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# Through Their Eyes: Buffalo Bill's Wild West as a Drawing Table for American Identity

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**Through Their Eyes**  
**Buffalo Bill's Wild West as a Drawing Table for American Identity**

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For the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in places such as New York, Chicago, California, London, Georgia, even in smaller towns like Bloomington, Illinois, Wild West shows were the “it” thing. Presented to crowds of 20,000 and more, they were spine-tingling, rip-roaring sensations not to be missed, if nothing else, for the sake of a story to tell a grandchild fifty years later. As the harsh, open expanses of the American West closed in with the heavy footsteps of manifest destiny, the “character building” quality of Western land and Western life found a new home in Wild West shows and the public discourse surrounding them. The ability to construct distinctly American identities that contemporary historian Fredrick Jackson Turner attributed to the Westward moving pioneer was now available, in entertainment form, to all.

Some scholars, such as Louis S. Warren, condense this identity construction to racial regeneration through violence, hardship and technological conquest.<sup>1</sup> Although Warren applies this interpretation to the framing of the Wild West show and not the West itself, this view is an overly simplified and inaccurate portrayal of not only the actual frontier’s but also the Wild West show’s contribution to American identity. Wild West shows did fail to convey a precise picture of the diversity of Western life, in part, because the settlement of the West cannot be defined in the racial progression used by the paradigms of the time. Although Buffalo Bill was well intentioned and tried at times to be careful when it came to portraying the West as racial conflict, he did, in fact portray it as such.<sup>2</sup> Even at that time, a Western paper, the *Omaha Daily Republican*, jokingly accused him of merely “pretend[ing] to have a complete picture of wld [sic] life in the far West.”<sup>3</sup> Yet, surprisingly, the shows did provide a focal point around which people of many classes, backgrounds, and even races could transmit, contemplate, discuss, and absorb a wide array of “American” ideals, extending beyond the immediate issue of the

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<sup>1</sup> Louis S. Warren, “Buffalo Bill Meets Dracula: William F. Cody, Bram Stoker, and the Frontiers of Racial Decay,” *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 4 (October 2002): 1139.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1150.

<sup>3</sup> *Omaha Daily Republican*, 18 May, 1883.

assimilation and the identity of the Indians (this discourse often focused not just on the shows, but on visits to the show grounds by newspaper reporters). Furthermore, the emotional intensity, vivacity, and immediacy of the ritualistic show itself opened boundaries, temporarily freeing the spectator from his/her social position and leaving him/her capable of “formulating a potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements.”<sup>4</sup>

Hence, enticed by the influence of Buffalo Bill’s “school,” a variety of competing perspectives on racial, national, and moral identity used Buffalo Bill’s show as a drawing table to reflect, and even insist, on what it meant to be American in a heterogeneous country where regional, racial, religious, and class differences seemed insurmountable.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, when newspaper reporters commented upon the numerous cultural, racial, and even gender stereotypes involved in Wild West shows, they did not hesitate to “mix and match” when proclaiming the ideal.

At first glance, however, Buffalo Bill’s show does mistakenly seem like a simple, linear clash between “Anglo-Saxon attributes” and “non-Anglo-Saxon attributes,” or “civilization” vs. “savagery.” It appears to confirm Louis S. Warren’s blanket statement that the show “reinforced the idea that the story of the West was...one of civilization trumping savagery,” of “fixity and settlement triumphing over mobility and nomadism,” and of “a return to the scene of a white family domicile.”<sup>6</sup> The show’s constantly changing format consisted of several exhibitions and competitions involving activities such as riding, hunting, shooting, and dancing. American Indians, primarily the Ogalala Sioux, a plains tribe, contracted on their own will for a salary and toured with the show, playing “themselves” in re-enacted battles and scenes such as the famous finale, the “Attack on the Settlers Cabin,” in which white performers would defend a homestead

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<sup>4</sup> Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphor: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Symbol, Myth, and Ritual, ed. Victor Turner, (London: Cornell University Press, 1974), 14.

<sup>5</sup> Joy S. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History*, (Hill and Wang: New York, 2000), 61.

<sup>6</sup> Louis S. Warren, “Cody’s Last Stand: Masculine Anxiety, The Custer Myth, and the Frontier of Domesticity in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 59.

of women and children from native raiders. According to historian Paul Reddin these scenes did not “reflect the subtleties of his [Buffalo Bill’s] beliefs” and a “regard for Indians got lost among battle cries and scalps.”<sup>7</sup> Still, the Wild West did not begin with this whirlwind; there was a purposeful “graduated excitement” to the show which often began with the relatively calm shooting performance of Annie Oakley and then worked up to frenetic and noisy action.<sup>8</sup> Riding exhibitions and competitions played a key role, and although winning and losing depended on the day because competitions were debatably not rigged; one *Chicago Tribune* article boasted that the American cowboy always beat “them all” (Indians, in addition to Mexicans, and other foreign performers that were later invited into the show).<sup>9</sup> At the end of the show, Buffalo Bill often used the cabin scene to bring audience emotions to a culminating point. As one reporter wrote “[t]he more there was of banging pistols and scurrying Indians, the better apparently the spectators liked it.”<sup>10</sup>

Another segment entitled “Life Customs of the Indians” embodied Buffalo Bill’s earnest, though perhaps biased, attempt to portray the everyday life of the Sioux who even performed traditional songs and dances before the crowd.<sup>11</sup> For some, these “ethnological” expositions, in which several aspects were similar to those at the Chicago Worlds Fair of 1893, celebrated bourgeois culture by highlighting what they considered to be the polar-opposite lifestyle.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the definition of identity is often sought in its opposite. What is “right” is what is “not wrong,” and in this case, what was “civilized” was supposedly that which was “not savage.” One way to be delineated as “not savage” and, therefore, “civilized” was to have a relationship with technology. Correspondingly, Warren notes that the most technological feature of the

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Reddin, *Wild West Shows* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 75.

<sup>8</sup> “How the Wild West Show Has Developed,” *New York Times*, 7 April 1901, 26.

<sup>9</sup> “Will Show Wild Life: Rough Riders And Fighters Of All Nations Are Gathering,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 14 April, 1893; see Reddin, *Wild West Shows*, 109 for a discussion of possible “cheating” tactics.

