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

Abstract

This article discusses the Wild West shows and their role as educational, entertainment, and also American rituals. It also describes the contradictory elements in these shows, particularly the portrayal of the Native Americans.

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

Kathryn White

During the last quarter of the 19th 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.¹⁸⁷ 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 shows contribution to American identity. Wild West shows failed 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.¹⁸⁸ Even at that time, a Western paper, the *Omaha Daily Republican*, jokingly accused him of merely "pretend[ing] to have a complete picture of wild [*sic*] life in the far West."¹⁸⁹ Yet, surprisingly, the shows did provide a means 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 assimilation and the identity of 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."¹⁹⁰

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.¹⁹¹ 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 to be a simple, linear clash between "Anglo-Saxon attributes" vs. "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

¹⁸⁷ Louis S. Warren, "Buffalo Bill Meets Dracula: William F. Cody, Brain Stoker, and the Frontiers of Racial Decay," *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 4 (October 2002): 1139.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 1150.

¹⁸⁹ *Omaha Daily Republican*, 18 May, 1883.

¹⁹⁰ Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphor: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Symbol, Myth, and Ritual, ed. Victor Turner, (London: Cornell University Press, 1974), 14.

¹⁹¹ Joy S. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History*, (Hill and Wang: New York, 2000), 61.

Constructing the Past

return to the scene of a white family domicile."¹⁹² 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 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."¹⁹³ Still, the Wild West show did not begin with this whirlwind; there was a purposeful "graduated excitement" to the production which often began with the relatively calm shooting performance of Annie Oakley and then worked up to frenetic and noisy action.¹⁹⁴ Riding exhibitions and competitions played a key role, although winning and losing depended on the day because competitions were debatably rigged; one *Chicago Tribune* article boasted that the American cowboy always beat "them all" (Indians, Mexicans, and other foreign performers that were later invited into the show).¹⁹⁵ 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."¹⁹⁶

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.¹⁹⁷ For some, these "ethnological" expositions, of 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.¹⁹⁸ 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 show, the shooting competition, always saw white Americans victorious over Indians and Mexicans.¹⁹⁹

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."²⁰⁰ This allegorical portrayal is 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 straightforward. The show as tool offered a claim on the physical attributes, morals, and lifestyles portrayed, regardless of race."²⁰¹ For some, these even included the best parts of "wildness."²⁰²

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

¹⁹² 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.

¹⁹³ Paul Reddin, *Wild West Shows* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 75.

¹⁹⁴ "How the Wild West Show Has Developed," *New York Times*, 1 April 1901, 26.

¹⁹⁵ "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.

¹⁹⁶ "Indians at Erastina," *New York Times*, 26 June, 1886, 2.

¹⁹⁷ Kasson, *Celebrity*, 113.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁹⁹ Warren, *Buffalo Bill Meets Dracula*, 1139.

²⁰⁰ Reddin, *Wild West Shorn*, 76.

²⁰¹ Kasson, *Celebrity*, 178.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 114.

contemporary shows (i.e. minstrels) did with other ethnic and racial groups.²⁰³ Secondly, at least one newspaper article commented that Buffalo Bill's Wild West was equally suited to its savage venue at 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."²⁰⁴ Thus, Wild West shows allowed those who 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 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. The appearance of the Indian performers, as well as their wives and children, was both admired and ridiculed. However complexly or "accurately" portrayed, 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."²⁰⁵ 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."²⁰⁶ For instance, one article called an Indian performer named Pushaluck the "handsomest member" of the show because of his "regular features."²⁰⁷ 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.²⁰⁸ Americans were not only willing to attribute qualities such as virility, strength, and masculinity to those who "conquered" the West, but also to the conquered themselves.

Furthermore, building up the qualities of a newly defeated opponent is akin to building up one's own attributes because it is assumed that the winner is superior. By the late 1800s when Wild West shows first opened, Indians were no longer seen as a significant threat to the lives of Western emigrants or to "civilized" American culture, so there was little risk in shedding 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, such as Black Americans will, vary from that of a race freshly and permanently ground into not just submission, but near extinction, such as American Indians.

Giving what was 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 typical Indian to the mythical figures of Hercules and Atlas. More interestingly, the author weaves a description of the Chicago Indians with a sense of regional pride demonstrating that, in addition to national identities, the discussion space around the show aided in the formation of

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 214.

²⁰⁴ "Buffalo Bill in Classic Quarto's," *The Independent*, 17 Nov, 1887.

²⁰⁵ "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*, 1 October 1894.

