On a cold and very bright morning in December, the class gathered at the Milwaukee Public Museum (MPM) for their culminating project. Following a script we had spent the previous month developing, each student used Twitter to send out a carefully ordered series of tweets from accounts they made for the reenactment’s “characters,” each including the hashtag #MKEZero embedded somewhere. The goal was to reenact an event from 1932—the day of the birth of Zero, the first polar bear cub born in a North American zoo to survive to maturity. Despite our preparations, the students were apprehensive. They were used to writing papers for traditional history classes and working on their own, mostly without revising their writing and certainly without a public audience. They had trusted us to guide them toward this collective project, released on a platform some had never used before this semester, and they still had trouble envisioning how it would all play out.

As the morning unfolded, however, the students began to understand how the pieces of their work fit together. The story they told included pathos—the removal of polar bear cubs from
the wild and the deaths of at least four of them in zoos—but as the students relaxed and discovered the spirit of the event, they were able to begin to laugh at their own small mistakes and improvise unplanned reactions to each other’s tweets. MPM’s “Granny” account (@MPMgranny), run by Museum Educator Jaclyn Kelly, offered spontaneous comments on the students’ tweets as they hit the Twittersphere. By the time they wrapped up the reenactment three hours later, the students agreed with the previous year’s class. They had learned a lot from the reenactment. And, importantly, during the ongoing stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Twitter reenactment was fun.

This paper is based on the first two iterations of the Twitter reenactment in “History 450: The Growth of Metropolitan Milwaukee,” taught at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) in Fall 2020 and 2021. The Fall 2020 reenactment recreated the first official weather forecast in U.S. history, while the Fall 2021 reenactment centered on Zero’s birth. Both events were fundamentally Milwaukee stories, but served as jumping-off points for broader explorations of history. We did not come up with the Twitter reenactment as a pedagogical tool on our own. As James Grossman, the Executive
Director of the American Historical Association, frequently reminds us (on Twitter, of course), “#EverythingHasAHistory”—including historical reenactments. This paper describes the development and refinement of Twitter reenactments since 2009. The Milwaukee version of historical Twitter reenactments began at MPM in 2015, with a portrayal of a fire that destroyed a large swath of the city in 1892. We explain how we worked out the details of transforming what had been a volunteer activity into the core of a class. We conclude by examining some of the ethical and pedagogical questions raised by having students engage in a historical reenactment. Historical Twitter reenactments need not be as elaborate as the one we are building into an annual event. They can offer students an unusual opportunity to develop their historical thinking and share original research findings with a public audience. They meet students in a realm where many of them already dabble—social media—and where they can find an audience that does not have to be physically present to engage with the fruits of their work.

What is a Historical Twitter Reenactment?

A historical Twitter reenactment is a recreation of a past event using the microblogging site Twitter (recently rebranded as “X”) as the platform for expression. Some Twitter reenactments hew closely to the primary sources on which they are based. For example, the Archives of Ontario deployed the diary of Ely Playter as a window into the War of 1812. The archivists tweeted out edited excerpts from Playter’s diary across the course of a year to commemorate the war’s 200th anniversary. Similarly, the “Martha Ballard” account (@Martha_Ballard) features excerpts from the late eighteenth-century diary that Laurel Thatcher Ulrich made famous with A Midwife’s Tale (1990). Alwyn Collinson, tweeting from @RealTimeWWII, has been recreating World War II from a third-person perspective since 2011. Collison’s account shares photographs and other primary sources with followers. A one-person project, @RealTimeWWII has cycled through the war once already and is now repeating the reenactment with new insights, funded with an appeal through Patreon, receiving media coverage from The Atlantic. In 2014, U.K. publisher The History Press used its @TitanicRealTime account to recreate the ill-fated voyage of the giant ship, with tweets from
a variety of perspectives coming from a single account. Other historical Twitter reenactments are fictionalized versions of the past that interpret history for modern audiences. The National Park Service observed the 150th anniversary of the Civil War by creating a generic @CivilWarReportr account to share what the conflict might have looked like from a journalist’s perspective. While historical Twitter reenactments are founded on a variety of methods, they share the goal of bringing historical knowledge to public audiences.

Twitter is, of course, only the latest among many kinds of venues for interpreting the past—in more or less sanitized forms—for the general public, as well as for students. Living history museums such as Colonial Williamsburg and Old World Wisconsin immerse heritage tourists in the landscape of the past through period architecture and costumed staff interpreters. American hobbyists also participate directly in reenactments of past events. Although historical reenactments probably peaked in the 1980s and 1990s, in the United States, the most popular live-action reenactment topic surely remains the Civil War. Tens of thousands of participants invest their discretionary income in period props and costumes and devote weekends to recreating battles. Cosplay (costume play), larping (live action role-playing), historical costuming, and Renaissance fairs also provide consumers with the opportunity to imagine their way into the past by dressing up, eating quasi-authentic foodstuffs, and engaging in recreational activities from the past. Historical fiction, such as Ken Follett’s Pillars of the Earth series, allows readers to absorb context and details about the past under the guise of entertainment. Historically oriented video games such as Assassin’s Creed allow players to try to win glory, freedom, or battles of the past from their couches. Educational simulations such as Reacting to the Past lead students through role-playing activities in order to inculcate deeper understandings of events, including the trials of Galileo and Anne Hutchinson. Historical plays and movies, such as Russell Crowe’s blockbuster depiction in Gladiator (2000), are legion.