<sup>10</sup> “Indians at Erastina,” *New York Times*, 26 June, 1886, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Kasson, *Celebrity*, 113.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

show, the shooting competition, always saw white Americans victorious over Indians and Mexicans.<sup>13</sup>

Nonetheless, it would be a gross mistake to perceive Wild West shows in a “bad” vs. “good” context. Despite evidence to the contrary in his book, Paul Reddin described the show as a “gladiatorial approach to Manifest Destiny” in which “Cody, along with scouts and cowboys represented the forces of good and Indians and a few errant white road agents symbolized evil and barbarism.”<sup>14</sup> This allegorical portrayal is just too simplistic. The shows did not merely ratify the spectator’s “sense of superiority and triumph,” they became a tool in an identity process that was hardly that straightforward. The show as tool offered a claim on the physical attributes, morals, and lifestyles portrayed, regardless of race.<sup>15</sup> For some, these even included the best parts of “wildness.”<sup>16</sup>

A few immediate clues indicate that both portrayal on the part of the show producers and perception on the part of the spectators were not polarized. First of all, the shows did not criticize Indians with humor as other contemporary shows (i.e. minstrels) did other ethnic and racial groups.<sup>17</sup> Secondly, at least one newspaper article commented that Buffalo Bill’s Wild West was equally suited to its savage venue of the Roman Colosseum, a symbol of barbarism where the gladiators fought and where “savage lions crunched the flesh of martyrs,” as it had been to the civilizing venue “of London drawing rooms.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, Wild West Shows allowed those that commented on them to suggest that savagery and civilization were both valid options and were not necessarily contradictory when it came to being American. Of course, each observer and reporter constructed different interpretations, but they did so actively. Those who discussed the Wild West Shows employed the dualistic presentation of race and culture as a

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<sup>13</sup> Warren, *Buffalo Bill Meets Dracula*, 1139.

<sup>14</sup> Reddin, *Wild West Shows*, 76.

<sup>15</sup> Kasson, *Celebrity*, 178.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>18</sup> “Buffalo Bill in Classic Quarters,” *The Independent*, 17 Nov, 1887.

springboard for a myriad of identity topics such as dress, child rearing, peace, and marriage. These topics frequented the press outside the realm of Wild West Shows. However, the sensational and ritualistic aspects of the shows as well as their heady indication of a crucial timeline in national identity (the “closing” of the West) ensured that reporters would apply them as catalyst to controversy at every chance possible.

At a time when pseudosciences such as phrenology dominated the scene and people truly believed that exterior features determined interior abilities, physical appearance played a crucial role in the conception of identity, and that of the Indian performers, as well as their wives and children, was both admired and ridiculed. However complexly or “accurately” done, the performers of all races had their own dynamic identities, in addition to those they represented, objectified – literally rendered into concrete ideas that could be incorporated into, or contrasted with, the identities of others. In some cases, Indians were described as “fine specimens of physical manhood” with “wonderful dexterity.”<sup>19</sup> An article in the Columbus Press-Post called the Indian performers “stalwart fellows with no signs of degeneracy, but with clean, straight, and muscular limbs, lithe as willows and supple as whips.”<sup>20</sup> For instance, one article called an Indian performer named Pushaluck the “handsomest member” of the show because of his “regular features.”<sup>21</sup> In fact, Pushaluck had eloped with a white bride against her parents wishes, and the reporter indicated that the woman was attracted to him *because* he so physically represented his own race.<sup>22</sup> Americans were not just willing to appropriate qualities such as virility, strength, and masculinity from those that “conquered” the West, but also from the conquered themselves.

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<sup>19</sup> “Indians Make Their Complaints,” *New York Times*, 4 October, 1895; “Farewell to Ambrose Park: Last “At Home” of Squaws of the Wild West Show,” *New York Times*, 7 October 1894.

<sup>20</sup> “Wild West Delighted Two Big Crowds,” *Columbus Press-Post*, 5 Sept, 1907.

<sup>21</sup> “Won A White Bride,” *New York Times*, 19 August 1886, 3.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

Furthermore, building up the qualities of a newly defeated opponent, is akin to building up ones own attributes because it is assumed that the winner is superior. By the late eighteenth hundreds when Wild West shows began, Indians were no longer seen as a significant threat to the lives of Western emigrants or to “civilized” American culture and so there was no risk in shedding some positive light on their racial qualities. It is interesting to note that several of the same racial stereotypes of virility, strength, and masculinity were applied to blacks, but in a highly negative fashion. It is a reasonable expectation that the symbolic portrayal of a race in the process of attaining a more threatening economic and social status (Black Americans) would vary from that of a race freshly and permanently ground into not just submission, but near extinction (American Indians).

Giving what he perceived as a needed elaboration on the portrayal of Indians in the Wild West shows, one *Chicago Tribune* reporter goes as far as to liken the typified Indian to the mythical figures of Hercules and Atlas. More interestingly, he weaves his description of the Chicago Indians with a sense of regional pride demonstrating that, in addition to national identities, the discussion space around the show helped form regional identities outside of the West itself.<sup>23</sup> During that year, 1890, Chicago in particular was looking to boost its image while it competed with the eastern giant, New York, for the coveted prize of host to the Columbian Exposition in 1893.<sup>24</sup> While there was much insistence that Chicago was just as civilized, and therefore worthy, as New York, the emphasis was actually on invoking its link to the opposite. It did not matter that the logic was muddled; the point was to demonstrate the tough and capable qualities that the city of Chicago (and its citizens) shared with its early inhabitants. In addition, that particular reporter suggested that the Indians’ superior leaping abilities and leg strength

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<sup>23</sup> The Indians of Chicago: The Tribes Found In The Region By Early Explorers,” *Chicago Tribune*, 20 April 1890.

