas City in October 1864), Union scouting parties were sent into Kansas:

We're representing just a Cavalry scouting detail, uh, with one horse-drawn gun...well, it's not actually horse-drawn. It's being pulled by imaginary horses today. But, uh, we're just a scouting patrol running ahead of the rest of the army, and we run into a little resistance over here. And so it's a little bit of a fictional battle we're gonna do, but we're doing the best with the numbers we have. Thank you, folks.

Uh, now, I know this is not a historic time-piece, but I have to know how much time or I'll talk too long (audience laughs). They told me if I talk past 1:15, they'll just send somebody over here to lead my horse away while I'm talking...alright, I'm going to ride back and join my men, and, uh, we will commence. Thank you,

folks. Thanks for coming.

During the reenactment of this scenario, which lasted about 30 minutes, the Confederates slowly advanced toward the Union troops, frequently reloading their firearms. Several audience members started complaining that the reenactment was moving too slowly, joking that they were “ready to see somebody die.” One audience member compared this reenactment to a larger one that they had attended in Topeka, Kansas, where “people were falling dead all over the place. But they had about 60 more people.” Most audience members were conversing with their friends and families during the reenactment, making comments like “Oh! They got them!” in response to instances when a reenactor did “take a hit” and fell to the ground as if wounded or dead. At the point in the battle when more reenactors did start taking hits, a spectator from Kansas City prompted me to “just think of how many casualties they would have had. And most of it was just illness and stuff like that.” The reenactment ended with the Confederates taking captive and executing, by firing-squad, a handful of surviving Union soldiers.

As the action was coming to a close, another announcement was made that both commented on elements of the visual representation of the battle, and offered more extensive interpretation for audience members:

A lot of the units that fought out here were Militias. Basically, they went to battle wearing their own clothes, carrying their own weapons, supplying their own horses....There was so much hatred. There’s that old saying that the war on the border was fought to the knife, and the knife to the hilt. This is one thing you don’t read about in the history books. If you’re in school (at least when I was in school, I can’t say about now, it’s been a few years since I was in school) you know, the Civil War happened back East. Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia—Not much happened out here.

It wasn’t until I became a reenactor that I found out, actually, in Missouri there were more battles fought than any other state other than Virginia and Tennessee. The difference was, out here we didn’t have the huge battles with tens of

thousands of men on each side. They were small engagements something like we had here. The largest battle West of the Mississippi was the battle of Westport, in October 1864, with 30,000 troops involved. A lot of the battles West of the Mississippi, there'd be a few hundred involved. But it was a different war out here than it was back East. I thank you all for coming! Now, at 3:00, Kansas River gang is going to do some of their skits with the Old Town set up, right across the road from the World War II battle. The World War II battle will be at 3:00. Thank you all for coming, folks!



Figure 5. Confederate reenactors reloading their firearms during the performance. Photo by the author

With this conspicuous commentary, the rhetorical stance of the reenactment aligned with the rhetoric discussed in chapter one. In its effort to present a “fictional battle” or mimesis, the boiled-down message of the performance is that the war was smaller, more intimate, and in some ways more personal than the war back East: “we didn’t have the huge battles with tens of thousands of men on each side. They were small engagements something like we had here,” where soldiers (militia members) don’t wear uniforms and instead go into battle in their own clothes, or whatever clothes they can get ahold of. Because this mimesis (as opposed to a scenario that would commemorate a specific event already meaningful to a given community audience), general choices like this become central to the message of the reenactment. Through the choice to present and overtly emphasize imagery of individuals dressed in civilian clothing as primary players in the Missouri-Kansas warfare, the larger interpretive themes of the Civil War (including the value of independence and self-sufficiency used in Lost Cause rhetoric) are transposed into a frontier context. Furthermore, this commentary is aimed at creating a more nuanced or complicated version of history than that of pop culture or taught history, since “This is one thing you don’t read about in the history books.”