²⁰⁶ "Wild West Delighted Two Big Crowds," *Columbus Press-Post*, 5 Sept, 1907.

²⁰⁷ "Won A White Bride," *New York Times*, 19 August 1886, 3.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

regional identities outside the West itself.²⁰⁹ During, 1890, Chicago was looking to boost its image while it competed with the eastern giant, New York City, for the coveted prize of hosting the Columbian Exposition in 1893.²¹⁰ While there was much insistence that Chicago was as civilized, and therefore worthy, as New York, the emphasis was actually on invoking the city's 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 and citizens of Chicago shared with its early inhabitants. In addition, that particular reporter suggested the Indians' superior leaping abilities and leg strength 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 people.²¹¹

Other physical qualities 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.²¹² 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."²¹³ In addition, the cowboy performers, while said to be "rough and uncouth," were also described as "free as the air."²¹⁴ 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."²¹⁵ Admiration and imitation did not apply 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. This is an apt illustration of, one sees the unexpected combination of Protestant work ethic with spectacle diversion and revelry found in the Wild West shows

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 to "repress" the "latent energy" and "ungovernableness" of the Indian performers.²¹⁶ Conflicting implications frequently appeared with the same article. Even the reporter who painted Pushaluck as so physically admirable 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.²¹⁷

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."²¹⁸ 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

²⁰⁹ The Indians of Chicago: The Tribes Found In The Region By Early Explorers," *Chicago Tribune*, 20 April 1890

²¹⁰ Erik Larson, *The Devil in the White City* (Vintage Books, New York: 2003), 16-17.

²¹¹ "Indians of Chicago," *Chicago Tribune*, 20 April, 1890.34.

²¹² Unique Figure in History of Frontier Life," *Columbus Evening Dispatch*, 4 Sept. 1907.

²¹³ Title n.a., *The Rochester Herald*, 22 July 1897.

²¹⁴ "Wild West Delighted."

²¹⁵ Frank Gordon Hamilton, Cardiff, to Colonel W. F. Cody, 9 July 1903, copy in the Archives Collection, Buffalo Bill Grave and Museum.

²¹⁶ "Indians in the Wild West Show," *New York Times*, 21 April, 1901, 20. ³"Won a White Bride."

²¹⁷ "Cupid At Wild West," *The Brooklyn Citizen*, 16 April, 1897.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Constructing the Past

who were Hungarian horsemen performing in the show.²¹⁹ 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."²²⁰ Later he refers to all of the Indian women with the show as "humpbacked" and a "waddling band."²²¹ Here, there is no indication that the Indian had something to offer in the manner of 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 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 *Harper's Weekly*, commented that "[b]y just so much have we advanced; by just so much has the Indian stood still."²²² He then went on to sarcastically remark that Indian "woman's rights" were defined as "the rights to do everything that a man refuses to do."²²³ As was common, Ralph injected an issue of the day, 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."²²⁴ He reflected negatively on the squaws' ability to speak English, remarking that it was "not credible to them" and indicated it resulted from their excessive flirtatious behavior with white men.²²⁵ 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."²²⁶ 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.²²⁷

The tone is harsh and judgmental, revealing not just a rapid judgment of 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 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.²²⁸

Hunting was certainly not the only facet of Plains Indian culture that was transformed into a directly

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² Julian Ralph, "Behind The 'Wild West' Scenes," *Harper's Weekly*, 1894.

²²³ *Ibid.*

²²⁴ "Won a White Bride."

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ Kasson, *Celebrity*, 230.

Constructing the Past

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 moved 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. The reporter singled out the Indian women's dress, tying it into the notion of the ideal Western life, free and unrestricted. The author 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."²²⁹ 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 period, but also passed judgment on them: they were "unhealthy."

When the reporter described his visit with 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.²³⁰ A little while later the Little Eagle Horse, "like a good boy," went inside to show his mother the penny he received.²³¹ 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 emotionally undisturbed.

The reporter also praised the Indian performers for being practical and truthful in conversation. At one point, he dared to comment that the wives could "give points to a Saratoga bell in the way of trunks."²³² He went on to describe the women's "famous" shopping abilities including their frugal bargaining skills. Frugality, then, 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 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 members of upper classes who perhaps had the most to learn from the "Western lesson" constructed in and around the show.