<sup>24</sup> Erik Larson, *The Devil in the White City* (Vintage Books, New York: 2003), 16-17.



resulted from the activities they engaged in on a day-to-day basis thus reincorporating the frontier hypothesis that the land has the ability to fundamentally change a people.<sup>25</sup>

Other physical attributes of Indians associated with the Wild West show held less of a racial significance but were touted by many who represented them as direct results of Western land and life. For example, Buffalo Bill himself credited his “straight” body to a busy life lived outdoors.<sup>26</sup> In one interview, after correcting a rumor that he had died, Buffalo Bill stated that fresh air and outdoor exercise “will do more to prolong a man’s life than the most careful manner of living on the part of those who are confined indoors at some steady employment.”<sup>27</sup> In addition, the cowboy performers while said to be “rough and uncouth” were also described as “free as the air.”<sup>28</sup> Frank Gordon Hamilton, a graphologist who worked at L’Arcs Grand Waxworks wrote Buffalo Bill after having seen his show and lavished praise on aspects of the man’s form such as his “wiry frame” and the “penetration” of his eyes. Hamilton concluded by reiterating that Buffalo Bill was “an ‘Object Lesson’ to Every Young Man.”<sup>29</sup> Admiration and imitation did not attach to Buffalo Bill alone. The fine, athletic figures of all the performers served as advertisement for an active lifestyle; to be more American was to spend more time outdoors and to avoid idleness. In this case, one sees the unexpected combination of protestant work ethic with spectacle, diversion, and revelry.

Spectators did not always acknowledge the possibility of this combination. For some, the daily life and appearance of the Indians in the show acted as proof that if one identified with them excessively, or maybe even at all, one risked being influenced by undesirable characteristics. News reporting on the Wild West shows often touched upon the producers need

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<sup>25</sup> “Indians of Chicago,” *Chicago Tribune*, 20 April, 1890, 34.

<sup>26</sup> “Unique Figure in History of Frontier Life,” *Columbus Evening Dispatch*, 4 Sept, 1907.

<sup>27</sup> Title n.a., *The Rochester Herald*, 22 July 1897.

<sup>28</sup> “Wild West Delighted.”

<sup>29</sup> Frank Gordon Hamilton, Cardiff, to Colonel W. F. Cody, 9 July 1903, copy in the Archives Collection, Buffalo Bill Grave and Museum.

to “repress” the “latent energy” and “ungovernableness” of the Indian performers.<sup>30</sup> Conflicting implications frequently appeared within the same article. Even the reporter who painted Pushaluck as so admirable physically associated him with a boarding house known for being “patronized by freaks” and indicated that the young man was motivated by greed to marry the white woman.<sup>31</sup>

Some articles extended beyond these most common, and general, racial stereotypes that defined the undesirable. A notable example appeared in *The Brooklyn Citizen*’s reporting of “a red-hot romance at the Wild West Show.”<sup>32</sup> The reporter obviously designed this satirically written article to amuse, and racial descriptions provide a key component of his humor. The related story involves “alluring glances” between “Fawn-who-won’t-wash-her-face” and the Czikos who were Hungarian horsemen performing in the show.<sup>33</sup> The author referred to this Indian woman as “the belle of the camp, according to Indian ideas” and then proceeded to illustrate her monstrous, representative “non-beauty” as “knock kneed, pigeon toed...with a voice that sounds like escaping gas.”<sup>34</sup> Later he refers to all of the Indian women with the show as “humpbacked” and a “waddling band.”<sup>35</sup> Here, there is no indication that the Indian had something to offer the ideal American physique. Instead, the reporter illustrated what he considered the inverse and absent womanly image ideal by relating such a negative image and generalizing it to all of the Indian women. His biting sarcasm indicates that such traits are undesirable and, in reference to male admiration, unworthy of attention.

Touring the show grounds, Julian Ralph, a reporter for the *Harper’s Weekly* commented that “[b]y just so much have we advanced; by just so much has the Indian stood still.”<sup>36</sup> He then

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<sup>30</sup> “Indians in the Wild West Show,” *New York Times*, 21 April, 1901, 20.

<sup>31</sup> “Won a White Bride.”

<sup>32</sup> “Cupid At Wild West,” *The Brooklyn Citizen*, 16 April, 1897.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Julian Ralph, “Behind The ‘Wild West’ Scenes,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 1894.

went on to make a sarcastic remark about Indian “woman’s rights” defining them as “the rights to do everything that a man refuses to do.”<sup>37</sup> As was common, Ralph injected an issue of the day, here women’s rights, into his portrayal of the Indians. One finds a similar comment in the article about the elopement of Pushaluck. There, the reporter related that Pushaluck refused “to state whether he expects Mrs. Pushaluck to do all the work of the family when the reservation is reached.”<sup>38</sup> He reflected negatively on the squaws’ ability to speak English, remarking that it was “not credible to them” and indicated that it resulted from their excessive flirtatious behavior with white men.<sup>39</sup> Although tied to race, his admonishment provided commentary on suitable female behavior to all readers, regardless of race or gender: when in the company of a man, a woman should not “grin behind her hand.”<sup>40</sup> Ralph addressed the domestic issues more directly with child-rearing criticism. His sarcasm surfaced again as he commented that Indian parents regarded a baby’s crying as an “unpardonable sin” deserving cuffs and grunts.<sup>41</sup>

The tone is harsh and judgmental, revealing not just a rapid judgment on another culture, but in the process, Ralph’s own views on child-raising. He deftly wove these sarcastic commentaries into the text of his piece and, by doing so, subtly created a portrait of ideal domestic values by ridiculing their opposites. The author does not say, “You should not beat your child for crying,” such a tactic would be ineffective. Instead, he begins the article by objectifying the Indians as something to be painted, studied, and directed as when to dress or undress. By positioning himself in such a manner as the examiner, observer, commentator, and instructor, Ralph positioned himself as superior to the Indians. For the reader to be allowed to identify with Ralph as superior, he or she had to agree with him and his ideals. Hence, a sense of identity and values would have been formed. This is not to say that reporters always approached

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> “Won a White Bride.”

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

their work with an ulterior mission in mind, only that the Wild West shows provided a perfect space for readdressing, and perhaps redefining, contemporary issues.

For instance, as historian Joy Kasson points out, the hunting aspect of the Wild West show conveyed dichotomous messages. The connection between imperialism and hunting provided an interpretation that corresponded with the then waning American isolationism. On the other hand, the show exhibited “democratic rather than aristocratic values in the sport” and its creators chose to “extol and imitate” the hunting techniques of the Indians rather than some of the environmentally catastrophic techniques of the whites.<sup>42</sup>

Hunting was certainly not the only facet of Plains Indian culture that was transformed into a directly symbolic discussion of American mores and values. In fact, several aspects of the Indian performers’ way of life elicited positive, and even glorifying, commentary. Presenting the complete opposite picture of the *Brooklyn Citizen* and *Harpers Weekly*, *The New York Times* ran an article that described the last day of the performers on the grounds at Ambrose Park before the show changed venues. The article reads almost like an almanac and contains a range of advice on how to be a good American, all of which is conveyed in relation to several Indian performers and their families whom the reporter called upon in their temporary dwellings.

