Scadia: A Nostalgic Medieval Carnival of the Known World

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CHRISTOPHER LeCLERE

School of Social Sciences, Social Anthropology
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstracts</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The SCA’s History and Organization</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The SCA World</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entering the Event Space</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dressing the Persona</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing the Persona</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court &amp; Feast</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bardics &amp; Filks</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving one Foot in the Past</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screenings</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further Study</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15,603 Words
Abstracts

Scadia: The Known World
This feature-length ethnographic documentary completed in 2015 in partial fulfillment for the degree of Master of Philosophy in Ethnographic Documentary at the University of Manchester explores The Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA), a historical recreation group that relies on popular films, books, and magazines to create a romantic version of the Middle Ages. The estimated 60,000 participants create fictitious personas that could have existed prior to 1600AD. Members dress and enact these personas at various weekend-long events around the world. The film focuses on how participants use ideals created by popular cultural representations of the Middle Ages to bridge the gap between the mundane world and their persona. Specifically, it explores the SCA as a type of carnival that uses notions of chivalry, valor, and honor to challenge the progressive social, political, and technological landscape in American society.

Scadia: A Nostalgic Medieval Carnival of the Known World
This paper establishes the theoretical framework to locate Scadia: The Known World, a feature-length ethnographic documentary completed in 2015 in partial fulfillment for the degree of Master of Philosophy in Ethnographic Documentary at the University of Manchester within an anthropological discussion about re-creation and social identities. It examines the Society for Creative Anachronism as a leisure group that employs nostalgic enactments to create a carnival that challenges the changing social, political, and technological landscape in the American society.

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Introduction

At first, I had a hard time finding the group I was supposed to meet. The urban park was rather large and full of people out enjoying the unusually warm February day. I was looking for members of the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA): a historical re-creation group whose participants create and enact personas that could have existed between 800CE and 1600CE. The North Florida chapter was holding their weekly fighter practice and I was using the opportunity to introduce myself to the group and meet the people with whom I was going to live during my research.

After walking around for a few minutes, I heard the sharp rap of wooden sticks striking each other. I followed the sound and came upon a small clearing where about 20 people were standing in a loosely formed circle. Most of them, between 40 and 70 years old, were dressed in an interesting amalgamation of medieval and modern clothes. Some people were wearing armor made of plastic and metal while others had on tunics or Renaissance style dresses. One woman, wearing a tunic over top of a t-shirt and jeans, purposefully strode up to me. Her hand extended as she forcefully exclaimed, “My name is Liza. I am the Baroness of Castlemere. Are you interested in this sort of thing?” She was in her mid-50s with wiry gray hair that was battling the golden coronet resting awkwardly on her head. I struggled to introduce myself. I told her that I was the college student who was going to spend the next several months filming their group. Her eyes grew wide as she gave me a hug. “It’s great to meet you m’lord. Let me introduce you to the rest of the group.” She whisked me around to face the inside of the circle and announced my arrival: “Oyez, Oyez, m’lords and ladies, this is the young man from the university…he’s from England, although he don’t sound like it, and he’s the one who will be making the movie about us.” Liza then introduced me to Lord Osric the Confused and his wife Honorable Lady Deirdre Ui Mhaille (Glenn Murray and Kathy Duffy). I had previously arranged to rent their spare bedroom for the six
months I was planning to study the group. I found out during the planning phases that they had both been in the SCA for more than 20 years and had participated in several local groups across the United States. They even started their own local group while they lived in New Jersey in the 1990s. Glenn, in his mid-50s had a long bushy grey beard that was stained tan from tobacco smoke. He was wearing shorts and a t-shirt that read “Castlemere-The Baronial Investiture.” Kathy, in her early 60s was very thin with white curly hair and piercing blue eyes. She was wearing a blue tunic and tennis shoes. Kathy greeted me with a hug, Glenn shook my hand and we walked over to their car. It was an older, red station wagon with stickers of various medieval-looking shields on the back window. In many ways, this vehicle is emblematic of the SCA: a modern invention decorated with imagery from a fantasized Middle Ages. I later learned that each shield represented a kingdom in which Glenn and Kathy had lived. Glenn lifted the back hatch and I placed my luggage and camera gear in the back of their car. I climbed in the backseat and we headed off to a chain restaurant for dinner at what would become my home for the next several months.

Glenn and Kathy live in a three-bedroom, single-story house in central Florida. The decor is an eclectic mix of contemporary furniture, reproductions of medieval looking paintings, and various mass produced prints purchased from large retail shops. The teal blue pleather couch provided an interesting contrast to the replica sword and baroque style paintings that hang on the wall behind it. Many of the paintings were of scenes and characters from the King Arthur legends. Bookshelves overfilled with volumes about British and Irish history lined walls of the guest bedroom. Just like their car, their home is an amalgamation of modern and historical touches that indicate the occupants have an interest in medieval Europe.

That first night we talked about their lives both inside and outside of the SCA. Glenn is a socially conservative military veteran who expressed annoyance at my past career with a
liberal media outlet. During the conversation, I was surprised at how Glenn and Kathy frequently referred to each other by both their persona and mundane names without much distinction. Kathy told me about Glenn’s service in the United States military, but referred to him as both Glenn and Osrich. Similarly, during stories that occurred at SCA events, Glenn referred to Kathy by both her persona and mundane names. I asked if they saw much separation between the two worlds, and they both said no they are the same person, just in different clothes. Neither Glenn nor Kathy see their personas as theatrical, but rather as an extension of who they are.

We spent the next week preparing for my first “event.” This is a weekend-long private gathering where participants rent a campground, wear garb, and enact their personas. They have sword fighting, arts competitions, singing and dancing. The highlight of every event is the royal court and feast. Participants are required to “make an attempt” at pre-16th century clothing and address each other as m’lord or m’lady.

As the weekend approached, I was able to buy or borrow the essential items for an event: a tunic, mug, wooden plate and metal utensils. I packed a few snacks, a sleeping bag, and camera equipment into my rucksack and climbed into the backseat of Glenn and Kathy’s car. We spent the 90-minute drive listening to music produced by SCA members and talking about what I should expect during the upcoming weekend. As we got close to the site, a wooden sign shaped like a shied with the letters “SCA” painted on it pointed us off the paved motorway to a long dirt road. I pulled out my video camera and started recording.

We stopped at the entrance next to a nylon tent with a sign that read: “Troll” (their term for the guard). A man wearing a kilt and t-shirt walked out of the tent and stopped our car. He asked for our “blue cards” (membership cards) and handed us registration forms. He then wrote down our license plate number and took the forms. He told us where to check in
and wished us a happy event. Glenn rolled up the window and we drove into the campground. We now inhabited the SCA event space: a carnival world of leisure, play, and nostalgia.

My ethnographic film *Scadia: The Known World* explores how participants in the SCA bridge the gap between the mundane and their persona (two terms and concepts I will revisit). In this paper, I establish the theoretical framework and locate the film within an anthropological discussion about re-enacting and social identities. I will achieve this by looking at the SCA as a leisure group that employs nostalgic enactments to create a carnival that challenges the changing social, political, and technological landscape in the American society (“leisure group”, “nostalgia” and “carnival” are three terms I will explore more in-depth later in this paper).

The SCA’s History and Organization

The SCA is an entirely invented community built on a “heroic and mythic past” (Belk & Costa, 1998:219). Participants do not directly appropriate specific historical figures. Instead, they use a historical framework to construct and support a fictitious persona. “The Middle Ages as they ought to have been” is a phrase often used in the SCA (Society for Creative Anachronism 2004:1). Gender, religious, ethnic and national boundaries are irrelevant within the rules of the group while contemporary hygiene, modern medicine, and equal rights are encouraged. (Turner 2010:4). As Honorable Lord Philippe Devereux explains in the film,

“We’re not saying I want to re-enact a specific battle, a specific time frame. We are saying during 1348, this is possibly what could have happened. Then through our arts, we do a living archaeology. We find out what materials they would have used and actually make them. So that the main difference is that instead of re-enacting a certain instance, we are recreating the time period.”

According to the Society for Creative Anachronism’s official history, the group started as a single party in 1966 hosted by a group of university students in Southern
California (history.westkingdom.org). Diana Paxson was finishing a degree in medieval history at the University of California Berkeley and wanted to hold one last party before she graduated. She thought it would be fun to recreate a medieval style festival that she had learned about in her graduate classes. Two of her friends who had been trying to teach themselves medieval combat using swords made from rattan sticks and steel shields offered to help by holding a tournament based off of an event in Scotland in the 19th century. The winner of the “sword fight” would be crowned king for a day and his date named queen.

On 1 May 1966, guests gathered at Paxson’s home dressed in medieval costumes. The men fought with sticks while debating proper technique and combat etiquette. After the feasting and fighting wound down, the remaining revellers took to the streets in their fancy garb mockingly protesting modernity, the entirety of the 20th century, and everything else that occurred after the death of Elizabeth I of England. They attracted a large crowd of supporters who joined in the impromptu playful protest. It was meant to be a single event, however, the party was so successful that they decided to do it again the next year, but on a much larger scale. Instead of holding it at Paxson’s home, they rented a city park. The city required the group have a proper name before it could file a reservation. One of the organisers, science fiction writer Marion Zimmer Bradley, came up with the name The Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA) to play up their focus on creatively portraying an anachronistic version of medieval life.

