

American Studies Senior Seminar Thesis Proposal

Bridget Power, Nadia Mahmassani, and Abigail Hollar

We are in the process of deciding who would be the most appropriate advisor for our project.

The following are possibilities:

1. Professor Debra Sivigny; Department of Performing Arts
2. Professor Caetlin Benson-Alcott; English Department
3. Professor Elizabeth H. Andretta; Professor of CULP 232: Museums & the Construction of Knowledge

“Uses of the Past”: Exploring the Motivations for Keeping History Alive

Reenactors and living history interpreters spend massive sums of money and energy attempting to recreate and return to the past. Some reenactors choose to participate in staged tactical battles while others work to keep more ordinary day-to-day life styles of past centuries alive. No matter what strategy reenactors adopt to reach the past, they all share a strong affinity for history and a desire to bring it forcefully and visually into the present. This thesis explores the motivations behind that desire, looking into not only how but why reenactors take such drastic measures in pursuit of an authentic recreation of events and eras that many consider to be lost.

Question: How do reenactors' contrasting attitudes toward memory and authenticity lead them to different uses of the past?

Our interrogation of reenactors' motivations is part of the broader exploration of popular uses of the past. Therefore, the first body of scholarship we have been studying examines the ways Americans approach and deploy history. An important text in this field is British historian J.R. Pole's 1979 collection of essays *Paths to the American Past* in which he argues that Americans, in contrast to Europeans, perceive very little distance between the present and past. Pole explains that Americans approach history as "the property of [its] heirs and successors," which is an attitude we see clearly in reenactors' use of historic figures and events for modern purposes. Another critical text on this topic is *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* by American historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen. Published in 1998, this book studies ways individuals use the past to find meaning in the present as well as to shape the future.

Jay Anderson's *Time Machines: The World of Living History*, published in 1986, provides a useful foundation for understanding the different forms reenactment can take. A pioneer in the field, Anderson draws on his own experience as open-air museum interpreter to lay out three main areas: education, research, and recreation. To further understand how reenactment accomplishes these three activities, we are using Scott Magelssen and Rhona Justice-Malloy's recent text *Enacting History*, which interprets reenactment through the lens of performance studies (2011).

The specific question of reenactors' motivations can be best understood through an analysis of *Confederates in the Attic* by Tony Horwitz. Published in 1998, the book tells the story of several "hardcore" Civil War reenactors and details the drastic measures they take to keep the past "alive." A similar work is Jenny Thompson's 2004 book *War Games: Inside the World of 20th Century War Reenactments* in which she argues that reenactors are not merely attempting to "time travel." According to both Thompson and Horwitz, reenactment goes beyond simply replicating history and becomes a way of responding to and shaping the present by consciously fusing it with the past.

To justify our decision to make a film on this topic, we are looking into texts that discuss the importance of studying and explaining cultures visually. One work in this field is Sharon R. Sherman's 1998 article, "The Folkloric Film," in which she explains, "Folklore films combine the goal of documentary to record unstaged events with the goal of ethnodocumentary to provide information about culture." This is a balance we hope to achieve in our film on the

subculture of reenactment, so Sherman's article has helped us think about the genre our documentary may fall under.

For the website component, we have looked to scholarship that discusses the way that knowledge is structured, accessed and interacted with in a digital space, to inform how we should approach building a website that accomplishes our goal of moving a film beyond a film. George P. Landow's *Hypertext 2.0* is a seminal text that brings together literary and computer theory, to say that the technology of hyperlinking has revolutionized conceptual systems of linearity, hierarchy and centralized thinking, in favor of multilinearity, nodes, links and networks. Further, Landow explains that critical theory theorizes hypertext, while hypertext embodies and puts these theories into practice, a transition we hope to make with our website. (Landow 1997). Another key text is Lev Manovich's *Language and New Media*, which discusses the impact of New Media on the production and consumption of cultural objects, and how the structure and function of New Media alters this interaction. Manovich discusses the impact of previous cultural expressions such as analog cinema and photography to inform our uses, but also how software programming shifts the way we think about, learn about, and access these previous representations (Manovich, 2001). In *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving and Presenting the Past on the Web*, Roy Rosenzweig and Daniel J. Cohen directly discuss how history is preserved on the web from a theoretical and practical perspective, and provide a comprehensive overview of how to build, structure and archive history and memory on the web.

As we move into the production phase of our process, we will continue to keep two central questions in mind regarding our subjects. We hope to better understand why people choose to invest time, money, energy, and more into reenacting the past. In addition to learning more about the motivations of reenacting, we also want to know how different people reenact the past, and how they value the quality of “authenticity” when they are reenacting. We recognize that the four individuals that our film will follow are only a tiny sampling of the wider reenacting subculture, however, our conversations and interactions with these men and women will help convey some larger truths about why and how people rely on the past.