Elsewhere, economy and frugality were portrayed as traditionally white values and in opposition to 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 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."²³³ Yet, the "white friends" of Sitting Bull who were listening criticized this generosity as a "most impractical trait."²³⁴ These white men ridiculed the chief because "he had no idea of saving anything," but the article's stance remained ambiguous.²³⁵ Ralph related that Sitting Bull gave charity to children around the camp, to bootblacks, to newsboys and to anyone who he thought "would be better of assistance." However, he regarded the money and food "lavished in the most

²²⁹ Farewell to Ambrose Park: Last 'At Home' of Squaws of the Wild West Show," *New York Times*, 7 October, 1894, 12.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

²³¹ *Ibid.*

²³² *Ibid.*

²³³ "The Wild West: Buffalo Bill's Exhibition at the Woodbine," *The Globe* (Toronto, Ontario), 24 August, 1885.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

Constructing the Past

reckless matter."²³⁶ 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," or men whom all praise.⁵¹ The fact that the reporter framed Sitting Bull's habits as something to be "admitted" indicates that such prolific giving did not correspond with socially accepted "white" norms.²³⁷ 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.²³⁸

Another value embedded in the *New York Times* article was that of materially demonstrative affection within the marriage. Receiving written praise since the time of Ovid, such chivalrous behavior was applauded by some Americans and scorned by others, namely some leaders of the women's rights movement which was gaining strength at this time.²³⁹ The reporter commended Indian performers such as Eagle Horse and Mr. Little Wolf for lavishing their wives because they loved them, instilling support for the idea that such affection should be envied by women and emulated by men.²⁴⁰

A further important 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."²⁴¹ 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."²⁴² This completely contradicts his earlier statement.

Obviously, in both instances, Buffalo Bill was making a generalization about an entire culture that may or may not have been true. For example, Luther Standing Bear viewed both the negative and sympathetic depictions of Indians by whites as horribly inaccurate.²⁴³ 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 people or another. However, sometimes the application of the principle supplied, or at least added to, the judgment of the principle. For instance, Julian Ralph's article sets 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 their customs. Furthermore, it is evident that attitudes toward customs and values, and not simply 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.²⁴⁴ Buffalo Bill sought not only to

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

²³⁷ L.G. Moses, *Wild West Shorn and the Images of American Indians, 1883-1933* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 84.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

²³⁹ Ovid, *Art of Love*: book 3, see line 145 for an example; Sarah Grinke, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838; reprint 1970), 63.

²⁴⁰ "Farewell to Ambrose Park."

²⁴¹ "The Exhibition at Woodbine."

²⁴² "Will Accompany "Buffalo Bill," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 14 March 1891, 6.

²⁴³ Kasson, *Celebrity, 188-189*.

²⁴⁴ "Grandest of Amusement Schemes," (LaCross Wisconsin) 30 Oct. 1886.

Constructing the Past

amuse, but also to "instruct generations to come."²⁴⁵ In 1909, the press declared the show "more highly educational in character than ever."²⁴⁶ Cody preferred that the shows be called "exhibitions" and hoped to convey information about Western life, especially the life of a Plains Indian, which was 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. Lacking only the trained animal and shooting acts, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show was performed in full glory for the convicts of Auburn prison in 1909. Cody's opening speech highlights to several mores that supposedly corresponded to life in the American West:

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 just like telling anyone that they can not do a thing and many times it is the first thing that they do.²⁴⁷

Cody used his interpretation of the culture of the Indians to represent what he considered essential values. He referred to a code of honor, and a need for trust between people. Surely this did not apply only 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, Cody promoted the idea of minimal government, a principle that would take root in the politics of Western states.²⁴⁸ However, the concept was not new, as it had classical foundations and supporters in America, namely the Anti-federalists, before the Founding Fathers even wrote the constitution.

In this case, it took the form of a personal message for 1,400 convicts.²⁴⁹ To be a good American, to follow the "Western" example, one needed to be responsible to himself first and foremost and, secondly, to those 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, who had not successfully conformed to society, and 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 lessons obtained from Buffalo Bill's Wild West was "of the greatest possible value."²⁵⁰ The reporter accused parents who neglected to "give them [children] a chance to see, living and moving, such an extraordinary representation" of not doing "their duty."²⁵¹ He further asserted that Buffalo Bill's lesson was one that could not be found "anywhere else."²⁵² 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 representations of an era that had closed forever, and, most importantly, they had educational

²⁴⁵ "Unique Figure."