News of the SCA spread through discussions at science fiction and fantasy conventions. Soon people started to organise their own events adding in elements of fantasy and science fiction to the already anachronistic society. In 1968, Bradley moved back to the East Coast and formed an SCA group in New York. She called it the Kingdom of the East, to distinguish it from the original group that is now the West Kingdom.
While Bradley was bringing the SCA to the east coast, the group’s popularity was growing back in California. The SCA started as a liminal activity, but subsequent events led to the establishment of codified rules and ranks creating a social structure. The SCA formally registered as a not for profit corporation and wrote out by-laws, rules, ranks, and procedures. The self-published “A Handbook for the Current Middle Ages” contained all the instructions for setting up and operating a new chapter and established a rigid hierarchy. The first edition was officially released at the 1968 World Science Fiction Convention in Berkeley.

In 1969, a third chapter, The Middle Kingdom, was established. It covers the central part of the United States. By 1984, there were ten kingdoms including chapters outside the United States. In 1993, the Kingdom of Drachenwald, which covers Europe, Africa and the Middle East, became the first kingdom entirely outside of the United States. In January of 2003, the Australian Principality of Lochac was elevated to kingdom status and now covers Australia, New Zealand and Antarctica.

The Society for Creative Anachronism currently comprises 20 kingdoms, which they refer to as “The Known World.” They have approximately 30,000 paying members and nearly 60,000 casual participants. The organisation offers several annual membership subscriptions that range between $30.00 and $56.00. Paying members can vote, hold office, and receive discounts on site fees (https://membership.sca.org/).
Each member is part of a kingdom and then a secondary more localised group. Jacksonville, Florida, the area where I worked, is the Barony of Castlemere located in the Kingdom of Trimaris. A kingdom is the meta-organization that encompasses a large geographic region and serves as the umbrella organization for smaller groups. Each kingdom has a king and queen that typically reign for six months. Royalty is decided by a marshal combat tournament called Crowne Lyst. SCA by-laws state a “kingdom” must have a minimum of 400 registered members. A “principality,” which is a subordinate but semi-autonomous from a kingdom, has 100 regular members. A “barony,” which is run by a baron and baroness, must have 25 members and a “shire” has five members. “Cantons” are start-up chapters that are still in the organization process and beholden to a barony. The baronial/shire/canton level is the most local version of the SCA. This is where participants will attend weekly meetings and fighter practices. The SCA also has special chapters that are not required to have a consistent membership or leadership structure. They include a “college,” which is based at a university or other research institution. A “stronghold” is
organized at a military base. A “port” is a group of members who serve on a deployed naval vessel, but still want to retain SCA membership while at sea (http://www.kingdom.meridies.org/seneschal/new_group_guide.doc).

In the film, Mistress Alysoon explains that the SCA is not a hegemonic group. She argues that each of these groups has a distinct culture and operates as a separate country. She furthers that even within each kingdom “not one Scadian can speak for another Scadian.” However, the SCA does have a unifying calendar and rank system. Since one participant’s persona may be rooted in 1588 England and another in 1100 Norway, the SCA created its own calendar to help participants reconcile temporal differences. This allows for a certain amount of consistency between all 20 kingdoms and between different reigns inside each kingdom. The SCA calendar starts on May 1st of each year and cites 1966 as year 0. On 1 May, 2016 it will be the start of year 50. In SCA speak it will be “This first day of May, Anno Societatis 50.” The term Anno Societatis translates as “the year of our society.” All documents issued within the event space are noted with the SCA year, not the modern year.

In addition, talent and service oriented titles Knights, Pelicans and Laurels, collectively called Peers, and geographic titles like Baron and Duke exist in all kingdoms. Knights are recognized for their fighting ability. It takes approximately 10 years to become a knight. Knights receive the title “Sir” (regardless of gender), wear a white belt, gold chain, and spurs. The white belt and gold chain represents the purity of their honour. Their apprentices, called squires, wear red belts and silver necklaces. The red belt represents the blood they will shed to become pure and the silver necklace is not as pure as gold. The next order is the Pelican. This is a service-based peerage. SCA literature cites the medieval belief that a mother pelican would use her own blood to feed her children. Pelicans typically run administrative offices, set up events and manage the business and legal side of the organization. They wear a yellow belt and a pelican on some part of their garb. Their trainees
are called apprentices. The third peerage is Laurel. They are participants who excel at accurate material reproductions or academic research of medieval life. They hand stitch garb citing academic documentation or teach classes in accurate reproduction of some form of medieval life. Laurels wear a green belt and have a laurel wreath medallion around their neck. Their apprentices are known as protégées. Pelicans and Laurels use the title “master” or “mistress.” Once you are elevated to a peerage in one kingdom, you keep the title for life and can use it in any SCA kingdom. Participants take ranks very seriously. Falsely claiming to be a member of a peerage is grounds for banishment. Participants who lie about being peers are asked to leave the group and shamed on social media.

A parallel legal structure separate from the royalty runs the business side of the SCA. On an international level, there is a board of directors, which manages the society’s finances. Each kingdom, barony, shire and canton has its own elected leader called a seneschal. This person is responsible for the real world issues of managing the local group. This includes collecting dues, renting event space, signing contracts with vendors, or any other legal matters the local group may face. While the king and queen are the public face who set protocol, the seneschal makes it all happen. This parallel structure is not only a reification of the group’s overall duality, but also mimics the real world monarchy with a royal sovereign and prime minister.

The SCA World

While I attended 12 events during my fieldwork, this paper will use common elements and themes to construct a typical SCA event to frame my argument. I will explore the SCA event space as a form of carnival. My use of the idea of carnival is inspired by Korol-Evans’ (2009) work on Renaissance festivals. She asserts that in carnival events, people employ nostalgic enactments to challenge the status quo. Carnival is an opportunity people create to
change their identities without completely disposing of the one they embody in their everyday (mundane) lives. It is also provides an opportunity for experiencing social misrule in a safe space. The film explores how specific people regard their involvement in the SCA and how they participate in these carnivalesque re-enactments. In this text, I want to compliment this point of view by exploring the argument that the SCA carnival is in response to the rapidly changing social, political and technological landscape in participants’ everyday lives.

The SCA emerged during a turbulent period in American history that experienced massive social upheaval. The hippie movement, psychedelic art movement, Feminist movement, and Black Panther Party all started around the same time and in the same part of the country as the SCA. Coincidentally, the SCA and the Church of Satan were both founded in the same city on the same day. This era also saw the passing of the Civil Rights Act, Title XI, and violent protests against the war in Vietnam. Many white, middle class, Christians felt like their status quo in American society was being challenged. Duchess Islay, a founding member of the Orlando, Florida, group expressed this sentiment during her interview in the film.

“In the 1960s, huge social changes are underway in the United States. What happens, I believe, is a sense for home and belonging. Because of that break down in the 50s of the core family values, and how they dissipated. Before this time, you had solid family values and generations were connected and all lived together. All of that just dispersed in the post-World War II years. In the 60s they were looking for home and family. They wanted something special, so they found each other. I believe that process translates itself around the world.”

Duchess Islay believes that these original participants created the original medieval festival to help make sense of their rapidly changing world and reconnect with something they believed existed at one time. Bakhtin writes that festivals emerge during “massive breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man” (1984:9). However,
on that same page Bakhtin continues that medieval feasts, sponsored by the state, “sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it” (idem).

The SCA’s creation at such a pivotal time creates an interesting paradox. Using Bakhtin’s (1984) explanation of carnival and feast, I argue that the SCA functions as a carnival disguised as a medieval feast. Carnival is about misrule and inverting hierarchies, however participants create a nostalgic space with visible structures and give their mock king, who embodies honor, courtesy and chivalry, authority over the group. While Naficy (1993) asserts that nostalgia is about the desire to return to a homeland, SCA participants have never existed in the temporal or geographic space they are creating. Berdhal points out, “nostalgia is about the production of a present rather than the reproduction of the past” (1999:202). The dream creates a mock king who facilitates a “nostalgic past” in the present that is free from the plague and pestilence of the Middle Ages. Carnival for these participants is about inverting the hierarchy of social and political progress in American society and creating a present in the past. Interestingly, their newcomers’ handbook is titled _Forward into the Past_.

Much in the SCA revolves around the term “The Dream.” E-mails are signed “Yours in the Dream,” participants say they are “living the dream” and one of the main songs is “Vivat the Dream,” which opines about the glory days of yore. The opening lyrics are “The known world remembers mid laughter and tears.” While each person I asked had a different answer for the specifics of what that term means, they all defined it as the embodiment of SCA ideals. To quote Sir Dayvid of the Vale, “The Dream is honor, temperance, prowess, largess, courage, valor, honesty, hope, faith, and charity.” He feels these ideals are lacking in modern society and he strives to live them both in his persona and his mundane life. This notion of “The Dream” combines with Islay’s notion of the SCA as supplanting a lost family. This value structure fits into Erisman’s argument (1998) that participants use the SCA to
create a historical society to stand against what they see as the deficiencies established by the status quo of the “immoral present.”