When Twitter launched publicly in July 2006, it was not obviously a place to share historical knowledge. With each “tweet” initially restricted to 140 characters per post (a limit that did not increase until 2017, when it doubled to 280 characters), a poster might have only twenty words available. This was simply not much space for professionals used to disseminating their major written work in
book form and whose initial forays into serious scholarship often take the form of master’s theses running more than one hundred pages. But in Spring 2009, Marion Jensen and Tom Caswell, early Twitter adopters who were also history doctoral students at Utah State University, simulated the Battle of Gettysburg, sharing fictionalized tweets from the perspective of different historical actors and inspiring a small band of imitators from different historical “fandoms.” Soon after, Jensen and Caswell created “TwHistory,” a website that “broadcast” and archived scores of such reenactments. A librarian commenting on TwHistory called it “the big granddaddy of historical Twitter reenactments.”

In the 2010s, history instructors at the college level also began to include Twitter reenactments in their classes. In 2012 and 2013, inspired by TwHistory, Brian McKenzie of the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, used Twitter as the platform for his students’ recreations of the Paris Commune and the Battle of Stalingrad. Students signed their work with the hashtags #ParisCommune and #Stalinsim. In a 2014 article for The History Teacher, McKenzie emphasized Twitter as a site for digital humanities, then an emerging field. Although “historical re-enactments are fraught with epistemological and methodological issues,” McKenzie argued, these questions can be effectively deployed in classrooms to teach students about writing and thinking historically. In 2017, Jon Shelton of the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay collaborated with local history institutions to turn a reenactment of the Great Green Bay Fire of 1880 into a culminating class project for his course on “The Craft of History.” Among the advantages of using Twitter for classroom reenactments are the low logistical and budgetary barriers to entry and the platform’s capacity to engage students.

Across the same decade, Twitter reenactments also emerged as community public history events. In August 2013, on the 150th anniversary of Quantrill’s Raid on their abolitionist hometown of Lawrence, Kansas, staff from the Freedom’s Frontier National Heritage Area gathered residents at the public library to recreate a local episode of “Bleeding Kansas.” In a crucial innovation, organizers designated a unique event hashtag, #QR1863. Including the hashtag in each tweet allowed the Twitter audience to follow the unfolding storyline as participants tweeted out from their accounts. In contrast to viral hashtags, such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo,
the unique hashtag makes the reenactment discoverable years later. The National Council on Public History awarded the Quantrill’s Raid reenactment an Honorable Mention in its 2014 competition for Outstanding Public History Project. A year later, also in Lawrence, the University of Kansas European Studies Program commemorated the 100th anniversary of the start of World War I by recreating the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. They recruited student and community volunteers and published a detailed, sixteen-page “Tweeter’s Guide” to support the reenactment. Participants translated some tweets into European languages, a tactic that was meant to underscore the authenticity of the event.

**How Our Collaboration Developed**

Our collaboration on a classroom-based historical Twitter reenactment began at the Milwaukee Public Museum. Jaclyn Kelly, educator at MPM, first developed the Twitter reenactment project in 2015 after being inspired by the August 2013 reenactment of Quantrill’s Raid in Kansas. Kelly worked with the museum’s history curator of collections, Al Muchka, to create a short list of events in Milwaukee history for potential reenactment. They sought to create a compelling, dramatic, and informative online experience for MPM’s audiences. Once Kelly and Muchka narrowed down the list to a few events, Kelly visited local archives. The goal was not to research the events, but rather to determine the quantity and quality of the primary sources and whether they could support the kind of multi-perspective research necessary for the reenactment. Based on the availability and richness of the resources, Kelly and Muchka made a final decision on which event would be the basis for the reenactment.

The next step was to recruit volunteers. Kelly is a 2011 alumna of the history M.A. program at UWM, and so turned to the program for volunteers. She spoke with classes and distributed a flyer advertising the project. This recruitment strategy was only partially successful because the project never had an ideal number of volunteers to tell the story. Still, the annual reenactment had a good reputation among the graduate students and even had a few repeat volunteers. Over the course of multiple annual cycles, Kelly came to feel that the less-than-ideal participation was probably due to the many demands on the students’ time.
Once a group of volunteers was assembled, Kelly convened an initial meeting to distribute handouts, divvy up the characters, talk through the semester-long arc of the project, point them to local archival repositories, and answer any questions. The volunteers were assigned a few interrelated tasks. They each wrote a two-page biography of their character to build the character’s world and assist in developing the voice of the tweets. They created a personalized timeline of their character’s involvement in the event. Finally, they wrote thirty to forty first-person tweets expressing how their character experienced the event. The biography and timeline were exercises to help the volunteers think about their character’s world and experiences, and ultimately result in a better, richer, more realistic portrayal.

Kelly’s general practice was to meet with the students two additional times over the course of the project, including mid-project individual meetings with the volunteers and a final group meeting prior to the reenactment. Each mid-project individual meeting ensured the volunteer’s research was progressing satisfactorily and allowed Kelly to give feedback and direction on the research. The final group meeting allowed the students to “introduce” their character to the other participants, as well as review final logistics for the event.

