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Why It's Interpretive: Bid 'Em In

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Why It's Interpretive: Bid 'Em In

Abstract

Browsing the provocative blog "Jubilo! The Emancipation Century" recently, I came upon a [post featuring a curious YouTube video](#).

So why did *Bid 'Em In* speak so deeply to me? I think it's because it places you in the shoes of the 15 year old slave woman being auctioned. It's not an intellectual investigation of slavery. It's not an historical narrative written after the fact of a particular event. It's visceral. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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

Disciplines

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

Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

www.civilwarconnect.com



Why It's Interpretive: Bid 'Em In

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2011

Aside from our Tuesday-Thursday posting schedule, we'll be tossing in interesting bits here and there as they strike us. This is one of those.

Browsing the provocative blog "Jubilo! The Emancipation Century" recently, I came upon [a post featuring a curious YouTube video](#). I've embedded it below:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tu3j7rPscpY&feature=player_embedded

(If you've problems playing the video, you can head to the [YouTube page](#))

(For an equally meaningful schoolkids' version of the song, see [this video](#))

So why did *Bid 'Em In* speak so deeply to me? I think it's because it places you in the shoes of the 15 year old slave woman being auctioned. It's not an intellectual investigation of slavery. It's not an historical narrative written after the fact of a particular event. It's visceral.

I first watched the video with headphones on. The auctioneer's voice echoes in your ears like you're standing on the stage alongside him.

The objectification of the woman as she's described like a head of cattle is powerful. But the climax of the piece is the dove, flying away to freedom as the young woman's spirit is crushed and she is sold away. One commenter (soundwave0138) agreed with my feelings, remarking that, "damn, that bird parts gets to me everytime." The commenter continued, noting that it's, "Shameful that all the copies of this have such a low number of views." Another user (buddahmunk99) noted, "the bird flying away, u cant get any simpler with that image."

But simple works. You are, for a moment, living in that poor woman's shoes as she is auctioned off like a piece of meat. That's the power of interpretation. Too often we get bogged down trying to recreate vast battle movements or reading page long descriptions of battle and politics at a visitor. We speak *at* the visitors about the past. Instead, we need to offer visitors more opportunities to feel the past in their gut.

When I go to a historic site, let me feel why I might wish and hope and dream of owning a slave if I am a white yeoman farmer in the 1850s. Likewise, let me feel why I would be impelled to run away from not only slavery, but everything I've ever known in my life; why I would run away from my family, friends and relatives and into the unknown. Don't explain to me. They don't learn by being spoken at, they learn by being spoken with. People don't learn by hearing, they learn by feeling. Let me feel what it's like to walk a mile in another man's shoes.

That's why *Bid 'Em In* works. It doesn't explain. It lets you feel it. It places you barefoot on an auction platform and commands: "walk!"

The most profound statement that can be made about this simple piece of art comes from user david13gaspar: "I wish this never happend"

Me too, David. me too.