Throughout this paper, I will refer to the actors as “participants.” The SCA makes a very clear distinction between members and non-members. While anyone who makes an attempt at pre-sixteenth century garb and pays the entry fee (they refer to this as a “gate fee”) may attend an event, a member is someone who pays annual dues, allowing them to hold office, fight to become king, and receives a discount on gate fees. I also feel the term participant is important because the SCA does not have a distinct performer / audience division at their events. Each person at an event is participating as both performer for and audience to everyone else at an event. Using this blanket term will help avoid confusion or exclusion.

SCA participants use the term “mundane” to describe anything that is not directly a part of the society. For example, if someone is wearing modern clothes he or she is “in their mundanes.” Participants refer to their “mundane jobs” or “mundane activity.” The word “mundane” means something that is ordinary, lacking excitement, or dull. The term entered the SCA vernacular after appearing in the Xanth fantasy novels by Piers Anthony (1977). In the series, Anthony uses the term to describe everything outside of the magical world of Xanth. This is akin to the word “muggle” in the Harry Potter series. Considering participants look at the SCA world as a “magical” environment then this term is especially appropriate (Cramer 2010). While mundane is a blanket term to describe everything outside of the group, there is no universal equivalent to describe life within the group. Words exist to describe specific aspects of SCA life. For example, clothes are “garb,” dishes are “feast gear,” and cars are “dragons,” there is no universal term that encompasses the totality of SCA activity or material culture. This language further sets the mundane space apart from the magical SCA world and reinforces activities within the SCA as leisure.
The SCA is a volunteer organization. Participants have full time jobs and enjoy SCA events in their free time. However, the SCA is a major time commitment. King Gunnar compares being in the SCA to having a part-time job that you pay to do. Participants are responsible for the administration and execution of events. They have to physically set up all of the decorations, cook and serve the food and then clean up the mess. As Thalassia told a group of newcomers “volunteering to set up, cook, serve feast, and clean-up is not only encouraged, it is expected.” This work aspect does not disqualify it from being a leisure group. Turner (1982) argues that leisure is more than just freedom from work. Leisure is also “freedom to enter, even to generate, new symbolic worlds of entertainment, sports, games, diversions of all kinds. Furthermore, leisure offers the freedom to transcend social structural limitations, play with ideas, fantasies, words, paint, and with social relationships.”

In her ethnography on Europeans who stage Native American re-enactments, Kalshoven asserts, “the waning of play is associated with the rise of modernity” (2012:132). She noted that Indianists occasionally disregard historical research in favor of a movement that feels authentic in the moment. Schechner (1993) argues the difference between play and ritual is that play is an open activity with fewer rules and ritual has a stricter frame. Huizinga (1980) argues play is superfluous, but can become equated with a need through the enjoyment it provides. Play is disinterested and does not fulfill an immediate material or biological need. Play is regulated to a particular time and space (1949:8-10). While SCA events have a limited number of scripted rituals that are usually pop culture inspired activities lacking clearly defined rules, this makes SCA actions closer to play than ritual using Schechner’s definition (ibid).

During my fieldwork, I was also curious to see if participants engaged in what Schechner (ibid) describes as dark play. Dark play is a special type of play where those in the game will engage non-participants who are unaware of the game. Specifically, I was
interested in if and how participants enact their personas outside of the event space to goad non-participants. I had already seen engagement with non-participants during our first encounter in the park and thought this may provide further evidence on how participants situate their personas within the mundane world.

This paper focuses heavily on the notion of nostalgia. Lowe defines nostalgia as “a meditation of history, the site through which the past returns and is remembered, however, fragmented, imperfect or disavowed. Through that remembering, that decomposition, new forms of subjectivity and community are thought and signified” (1996:X). “All nostalgia is necessarily selective (and) creates a longing for what was past, lost, and can never be again” (Green 2007:65). However, it is important to note that nostalgia is more concerned with creating a present than reproducing an authentic past (Berdahl 1999; Mankekar 2002; De Franco 2007). Nostalgic enactments provide a valuable model for analysing how people enact representations of the past to express different current ideas about cultural value and identity. Several theorists (S. Stewart 1984; Turner 1987; K Stewart 1996; Jameson 1989; Frow 1991) have offered valuable ways of differentiating among forms of nostalgia. Specifically, I cite Turner’s (1987) four elements of nostalgic modelling of the past and its relationship to the present:

1) A sense of historical decline from a mythologized ‘golden age’ with which contemporary social life is compared and found wanting.
2) A sense of absence or loss of personal wholeness and moral uncertainty in which religious and moral values have been undermined by the development of capitalist relations, urbanization, and secularization.
3) A sense of the loss of individual freedom and autonomy because genuine social relationships have disappeared with the bureaucratization of everyday life and the
subordination of the individual to instrumental reason.

4) A sense of the loss of simplicity, personal authenticity, and emotional spontaneity.

It is important to note that one does not need to have direct contact or even secondhand knowledge of the past to create nostalgic enactments. People frequently make powerful connections to distant places and romantic pasts through the consumption of media (Appadurai 1986). Basu (2007), for instance, followed Canadians and Americans who had never set foot in Europe on pilgrimages to Scotland in search of their “homeland.” The book opens up with a story of two men who met during World War I, one from Scotland the other from Canada. The Canadian felt he knew more about Scotland than the native Scot and, even though he had never stepped foot on its soil, claimed to feel a deeper connection to the country. This anecdote challenges the reader to question definitions of home and belonging as it relates to nationality. Mankekar (2002) found similar results with her study in Indian grocery stores in southern California. She argues that second or even third generation Indian immigrants to the United States would frequent stores featuring food from India as a way to engage in nostalgic consumption of their ancestral homeland even though they may have never traveled outside of the United States. Those shoppers, like SCA participants, are using this nostalgic consumption to create a present identity that is selective of a problematic past.

The SCA is a leisure activity where participants use the event space as a playground to create a new symbolic world enacting different social relationships based on a pop culture inspired version of the Middle Ages. Within the walls of this space, participants use mock kings to elevate participants into the peerage ranks of their imagined realm. The focus is on creating a space that “feels right” based off films, books, and magazines rather than a serious investigation into historical accuracy. Nostalgic enactments are not based on a lived past, but rather an imagined temporal space that fills a present need. This takes the shape of a carnival that is closer in appearance to what Bakhtin (1984) calls a medieval feast. However, instead
of strengthening the mundane state, participants invert the current hierarchy to focus on establishing and strengthening their mock state with morals and values that align more closely their own beliefs.

**Methods**

During the six months I spent with the SCA, I recorded 780 hours of video across 12 events, 2 wars, 6 fighter practices, 8 business meetings, and 4 bardic practices. I also conducted 63 formal on-camera interviews. An event is a weekend-long gathering held at a private space and requires an admission fee. Events typically start on Friday afternoon and end Sunday morning. Participants sleep in tents or cabins and eat meals at the campground. The SCA requires all participants “make an attempt at pre-16th century clothing” in order at access the event site. During the discussions with SCA leadership, I agreed to wear garb so that I would maintain the aesthetic of their events. I typically wore a blue tunic over black sweat pants along with work boots and a belt bag. I also wore a bright orange sash across my chest that read “MEDIA” to alert participants that I was not just making home videos. SCA leadership and I agreed that I would be given full reign to wander and shoot as I wished without a handler. In return, I promised to be accurate in my handling of the material. We never explicitly defined the term “accurate,” however, Baron Turold, who is the legal representative for the local group, sent me links to several stories that had been done about the SCA that either mocked or sensationalized their activities. I assured him that my interest was purely academic and while I was not comfortable with him, or any member of the group, dictating my filming and editing process I was not there to lampoon their activities. I posted some of the raw footage on social media sites and solicited comments and criticism from both academics and participants. I eventually held a screening of the final film for participants and allowed them a chance to respond. I will discuss that in more detail later in this paper.
I employed visual methods because “films have a way of exceeding theoretical bounds, and of showing anthropologists’ purchase on the lived experience of their subjects” (Taylor 1996:88). I felt audio-video recordings could help support my writings about the SCA’s unique senescape. “Film expands our vision as it represents not just an act of seeing but a sensory and equally emotional experience” (Barbosa 2010:300). Film as research method makes field inquiries more accessible and “thicker” in Geertz’s sense. We have words, plus intonations, plus pauses, plus facial expressions, and even a suggestion of the elusive quality of relationship between anthropologist and informants, matters which an anthropologist along might have difficulty writing about (Loizos 1992). The ability to actively participate during events allowed me to have a proactive approach to my filmmaking, while providing other researchers the ability to comb through the material I collected and form their own theories and ideas about the SCA. With these “properly collected, annotated, and preserved visual and sound materials, we can replicate over and over again and can painstakingly analyze the same materials” (Mead 2003:4).