This time, the reporter singled out the Indian women’s dress, tying it into the idea of the ideal Western life, free and unrestricted. He (or possibly she) proclaimed that the women’s “jovial air of good health and spirits” was due to their clothes which had not “a suggestion of any unhealthy restraining stiffness.”<sup>43</sup> The reporter did not just make reference to the corsets and other uncomfortable, restrictive garments typically considered appropriate for middle and upper class American women during this time period, he passed judgment on them: they were “unhealthy.”

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<sup>42</sup> Kasson, *Celebrity*, 230.

<sup>43</sup> “Farewell to Ambrose Park: Last “At Home” of Squaws of the Wild West Show,” *New York Times*, 7 October, 1894, 12.

When the reporter described his call on Mrs. Eagle Horse, he expressed the same views as Julian Ralph in reference to proper interaction with and punishment of children. Interestingly, however, he professes his opinions using the complete opposite mechanism with reference to the Indian family. He declared that Mrs. Eagle Horse was not a bit “troubled with nerves” even though her little boy ran around making noise.<sup>44</sup> A little while later the Little Eagle Horse, “like a good boy,” went inside to show his mother the penny he received.<sup>45</sup> Again, the reader was instructed to tolerate children’s behavior. According to the reporter, the best parent not only resisted punishing a child in such a situation, but was also able to remain undisturbed emotionally.

The reporter also praised the Indian performers for being practical and truthful in the conversations he held with them. At one point, he dared to comment that the wives could “give points to a Saratoga bell in the way of trunks.”<sup>46</sup> He went on to describe their “famous” shopping abilities including frugal bargaining skills. Here, a protestant virtue, considered by those who praised it as a cornerstone of “civilization” was extolled and exemplified in “savage” women. The reporter considered them so superior in ability that he went as far as to propose they give the upper class belles advice. With this comment, he could have been simply suggesting that shrewdness and frugality were admirable qualities, or his criticism might have been aimed more directly at the upper classes that perhaps had the most to learn from the “Western lesson” constructed in and around the show.

Elsewhere, economy and prudence were portrayed as traditionally white values that contrasted with the collectivist ways of the Sioux. One paper recorded a conversation between a government agent and Sitting Bull while the chief was on tour with the Wild West show. This conversation revealed that Sitting Bull was feeding, not only his family of sixteen, but all hungry

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

tribal members with his rations, including his salary from Cody and Salsbury. He insisted that he would “feed anybody and everybody who came to his door hungry whether they were white men or Indians.”<sup>47</sup> Yet, the “white friends” of Sitting Bull who were listening criticized this generosity as a “most impractical trait.”<sup>48</sup> These white men ridiculed the chief because “he had no idea of saving anything,” but the article’s stance remained ambiguous.<sup>49</sup> Ralph related that Sitting Bull gave to kids around the camp, to bootblacks, to newsboys and to anyone who he thought “would be better of assistance.”<sup>50</sup> However, he reported that the money and food were “lavished in the most reckless matter.”<sup>51</sup> For the Lakota, generosity, including responsibility toward the poor or helpless, held just as much importance as courage and ability in battle when it came to joining the rank of “wichasha yatapika (“men whom all praise”).”<sup>52</sup> In contrast, the fact that the reporter framed Sitting Bull’s habits as something to be “admitted” indicates that such generous giving did not correspond with socially accepted “white” norms.<sup>53</sup> While this article appeared in *The Globe*, a Canadian newspaper, the commentary of the Ambrose Park article implies that Americans, as well, investigated the merit of frugality and economy through the culture of the Wild West show. The ambiguity implies that assessment of values and attributes held as much importance as their integration into racial stereotypes as far as newspapers were concerned. It did not matter as much whether the Indians were labeled as frugal or wasteful, as long as one the reporter had the chance to promote which ever characteristic he chose.

Another value embedded in the *New York Times* article dealt with the conception of love as material demonstration. As some upper and middle class women and men began to question

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<sup>47</sup> “The Wild West: Buffalo Bill’s Exhibition at the Woodbine,” *The Globe* (Toronto, Ontario), 24 August, 1885.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> L.G. Moses, *Wild West Shows and the Images of American Indians, 1883-1933* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 84.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

the underpinning ideas of gender in their societies in America, the idea of chivalry, including the showering of gifts by the male on the female, popped up from time to time as a hot topic.

Receiving written praise as far back as Ovid, such chivalrous behavior was applauded by some Americans during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and scorned by others, namely some leaders of the women's rights movement.<sup>54</sup> In this case, the discussion was, as many others were, drawn into the Wild West discourse. The reporter commended Indian performers such as Eagle Horse and Mr. Little Wolf for lavishing gifts upon their wives because they loved them, instilling support for the idea that such affection should be envied by women and emulated by men.<sup>55</sup>

One more such personal characteristic was the capacity to keep one's word. Buffalo Bill told one reporter that in "nine cases out of ten," the white man was to blame for creating disputes with Indians by "breaking faith."<sup>56</sup> The Indian, on the other hand, would keep his word at all costs. In contrast, when speaking to the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Buffalo Bill depicted his Indian performers as capricious in their promises. He stated that several days of waiting were always necessary before departure to the European venues because the Indian needed this time to change his mind several times. According to him, nearly half of those who had consented for a while afterwards refused to even "talk further about the proposition."<sup>57</sup> This completely contradicts his earlier statement.

Obviously, in both instances, he was making a generalization about a whole culture that may or may not have been true. For example, Luther Standing Bear viewed both the negative and sympathetic white depiction of Indians as horribly inaccurate.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, the importance of his comments, as of the Wild West discourse as a whole, to American identity was its attitude towards the characteristic itself, not the characteristic's immediate application to one group of

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<sup>54</sup> Ovid, *Art of Love*: book 3, see line 145 for an example; Sarah Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838; reprint 1970), 63.