During the Twitter reenactment “broadcast,” the volunteers were expected to be on-site at the Milwaukee Public Museum. The entire event took about four hours. In 2015, the volunteers reenacted Milwaukee’s 1892 Third Ward fire using the hashtag #mke92. In 2016, it was the Ice Wars, a 1901 conflict about ice harvesting on the Milwaukee River, using #mke01. The volunteers next tackled the Green Bay Packers 1939 championship game against the Giants, using #mke39. Finally, in 2018, they tweeted Wisconsin’s 1940 Armistice Day storm, using #mke40.

To support the volunteers, Kelly also recruited a summer intern to conduct a few interrelated tasks. One was to develop a list of sources about the historic event and prepare a document detailing the title and location of such sources, as well as a sentence or two detailing each source’s contents. These annotations facilitated the research of the volunteers during the semester. Another task was to develop a list of *dramatis personae* so that the volunteers during the semester could quickly and easily select a character they were interested in developing and portraying. The last task was to create an event timeline, citing specific moments along the arc of the full event. The intern’s work
allowed the graduate student volunteers to focus on developing their characters and writing tweets rather than engaging in laborious background research, which is a valuable but distinct skill.

Kelly sought a classroom partner as a solution to a few recurring challenges. One challenge was the difficulty of attracting volunteers. The project always had volunteers, but never as many as optimal for a wide range of characters to provide multiple first-person perspectives. Another difficulty was the volunteers’ ability to commit fully to the project. Not surprisingly, the students sometimes had difficulty finding the time to take on what was essentially another research project in addition to their scholastic responsibilities. A third challenge was scheduling. It was difficult to find meeting times that worked for the full group.

As a result of these conversations, we agreed to begin our partnership with the Fall 2020 semester. Seligman decided to build a course on Milwaukee history around a Twitter reenactment. History 450 is primarily an undergraduate course, but also enrolls a few graduate students. This course would draw on the local history expertise she had developed in co-editing the Encyclopedia of Milwaukee over the previous decade.27 Because MPM highlights topics at the intersection of nature and culture, we brainstormed themes to support that focus. Additionally, we strove to identify potential topics that would enable us to showcase primary sources housed at the UWM Libraries, particularly in the Archives Department. In recent years, librarians at UWM have been working systematically to deepen their teaching partnerships with campus instructors and fulfill the American Library Association’s Information Literacy standards. Archives staff in particular have worked as “embedded librarians” in several classes, offering extended and culturally responsive instruction to students, modeling a research disposition, and opening their eyes to new career possibilities.28 A fourth partner was UWM’s Office of Undergraduate Research, which agreed to sponsor the class as a “Course-Based Research Project,” allowing a course enrollment cap of twenty instead of the normal forty for upper-division lecture courses.

As we conceptualized the course, the Twitter reenactment was one of several interrelated, public-facing assignments the students engaged in throughout the semester. Although formally a class on the history of Milwaukee, approximately half the class meetings focused
on research and writing. The topic of the reenactment became the theme for the course, embedded in the context of Milwaukee history, giving students the opportunity to learn broadly and deeply in the same semester. As noted, in the inaugural year of 2020, the theme was the first official weather forecast in the United States, which was issued by Wisconsin naturalist Increase Lapham in 1870; for the second year, we chose the birth of Zero, the first polar bear cub to survive birth in a North American zoo.

To develop students’ communication skills, we crafted two opportunities to share their research with the public before the reenactment. They tabled with visitors to the Milwaukee County Zoo and the Milwaukee Public Museum. Early in the semester, they identified a primary source to share, and later curated one source around a structured format. We encouraged them to select primary sources related to the semester’s theme in order to cultivate deep knowledge. For each tabling event, students spent a two-hour shift in a prominent location at the cultural institution, where they engaged visitors in brief educational conversations about their materials. Tabling served as preparation for the reenactment, as students had to prepare and also think on their feet about their topic and their audience. Additionally, MPM offered two professional development field trips with museum staff, so students could get a peek behind the scenes of the museum and learn about career opportunities.

Because so much of the work of the major assignments would be invisible to the instructor, student course grades were determined through an “ungrading” process. Susan Blum, who called ungrading “a growing movement” in the twenty-first century, explained that giving students grades for their work is a system that (like everything else) has a history. In her edited collection on ungrading, Blum announced, “because we invented [grading], we can uninvent it. We can remove it.” In the first two iterations of History 450, students experienced two of the many different possible approaches to ungrading. In Fall 2020, students assessed their own work in written and interactive reflections, proposing their own course grades. In Fall 2021, all work received points for completion, and students wrote about how each major activity helped them grow. Final grades were calculated by combining accumulated points and the students’ own evaluation of the quality of their work and contributions to their classmates’ learning.
How the Reenactment Works

Goals

The syllabus for History 450 expresses the purposes of the class as goals rather than learning outcomes. The term “learning outcome” implies that the instructor knows what students will get out of the course. Because students show up in the classroom with such diverse personal histories and already knowing such different things, it is impossible to guarantee either that they will take away from a course what the instructor intended or that they did not have it to begin with. Additionally, the best learning is emergent, coming out of the classroom’s unique gathering of minds and questions. Trevor Hussey and Patrick Smith suggested:

[T]he most fruitful and valuable feature of higher education is the emergence of ideas, skills and connections, which were unforeseen, even by the teacher. Such events are rare enough without the additional restrictions of specified outcomes, imposed upon those involved in the learning process.31

Predetermining outcomes may foreclose the arrival of that mystery. Students in the course may deepen their historical research skills, learn to read primary sources closely, recognize the past in the urban landscape around them, and see local events in a global context. They may also give attention to how to interpret their understanding of the past to real members of the public. But there is no particular information in this class that students need to know in order to succeed; indeed, the annually changing content is a feature of the course, not a bug. While writing tweets is a skill, in this class, it is only a means to greater ends.32