Before starting the filming process, I decided that I would not direct, stage or recreate any activities. If I missed something on camera, I would either address it in the paper or try to film a similar moment that illustrated the same concept. Observational cinema, like traditional participant observation, requires the anthropologist to spend time with participants in everyday settings, not just specific circumstances that may fulfill the researcher’s pre-conceived “script” (Henley 2000). I acknowledge that I construct a narrative every time I press record regardless of whether or not I actively direct participants’ actions in front of the lens. I resisted the urge to create a shot list and instead just let my lens fall on the action. My hope is that I could minimize my influence by not telling participants how to behave or asking them to engage in a particular activity. Through using moments that were recorded as unobtrusively as possible, my hope was to construct an accurate representation that is
available to other researchers. Minors became the only caveat to this method. I decided early on that even though children participate in the SCA, this is an enclosed space with an expectation of privacy and there could be too many legal and ethical issues to include them in any significant manner. While some parents asked me to film or interview their children at events, I was not comfortable recording a minor who may not be fully aware of my research and thus able to give fully informed consent.

To honor my agreement to provide an accurate record of my time with the group, I took inspiration from Young’s (2003) essay to avoid any contrived tension while editing clips together. Instead, I relied on the subject matter to carry the interest. I felt the material would still be engaging since this approach “does not rule out the possibility that a film’s events will have the weight of general metaphor, but first and foremost they will have meaning within their own context” (2003:113). The coronation scene toward the beginning of the film, for instance, shows the new king taking his throne. Not adding music, using quick cuts, or speeding up the film rate allows the viewer to understand the moment’s importance and experience the event in real time. When done correctly, ethnographic cinema is not only a “record of culture…but also an analytic record about culture” (Taylor 2010:82). This is now their king, and he embodies the values they seek in the society that they feel are missing from modern American society.

I also circulated a multiple-choice survey using Google Docs. The questions revolved around basic demographic information (name, age, mundane occupation). In addition, I asked how long they have been participating, any form of peerage rank, and what name(s) they use on social media. According to the 304 responses, the average participant is 44.6 years old and has been involved for 17 years. Mundane occupations varied with clerical (15%) and education (11%) being the top, but not by an overwhelming majority. Pulling from a previous survey (Lenehan 1994), 52.4% of SCA members had college degrees and 40.4% are currently
enrolled in school. I was also interested in the length of participation to see if this is a long-lasting aspect in participants’ lives or a short-lived hobby. I felt this would help me differentiate between liminality and structure. Since the average participant polled reported being active for 17 years and belonging to at least one peerage rank, it appears that the SCA is not a liminal activity for most participants, rather an integrated part of his or her identity.

To confirm this result I examined how participants identified themselves on social media. Facebook is an important aspect of identity that is not prevalent within the SCA event space (campgrounds), but very visible within the mundane world. Out of the respondents, 89% reported having a Facebook page. While 24% have a separate page for their persona, 8% of respondents only have a Facebook page for their persona. This confirms the numerous interviews from the film where participants say SCA is not a contained activity, but closer to a lifestyle.

Entering the Event Space

SCA participants simultaneously exist in three spaces. The first space is the SCA geography of local kingdoms and groups determined by participants’ mundane postcodes. Participants have the most contact with this group both at events and through weekly meetings and fighter practices. I spent my fieldwork in the kingdom of Trimaris (roughly the
state of Florida in the United States). Most participants identify closest with their kingdom and local group. The second space is the persona’s geography, where their persona’s backstory is rooted. This geography encompasses the historical mundane world and places with which we are familiar. This will typically include Britain, Ireland, France, Russia, Japan, or other non-American nations. However, all titles and awards are based in SCA geography and become the main identifying point of the persona. For example, during my fieldwork, the king of Trimaris plays a 12th century Norse Viking and his wife (who was the queen of Trimaris) plays a 14th century Armenian merchant. During events, their primary role is current Trimarian royalty and their historical persona becomes secondary. The third is in the mundane present. In the book, The Knights Next Door, SCA participant Patrick O’Donnell writes “In practice, the majority (of participants) treat their persona like a crazy aunt they left home in the attic. They shop for it, make things for it, refer to it in the third person, but never bring it into public. They certainly don’t act like it, talk like it or live like it. Some members don’t play persona at all.” (2004:149). As King Gunnar says in the film, “It’s not like I am two people. I am the same person with two jobs. It’s like I have a full-time job and a part-time job.” Baron Taliesynne Nychymwrh yr Anghyfannedd Llanrhyddlad, holds a master’s degree in anthropology and has been a participant since the early 1970s, evoked Jean Rouch’s Les Maîtres Fous, when I asked him about the transformation from mundane to persona: “Anthropologically speaking this is institutionalised schizophrenia. You can dig ditches every day of the week and on the weekend you may be king and rule over the kingdom.” He may also have been referring to a former king of Trimaris who is a construction worker in mundane life.

The event is where participants are most free to enact their personas. The events in Trimaris are staged at campgrounds deep in the Florida woods. Other kingdoms rent hotels or banquet centres for their events. Regardless of their location, the SCA event space, like the
Indianist campground (Kalshoven 2012), creates a notion of separation from the mundane to signal and frame play. However, these spaces are not void of modern objects and are usually equipped with air-conditioning, lighting, electrical outlets, and modern appliances. The space is more about coding the activities as play rather than seclusion from modern society.

To enter the SCA space, participants must first pass through a position known as “troll” or “gate.” This is the first marker into the event. Their primary job to make sure that only paid participants enter the site. Each person waits in their vehicle and must fill out a form asking for his or her persona name, mundane name, vehicle make and registration. Each form also acts as a liability waiver releasing the SCA from real world legal action if a participant is hurt at an event, which could lead to mundane financial responsibility.

A fellow participant called “the troll” who wears garb while sitting in a nylon pavilion at the entrance to the campground, facilitates the introduction into the event space. There are signs informing motorists that this is a closed event. In the evening, the gate torches on bamboo poles provide light to mark the gate. The scene could remind one of the opening to Jurassic Park, where the wooden torch lit gate is the visual cue to participants that they are about to travel back in time. Seeing other participants already wearing garb is usually the first signal that the participant is about to cross from the mundane world into the SCA event space.

By crossing the threshold past the gate and into the SCA event space the participant is transitioning out of the mundane and is becoming part of the scenescape. The event space, like the carnival space, is a “site of communitas, a playful domain partitioned off from the rational and economic “real” world” (De Freitas 2007:49). Participants see medieval-looking tents and pavilions, other participants already in garb, campfires and medieval-looking banners that have directions to various buildings and scheduled activities within the space.
Many participants report that entering the event space make them feel closer to their persona and further from their mundane self. To use Gunnar’s earlier analogy of viewing the SCA as a part-time job, this is like walking into the office the morning, before you sit down at your desk. You have started to consider work, but may still be thinking about moments or responsibilities outside of the office. The official workday has not started, but you are entering the workspace. Seeing the medieval codes while wearing mundane clothes and driving a vehicle starts the shift in frame.

The first stop after entering the event space is registration. As participants drive down the dirt path to the registration building they are physically leaving the modern roads and infrastructure behind. Along the way, they pass tents and cabins that are in various stages of transformation from summer camp bunks to quasi-medieval dwellings. At registration, participants enter a room that could suffice for a low budget retelling of Robin Hood. Craft paper and sheets painted to look like stone hang from the walls. People in various stages of garb mill about talking with each other. A long plastic card table with a laptop computer and cash register makes the scene look more like a fun house than a medieval re-enactment. There is usually even a porcelain dish filled with candies on the table for participants to enjoy while they sign in.

At registration, participants show their gate papers and are asked if they have paid for “feast,” a meal plan offered to participants. After paying the various fees (usually $30 for the weekend, which covers two nights of dormitory-style sleeping accommodations), participants receive their bunk assignment and one or two small trinkets. The first trinket is a “site token” the second is a “feast token”. Everyone receives a site token, which should be visible at all times to signify that you paid to be on site and are part of the event. The second trinket is a “feast token”. This is essentially a meal ticket to show you paid for feast and allows you access to the hall at meal times. Not everyone pays for “feast”. Some opt to bring their own
meals and eat with friends or “households” away from the feast hall. If you pay for “feast” (typically an extra $10) the event staff provides dinner Friday night (usually beans and rice with meat and bread), breakfast Saturday morning (eggs and fruit with coffee), Saturday lunch (sandwiches and salad) and a large 8 to 10 course meal Saturday night. Sunday’s breakfast is typically leftovers from Saturday. The portions are larger than most restaurants and many participants (myself included) gain around 20 pounds after six months of active participation. Participants who want to eat “feast” but are unable to afford the $10 usually volunteer as kitchen staff in exchange for free food. This allows participants who are struggling with mundane economic issues the opportunity to trade labour for food while participating in the act of commensality. I will discuss the specific aspects of feast and its role in the event later in this paper.

Most participants sleep in cabins, which are summer camp bunkhouses made of cinderblock. They typically have eight bunk beds on either side and a single bathroom in the back. All cabins are mixed gender, which requires participants to negotiate bathroom etiquette and appreciate differences in modesty. Cabin assignments change each weekend, so this is an ongoing process with each new sleeping cohort.