<sup>55</sup> "Farewell to Ambrose Park."

<sup>56</sup> "The Exhibition at Woodbine."

<sup>57</sup> "Will Accompany "Buffalo Bill," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 14 March 1891, 6.

<sup>58</sup> Kasson, *Celebrity*, 188-189.

people or another. However, often the application of the principle to a culture or race supplied, or at least added to, the judgment of the principle. For instance, the Julian Ralph article set up a negative stance towards the Sioux people by objectifying and inferiorizing them, then he syllogistically linked certain customs (e.g. child hitting) to the people in order to criticize these customs. Furthermore, it is evident that attitudes about customs and values, not just the approach to these attitudes, differed. For example, although one reporter referred to the Indian performers' attire as unrestrictive and healthy, another would describe it as indecent.

Why were these diverse perspectives on American culture so eagerly intertwined with Buffalo Bill's Wild West show? The most obvious reason was that the show itself claimed to be instructional. Anything claiming to be "educational" will attract those who want their lessons included in the curriculum.<sup>59</sup> Buffalo Bill sought not only to amuse, but also to "instruct generations to come."<sup>60</sup> In 1909, the press declared the show "more highly educational in character than ever."<sup>61</sup> Cody preferred that the shows be called "exhibitions" and hoped to convey information about Western life, especially Plains Indian life, not generally known to the public. In fact, the show programs contained detailed descriptions of Indian customs such as dancing. Moreover, as illustrated by his interviews, his purposeful approach included transmitting "Western values" such as outdoor living to the spectators.

The perceived instructional merit of the shows was even employed for prisoners. Minus only the trained animal and shooting acts, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show went off in full glory for the convicts of Auburn prison in 1909. Cody's opening speech attests to several mores that supposedly corresponded to life in the American West:

"The Indians are called savages but the Americans can learn from the savage. They are governed by a code of honor instead of the numerous laws. They have no prisons or courts and I think that it would be better if we had fewer laws. It is

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<sup>59</sup> "Grandest of Amusement Schemes," (LaCross Wisconsin) 30 Oct, 1886.

<sup>60</sup> "Unique Figure."

<sup>61</sup> "Three Shows Here," paper n.a., Buffalo Bill's Scrapbook 1909, Buffalo Bill Historical Center.



just like telling anyone that they can not do a thing and many times it is the first thing that they do.”<sup>62</sup>

Cody used his interpretation of the culture of the Indians to represent what he considered essential values. He referred to a code of honor, a need for trust between people. Surely this did not just apply to the Indians; settlers of all ethnicities would have valued such a system in the West where law enforcement was sporadic and sometimes non-existent. Also, he promoted the idea of minimal government, a principle that would take root in the politics of Western states and existed in context with the Progressive movement.<sup>63</sup> However, the concept was not new; it had classical foundations and supporters in America (namely, the Anti-federalists) before the founding fathers even passed the constitution.

In this case, it took the form of a personal message for 1,400 convicts.<sup>64</sup> To be a good American, to follow the “Western” example, one needed to be responsible to himself first and foremost and then secondly to those to whom he gave his word, or came in contact with. Here, it is obvious that the lesson in the show was directed at those in prison, those who had not successfully conformed to society, those who had failed previously to “get” what it meant to belong to American society or any of its accepted facets and factions. The fact that Buffalo Bill chose to perform with the show for the last time inside the prison walls demonstrates how important he considered the instructional aspect of the show.

Nevertheless, those outside of the show’s production were also quick to latch onto the “educational” theme. One article from *The New York Evening Journal* claimed that the learning to be obtained from Buffalo Bill’s Wild West was “of the greatest possible value.”<sup>65</sup> The reporter accused parents who neglected to “give them [children] a chance to see, living and

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *The American West: A New Interpretive History* (Yale University Press: 2000), 529-530.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> “You Would Not Miss a Dancing Dinosaur or Sabre Toothed Tiger,” *The New York Evening Journal*, 26 April 1907.

moving, such an extraordinary representation” of not doing “their duty.”<sup>66</sup> He further emphasized that Buffalo Bill’s lesson was one that could not be found “anywhere else.”<sup>67</sup> However, his most astonishing argument was that which compared the Wild West show to dinosaurs or saber toothed tigers. According to him both the Wild West show and these ancient species shared three things in common; they provided spectacle, they were prehistoric/they represented eras that had closed forever, and, most importantly, they had educational value.

Yet, he emphasized that one could watch natural elements of the West live in Buffalo Bill’s show, an opportunity long gone when it came to dinosaurs and sabertooths. He insisted “that children should get education,” but not just any kind of education, an education “THROUGH THEIR EYES.”<sup>68</sup> This idea of an education “through their eyes” was exactly what Buffalo Bill had in mind while creating and producing his shows. The spectator was not at the show to read, recite, or memorize: he or she was there to watch, to absorb, to *be*. The audience members learned a powerful combination of perceived past and potential future by associating the performance with “their own hopes and fears, their own power and goodness.”<sup>69</sup> The “immediacy and conviction of live performance” allowed and even “encouraged spectators to imagine their own participation.”<sup>70</sup> The reporter who encouraged parents to bring their children stressed that an effective education should also be amusing with plenty of “noise, excitement, movement, [and] thrill.”<sup>71</sup> Nonetheless, the education of the Wild West show attracted not just “the small boys,” but the “big ones too.”<sup>72</sup>

The urgency that revolved around seeing the show arose from the threat that one might miss out on the opportunity to see the West in some semblance of its supposed original form.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Kasson, *Celebrity*, 162.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 248 & 245.

<sup>71</sup> “Dancing Dinosaur.”

<sup>72</sup> “Buffalo Bill,” *New Haven Evening Leader*, 21 May, 1907.