Instead, the historical Twitter reenactment is structured to provide practice in two capuously conceptualized competencies with broad benefits: collaboration and communication. The American Historical Association has researched and promoted the “Career Diversity Five Skills” that are vital to “historians with PhDs who found careers beyond traditional academia—five things they hadn’t learned in grad school but that they found they needed in order to succeed beyond the academy.”33 Most undergraduate majors who take history classes will not go on to graduate-level study, but these skills are useful for almost every student and translate well beyond
the college classroom. The Twitter reenactment provides a fun and low-stakes way for students to share what they learn about history while enhancing the collaboration skills, no matter how good at them they are before they arrive in the classroom. Producing the work requires students to collaborate with peers, and presenting it requires communicating with the public. These skills also enriched our own development as museum and college educators. Since this was a new professional relationship for us, we also improved our own communication and collaboration practices as we developed the Twitter reenactment and the course as a whole. We had to work not only with each other, but also with colleagues in the UWM Libraries and the Office of Undergraduate Research, as well as the student researchers whose efforts supported the theme’s intellectual content before the class ran in the fall semester. For the 2021 birth of Zero reenactment, we extended our communication and collaboration skills in partnership with the professionals at the Milwaukee County Zoo, which also hosted several class field trips (Figure 2).

Supporting the Reenactment

Like their volunteer predecessors at MPM, students in History 450 do not research their reenactment from scratch. Instead, to allow students to focus on the problem of how to interpret a particular historical character’s experiences as a voice on Twitter, the entire reenactment is supported by an annotated bibliography prepared by other researchers before the semester starts. Much as a course instructor primes student research by selecting a textbook, giving relevant lectures, and shaping an assignment, the bibliography lays out possibilities for the reenactment without ordaining students’ choices about the reenactment’s action. The bibliography includes a summary of the central event, a timeline, and a cast of potential characters—and, most importantly, an annotated list of primary and secondary sources that the reenactors might wish to use to research their topics. In creating this bibliography, we continue the model Kelly developed for her volunteer reenactors.

The authors of the bibliography seek a delicate balance in suggesting characters and sources for the reenactors. They strive to suggest fruitful avenues of historical expression, pointing out the potential for certain lines of investigation, without over-determining...
Figure 2: Our research about polar bears at the Milwaukee County Zoo took us to a special exhibit of animal sculptures. This mother and cubs polar bear family was made by artist Sean Kenney from 133,263 Lego bricks. Photo by Amanda Seligman.
any particular character. Students in the course should still have the opportunity to develop their characters’ backstories, bring to light key ideas and context, and, of course, write their own tweets—the central creative product of their research. The bibliography should support students enough to reach research levels they would not have time to do on their own, but also leave them space to innovate and—inevitably—make their own mistakes as well. Leaving the right amount of space for student innovation facilitates the collaborative aspects of the course, where students refine and revise their tweets based on feedback from their classmates.

This level of preparation and support is not essential in order to hold a successful historical Twitter reenactment. Instructors adopting the Twitter reenactment in their own courses could certainly forgo the advance preparation of the bibliography and have enrolled students conceptualize their own characters and locate their own sources. The initial reason for advance preparation of a bibliography was the voluntary nature of the project when it was based at the Milwaukee Public Museum. The preparatory work of a summer student intern could put limits on the commitment required of volunteer participants—maximizing benefits while minimizing time. Further, the research internship provided an advanced student a coveted opportunity to build a connection with the most prestigious science and cultural museum in the state. Once housed at the university, in an undergraduate course, the reason for writing a supportive bibliography shifted. Having a prepared base of suitable secondary and primary sources obviated the need to teach basic research skills in an already crowded semester. This was especially important during the first iteration of the class, when the university’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic left only one hour a week available for synchronous meetings across a fifteen-week semester. The bibliography also functions as reassurance to the instructor that the reenactment can be accomplished successfully with available sources. Most importantly, the research invested in the bibliography meant that enrolled students could focus their energies on the creative interpretation of their characters and the collaboration with their classmates.\textsuperscript{34} The students who prepare the bibliography are credited as its authors. The bibliographies themselves are posted in the Course Management System and on the university library’s Digital Commons. The student authors enjoy a
publication line for the resumes, a talking point in a job interview, and the nerdy satisfaction of immortality via the library catalog.\textsuperscript{35}

Preparing a reenactment-specific bibliography led to some unanticipated yet beneficial extensions of the research experience beyond the boundaries of the semester for a few students. UWM is an access university, not the flagship of the University of Wisconsin System. Since 2016, however, UWM has also been designated a Carnegie Research 1 university. UWM endeavors to distinguish itself regionally by making research experiences available to increasing numbers of undergraduate students.\textsuperscript{36} In 2018, the Council on Undergraduate Research recognized UWM’s success in this goal with its Award for Undergraduate Research Accomplishments.\textsuperscript{37} UWM’s Office of Undergraduate Research (OUR) sponsors the Support for Undergraduate Research Fellows (SURF)—a grant
program that enables faculty and staff to hire students onto their research projects for competitive wages. In preparation for the first reenactment in 2020, a doctoral student prepared the bibliography. But in Spring and Summer 2021, SURF awards permitted a couple of students from the prior Fall semester to work five to ten hours a week preparing the bibliography for the new theme. These students extended their research skills and developed new characters. Because they had the benefit of prior experience with the course, they also raised new questions and suggested refinements to the reenactment as a pedagogical exercise and a public performance (Figure 3).