Cabins are rarely transformed to hide the modern appointments. Some participants add minor decorations or may hang their device (coat of arms) from a bunk or nearby wall. For the most part, however, there is very little attempt to change the sleeping spaces into a medieval experience. One participant told me she thinks that it is because many of the members are older and have health issues, so they rely on CPAP machines, medical refrigeration units, or do not want to add any extra obstacles to their sleeping areas. This could also be because the cabins are seen as a personal rather than communal space. This is where participants sleep and take care of mundane obligations. To put it in Goffman’s (1959) terms, the cabin is “offstage.” Cabins are designated areas within the SCA space where
participants are still in garb, but not fully “acting” their personas. Peerage and royalty ranks are respected, but bowing and other rules are relaxed while in the cabins. Participants will also use this area to complain or gossip about each other in a semi-private space.

After setting up camp, most participants gather in the hall to see who else has arrived and catch up on news over “traveller’s feast”, a meal usually consisting of rice, beans, and bread. From the outside the feast hall looks like a larger version of the cabins. However, if the cabins are backstage, then the feast hall is the frontstage. Inside, a large wooden table lines the back wall with 14 chairs all facing the hall. Twelve smaller chairs flank two giant thrones. The king’s and queen’s banners hang over each of the thrones. Shields line the walls and tissue paper covers the windows to look like stained glass. In addition to the florescent lights, wooden chandeliers with plastic battery-operated candles hang from the ceilings. Various medieval-looking banners are on display around the room to conceal the building’s modernity. People fill the room talking, eating, drinking, and showing off their arts and craft projects. Most of the conversations focus around the drive to the site, unpacking, and the previous day at work. Had it not been for the garb and decorations that code this space as medieval, this moment could have passed for any social hall gathering on any given Friday night.

With an abundance of anachronisms, this is the SCA, and this is their re-creation of medieval. Conversations are cross-coded between complaints about mundane finances and period sewing practices, without signalling a re-key. Participants sit around talking about who is sleeping with whom or who was just fired, hired or promoted. They tell jokes, some with medieval-themed punchlines and others placed squarely in the modern day. Gwlados, a participant in her mid-30s who is a self-proclaimed “ball-busting feminist during the week and a medieval nun on the weekends” said during an interview:
“We do a lot of everyday mundane socializing in our garb. I am not going to buy into the character to the point it comes in the way of my friendships. I am not going to freak out every time someone says a bad word or something like that or tells a dirty joke when we are all hanging out in our garb enjoying our medieval hobby, but not necessarily being medieval people.”

The feast hall shows the SCA as more of a carnival than liminal communitas (1984). Like a carnival with its evolving characters, traditions, and expectations (De Franco 2007; Green 2007), SCA customs and traditions replace mundane social structures. Symbols and images of this society hang from the walls, reminding participants of the SCA’s focus on its own hierarchies and geographies. Participants answer to a mock king who literally sits at the head of the hall overseeing a hierarchical peerage system wielding real power over the group.

Dressing the Persona

While the decorations on the campground buildings and presence of a “troll” establish the event space, garb marks the participant as part of the carnival. Participants prefer the term “garb” to “costume” when referring to their SCA outfits. Mistress Alysoon notes this important distinction in the film Scadia: The Known World. She says costumes are cheap and geared for make-believe. However, her garb is part of her overall attire, more like workout clothes than a costume. She says she is just as comfortable in her garb as her mundane clothing. Gunther echoed that sentiment when he said that costumes are reserved for Halloween, his garb is part of his wardrobe.

Unlike other groups that re-enact a specific battle or war, the only requirement to attend any SCA event (other than paying the fee) is to wear clothes that attempt to look pre-sixteenth century. It is perfectly acceptable (and common) for participants to wear a polyester tunic over sweatpants with black trainers. As one informant is quoted in Korol-Evans, “Authentic would be if I had an actual sixteenth century goblet on site. No one is authentic.” (2009:13). While historical accuracy is marginally important, SCA accuracy is paramount.
Similar to carnival players who have rules that govern and classify the costumes they wear (Green 2007) participants have rules against wearing a piece of garb that is not appropriate for their position within the society.

A participant who wears mundane clothing inside the event space is called “naked” and usually teased. This is a common joke Friday nights when there is some leeway in the dress code as participants are just arriving. The social norm however is to have on some form of garb no later than one hour after arrival. However, the acceptable spectrum for garb is wide. Some members wear intricate, hand-sewn Italian Renaissance style dresses, others may wear a simple cotehardie. Regardless of what they currently wear, almost every participant started with and still owns a basic T-tunic. Participants wear tunics around the site when they do not have time to dress in something more elaborate. This signifies that someone is actively participating, without having to wear full garb while setting up camp or socializing in the feast hall. In his emic study on the SCA, Michael Cramer (2010) talks about one participant he interviewed who would wear a tunic over jeans and boots, even when he was king. His argued that the tunic alone coded him as being at the event. The anachronisms of jeans and boots as his garb were inconsequential because he was not playing a character. He was himself. The tunic was a signifier, not a costume or the clothing of an imaginary medieval person.

I had to wear a garb anytime I was at an event. SCA leadership felt that since many participants take photos and videos at events my camera would not be too much of a distraction, but mundane clothes would spoil the aesthetic. This is a common requirement for anthropologists studying re-enactment groups (Horowitz 1998; Cramer 2010; Kalshoven 2012; Daugbjerg 2014). I acquired two tunics to wear at events. The first one was royal blue and the other one was white. I wore them over sweat pants and hiking boots. While I did have
a few participants tease me about my garb (both were seamstresses looking to sell nicer garb), my simple attempt at garb was respected.

Putting on garb enriches an ethnographer’s experience with recreation groups (Crang 1996; Horowitz 1998; De Franco 2007; Green 2007; Korol-Evans 2009; Turner 2010; Kalshoven 2012; Daugbjerg 2014). I noticed a change whenever I wore the tunic at an event. Like a uniform, or wearing a suit at the office, it placed me in a different mind-set as I got ready in the mornings and coded me within the event. I figured it was because I knew I was heading to spend my day filming, but Mistress Alysoon says that the clothes affect your actions. In the film, she argues that the clothes are not only a code to other the participants, but also a reminder for herself that she is now in the event space. In her interview, she says she can feel her posture change as she puts on all of her medallions and regalia. She stands up a little taller, and feels more like a peer of the realm rather than an office clerk. She has started to wear some of her SCA regalia to her mundane job and feels like it gives her confidence she would normally have struggled to find.

However, garb is not static and can change to fit the weather or participant’s mood. Many participants will maintain their original persona but change clothes to reflect the mundane seasons. For example, many Trimarians will wear Greek or Roman inspired garb at summer events when the temperature can frequently reach 36C during the afternoon. When the seasons change and a chill takes the air, they will switch to either Russian or Italian Renaissance inspired garb because of the heavy brocade and fur lining.

The idea of wearing garb is not unique to the SCA. Noted theatre scholar Evreinov (1927) argues that dressing up and pretending you are someone else is natural and does not necessarily change who a person is outside of that moment. He equates Mardi Gras, Broadway musicals, or even just painting your body in team colors and attending a football
game as examples of dressing up for an event without changing your personality. This analogy extends to swimming costumes, business suits or even jeans and a t-shirt. Like sports or theatre patrons, beach-goers or suit-wearing professionals, SCA participants do not see themselves acting out a theatrical character. Rather, their clothing signals the frame, without modifying the individual. If anything, the carnivalesque nature of garb may provide a mask that allows the participant to reveal his or her true self under the guise of persona. During his interview in the film, Count Adamhar says, “We can be the person we have always wanted to become.”

The SCA’s requirement to wear garb and the allowance to change it at any time closely aligns with the transient nature of carnival (De Franco 2007). While SCA garb is not a “costume,” it is not worn every day. Garb is reserved for a specific temporal and physical space. Garb is a signal that participants have entered the event space, assumed their persona, and bow before a mock king. Rules and the mundane social order is disrupted under the guise of leisure.

Playing the Persona

The one area of the SCA event that has the strongest connection to historical research is the naming process. All participants research and adopt a historically accurate name for their persona. Persona names can illustrate how participants like to revel in the unconventional and highlight difference. Many of the persona names are awkward for the American tongue, such as Baron Taliesynne Nychymwrh yr Anghyfannedd Llanrhyddlad or Master Iefan Colledig AP Dynfwal Abertawe. However, other participants will adopt persona names that are close to their mundane name: Duke Martin Lochner (Mark Lock), Duchess Elspeth MacNaughton (Elizabeth McNautten) or Adamhar, which is the French version Adam uses to fit into the SCA’s period. All names have to get approval from a board using
historical documentation the participant provides proving that the name existed at the same

time and place as the persona. Some participants are able to register their name quickly while

others can take decades to pass. During the film, Eva Inghean Alaxandair explained why it
took nearly 20 years for her to create and register a persona name:

“I wanted my SCA name to be 14th century Irish. When I started looking, I joined the
SCA and I had Ever (her mundane name) as my SCA name, but that was on the
banned names list. I used it for a while, but couldn’t get it passed with our registry
because it is not something from my time period. After about 20 years of using it as a
nickname, I decided to get a passed name. I wanted something similar. I found the
Annals of Ulster from my time-period. I found Eva, who was some important
person’s daughter who died in 1400. I thought ‘great, this is in my time-period and
close to my mundane name. The documentation on my first name is solid.’ My dad’s
SCA name was Alexandair Gallowglass. Different spelling of Alexander, but I knew I
wanted to be Eva, daughter of Alexander because my dad passed away a few years
erlier. In tribute to him, I found the funkiest spelling of Alexander that I could within
my time period. Inghean means ‘daughter of’ and was used in the 14th Century in
Ireland or would have been, it is very anglicized, but it’s a good Irish name. So, Eva
Inghean Alaxandair… Eva daughter of Alexander, that’s the way my name structure,
breaks down.”