Our multi-dimensional project is truly interdisciplinary. Obviously, with its cinematic and web components, it is an exercise in film and media studies. This project deals with history, and our subjects are attached to particular eras or particular historical situations. But our approach will also rely on psychology, such as when we interview a veteran who reenacts to treat his PTSD. As an extended look at a particular cultural group, this project is anthropological. Since it focuses on how people use the past by reenacting, it is also an example of performance studies. Finally, it deals with sociology as it encounters and addresses the different motivations that reenactors hold. Already, we have learned that for some, reenacting is more about the tactile experience than an opportunity to educate, but for others, this is not true.

We have already begun to collect our “data” by interviewing several individuals associated with living history and reenactment. We have more people to interview and have begun filming interviews on video camera. Parts of this footage will be incorporated into our documentary film, but other useful segments will be posted on our website to give viewers a more complete sense of our process and the nature of reenactment as a hobby and profession. Many of the questions we have asked our subjects have focused on our concerns about motivation and authenticity. We plan on narrowing the focus of our film after we have done more shooting and begin editing. We are not concerned about asking a broad range of questions, as we see this an opportunity to share more footage and information about reenacting via our web platform.

The proposed structure of our film will be to capture footage of four individuals as they live, explain and demonstrate their understanding of reenactment and living history, and how they use this interpretation of the past to situate their lives in the present. We will then weave these narratives together, to juxtapose the major themes and motivations that present themselves, likely authenticity, preservation, education and escapism, as well as demonstrate how individual interpretations of each word varies from person to person to represent diverse uses of cultural memory. However, the precise arc of our narrative cannot be determined until we have obtained more footage.

Bearing in mind constraints of access and interest in our project, we will aim to find individuals who's narratives demonstrate the personal and public, hobby and occupation, escapist and educational aspects of reenacting, as well as how gender, time period and location might play a role. The first interview we have filmed is a woman named Heather Bodin who is employed at a living history farm, called Claude Moore, set in 1771. We also intend to interview an Army veteran who suffers from PTSD, and reenacts some of these experiences as a way to come to terms with these tours. A third interview will likely be a woman named Kelsey Freeman, a substitute teacher by occupation, but multi-time period reenactor by choice. Our last interview is still being researched from a list of contacts we received from Freeman, but will tell a fourth unique narrative.

For the website component, the proposed structure will have three main components. The first component will document the filmmaking process through a blog that each member of the team will post to bi-weekly. We will comment on obstacles, breakthroughs, interesting themes we are discovering, as well as provide links to articles and media that we find notable on the web as we continue to research. This blog will be embedded into our website, which is the second component. The website will be developed during and after the film has been completed, to give contextual background to us as the filmmakers, the film itself and the American Studies program. It will also consist of featured profiles of the individuals depicted, "Director's Cuts" of footage, and other interactive data such as images and maps. This last component will provide a platform for discussion, where viewers can post their responses and reactions to content in our film and on our site, and connect with one another in this way.

An example of the framework for some of the elements we plan to include is below:

<http://www.pbs.org/thebuddha/>

Our film plans to interview human subjects, none of whom are experts in their field or public figures, though they will sign consent forms to be filmed. There is a possibility we will interview an Army veteran to discuss his experiences with PTSD on film. For these reasons we are submitting an IRB application for the November 21st deadline in order have it reviewed at the December 9th Social and Behavioral Committee C meeting.

There are two elements of formal innovation that comprise our thesis project. The first takes the form of a documentary film, the second takes the form of a website. Being that our central question is how individuals use and remember the past, we feel that it is a question perhaps best answered by the individuals themselves, in a medium that allows them to show, not just tell their perspectives. Furthermore, the concept and motivation of reenactment is one that is unique to every individual, and therefore most accurately articulated by the individuals themselves. In capturing these articulations on film, we can juxtapose how varying motivations of authenticity, preservation, education and progress become manifest in process of reenacting, and weave these themes to demonstrate the diverse environment that reenactors inhabit.

The website component presents the opportunity to push the film beyond a film, and use a website to get to the heart of what American Studies is all about: interdisciplinarity through multimedia. Like the film, the website will bring together different perspectives, disciplines and textual/visual elements, but also increase access, interactivity and further information, in ways that a film can't. By tracking the progress of our filmmaking, expanding upon the people and themes that are depicted in our film, embedding links to further resources on these topics, and providing a forum for people to share stories and react to what they see, this medium provides a multi-layered identity to the project that experiments with the possibilities of new scholarship and new media.