The 2021 SURF students inspired several important innovations. First, they suggested, designed, and curated a digital archive of primary sources. The opportunity to learn about metadata and collaborate with the university’s digital librarian on creating the archive were important professional development experiences for those students. The digital archive proved especially helpful for subsequent students, whose activities were constrained by the ongoing pandemic, as well as commitments to other classes, families, and jobs. The SURF students also suggested that students broaden their understanding of context by writing a few tweets for the reenactment’s narrator account. They also offered insights from their experience to the new class when they participated in a panel presentation, discussing the ups and downs of the reenactment with their peers. One student deepened their learning considerably by working as an undergraduate Teaching Assistant in the class and launching work on a senior thesis based on their research for the bibliography. Finally, the 2022 team of student researchers provided commentary on a draft of this article.

Preparing the Reenactment

Students reenacted the topic on Twitter through three different types of characters. Some students took on the roles of central characters—that is, figures without whom the event would not have occurred. For example, in Fall 2020, three students shared the role of Increase Lapham, the Wisconsin natural scientist who issued the first U.S. weather forecast. In Fall 2021, two students split the role of Edward Bean, director of the zoo where Zero was born. Students also researched real historical figures whose perspectives
were relevant to the action, but who were not central to its execution. For example, in 2020, one student reenacted Julia Lapham, allowing the audience to learn about how Increase Lapham’s daughter strove to preserve his memory for subsequent generations. A third group of students created “context characters,” whose experiences provide important contextual insight into the event. In the case of the weather forecast, one student reenacted a “Weather Prophet,” a type of nineteenth-century huckster whose business model was threatened by the development of the science of meteorology.41 For the zoo reenactment, students chose to recreate a newspaper reporter covering the birth of Zero and a schoolteacher bringing her students to see the polar bear cub.

Whenever possible, characters were based on real historical figures. Some students, however, took on the roles of composites—or types of people who existed in the moment under study, but for whom we did not pre-identify a particular historical personage. It is very helpful to have a few generic characters whose numbers can fluctuate to suit the number of students in the course. Fictionalized characters also take pressure off students who might worry about the reactions of the descendants of real people to their portrayal on Twitter. For example, for the Zero reenactment, we conceptualized a family group and an immigrant who went to see the polar bears. In those cases, students were responsible for creating names and backstories for their characters, tasks that required primary- and secondary-source research in order to create authenticity.

Finally, in an innovation suggested by the SURF researchers, in Fall 2021, students were assigned to write a few tweets for the narrator’s account, which shared primary sources and other contextual information that did not fit neatly within the confines of a particular character. The narrative tweets were an elaboration of the use of the instructor’s account to announce scene-shifting temporal information in the 2020 reenactment. One consequence of distributing the responsibility for the reenactment among such a broad variety of characters is that the success of the event did not depend on any one student—an especially important precaution, given the pandemic context. Instead, as with most real events in the process of unfolding on Twitter, the audience’s view of events emerged from the totality of the students’ tweets. Truly, the Twitter reenactment is an ensemble production.
Each student in the class was charged with writing a total of eighteen or twenty tweets from the point of view of their character. This choice contrasted with Brian McKenzie’s class, in which students could write tweets for any figure in the reenactment. Whereas McKenzie’s goals for student learning were more about the historical topic under study, our approach was more about process than topic and cultivated students’ deep understandings of the particular historical figure they were focused on.\(^{42}\) When multiple students reenacted the same character, they had to coordinate with one another to make sure that their tweets were ordered correctly, were not duplicative, and shared the same voice. Tweets included not only text, but also images of primary sources; depending on the student’s initiative, attitude, time, and devotion to revisions, they might also include images, hashtags, and callouts of other Twitter accounts.

Crucially, every tweet in the reenactment also needed to include the hashtag for the course (#MKE70 for the weather forecast and #MKEZero for the birth of Zero). Like the reenactors of Quantrill’s Raid, McKenzie had his students use hashtags to organize their tweets. However, the hashtags he used were not unique to his courses, making it difficult to later extract the reenactment from Twitter’s ongoing flood of user-generated content. The hashtag #ParisCommune continues in frequent use; the more uncommon hashtag #Stalinsim unfortunately corresponds to a frequent misspelling of “Stalinism.” The distinctive course hashtags of History 450 made it possible for the audience both to watch the tweets stream out as the students released them and to revisit the reenactment later. In addition, Kelly used the course hashtag to amplify and share student tweets through the MPM Education Department’s general and “Granny” accounts. Tweeting from these well-established accounts, which have about 1,600 followers, broadened the public reach of the reenactment. In Twitter, hashtags frequently function as keywords that bind together unrelated users; the more common the hashtag becomes, the more successful it is. The hashtags #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo have generated global discourses; #BlackLivesMatter is so thoroughly recognized that it is frequently shortened to “BLM” with no loss of meaning. In the historical reenactment, however, the best hashtag serves the course alone, with no aspiration to trend.
As a part of their preparation for the reenactment, students made Twitter accounts for their characters. This work involved picking a name and a handle, creating the account, finding a profile image, and writing a mini-biography. Students also wrote longer character sketches for posting on the course blog. In order to avoid accusations of digital humanities malpractice, their Twitter accounts indicated that the characters were fictional recreations of historical figures. MPM staff created cover images that the students could post on their characters’ accounts in order to create a sense of unity across the ensemble, as well as to provide advertising for the day of the reenactment (Figure 4 and Figure 5).