Like the dinosaurs and sabertooths, the cowboys and Indians of the show were species soon to be extinct. A child who attended the show would later “in his old age be able to tell of something that nobody then living will know anything about.”<sup>73</sup> In this way, Wild West shows helped conceptualize both the past and the future. For instance, the *New York Evening Journal* portrayed the future as a complete triumph of civilization over savagery. However, the picture painted was nonetheless lacking the luster claimed by those who touted progress. Instead of a gleaming, technological paradise, the author depicted the world to come as a “quiet, lackadaisical spot” where the imagination would “find excitement only in books and pictures and in stuffed or painted representations of the past.”<sup>74</sup> It appears that his hope was that the education transmitted by the Wild West shows would inject a kind of excitement into this boring future. The emotional intensity of the *Evening Journal*’s appeal to parents highlighted the complex and contradictory natures of the conflict between wildness and civilization expressed by the show. Romance and progress garnered equal billing in the spectacle which dared to suggest that by incorporating romanticized memories into new progressive identities, the two did not have to be mutually exclusive.<sup>75</sup>

Furthermore, it illustrated the desire of Americans for a turning point, a pivotal means for demarcating and creating the past and the future. In the 1890s, Fredrick Jackson Turner first put forth a theory about the West that would dominate for years to come. He portrayed a personal struggle between man and land that shaped both simultaneously, forming a new entity that was purely American. The settler “fits himself” into his environment, but he also “little by little... transforms the wilderness.”<sup>76</sup> According to Turner, the closing of the West, the

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> See Reddin, *Wild West Shows*, 111. See for a discussion of romanticism and progress in Wild West shows.

<sup>76</sup> Fredrick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1920), 19-21; quoted in John Francis McDermott, “The Frontier Re-examined,” in *The Frontier Re-examined*, ed. John Francis McDermott (University of Illinois Press: Urbana, 1967), 2.

disappearance of a definite and unbroken frontier, signaled the end of this process. More recently, historians have brought a rain of criticism down on Turner's theory.

For example, in *The Frontier Re-examined*, John McDermott points out that Turner's representation of the frontier failed to fit the real frontier. In fact, he maintains that there was no "one frontier." Business and capital often reached ahead of the lone settler, isolation was not always a rule of frontier life, many pioneers enjoyed a range of amenities, and several types of men and distinctive social classes were represented among "Westerners."<sup>77</sup> There existed no general, prototypical battle between man and the elements and, therefore, no prototypical American as a result of such a battle.<sup>78</sup> The Wild West show and the discourse surrounding it does not help solve the debate about what "the West" was. Instead, it helps reveal what some Americans *wanted* the West to be. There may not have existed a broad set of American characteristics and values created by pioneer life, but that did not stop people from seeking one out.

This desire went hand in hand with the idea that America was witnessing an end and, consequently, a beginning. One must consider Turner's own investigation into American identity within this context. Although Buffalo Bill asserted in the *Columbus Evening Dispatch* that there was "enough in the West to amuse and instruct generations to come," the urgent voice of the reporter for the *Evening Journal* indicates that Turner was not alone in his view that an era had ended.<sup>79</sup> As a matter of fact, the sentiment ran rampant in the media cocooning the Wild West shows. A reporter for the *New York Times* reminded the reader that "it should not be forgotten that this period is fast drawing to a close, and these scenes may never again be

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<sup>77</sup> John Francis McDermott, "The Frontier Re-examined," in *The Frontier Re-examined*, ed. John Francis McDermott (University of Illinois Press: Urbana, 1967), 3.

<sup>78</sup> William Deverell, "Fighting Words: The Significance of the American West in the History of the United States," in *A New Significance: Re-envisioning the History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner II (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1996), 31.

<sup>79</sup> "Unique Figure."

witnessed.”<sup>80</sup> Likewise, the *New Haven Evening Leader* declared that the show represented “the old life that once was but is no more.”<sup>81</sup> Yet, that reporter referred to civilization as “achievement” rather than as the boring existence lamented by the *Evening Journal*.<sup>82</sup>

These concepts of ends, beginnings, and lessons inherent in Wild West shows illustrate why historians call the memory created around the American West “mythical.” In the Classical myth, someone (a hero) died so that the trials of their life could be learned from, could be used to build a knowledge of appropriate behavior, appearance, and other cultural norms. In this case, the death was figurative, it denoted the fall of the frontier itself. The myth of the West operated independently of the true history of the West. It was an active process that reporters, in addition to the shows’ producers, certainly invested in. While those who wrote about the Wild West show may have focused on these mythical Western components, their method fit their purpose which was geared more to shaping the future than encapsulating the past. *The Rochester New York Union and Advertiser* called Buffalo Bill “an institution, linking the present with a part that will always stand out as an historic cameo in the story of ‘the making of the West.’”<sup>83</sup> Here the reporter acknowledged that the subject at hand was a “story” and that the Wild West show held responsibility for weaving that story into the present.

Some historians highlight that this present, i.e. the end of the nineteenth century, involved a nation trying to heal from civil war and in need of cohesion between rivaling regions, cultural groups, and political factions. Paul Fees, curator at the Buffalo Bill Historical Society in Cody, Wyoming, has argued that the myth enacted by Buffalo Bill’s show was a “myth of accomplishment shared by all Americans” and “hence a myth of unity.” The easiest definition of this myth of unity would be that it bonded a range of Americans against a “symbolic common

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<sup>80</sup> “The Wonderful Wild West,” *The New York Times*, 2 Sept, 1894, 11.

<sup>81</sup> “Buffalo Bill.”

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> “Cody Again in Saddle,” *Rochester New York Union and Advertiser*, 5 May 1916.

enemy,” whether this enemy was the Indians or the land itself.<sup>84</sup> The myth of the frontier contains fundamental contradictions; somehow isolation that it was said characterized the West led to integration.<sup>85</sup> Wild West shows and the dialogue they provoked were arguably key in making this contradiction functional. Americans could come together by celebrating their common accomplishment, what they perceived to be a conquest. “Together” in practice, not just in name, spectators could relive Turner’s hypothetical process of Americanization collectively in full action, thanks to the Wild West shows.

Yet, this kind of identity could have been carved out only with an oppositional depiction of the West where the characteristics of the triumphal were distinct from those of the vanquished. The “conqueror” could assume some characteristics of the defeated, but these would have had to have obtained agreement across the board, promoted and accepted by the majority of Americans. However, the evidence does not support the idea that such delineation and corresponding unification prevailed when it came to discussing Wild West shows. First, although spectators from varying economic and even ethnic backgrounds attended, the subject of economic class remained topical in relation to the Wild West show even after the hypothetical forged alliance spectatorship between showgoers had taken place. To note one example, according to a *New York Times* article from 1894, the management of the show hoped “to cater to the better class of the people of the metropolitan district” and, consequently, had been pleased that “there was a noticeable absence of the rough elements” at the latest performance.<sup>86</sup>

Secondly, as already made evident, the shows contained a “strange blending of paganism and barbarity with civilization” and, although it may seem so, even a myth is apparently not one-sided.<sup>87</sup> Those who chose to record and characterize the performers, components, and themes of

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<sup>84</sup> Kasson, *Celebrity*, 244.