Other names are not as thoroughly researched. Many come from inside jokes or are
bastardizations of their mundane name. Alysoon, for example is Allison. She used the
phonetic spelling of how she pronounces her name and found that it was used in 14th century
France. She created a French persona to match her name. During my second event, I
accidentally named myself (it is a nickname in the SCA because I did not attempt to get it
passed). I was hot, hungry and tired. It was the end of a very long day and several participants
had become start struck over my camera. People who wanted to be in the film were calling
me in every direction. However, most did not know my name and would call out “Hey
Media,” referring to my bright orange sash. In a moment of exhaustion I snapped back at one
person who was particularly aggressive “It’s not media… it’s Media (pronounced Medea),
because I am about to be a Greek tragedy.” Everyone in earshot howled with laughter. The
name stuck (I even use it in the credits on my film) and that moment became one of the
stories told about around the campfires in bardic circles. In a small way, I added to the mythic
stories within the SCA. Like many names in the SCA, my mundane interests or involvement created a naming structure.

Like mundane life, most participants will use a nickname version of their persona name. These are either shortened versions of longer names that the board approved, or, like my name “Medea,” which falls into the “not passed.” However, switching between persona, nickname and mundane name does not necessarily change the game. Some participants are more comfortable using mundane names, or they may only know a participant’s persona name. Occasionally, name-changing from persona to mundane within the event space is a sign that play has stopped and sets the moment outside the game. For example, during an intense argument over a proposed change to the corporate bylaws one participant exclaimed “I am not talking to Gunnar the king, I am talking to Mark the person.” This immediately silenced the room and changed the game. In this moment, the participant who made a point to break frame and stop the game did so to remove the king’s authority over the game and reduce him to an equal with the rest of the individuals in the room. This exchange reminded me of a moment in Dreschke’s film Die Stämme Von Köln (2011) where members from a Hun recreation group were meeting, out of costume, in a social hall arguing over whether their group would march in an upcoming parade. Some members were concerned it would hurt the club’s reputation as a serious organization. Members voiced their opinions, using the non-club names and the acting Atalla had the same authority as every other member.

There are many parallels between the persona and mundane personality traits. Cramer quotes one participant who compared it to high school: “You’ve got your jocks (the fighters), cheerleaders (their consorts), your student government nerds (the Pelicans), and your weird artsy types (the Laurels). You have your in crowds and your out crowds and any number of cliques, the politics is brutal, and everyone’s favorite topic of conversation is who is sleeping with whom.” (2010:36). I too noticed that many military veterans adopted stereotypical
earlier era warrior personas while participants with office or desk positions typically enacted later period clerk or scribe personas. Obviously, this trend is not absolute, but seemed consistent regardless of the mundane gender.

Court & Feast

The court herald will usually start morning announcements around 8:30. He or she will walk near a cabin and yell the announcements. One such announcement starts the second act of the film, “Oyez, oyez! Greetings unto the populace of Trimaris. The time is now 8:20 and breakfast is being served in the hall. There is a newcomers’ class at 9. Then the lyst marshal will start armour inspection at 9:30… that is all.” This usually signals a mad dash to the hall for breakfast, which typically consists of scrambled eggs, fruit, coffee, and a piece of toast.

Most days are spent either taking classes on some aspect of medieval arts and crafts or out on the tournament field participating in full-contact martial arts. While more male participants stock the battlefield and classes draw more female participants, it is not exclusive. In the SCA, men cook, sew and construct crafts while women fight, earn the title of knight and even become champions. All knights in the SCA are required to learn a craft, know how to dance, be able to perform a song or story as well as be skilled fighters. Favouring pop culture over the medieval, knights are the top of the hierarchy (outside of royalty) and expected to be chivalrous and well-rounded. SCA knights are more akin to characters from the Arthurian stories than actual period knights.

Around 6pm, participants gather in the feast hall for court. The populace gathers on benches facing a set of thrones. They chatter among themselves about the day’s events, who they want to sit with at dinner, or what they have planned for the next day. Then a booming voice usually shatters the dull roar of chitchat “Oyez oyez! Please rise for their most
honourable majesties King Gunnar Oxnameigen the Fourth and Queen Brandys Rofthald…

the king and queen of Trimaris!” The crowd all jumps to their feet and lowers their heads as the royalty passes. This is the most carnival moment of the event. A mock king stands in full regalia in front of his populace and bestows them with awards and titles borrowed from popular culture. Returning to Goffman’s (1959) frames, this is the frontstage. Other participants, the peerage ranks, and royalty are watching them. The royalty is acutely aware that court is highly theatrical and their role is to make it as enjoyable as possible. As Queen Brandys told me, “I know every person in there is staring at me, and I had better act as a queen for the entire of court, or I will ruin their dream.”

During my time with the SCA, the king and queen were a married couple in their mid-40s. He is a financial advisor and she is a physics professor. All reigns last six months and are determined during a combat tournament called “crowne tourney.” After their time is up they will stage an exit of some sort and their heirs will ascend to the throne. While royals have a limited time on the throne with a known exit date, their power is real and their actions have real implications, not only for the SCA, but also in real life. As one previous queen told me

“Even though we are re-enactors and I am not a real queen, I am their queen and that’s a big responsibility. That hit home at coronation when I had someone who was in tears walk up to me right afterwards and she said she was new to the SCA and was very happy I was her first queen. I don’t know what I did, but I think I hugged her and welcomed her to the SCA”.

The royalty sets the tone for the participants and provides a visual reinforcement of heteronormativity. Even if a woman is able to win in the tournament and become queen by her own abilities, she is still subject to the king’s rules and decisions. After a long and heated debate, lasting several years the SCA allowed a man to fight for his same sex partner in crown list in 2014. Xephrena, a duchess decried the decision to me during an interview saying it destroyed her dream of a strong masculine king and his beautiful queen who needs his protection. Similarly, a participant told me about a past king who was very unpopular and
it caused participation to dwindle. Some felt the king violated the SCA’s core beliefs of chivalry and honour when he was accused of not being honest on the battlefield and acknowledging when people hit him. Participants considered him brutish and not chivalrous. That put the face of the kingdom (the king) at odds with the proclaimed ideals. Kings are in charge of giving out awards and granting promotions within the group. A king has the power to make anyone anything in the SCA event space, and this can lead to jealousy and conflict. It also gives a sense of benevolence to the royals that affords them a special place within the society.

The king and queen hand out the awards during court in a very public and frequently emotional spectacle. With very few exceptions, SCA rituals are not scripted. Participants will act in whatever manner feels appropriate within the context of the moment. After one particularly comical and engaging court session, Countess Dulcia told me that it is all live theatre. Other than the name of the person being called up in front of the court and the award they are receiving, she does not always know them personally or the specific reason for giving the award. In place of a written script SCA participants rely on the society’s customs, history, traditions, and rituals that serve to bind the whole together into a community (Cramer 2010).

Even though court is not scripted, it is the most theatrical and structured moment at an SCA event. The participant receiving an award is called up in front of the king and queen and kneels while the rest of the populace watches. The royalty will give an improvised speech about that person’s virtues and why they deserve the award. Most of the awards allow for some comedic routine. For example, King Youn would always start his speeches with a sword pretending that he was going to execute the person. After a bit of banter the court herald reads a short prepared speech that is codified with each award. The recipient is presented with a hand-illuminated scroll and is usually given a new honorific title of sorts.
At the end of my fieldwork I was given the “Crown’s Order of Gratitude.” I was called up and presented with a scroll and a hand-painted glass medallion. An average of 10 scrolls are awarded per event. While this is a highlight of any event, it is not at all historically accurate. What participants call scrolls, are more accurately termed “writs” and were rarely handed out by royalty in comparison to the volume of scrolls generated by SCA royalty.

In addition to presenting scrolls, court is also a time for general announcements; organizers thank other participants for help and offer verbal recognition to participants who excelled on the battlefield or in the classroom. During each court, there were multiple references to popular culture, movies, music and events. People quote Monty Python, Austin Powers or hum the Jeopardy theme if someone took too long to walk from their seat to the front of the room after being called up.