Students researched and wrote their characters’ tweets over an entire month of the course. Writing twenty short tweets may seem like a small assignment that can be done with little thought or revision. Because of Twitter’s character limits, twenty tweets may amount to no more than 500 words—the length of a traditional, short history paper. However, students developed their tweets over multiple assignments, creating many opportunities for reflection, revision, and coordination. The process promoted historical accuracy, depth, and storytelling. A lecture about how to tweet featured Brian McKenzie’s exhortation “to think of tweets as roughly falling into one of three categories: direct, first-hand tweets—for example a Communard tweeting about the fall of Courbevoie; indirect, second-hand tweets, such as Zhukov tweeting about the capture of a factory; and ‘ideational’ tweets illustrating inferred expectations, attitudes, and opinions.” Students began by gathering their sources and considering what topics they would
need to cover to recount the theme’s events from their characters’ perspectives. They needed to think about what kinds of commentary would best illustrate their characters’ backstories and reflect their view of and role in the central event. As they compiled a list of topics to cover and refined that list into specific tweets, students put those subjects in chronological order. Drafting a chronological list of tweets facilitated the creation of a shared class Google Doc that interfiled all the planned tweets into a “script” for the reenactment. They added hashtags and images to enrich their portrayals. Although there is no room in a tweet for citations, students maintained file copies of their tweets that showed the sources of the information and images, in case of queries or challenges. We reserved class time for students to share their draft tweets, revise in light of duplication, coordinate with classmates who were sharing characters, plan reactions to other characters’ tweets and retweets, and understand the entirety of the narrative arc they were producing.

**Ethics**

History classes often touch on ethical issues related to research, including citation practices, plagiarism, archival discovery, openness to new evidence, moral judgment of historical figures, and the like. Asking students to put words in the mouths of real and composite historical actors raised several significant, related ethical matters. First, the central event itself was chosen to avoid having anyone impersonate a living person. Additionally, throughout their research, students had
to consider how reenactors can combine historical accuracy with Twitter’s demands for pithy rhetoric. We also attended to how could students exercise their historical imaginations while avoiding the peril of blackface-style caricature. Finally, staging history on Twitter raised the question of how to represent the passage of time.

When we set the terms for the reenactment, we inadvertently built in some conditions that constrained the extent to which the students might be able to see themselves—or at least their ancestors—in the story. In planning, it seemed particularly important to avoid having students impersonate anyone who was still alive or might at any point in their lives have had the potential to have a Twitter account. In a fundamental sense, historical inquiry gives meaning to things that are true; pretending to be someone who can still speak for themselves is contrary to the spirit of our scholarship. Although a variety of public-facing course materials—including the blog, the hashtag, and the Twitter characters’ home pages—indicated that the tweets were acts of imagination, we did not want to inadvertently commit libel, misrepresent a person who might take umbrage, or lead a spectator to believe that a living person said something they did not in fact say.

In practice, this concern for the feelings of living people means that we should not choose a reenactment topic less than a century old. But setting the first reenactment in 1870 meant that large groups of students would not be able to explore their ethnic forebears as part of the course. Personal affinity can be a powerful gateway to historical explorations. Although students of Mexican and Hmong heritage make up significant portions of the UWM student body, we could not accurately place Mexicans or Hmong people on the scene in 1870s Milwaukee. At the same time, it was important that students not misrepresent the cultural and religious heritages of their own or their neighbors’ ancestors. In researching the history of Lake Michigan, we learned about Mishibizhiw, a water panther said in Anishinaabe lore to influence the weather. Students representing a Native character commenting on local weather conditions would need to take care to represent belief in Mishibizhiw respectfully, using language of historical accuracy rather than cultural caricature.

In order to encourage students to find that balance, one preparatory class session focused on the ethics of the reenactment and the idea of historical imagination. The students should exercise their historical imaginations without giving into it. A lecture highlighted C. Wright
Mills as the originator of the antecedent concept of sociological imagination. Quotations from two articles by James Axtell helped students to understand that what historians do is fundamentally an exercise of imagining our way into the past. One of Axtell’s articles gives students permission to use their feelings to understand historical figures as people who are as human as they are, even when there are holes in the historical record: “deep research and the liberal exercise of intuition and empathy can help reduce its limitations. After immersing ourselves in the recorded thoughts, feelings and actions of the past, we must try to identify with its actors, to rethink their thoughts, re-experience their emotions, relive their deeds.” Axtell also advises that we turn our insights about the past into contemporary language:

[W]e must plunge into the dark recesses of the past, armed with relatively few and weak sources of light, in order to meet and to understand its peoples, societies, and cultures on, and in, their own, alien terms. Then, after immersion in that ambient strangeness, we must emerge and translate our understanding into modern, though still faithful, terms that our students and readers can comprehend and appreciate.

Exercising historical imagination for a Twitter reenactment requires students to balance competing impulses. On the one hand, through fundamental humanity or a shared sense of identification, students may have some intuitive insights into how a specific figure may have reacted to or felt about a particular event. On the other hand, all past figures are alien to those of us in the present, because of differences of time and context.

