

Repetitive Compulsions of Trauma: Critically Analyzing Damages Done When Perpetuating Heroic White Masculinity at Federally Managed United States Civil War Battlefields

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Abstract : Abstract-This study is built from the culmination of four years of research into the cultural interpretation of Civil War heritage at a National Park Service (NPS) site, namely the Manassas National Battlefield Park, within an increasingly contentious political landscape surrounding the U.S. Civil War. Originating as questions regarding the relevancy of historic battlefields to the current culture within the United States soon evolved into more philosophical questions about what it means to feel welcome at a battlefield site, and what are considered appropriate actions and behaviors at what was once a mass gravesite. In trying to answer these questions, this work aims to critically analyze the confluence between the cultural authority of the NPS and collective memories of the U.S. Civil War. Operationalizing trauma as repeated violent acts within public spaces, the authors posit that the normalization of violence from white or white-passing men partially stems from the glorification of heroic white masculinity at National Park Service Civil War battlefield sites—especially those which also commemorate Confederate military strategy and prowess. From here the study moves outward to focus on the prevalence of heroic white masculinity within the nation’s current social zeitgeist, and particularly the notion that to take back masculinity one must utilize violence as a means of symbolic restoration from perceptions of white victimhood. The study ends with case studies of dark tourism framing at international battlefields as models for expanding heritage interpretation at the NPS site to foster narratives of empathy and responsibility within an increasingly contentious political landscape within the United States of America. Visitors do not leave Manassas National Battlefield Park with answers about the social and moral implications of the U.S. Civil War, but the tools for championing their own (predominantly white) heroic masculinity. As such, it is only logical that one common reaction when masculinity is symbolically threatened is to enact violence against Others as a restorative force within the United States.

Keywords : confederate heritage, military history, national park service, trauma, United States civil war

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