<sup>85</sup> Deverell, “Fighting Words,” 33.

<sup>86</sup> “Delighted Twenty Thousand,” *New York Times*, 13 May, 1894, 2.

<sup>87</sup> Kasson, *Celebrity*, 193.

Buffalo Bill's show proved that stereotypicality was not necessarily synonymous with simplicity. The contemporary discussion of Wild West shows demonstrated that different agendas and perspectives called for fundamentally different interpretations of the "American character" that purportedly stood as epilogue to the frontier myth.

The multifaceted and dynamic influence of the Wild West show often faced forwards towards new and controversial topics such as imperialism (over the years, the show incorporated more and more performers and scenes of differing nationalities). The shows constantly lent an evolving structure to the varying dialogues of the time by providing a focal point that infused them with urgency and sentiment. Those who framed and dissected the Wild West shows sought to follow the shows "through the eyes" of the spectator, to his or her conceptualization of what constituted "American" values and identity. Revolving around "astonishing intensity" and participation of all the senses, Buffalo Bill's formula made each performance a ritualistic experience meant to leave a lasting impact.<sup>88</sup>

Although the shows were fairly secular, one must remember the alternate, non-religious definition of ritual that focuses on the idea of "established procedure."<sup>89</sup> Although the religious and non-religious aspects of ritual are often intertwined, ritual conveys cultural and racial symbolism, not merely through spiritual meaning, but also through this allusion to, or illusion of, tradition. Some scholars suggest that rituals involving an "imagistic mode" are those that are infrequent.<sup>90</sup> In other words, they are those which are meant to create and transmit an enduring message, those that will not be "refreshed" in the future. While others have indicated important qualifications in this theory that relate to the religious aspect of rituals, the idea holds true for Wild West shows which did not focus on religious elements. A reporter for the *Peoria*

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<sup>88</sup> "The Wild West," *Peoria Democrat* reprinted in a Bloomington, Illinois paper, date n.a.

<sup>89</sup> [www.Hyperdictionary.com](http://www.Hyperdictionary.com)

<sup>90</sup> Robert N. McCauley, "Ritual, Memory, and Emotion: Comparing Two Cognitive Hypotheses," in *Religion in Mind: Cognitive Perspectives on Religious Belief, Ritual, and Experience*, ed. Jensine Andresen (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001), 121.

*Democrat* called the “picture” put forth by the show “an extraordinary one, such as we are not likely to see again.”<sup>91</sup> The shows inextricably linked a sense of finality and change with the “grimly realistic” scenes.<sup>92</sup> A spectacle of monumental impact was necessary to mourn the mythical “death” of the West and permanently solidify its perceived lessons into an infinite and unknown future.

According to social scientist, Michael Suk-Young Chwe, transmission of common knowledge through this sort of ritual requires not only that the spectator know something, but that he or she know that the other spectators know that thing and know that they know he/she knows, etc. Everyone must know that everyone else is receiving the message before they are willing to participate in such a message. If this coordination of understanding and a mutual decision to participate is successful, it can form “collective identities,” even “imagined” ones.<sup>93</sup> Although such spectacles shared certain premises with other exhibitions, like those of the anthropology building during the Chicago World’s Fair, they provided an additional component: “fun” and, therefore, a higher level of engagement to those who attended them.<sup>94</sup> “Intensity of image, feeling, and interaction” ensured that Wild West shows conveyed common knowledge.<sup>95</sup> When Buffalo Bill invited 4,000 children from institutions, ages and neighborhoods of every kind, they were said to have experienced “wild joy” and “wept bitterly.”<sup>96</sup> The scenes appeared so realistic to the young ones that at the end of the performance, the teachers were faced with explaining to the children that people had not actually been killed.

Here, one also witnesses a specific process of identification. During the performance, the young spectators singled out and cheered on an Indian child who snatched a cartridge off of the

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<sup>91</sup> “The Wild West.”

<sup>92</sup> “Wild West Delighted Two Big Crowds.”

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

<sup>94</sup> Kasson, *Celebrity*, 218.

<sup>95</sup> Michael Suk-Young Chwe, *Rational Ritual: Culture, Coordination, and Common Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 73.

<sup>96</sup> “Orphans at the Wild West,” *New York Times*, 3 April, 1901, 9.



ground and proceeded to hurl it at his elders. By identifying with someone with whom they shared a common culture (that of childhood and its values), the children experienced the liminal space between non-shared cultures (in this case, ethnic) that Victor Turner claims is a crucial element of the ritual experience. The basic notion is that the ritual must fracture existing identities in order for new ones to form. Because of the emotional and uniquely structured crowd atmosphere, the participant did not have to conform to more everyday social rules. Indeed, according to one journalist, “sham fights... filled the dime novel boy’s heart with delight and elicited from him yells that drowned even those of the Comanche and other Indian performers.”<sup>97</sup> The observer became participant to an extent that let him or her shed boundaries and experience a range of possibilities. When it came to overwhelming the senses and coaxing the spectator out of his or her current social consciousness, “the confusion, the rout, falling horses and dying warriors was real enough.”<sup>98</sup> *Sporting and Dramatic News* proclaimed that “the reality” of the Wild West Show was “one of its chief attractions” and praised the “peculiar vivacity” of episodes such as the attack on the Deadwood Coach.<sup>99</sup> Mark Twain even attested to the show’s realism commenting in a letter to Buffalo Bill that the “effects produced upon” him by the spectacle “were identical with those wrought upon [him]... a long time ago by the same spectacles on the frontier.”<sup>100</sup>

According to a letter sent into the *Waide Weeklier*, the performers, props, music and animals were “combined so strikingly” that they immediately held fast the “sympathetic attention of the vast audience” and “stirred one’s deepest feelings.”<sup>101</sup> A reporter for the *Gaton Gazette* captured the show’s intensity and involvement with this description: “The whole thing comes

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<sup>97</sup> “Buffalo Bill’s Bonanza,” *New York Times*, 29 June, 1886, 2.