Moreover, there are limits that students should also consider as they seek to reenact people from the past. In Black for a Day (2017), English professor Alisha Gaines cautions against Axtell’s impulse to identify thoroughly with historical figures. She warns white people in particular against the perils of “temporary, empathetic racial experiments in blackness.” Her book recounts how several twentieth-century white Americans seeking to promote racial empathy by embodying Black people actually relied on and reinforced racist scripts. Students reenacting historical figures about whom they know a little, but not a lot, run the risk of offending, mocking, and damaging others. Using class time to raise the potential misstep of blackface is meant to reduce the risk that students will inadvertently cross an unacceptable line.
Rather than dictate how students should represent their historical figures, the Twitter reenactment treats understanding historical imagination as a problem that students should reflect on as they prepare their tweets. All historical writers must take on an ethos that expresses their understanding of how tightly the evidence binds their interpretive possibilities. Some historians produce work that excavates the exact particulars of the past in order to understand exactly what happened, minimizing their commentary. In *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* (1988), for example, George Lipsitz carefully verified his subject’s oral history interviews against other forms of evidence to produce a tightly argued, accurate biography of a person who was not well known outside his hometown of St. Louis. Other historians give their imagination free rein. Tiya Miles’s recent *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley’s Sack, a Black Family Keepsake* (2021) is a winner of a National Book Award and a *tour de force* of historical imagination.
Without defying the proprieties of historical scholarship, Miles scaffolded great meaning and historical possibilities atop a single, powerful primary source—a sack embroidered with the narrative of a family torn by slavery. Both approaches to historical scholarship have great merit. But each historian must decide for themselves what degree of leeway to use in interpreting their sources.

Twitter reenactment students must consider questions about whether they can put words absent from primary sources into their character’s tweets. They should think about whether a historical figure—such as a newspaper reporter or schoolteacher—would have used modern professional norms in their work. Has childhood changed enough from the past that it is risky to impute modern children’s slang and behavior to a composite figure from a century ago? What inferences can students make from primary and secondary sources about how a given person might have represented themselves on Twitter? What should one do for a profile picture for a person of whom there are no actual historical representations? The zoo-themed reenactment presented a special problem: Can a polar bear speak? A student who reenacted Zero’s mother, Sultana, developed an ingenious solution to this last question. Each of Sultana’s tweets was a sound or a gesture, which they then glossed in parentheses so that “hoomans” could understand what they meant (Figure 6).

The student reenactors also needed to give careful consideration to the time frame that their tweets would cover. When the Milwaukee Public Museum began organizing volunteer reenactors, they planned a direct correspondence between real time and historical time. For example, when ten minutes passed in the historic event, only one minute might pass in the present. Arranging the reenactment with set ratios for time passage allowed for simple coordination of the event. The volunteer reenactors put timestamps on their own tweets and then released them—sometimes simultaneously—at the appointed time.

When the reenactment shifted to a UWM class, however, we changed the representation of time. Instead of focusing on a single crucial day or several hours, students placed the central event in a deep historical context. When showcasing a few events in an early decade and planning more than one hundred tweets on the major day many years later, it would be impractical to compress time in a standardized fashion. For example, in the weather forecast reenactment, which was anchored around November 8, 1871,
students’ tweets began in 1836 (with Increase Lapham accepting a job in Milwaukee) and ran through 1891 (when Cleveland Abbe commented on a weather-related conference). The polar bear birth reenactment began with a dateless tweet (but implied as before 1854) from Frederick Law Olmsted and concluded in the 1960s. A majority of the tweets, however, belonged to 1919. Although Alwyn Collinson can make the space to run several daily tweets from the @RealTimeWWII account outside of his regular work hours, a course that is running for fifteen consecutive weeks does not have the leisure to let time accordion so smoothly.

Choosing to narrate time shifts allowed students and the audience to watch the central event unfold in a deep historical context. This structure connects a single moment in time with events decades before and after it occurred. As a practical matter, this linear yet disproportional approach to time allowed us to send out one tweet after another in sequence—as soon as the last one was posted—facilitating an expeditious performance. As students built the event timeline, they placed their chronologically organized tweets in “buckets” of time in the shared class cloud document, making it easier to find the ones that they belonged near. As the weather forecast reenactment neared, one student realized that many of the tweets remained out of order and took the initiative to spend several hours one night rearranging the narrative arc so that the timeline was consistent.54 To prevent audience confusion, the course’s instructional account set the scene for changes in time, announcing, like a Greek chorus, when the reenactment entered a new year or decade. The students’ 2021 contextual tweets also served to let the audience know what else was going on—Prohibition, World War I, park construction—without having to create an extra character to allude to these developments.

The Twitter reenactment also presents an ethical issue for teachers—one that is dealt with in the selection of the central event. In developing historical Twitter reenactments at UWM, we have excluded certain kinds of historical events that are better taught through traditional lecture and discussion methods. History is not a psychologically light subject. Historians teach students about genocide, war, colonization, ecological disaster, racism, sexism, labor conflict, and other weighty topics. In choosing Twitter reenactment topics, we have tried to steer clear of putting students in a position
where they must assume the identity of a person who is experiencing or inflicting trauma. In this choice, we echo Classics scholar Daniel Padilla Peralta, who told a *New York Times Magazine* reporter observing his students perform a live-action reenactment, “I’m not yet ready to turn to a student and say, ‘You are going to be a slave.’”