²⁴⁶ "Three Shows Here," paper n.a., Buffalo Bill's Scrapbook 1909, Buffalo Bill Historical Center.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁸ Robert V. Mine and John Mack Faragher, *The American West: A New Interpretive History* (Yale University Press: 2000), 529-530.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁰ "You Would Not Miss a Dancing Dinosaur or Sabre Toothed Tiger," *The New York Evening Journal*, 26 April 1907.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

²⁵² *Ibid.*

Constructing the Past

value.

Yet, the reporter 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."²⁵³ This idea of an education "through their eyes" was exactly what Buffalo Bill had in mind while producing his shows. The spectator did not attend 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."²⁵⁴ The "immediacy and conviction of live performance" allowed and "encouraged spectators to imagine their own participation."²⁵⁵ 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."²⁵⁶ Nonetheless, the education of the Wild West show attracted not just "the small boys," but the "big ones too."²⁵⁷

The urgency that revolved around attending the show arose from the threat that one might miss the opportunity to see the West in some semblance of its supposed original form. Like the dinosaurs and sabertooths, the cowboys and Indians 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."²⁵⁸ 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. Rather than 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."²⁵⁹ It appears his hope was that the education transmitted by the Wild West shows would inject 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.²⁶⁰

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 American 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 also "little by little . . . transforms the wilderness."²⁶¹ According to Turner, the closing of the West, the disappearance of a definite and unbroken frontier, signaled the end of this process. More recently, historians have brought a rain of criticism down upon Turner's theory.

For example, in *The Frontier Re-examined*, John McDermott points out that Turner's representation of the

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁴ Kasson, *Celebrity*, 162.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 248 & 245

²⁵⁶ "Dancing Dinosaur."

²⁵⁷ "Buffalo Bill," *New Haven Evening Leader*, 21 May, 1907.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁰ See Reddin, *Wild West Shows*, 111. See for a discussion of romanticism and progress in Wild West shows.

²⁶¹ 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.

Constructing the Past

frontier failed to conform to the real frontier. In fact, he maintains 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."²⁶² There existed no general, prototypical battle between man and the elements and, therefore, no prototypical American as a result of such a conflict.²⁶³ 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 many 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 such values.

This desire went hand in hand with the idea that America was witnessing an end of an era and, consequently, the dawning of a new one. 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 exigency of the reporter for the *Evening Journal* indicates that Turner was not alone in his view that an era had ended.²⁶⁴ 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 witnessed."²⁶⁵ Likewise, the *New Haven Evening Leader* declared that the show represented "the old life that once was but is no more."²⁶⁶ Yet, that reporter referred to civilization as "achievement" rather than as the boring existence lamented by the *Evening Journal*.²⁶⁷

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 classical mythology, someone (a hero) died so that the trials of their life could be learned from and utilized in building knowledge of appropriate behavior, appearance, and other cultural norms. In this case, the death was figurative, denoting the fall of the frontier itself. The myth of the West operated independently of the true history of the region. It was an active process that reporters, in addition to the shows' producers, certainly invested in. While those who wrote about the Wild West shows may have focused on these mythical Western components, their method fit their purpose which was geared more toward 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.'"²⁶⁸ Here the reporter acknowledged that the subject at hand was a "story" and the Wild West show held responsibility for weaving that story into the present.

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

²⁶² John Francis McDermott, "The Frontier Re-examined," in *The Frontier Re-examined*, ed. John Francis McDermott (University of Illinois Press: Urbana, 1967), 3.

²⁶³ 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.

²⁶⁴ "Unique Figure."

²⁶⁵ "The Wonderful Wild West," *The New York Times*, 2 Sept. 1894, 11.

²⁶⁶ "Buffalo Bill."

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁸ Cody Again in Saddle," *Rochester New York Union and Advertiser*, 5 May 1916.

enemy was the Indians or the land itself.²⁶⁹ The myth of the frontier, however, contains fundamental contradictions; somehow the isolation that characterized the West led to integration.²⁷⁰ 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, which 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 obtain 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 notion of economic class remained topical even after the hypothetical forged alliance between show goers 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.²⁷¹

Secondly, as is already 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.²⁷² Those who chose to record and characterize the performers, components, and themes of Buffalo Bill's show proved that stereotypically 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," which purportedly stood as epilogue to the frontier myth.

The multifaceted and dynamic influence of the Wild West show often faced toward 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 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.²⁷³

Although the shows were fairly secular, one must remember the alternate, non-religious definition of ritual that focuses on the idea of "established procedure."²⁷⁴ 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.²⁷⁵ 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 relating 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 Democrat* called the "picture" put forth by the show "an extraordinary

²⁶⁹ Kasson, *Celebrity*, 244.