<sup>98</sup> “Wild West Delighted.”

<sup>99</sup> “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West – The Attack on the Deadwood Coach,” *Sporting and Dramatic News*, 28 May, 1897 in Buffalo Bill’s Scrapbook 1887.

<sup>100</sup> Mark Twain, Elmira, to Mr. Cody, 10 September 1888, reprinted in “Mark Twain and the Wild West,” *The Hartford Courant*, 18 July, 1885.

<sup>101</sup> Title n.a., sent to the *Waide Weeklier*, Nov 1903 in Buffalo Bill’s Scrapbook 1902-1903.

and goes like a lightning flash, and the spectator, dazzled, gazes over the wide, vacant enclosure, uncertain whether what he has just seen was reality or a dream.”<sup>102</sup> He went on to recreate the dramatic battle scenes in florid, gruesome detail recounting such auditory experiences as an “unearthly whoop” and “fiendish yells.”<sup>103</sup> The excitement reached such a level that the following tranquil horseback performance provided “[a] grateful relief from this blood-curdling episode.”<sup>104</sup> As mentioned earlier, this ritualistic force was what made Wild West shows the focus of identity discussion.

Without it, the symbolic representation would have been noticeably different. In *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*, Kasson analyzes the symbolic values and meanings in a range of flyers, posters, and pamphlets. Like the ritual itself, these visual depictions carried significant representational power concerning ideology to those who encountered them. Unlike the shows themselves however, these advertisements and programs did not include participation: there was no feel of response and interaction with a piece of paper and no “thousands of spectators” with which to react and identify.<sup>105</sup> Chwe would probably argue that the common knowledge conveyed by the shows held more strength than that of such visual, promotional media because a shared experience allowed the spectator to not only experiment with identity, but also to know that others were absorbing this content as well. To witness the show was to engage in a long term participation based on the knowledge that others were also going to participate. The spectacle corresponded with a sense of beginning and end to form a feeling of initiation by way of diffused common knowledge. Contemporary statements such as “All Americans know what the cowboys are and what they can do” that appeared in articles about the Wild West shows revealed these

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<sup>102</sup> “The Wild West.” *Gaton Gazette*, 6 June, 1887.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> Kasson, *Celebrity*, 227.

sentiments linking the West to two simultaneous initiations, that of the nation into a new era and that of the audience member/reader into the nation.<sup>106</sup>

Yet, although the ritual of the show furnished a coordinated environment for conveying meaning that posters, pamphlets, and programs did not. In an article on world fairs, historian Warren Susman points out that “souvenirs” took on a certain importance during the late 1800s in America. These items “recalled for years the event and its personal meanings,” aiding their owners to disseminate ideologies/identities that they had imbibed by more potent methods (i.e. the show)<sup>107</sup> Such souvenirs comprised an important part of the Wild West Show and, in that case, the visual displays and programs discussed by Kasson would have had substantially more ritualistic significance because their owners had attended the show.

The visual advertisements, as well as the written media, contributed to what anthropologist, Göran Aijmer, terms the discursive order of communication through violence. Aijmer maintains that the symbolic meaning of violence is meshed within three symbolic orders. The first of these orders is the imaginary order and is composed of symbolism beyond words; it has meaning that cannot be deciphered into sensory input or output. The imaginary order refers to the fact that when one observes, or plays a role in, a symbolic event, he or she takes away a certain amount of meaning that can never be expressed to another person. The second order is called the discursive order and is used to describe a flow of acts able to be communicated verbally, visually, or by another sense mechanism. Finally, the ethological order refers to the biological/genetic aspect of symbolic communication. In relation to violence, this would be the effects of creating pain and being in pain.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> “The Wonderful Wild West.”

<sup>107</sup> Warren Susman, “Ritual Fairs,” *Chicago History* 12 (1983), 5.

<sup>108</sup> Göran Aijmer and Jon Abbink eds, *Meanings of Violence: A Cross Cultural Perspective* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 2 & xi.

As demonstrated, the imaginary order played a crucial role in the enactments of the Wild West show. On the other hand, the magnetic effect that Buffalo Bill's show produced on discussions of identity reflects on the importance of the discursive order. Stanley Tambiah defined the meaning of a public ritual "not in terms of 'information' but in terms of *pattern recognition*."<sup>109</sup> Yet, the evidence illustrates that contemporary interpretations of Wild West shows did not "recognize" one set pattern in the show. Instead, journalists and others continuously fitted a variety of retroactive patterns of value and identity to the emotional power of the show itself. They assigned complex and even contradictory values and characteristics to blanketing generalizations of American identity, tugging at the corners of the liminal space created by the experience of the Wild West show, taking advantage of the fact that the imaginary order, discursive order, and ethological order must remain fundamentally intertwined. By conceptualizing the Wild West shows in this fashion, it is reasonable to recognize them as "historically changing discursive sites" that allowed "group identities" to be "formed through communication."<sup>110</sup>

The show anchored a broader discursive circle because it "represented itself as a place...in which spectators could temporarily suspend their awareness of the contradiction" that formed both the myth of the West and prevailing ideas of what it meant to be American.<sup>111</sup> To understand the contextual significance of the discourse surrounding Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, it is necessary to recognize that contradictions were inevitable in an active process of identity creation. The Wild West show did not force a myth of the West, inseparable from the myth of America, onto Americans. Rather, the show's vibrant and ritualistic engagement, a

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<sup>109</sup> Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, "A Performative Approach to Ritual," in *Culture, Thought, and Social Action: An Anthropological Perspective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 138; quoted in Michael Suk-Young Chwe, *Rational Ritual: Culture, Coordination, and Common Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 28.

<sup>110</sup> Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 100; quoted in Michael Suk-Young Chwe, *Rational Ritual: Culture, Coordination, and Common Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 92.

<sup>111</sup> Kasson, *Celebrity*, 236.

current awareness of historical change, and a slew of journalistic interpretations supplied tools to spectators and readers so that they could experiment in constructing diverse, but sometimes converging, ideas of what was “purely and distinctly American.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Mark Twain to Mr. Cody.

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