When we select a reenactment topic, we do not always know what traumatic themes might lurk within the topic. The first official weather forecast in U.S. history sounded like an innocent and safe topic until our research revealed that Increase Lapham’s advocacy for the service was an effort to prevent further shipwrecks on the Great Lakes—which implicitly involves the icy drowning of many men. Although some pain is inevitable, we avoid making traumatic events the starting point or center of the reenactment.

### Conclusion

Because they are so novel, historical Twitter reenactments possess a charisma that provides an opportunity for explaining to the public what historians try to teach our students. Journalists can recognize in the Twitter reenactment an intriguing and novel pedagogical method they can readily translate for public audiences. The 2021 iteration of the reenactment resulted in three news stories: two in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* and one in the college newsletter. One article in the *Journal Sentinel* featured the class as a whole, with photographs from the tabling event at the Milwaukee Public Museum. The second *Journal Sentinel* article was a recap of the reenactment’s highlights. The college newsletter article provided an overview of the Twitter reenactment. All three stories liberally featured the words of participating students. This is to say that while the Twitter reenactment can help students learn about communicating historical knowledge, it is also a means for historians to communicate with the public about the value of our pedagogy, both directly and via the press.

Building a class around a Twitter reenactment puts research and communication skills rather than particular content knowledge or traditional analytical writing at the center of the course. Although it is not public history in the “shared authority” sense, Twitter reenactments are history projects oriented toward public audiences. With a real audience, students are motivated to dig deep into the
research for their characters, craft a consistent and authentic voice for their account, appreciate context, and attend to chronology. In the process of working with the entire group, they develop collaboration and communication skills. Their knowledge becomes both deep and broad.

Finally, as we have worked through our collaboration between UWM and MPM, we have also unabashedly built professional development into the course centered on the Twitter reenactment. We bring students to the museum to meet working professionals, giving them a glimpse behind the scenes of institutions they may already love. They may be surprised by the range of staff who make museums work: not just curators, registrars, and educators, but exhibit planners and fabricators, graphic designers, and social media experts as well. Students learn about the existence of jobs they might apply for, about the career paths of museum and library professionals, and about relationships they can use to network for professional opportunities. Incorporating Twitter reenactments into history classes does not mean that students will abandon traditional historical skills. Rather this offers the opportunity for students to broaden their sense of how history can matter in their lives beyond the classroom.

Notes

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1. This paper was written and accepted before Elon Musk completed his purchase of Twitter and changed its name to X. This takeover changed Twitter enough that in the fall of 2023, the class reenactment was staged on different platforms.


3. The Milwaukee Public Museum’s “Granny” account tweets from @MPMgranny, <https://twitter.com/MPMgranny>. The Granny character is
herself a historical Twitter reenactor, based on a mannequin called “Granny” who “lives” in MPM’s beloved Streets of Old Milwaukee, a reproduction of an early twentieth-century neighborhood.

4. Our first Twitter reenactment, which ran November 5, 2020, occurred during a deeply stressful time in world history. The COVID-19 pandemic and the U.S. presidential election overshadowed much of the semester. The pandemic affected many aspects of course implementation. The enrolled students were never in one room at the same time. Although it was officially listed as a face-to-face class, in practice, it was necessary to offer students three modalities. In addition to the socially distanced classroom setting, students had the option of attending remotely or participating asynchronously, shifting among the modalities as their personal circumstances dictated. Many students experienced infection or had to isolate as a precaution during the semester, as cases in Wisconsin rose to their first peak in November 2020. Most students were affected by illnesses in their immediate households or relatives’ households, as well as by personal and familial job losses. The Milwaukee Public Museum closed its doors, which meant our “field trips” became online meetings, our tabling sessions shifted to planned meetings and recorded presentations, and the reenactment ran from campus rather than the anticipated and highly visible museum location we had planned.


8. Alwyn Collinson’s “Second World War tweets from 1940” account tweets from @RealTimeWWII, <https://twitter.com/RealTimeWWII>/.


10. The History Press’s “TitanicVoyage” account tweets from @TitanicRealTime, <https://twitter.com/TitanicRealTime>.


27. The *Encyclopedia of Milwaukee* at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (available at <https://emke.uwm.edu>) was created and edited by Margo Anderson and Amanda I. Seligman.

29. Students also were offered the option of publishing their curations on UWM’s *Documenting Milwaukee* website.


32. For more on learning outcomes, see Michael Bennett and Jacqueline Brady, “A Radical Critique of the Learning Outcomes Assessment Movement,” *The Radical Teacher* 100 (Fall 2014): 146-152.


39. Undergraduate researchers Lillian Pachner and Henry Wehrs, supported through Support for Undergraduate Research Fellowships, developed this typology.


43. Some of the students were already active Twitter users and did not want to confuse their existing online persona with a school project. A few did use their personal accounts to hail their followers on the day of the reenactment and ask them to follow along with our school project. One student tweeted: “Guys please go check out my history assignment!! It can be found on this hashtag #MKE70 it’s so goofy!!” The author of this tweet verbally clarified that “goofy” was a compliment, not a criticism.

44. The blog is titled “History450Milwaukee” and is available at <https://history450milwaukee.blogspot.com/>. The course Twitter account is @HIS450MKE, <https://twitter.com/HIS450MKE>.


54. In our next iteration of the Twitter reenactment, we intend to experiment with using a shared spreadsheet to allow for sorting of planned Tweets by the dates they represent.


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