²⁷⁰ Deverell, "Fighting Words," 33.

²⁷¹ "Delighted Twenty Thousand," *New York Times*, 13 May, 1894, 2.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 193.

²⁷³ "The Wild West," *Peoria Democrat* reprinted in a Bloomington, Illinois paper, date n.a.

²⁷⁴ www.Hyperdictionary.com

²⁷⁵ 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.

Constructing the Past

one, such as we are not likely to see again."²⁷⁶ The shows inextricably linked a sense of finality and change with the "grimly realistic" scenes.²⁷⁷ 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.²⁷⁸ 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. 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 of "fun" and, therefore, a higher level of engagement to those who attended them.²⁷⁹ "Intensity of image, feeling, and interaction" ensured that Wild West shows conveyed common knowledge.²⁸⁰ When Buffalo Bill invited 4,000 children of all ages from institutions, and neighborhoods of every kind, they were said to have experienced "wild joy" and "wept bitterly."²⁸¹ 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 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."²⁸² 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."²⁸³ *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.²⁸⁴ 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."²⁸⁵

According to a letter sent to 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

²⁷⁶ "The Wild West."

²⁷⁷ "Wild West Delighted Two Big Crowds."

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 8-9

²⁷⁹ Kasson, *Celebrity*, 218.

²⁸⁰ Michael Suk-Young Chwe, *Rational Ritual: Culture, Coordination, and Common Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 73.

²⁸¹ "Orphans at the Wild West," *New York Times*, 3 April, 1901, 9

²⁸² "Buffalo Bill's Bonanza," *New York Times*, 29 June, 1886, 2.

²⁸³ "Wild West Delighted."

²⁸⁴ "Buffalo Bill's Wild West - The Attack on the Deadwood Coach," *Sporting and Dramatic News*, 28 May, 1897 in Buffalo Bill's Scrapbook 1887.

²⁸⁵ Mark Twain, Elinora, to Mr. Cody, 10 September 1888, reprinted in "Mark Twain and the Wild West," *The Hartford Courant*, 18 July, 1885

Constructing the Past

feelings.²⁸⁶ A reporter for the *Gaton Gazette* captured the show's intensity and involvement with this description: "The whole thing comes 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."²⁸⁷ He went on to recreate the dramatic battle scenes in florid, gruesome detail recounting such auditory experiences as an "unearthly whoop" and "fiendish yells."²⁸⁸ The excitement reached such a level that the following tranquil horseback performance provided "[a] grateful relief from this blood-curdling episode."²⁸⁹ As mentioned earlier, this ritualistic force was what made Wild West shows the focus of identity discussion.

Without ritual, the symbolic representation would have been noticeably different. In her book *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.²⁹⁰ Chew 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," which appeared in articles about the Wild West shows revealed these 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.²⁹¹

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 and identities they had imbibed by more potent methods (i.e. the show).²⁹² 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 Goran Aijmerv 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 compromised 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 and genetic aspect of symbolic communication. In relation to violence, this would be the effects of creating pain

²⁸⁶ Title n.a., sent to the *World Weekly*, Nov 1903 in Buffalo Bill's Scrapbook 1902-1903.

²⁸⁷ "The Wild West." *Gaton Gazette*, 6 June, 1887.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁰ Kasson, *Celebrity*, 227.

²⁹¹ "The Wonderful Wild West."

²⁹² Warren Susman, "Ritual Fairs," *Chicago History* 12 (1983), 5.

Constructing the Past

and being in pain.²⁹³

As demonstrated, the imaginary order played a crucial role in the enactments of the Wild West show. On the other hand, the magnetic effect 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*," yet, the evidence illustrates that contemporary interpretations of Wild West shows did not "recognize" one set pattern within 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.²⁹⁴ They assigned complex and even contradictory values and characteristics to blanket 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."²⁹⁵

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.²⁹⁶ To understand the contextual significance of the discourse surrounding Buffalo Bill's Wild West 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 current awareness of historical change, and a slew of journalistic interpretations supplied tools to spectators and readers so they could experiment in constructing diverse, but sometimes converging, ideas of what was purely and distinctly American.²⁹⁷

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²⁹³ Goran Aijmer and Jon Abbink eds, *Meanings of Violence: A Cross Cultural Perspective* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 2 & xi.

²⁹⁴ 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

²⁹⁵ 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.

²⁹⁶ Kasson. *Celebrity*, 236.

²⁹⁷ Mark Twain to Mr. Cody.

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