During the court on Memorial Day weekend, Queen Brandys gave a 4-minute speech where she asked everyone who was a member of the mundane military to stand up. She asked the participants to thank them for service saying, “because of their sacrifice out there in the real world, we get to be safe and play our little game in this world.” (In the film, I edited the speech in half because of time.) This very public support for the US military is common at events because of the large number of veterans that participate in the SCA and reinforces that participants do not enact characters; rather they are themselves at all times, regardless of frame.

After court is feast. This is probably one of the most visually engaging moments at any SCA event. The feast hall is transformed into something that closely resembles a medieval structure. Wooden chandeliers hide the darkened fluorescent ballasts and sheets painted to look like stone hang from the walls. Each table is illuminated by candlelight and covered with a tablecloth. Participants are encouraged to eat from either metal or wooden
plates using medieval-looking utensils. Heralds announce each course as it is paraded around
the hall. The king, queen and other nobility sitting at the high table are served before the
populace.

The bill of fare usually consists of seven to nine courses and typically starts with a
bread and cheese course. The second remove is usually a salad of sorts followed by fish, then
chicken, maybe a vegetable item and then a beef-based item. There are always several
desserts and occasionally a fruit plate as a palate cleanser. While the cooks use medieval
recipes as inspiration, they have to acknowledge modern allergies and food intolerances.
Each meal has a gluten-free option and a vegetarian alternative. Recipes are made public days
before so members can see if any ingredients may offend them or cause medical issues. If a
cook does a particularly poor job of providing gluten-free or vegetarian alternatives there is
usually a low turnout and much gossiping on Facebook during the following days.

While most cooks attempt to create an accurate meal, this does not prevent them from
having fun with the food. One dish (seen in the film and affectionately referred to as “dragon
chicken”) stole the show at the feast at St. George’s Faire. The cook offered baked chicken on
the menu and wanted to add theatricality to the course. She transformed the chicken into a
dragon by fashioning a head and tail out of ground beef and used black olives for eyes. When
the meal was announced the herald told an improvised story about how a dragon tried to
attack the village, but the fighters prevailed and this was not run across the grill for the
populace. Cooks will also look to modern menus for inspiration. For example, slow cooked
beef with pickled cabbage and shredded potatoes cooked in oil is both a period medieval dish
and announced with comedic flair as barbeque with coleslaw and chips.

During feast, members of the populace will give performances between courses.
These can be songs, stories or dances. Some members will give speeches or offer toasts to
their friends. Most of the performances have something to do with militaristic valour written as chivalrous acts. Participants frequently weave a Battle of Maldon-like theme into their stories or songs. In addition to the filks, participants will write and perform completely original songs. “Vivat the Dream” and “Trimarian Blood” are two of the most popular and use modern Floridian geography as inspiration for the mythic homeland of Trimaris.

As the feast finishes, participants will turn back on the florescent lights, wash their own dishes in a giant tub of soapy water and help the kitchen staff clean up the hall by dismantling some of the medieval signifiers. This signifies the end of organized activities at the event and slow return to normalcy. A few participants will change back into mundane outfits to help clean up the site or hall and then head home. Many, however, will leave on a coding object like a coronet and an old tunic to signal their rank in the hierarchy and continued participation in the space. Other participants do not change out of their garb and scuttle off to dance, hold a bardic circle or engage in other bacchanal activities.

Court and feast are not only the most visually impressive events at an event; they are also usually the most cohesive and are used to strengthen participants’ social connections. Feast is what most of the participants look forward to all day. As Mistress Dyana told me, “this is where the SCA really tries to get medieval. If you walk in, and see decorations lit by candles, smell the food and hear people singing you just might be transported back… not literally, but in your mind at least.” Feast is a several hour affair, where participants eat, drink, and laugh together. Participants are entertained, enjoy a hot meal and may feel fully immersed in the SCA’s ideals while feasting in the presence of the mock king and queen.

Bardics & Filks

After feast participants typically gather around various campfires. Using fantasy-inspired medieval dialogue they tell stories and sing songs. These stories and songs, called
either bardics or filks typically romanticise a period of SCA history or feature a participant as either the hero or villain. Bardic is an SCA term for any gathering where people sing and tell stories within the event space and usually occur around a campfire while participants pass around a bottle of alcohol. Filk is a specific type of bardic performance that illustrates the SCA’s notion of nostalgia. During a filk, a participant will use the music from a popular song, but change the lyrics to a medieval theme. It is in these moments that the overlap between persona and mundane become the most apparent. If performers sing in a strictly medieval melody it would slow the moment and force participants to engage on an intellectual level. “Not everybody understands how a fourteenth-century canso should be structured, but everybody knows the tune to “Born in the U.S.A.”(Cramer 2010:155). However, by employing familiar tunes the audience can pay more attention to the lyrics and form a stronger connection with the content through their attachment to the popular melody. The SCA is a group where people can write their own myths with themselves as the heroes. This allows SCA histories to become larger and grander than actual events, allowing participants to be a living part of the society’s own history, creating deeper connections between participants and enriching the experience.

“Duke or Earl” is a popular filk that takes the “Duke of Earl” song tune and changes the lyrics to mock the chivalry and poke fun at SCA peerage levels. Like the tropes taken from movies and literature, filk songs reach participants using two forms of nostalgia. The first is the original tune that evokes a visceral reaction using the mundane connection. The second is the nostalgia for the SCA event, which is the subject of the song. Combined, the new song actually creates an independent level of nostalgia since the filk becomes greater than its two original halves. This speaks to the intricacy of nostalgia, using historical tropes to produce connections in the present. The songs and filks range in subject matter from honour and valour on the battlefield to drinking and wooing members of the opposite sex. This
speaks to Berdhal’s (1999) and Mankekar’s (2002) notions that nostalgia is about looking to the past for inspiration to create an experience that is relevant in the present.

The other type of after-feast fireside entertainment is bardic stories. Bardic stories can be set either inside or outside of the event space and typically place the storyteller in some heroic role. One story even claims that an SCA knight saved a woman who was being assaulted in a park while he was walking home from his mundane job. Another story involves a participant who used his SCA helmet and sword to fight off a man who was trying to rob his house. These stories, which are set outside of the event space, but feature participants as heroes that stand up for themselves and others speak to the frustration many feel with crime rates and lack of morals in modern American society and their desire to intervene.

Bardic stories that take place inside of the event space and typically involve moments from the battlefield. These are typically referred to as “No Shit” stories. They got their name because the stereotypical story starts out “No shit, there I was…” There is a Facebook page with the sole purpose of allowing participants to share their “No Shit” stories with other groups.

One of the most popular stories in the SCA, which is neither set outside the event space, nor on the battlefield, is the story of Saint Martin. Marc Falcoun (Duke Martin) is a well-known participant in the SCA. He has served as both King of Trimaris and on the Board of Directors overseeing the international group. In his mundane life, he is a vice president of sales for a software development firm. He stands about 6’ 5” and has an impressive physique. One morning, while at an event, Duke Martin was using a pickaxe to dig a trench next to his tent. Unfortunately, he struck a water main and water went shooting into the air, flooding the campground and disrupting service for the rest of the camp. The campsite owner had to hire a crew and after about 15 hours, the damage was repaired. Participants retell the story, but in a
medieval frame. The story is now that Duke Martin is a Saint who struck the ground flooding the site with holy water. People claim that the water healed imaginary ailments. Participants started chanting Deco Covo Provo (poorly translated Latin for “Call before you dig”, which is from an American public service announcement advising people to inquire with utility companies about buried cables before digging up their gardens). A close friend of Martin’s quickly went to a giant supermarket and purchased a pickaxe that he painted gold and started hanging a silk banner painted with Duke Martin standing in front of a gushing geyser. There is an annual celebration at the site, merchandise for sale and even a website (www.onetruepipe.org) about the now infamous incident. The retellings are indicative of an SCA hero story and show how nostalgic narratives are embraced within the SCA. Participants who were at the event now hold an amount of cultural capital within the society for having been present at “the miracle.”

These stories show participants are not just interested in recreating a lifestyle from hundreds of years ago, but also actively creating a history of the society that will soon provide the basis for a nostalgia for the SCA. Even the details surrounding the founding years and important events are debated because participants prefer using oral traditions, which feel more nostalgic than codified written stories.

It is important to note that while SCA participants appreciate poetic license for a good story, they do not tolerate outright lying since it violates their notions of honour. There are several instances of participants who have moved to Trimaris claiming to hold prestigious titles from different kingdoms. In one instance that I witnessed unfold on an SCA Facebook group, a participant introduced himself as a knight from another kingdom and bragged about his ability as a fighter. However, he was on medical discharge from the military, so he could no longer fight and prove his skills. His stories caught the attention of a few of the knights in the group who started investigating his past. They found out that he was not a knight and had
lied about awards he was supposed to have received in other kingdoms. They not only asked him to leave the group, but posted photos of him on social media to warn other participants. One participant commented on Facebook, “To portray yourself as someone that has received this accolade is not only disrespectful to every knight, but also to all that aspire for it. It spits on all that we in the SCA hold very dear to our hearts, not just here but in our daily dealings. I take that very personal.” Baron Turold added, “We don’t just feign belief in these ideals - we try to live them. Otherwise, we are just a bunch of people running around in the woods wearing funny costumes.”