Again, these types of events don’t work as commemoration in the sense that they prompt audiences to remember specific Civil War events in a specific light, but instead work as a general insertion of Civil War symbols into a contemporary context (such as a Veterans Day parade and celebration). At Ottawa, no explicit explanation on the connection between Veterans Day and Confederate and Union soldiers of Missouri and Kansas was communicated, and instead the event served as a general acknowledgement that the Civil War did happen here, and that it was also a trauma on American soil (unlike

the other wars represented such as the first and second World Wars, whose reenactors at this event engaged in artillery demonstrations rather than battle scenarios). But by placing Civil War soldiers (both Union and Confederate) alongside US soldiers from other, less “controversial” wars, the implicit message was all of these historic characters should be seen and honored. Although reenactors may have specific interpretations of history (as demonstrated through Chapter 1) how much this message is communicated to audiences in these contexts is largely dependant on the existing knowledge and awareness of audience members. As I experienced as an audience member in both of these cases, the events do work as a forum for discussing the presence and meaning of the Civil War, but the conclusion about that meaning is a relatively uncertain one.

While the narrative rhetoric of ethical ambiguity I presented in chapter one was primarily intended to challenge “textbook” or “taught” history, the visual rhetoric of events like those at Hermann and Ottawa also interacts to a large extent with pre-existing visual representations of the Civil War and replaces them with more ambiguous ones. For instance, Vince (pseudonym), A Kansas City-based reenactor affiliated with the Confederate-Bushwhacker group Elliott’s Scouts, emphasized that he sees his hobby as a way to promote a more complicated version of the Civil War than is found in what he calls “Hollywood history.”

Noting that conceptions of the war tend to revolve around central cultural symbols (North and South, Blue and Grey, Lincoln and Lee, Slave and Free), Vince uses reenactment to push back on other forms of image and storytelling about the war which are present in American consciousness, explaining that a primary way he sees this idea being communicated to audiences is through costume. Typically, when reenactors portray

frontier Confederates, it is often unclear at first if they are portraying Civilians or even Union soldiers, their costumes typically involving working-class civilian clothing sprinkled with military items here and there—a Federal blue wool jacket, grey Confederate pants, replica military-issued firearms:

Look at us. What do you see? Union Blue, right? But we're Confederates! Confederates out here wore a lot of Union Blue, for the simple reason that that's all they had. If they wanted to go stark naked, then...but they wore a lot of Union Blue because that's all the clothing they had. A lot of them, in the case of like, guerillas or scouts, would wear each other's uniforms for deception. But a lot of Confederates out here were so threadbare, that if they weren't getting clothing from home...the Confederate government really was in no position to push supplies out here...But here in Missouri and Northern Arkansas, basically, you wore what you could get. And in many cases, that was Union Blue, 'cause that was all you had.

Here, Vince ties up the visual rhetoric of his costume and the reenactment performance with the type of ethical ambiguity often emphasized by reenactors. Complicated, “real history,” then, is history that lies in contrast to popular representation—the imaginative type of history that is found in films. Combatting “Hollywood history” in his own consciousness involves the cerebral work of studying and reading, which “debunks” what he has previously learned, he says: “And so it’s a mindset you’ve got, saying you have to fight against and realize—no this is what it really was like. Not what you’ve seen. And so you’re fighting against things that you’ve learned, that you’ve taken for granted. Oh, this is the truth! Well, no, it’s not.” His comments reveal a continuous tension between the narratives he encounters through the practice of reenactment, and through study of written history, and those that he absorbed through culture. The conclusion of this tension is an equally ambivalent one: “As a reenactor, one of the things that I try to bring out is the fact that, yeah, one man’s villain is another man’s freedom fighter. One man’s loyalist is another man’s rebel.”

After speaking with Vince and reflecting on the desire of many reenactors to “complicate” the ethical judgements we place on Civil War soldiers, I wonder what these reenactments would have been like if the message of ethical ambiguity were overtly broadcast to event attendees at Hermann and Ottawa. Moreover, since much of the overt interpretive message delivered orally in these performative contexts by a representative reenactor, it is conceivable that the rhetoric employed may vary greatly if a reenactor with a different stance is charged with or takes up the task of making announcements. Furthermore, the events in Hermann and Ottawa may have been more ambiguous because they existed in the context of larger Civic festivities, whereas other regional events, especially those taking place near or on battlefields more strongly attached to local history and belief, may serve as a space to re-affirm more specific interpretations. Still, since history is about telling ourselves who we are, the act of not passing judgement on our ancestors—and of not telling our communities how we interpret the meaning and mission of the war while simultaneously setting up a space for public discussion of the war—works much like silence in the case of the notorious “Bystander Effect”: sometimes to try to say nothing is to say everything: “We carry the battle flag because that’s what they carried, the battle flag. We’re not making any kind of a racial or political statement—we’re being historically correct.”

Conclusion

Missouri Civil War reenactment engages with rhetorical stances (and ambivalence about war's meaning) that are as old as the war itself. Writing in January, 1864, in the *New York Daily Tribune*, Frederick Douglass asked his audience to consider the debated "Mission of the War," even in the midst of its ever-present violence and devastation. The article documents a speech that he gave a number of times during the winter of 1863-1864. Is the war an Abolition war? In this speech, Douglass implies that it is not, but that it ought to be. He also points to Missouri as the origin of the war, explaining that "Had Slavery been abolished in the Border states at the very beginning of this war, as it ought to have been—had it been abolished in Missouri, as it would have been but for Presidential interference—there would now be no Rebellion in the Southern States—for instead of having to watch these Border States, as they have done, our armies would have marched in overpowering numbers directly upon the Rebels and overwhelmed them" (331).

The motivation of the Confederate rebellion, he argues, is "without parallel in the history of any nation, ancient or modern: a rebellion inspired by no love of liberty and by no hatred of oppression, as most other rebellions have been, and therefore utterly indefensible upon any moral or social grounds: a rebellion which openly and shamelessly sets at defiance the world's judgement of right and wrong" (328). Douglass then portrays the economic and cultural devastation of the war, and asks, "for what is all this desolation, ruin, shame, suffering, and sorrow?...We all know it is slavery" (328).

Reenactment works as a forum to re-work these larger questions of the war: how to judge

right and wrong, and the meaning of desolation, shame, and sorrow, and other ethical questions that are by no means limited to a Civil War context.

Auslander, in his description of southern lynching reenactments where white reenactors perform as lynch mob members and African Americans take on the role of the victims, notes that “it is striking that white reenactors always are careful to wear clothing that marks them as being in performance mode, such as an old-fashioned hat or a standardized white T-shirt. In contrast, the African American “victims” nearly always wear street clothes and make no attempt at donning period-appropriate adornment” (Auslander 176). He then presents interview excerpts from African American participants who explain this choice to dress in contemporary street clothes. These participants link their choice to wear current clothing to the idea that such trauma and abuse of their community is ongoing, not an event that happened only in an isolated past moment (176).

The modes of ongoing violence that Auslander writes about have a way of pointing out how agents continue to take on the “roles” of their ancestors, reenactment aside. When placed in contrast to such lynching reenactments, it is perhaps easier to see the Civil War reenactment as portraying an isolated trauma located in a specific place in the American past. After all, reenactment and historical study of this period of time is often associated with another popular maxim that warns “those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it,” suggesting that the roles taken on during the war are not currently being repeated. Yet, if the individuals of the Civil War (or who I have referred to above as “historic community members”) are seen as ethically neutral in most instances, to what extent is this ethical vision seen as inherited by these reenactors? These characters populate an ethical landscape undoubtedly shaped by larger geo-political climates

controlled by more powerful agents, but they themselves are characterized as simply looking out for themselves, making choices based on personal pain, or in some cases simply acting on a whim.

This thesis is intended to present some preliminary interpretive themes in the context of Missouri Civil War reenactment and expand understanding of the cultural work performed by historical reenactment. As such, more research is needed to better understand the factors that may influence reenactment as performance and personal practice in Missouri's varied contexts. More specifically, how might differences in location shape how communities use reenactment as commemoration? Furthermore, the status of Missouri as a border state with such divided allegiances among citizens during the Civil War may offer a useful context to explore and challenge assumptions about reenactor loyalty to performing as Confederate or Union and its connection to personal ancestry.

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