Interestingly, participants are more tolerant of lying about mundane achievements than a persona’s accomplishments. This may have to do with the fact that many participants feel that the SCA is a more authentic experience than their mundane lives.

Even during these filks and bardic moments, many conversation topics remain modern and focus on notions of honour and chivalry. Occasionally, they are infused with language coded as medieval, but the topics are mundane. For example, a participant complaining that their spouse is not doing their share of housework will refer to them as “my lady wife” or “my lord husband”. This also extends to other situations. A woman in her mid-20s talking about a bad date she was on the week before talked about “his lack of chivalry” and “he didn’t treat me with honour, as a lady should expect.” What is interesting is that these language patterns and word choices are also used outside of the event space while they are gathered at the pub or having dinner at home. The location does not change the language.

Leaving One Foot in the Past

The next morning most participants will usually wear a tunic over mundane clothes as they gather in the hall to eat leftovers from feast the night before. They work to remove the last bit of medieval decorations from the buildings and grounds and pack it all into trailers
before heading back home. There is no need for an official closing ceremony or big announcement since events are held almost every weekend and many of the participants will see each other several times during the week at various meetings and practices. Sunday mornings do not signal the death of the persona, but an end of that weekend’s carnival allowing the mundane to return to the forefront. However, just as the mundane never left when the persona stepped into the spotlight, so too does the persona co-star with the mundane. Many participants have Trimarian shield stickers on their cars or gold chains hanging on their windshields. In the film, you see Duke Gunnar’s cross and gold chain around the rear view mirror of his vehicle to remind him that he is a knight and not to lash out at other drivers in traffic. Lady Celia says she has the SCA shield sticker on her car to signal to other motorists that she is a courteous and chivalrous person. She also claims that people are more likely to stop for a stranded motorist if he or she is part of the SCA. A few members wear SCA logo t-shirts as they drive off in cars with personalized plates emblazoned with medieval words like “En Guard” or “Knight.”

Some participants will remove their tunics as they head off site. Others remain in garb and agree to meet at a local restaurant for lunch on their way home. This is a game called FOM or “Freaking Out the Mundanes.” Participants are seeking a reaction from those outside of their group who are not in on their joke. Schechner (1993) would describe this as dark play. Dark play is a special type of play where those in the game will engage non-participants who are unaware of the frame. This firmly establishes SCA participants as “other” to mundane culture and allows the “inside joke” to continue into the outside world. Many of the stories from FOM will make their way back into the event space as “no shit” stories at the next weekend’s event. This also continues the SCA carnival by enacting misrule and inverting social norms outside of the event space. I participated in several episodes of FOM. I
felt out of my element and was uncomfortable wearing garb in public. I longed for the safety of the event space.

Screenings

As I started to edit the film and write this paper, I worked to juxtapose the modern and medieval and show how participants use their personas in their mundane lives. I opened the film with a shot of Gunnar’s gold chain and cross swinging from the windshield of his car. This establishes the trip we are making to the event space and shows blending of SCA material culture into participant’s present day lives. In a later scene in the film, shot during that same car trip, Gunnar talked about using the chain and cross as a reminder of his SCA oaths to avoid road rage. The film runs 100 minutes and, like this paper, uses several events to illustrate a typical SCA event from arriving and unpacking to feasting, fighting, and singing. The film, however, focuses more on how participants attempt to fuse values from the SCA world with their mundane lives.

I did not allow any participant input over the initial editing process. However, I scheduled two screenings of the film. I had 164 people attend the first screening and 63 at the second. I invited participants to come in garb and opened the venues up to the public. I created a Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/scadiamovie) to solicit feedback and held a reception afterwards where I spent time meeting with participants to hear their opinions. Most of the comments were very positive. One former participant told me that the film made them want to return to the SCA and Baron Turold commented on Facebook, “Chris has beautifully captured what I do. In my 35 years my mother has never understood this hobby. Now she supports me.”
I wanted to interject the medieval into the modern act of filmmaking. I worked with a graphic designer to create a logo for the film that embodied the SCA’s anachronistic spirit. The giant S is obviously an homage to illuminated manuscripts. However, we took the lettering style from a book of medieval letterpress characters. A triskele serif was added to either side, making the Victorian era letter more SCA (the triskele is the symbol for Trimaris). We chose this S specifically because of its yin-yang look, a nod to the duality of persona and mundane in the SCA. I also chose the S letter as an illusion to the Superman logo. Many participants feel a connection to the mythical superhero who comes from a storied alien planet and must use an obfuscated identity to exist in the world while simultaneously acting as its protector. Talking the anachronistic process a step further we hand carved the letter into a linoleum block and then rolled it with black ink. That print was scanned into a computer and used as the logo on to the DVD and packaging. The logo won an American Graphic Design award. This film, with its anachronistic logo also lives in two spaces, using modern methods to capture and preserve part of the SCA’s mythic past. Allowing personas to exist on the defined space of a film screen while conversing with the modern world.
Conclusion

The SCA is a leisure group that employs nostalgic enactments to create a carnival that disrupts the trend of social progression. SCA participants dress in medieval-inspired clothing and cloister themselves to enact their personas in their free time, which satisfies both of Victor Turner’s definitions of leisure: “(1) freedom to enter, even to generate, new symbolic worlds of entertainment, sports, games, diversions of all kinds. It is furthermore, (2) freedom to transcend social structural limitations, freedom to play with ideas, with fantasies, with words, with paint, and with social relationships.” (1982:35-36). While SCA participants generate a new symbolic world of play wherein they create new and different social relationships based on romantic, Victorian notions of medieval life rooted in popular culture notions of medieval combat and ritual. I contend that the SCA is a group with not one truth, but many, making it a postmodern society that employs multiple realities. Cramer echoes “in a sense, the SCA is a postmodern construction of a Hollywood version of a Victorian image of a romantic Middle Ages that never actually existed’ (2010:26).

These nostalgic enactments are as much about existing in an imagined past as creating a present that is closer to participant’s ideals of honor, chivalry, and courtesy. It is this point about nostalgic enactments that led me to believe that participants are not trying to restore a historic past, but create a parallel present. Participants appropriate modern objects and invented rituals into their medieval game to create new traditions that resonate with participants. Filk, bardic and court are all examples of this invented tradition.

Unlike Civil War reenactors who starve themselves and fuss over the accuracy of every button and stitch (Horowitz 1998), authenticity in the SCA’s carnival landscape does not come from creating the most accurate representations of the past. Rather, it comes from the emotional fulfilment found in the performance. “The quest for the real in re-enactments is
considerably more of a self-knowing performance than is often suggested – and it is this that makes living history such an exemplary dramatization of modernity” (Crang 1996:417). Participants strive to create an idyllic framework where tropes of social structures that existed prior to the industrial revolution are still in existence. The militaristic language and focus on fighting for a “just and noble cause” is more akin to J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* than the Middle Ages. Participants create a carnival where the mock king is a just monarch and everyone, even the smallest participant, can become a hero. Participants use this carnival atmosphere to create a nostalgic society that never existed based on ideals found in an imagined past inspired by the modern mediums of film and television. Participants talk about their desire for an idealized feudal society where anxieties about the pace and scope of an industrial capitalist world no longer exist. The SCA’s carnival nature, inversion of hierarchies, and recreation of rigid social rules allows for a temporary release of tension. This releases their discontent with the modern world and allows participants to return to the structures of contemporary society after indulging in a relatively harmless form of misrule before returning to the mundane world.

**Further Study**

Through their nostalgic enactments, SCA performance recalls a specific period of time that saw one gender and group rule over another. Intentional or not, framing the activity within a Victorian version of the middle ages establishes the game in an era that was highly gendered and racialized. Postmodern ideals espouse that there is not one truth, but many. This makes the SCA, a postmodern creation, an interesting place for gender identity studies in general. In speaking with female participants, I noticed several who had changed their personas to match their male partner. This includes construction of a new backstory, name
and matching garb. While it is common in Western culture for a woman to shed her name and identity in favour of her male partner, it seems at odds with the SCA’s postmodern nature. However, it is in line with the duality of persona and mundane identities. I would be very interested to explore the notion of self, identity, and persona with a feminist lens and investigate the influence of sexual relationships on persona development.

Some participants hype gender or ethnicity stereotypes they are playing. This concern is both for the low number of non-white participants within the SCA and for how participants enact and appropriate elements of foreign cultures. One participant, an older while man with a deep southern accent portrays a Japanese persona. He is known for wearing a kimono of sorts and greeting people with the phrase “ka-NEE-chee-wah Y’all”. While he feels this enactment is paying homage and respect to the culture, he is necessarily exaggerating, and possibly lampooning, aspects of a culture based on popular media portrayals to code him in his persona to other participants. Conversely, Michael Cramer notes, “A person of color who plays a Moor fighting with the Europeans is one thing, but a person of color who portrays a person who must have been white calls race as a signifier into question the same way drag challenges the notion of gender.” (Cramer 2010:39).


