

**ARE THERE ANY NATIVES IN THE WEST?:
COMPETING DISCOURSES OF WESTERNNESS AND NATIVENESS AT A HERITAGE SITE.**

Paper Presented at the 2007 Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA) Conference
“Thinking Through Tourism” in London, UK as part of an organized session
‘Tourism as Social Contest,’ Keir Martin and Carlo Cubero convenors

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(DRAFT – Please do not cite or circulate without author’s consent)**

Abstract: Cultural tourism and heritage sites are spaces for the production of national identity, culture and history. Tourist sites, however, produce partial histories and valorize selective identities. This paper considers the politics of recognition – that is exclusion and inclusion of Nativeness – at a heritage site in Sheridan Wyoming. I examine how Westernness and Nativeness are constructed by and through reenactments and performances of the “wild west” at Sheridan’s “Buffalo Bill Days” event. While the dominant discourse commemorates Western history and identity, I argue that Native participants contest this discourse through their performances, which celebrate contemporary Native culture and identity.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I examine how Westernness and Nativeness are constructed by and through reenactments and performances at *Buffalo Bill Days* (hereinafter referred to as BBD) in Sheridan, Wyoming. I argue that the production of Westernness¹ and Nativeness in Wild West show reenactments is a complex process of inclusion and exclusion, where select meanings are established and celebrated. Drawing on the concept of heritage, I examine how place-site, people, experiences, and history, connect to produce preferred representations and discourses of Westernness. While Native participation is limited, it is not without agency. Native performers at Sheridan’s Wild West show resist historic, stereotypical representations of Nativeness and present alternatives. Native performers present a contemporary Native identity based on powwow music, dance, and regalia. I argue that performances of a contemporary pan-Indian identity are a form of agency in that that pan-Indian identity is employed to negotiate interactions as an opportunity to educate the public, correct stereotypes, and make statements of cultural continuity. Native participation in Wild West show reenactments at BBD, therefore, are meaningful expressions and experiences of Nativeness.

BUFFALO BILL DAYS IN SHERIDAN WYOMING

BBD first took place in 2003 to celebrate the 110th anniversary of the Sheridan Inn, a National Historical Landmark.² The Sheridan Heritage Center Inc. (hereinafter referred to as SHC) brought in the *Great American Wild West Show*, a traveling variety Wild West show complete with all the essential acts, an entire troupe, a spectacular production. In 2004, they hired a group out of Denver Colorado called *The Westernaires*, a non-profit group who works with disadvantaged kids and teaches them to ride, etc, who also put on a good show. There were stunts, horse drills, whip cracking, an Indian scene, they did it all. In 2005, the SHC decided to take the reigns and try something different. Rather than contract an entire Wild West show

¹ The term Westernness parallels my usage of the term Nativeness (in replacement of the term Indianness found in the literature). By Westernness I mean Western culture, history, and identity.

² Fieldnotes; my discussion on the history of BBD is based on a conversation June 24th 2005 with Edre Maier.

production, they hired individual acts from all over the United States. They found these acts through contacts established at previous shows in Sheridan and through Wayne Bauman, former Buffalo Bill performer at BBD. Whether these performers knew the history of Buffalo Bill or Sheridan was not important; but the SHC did want to hire quality acts that incorporated an historical component or narrative. BBD, however, is more than just a Wild West show; it is a complete ‘Western experience.’ The weekend events include an historical ball, birthday celebration³ complete with chuck wagon barbeque and birthday cake, pony express reenactment, a historical parade, and finally, the Wild West show.

Despite the reoccurring appearance of Buffalo Bill, the celebrations are not *about* Buffalo Bill himself. Edre Maier, Manager of the Inn and Executive Director of the SHC, says that the goal of BBD is to increase interest of the Inn and boost support for restoration projects.⁴ She says that Buffalo Bill is very marketable, and that his celebrity status combined with heritage tourism will bring attention to the Inn and to the history of their Western town more generally. BBD incorporates a ‘living history’ component (that is reenactment) to a heritage site (the Inn) as a way of marketing Westernness, more specifically, as a way of marketing Sheridan history and the Inn. Thus, while the main goal is to raise the profile of the Inn, the SHC is also *commemorating* Westernness as a result of their heritage tourism strategy.

Heritage: Making the past valuable - History, Place, People

Heritage literally means something that may be inherited; it is something of value related to the past, a tradition or thing that is passed down from previous generations⁵. It may be tangible (natural) or intangible (cultural), but we often think of heritage in terms of sites or places. Although heritage may be linked to places of significance, their significance or ‘value’ is produced. For example, an empty field may appear to be just a vista, but may be selected as the place of a significant battle; once marked with a plaque for instance, this field becomes a heritage site. We may therefore think more critically about heritage as something that is not a given, but rather produced. In other words, heritage is a mode of cultural production (Krishenblatt-Gimblett 1995:370). Heritage is also a “use of the past” (Tivors 2002:188). Simply stated, heritage is the commodification of history. Because history is selective and heritage is produced, it follows then that heritage involves processes whereby symbols of history are selected, remade and performed. Schouten writes: “Heritage is history processed through mythology, ideology, nationalism, local pride, romantic ideas or just plain marketing into a commodity” (1997:21 in Tivors).

While heritage draws on symbols, myths, and history to construct its narrative, it is not a pre-existing entity that is found or conserved. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett proposes that heritage and the past by definition are necessarily obsolete, but are made valuable again or “given a second life” through cultural production (1998, 1995:369). In the case of Sheridan, the Inn was no longer in use as an Inn after 1965, despite efforts to revive it as a hotel (Atkins 1994). The defunct Inn is made valuable through its production as a site that is representative of Westernness. A series of narratives are selected to give it value and establish it as a site of significance. For example, the Sheridan Inn is a significant site in terms of architecture, known for its incredible 69 gables. It is also the site of many ‘firsts’ – the first Inn built in Sheridan and the first building to have electricity, running water, and a telephone (ibid). In addition, many famous people stayed at the Inn, such as Ernest Hemingway, President Hoover, Vice President Dawes, General Pershing, Major Sheridan, Will Rogers, Charlie Russell, and Bob Hope (ibid),

³ Although Buffalo Bill is present, the birthday celebration at BBD is for the opening of the Sheridan Inn.

⁴ Fieldnotes, conversation with Edre.

⁵ Concise Oxford English Dictionary.

adding to the value of the site. The fact that it is now also officially designated a National Historic Landmark further increases its value and significance.

In terms of making the Inn a valuable heritage site, the SHC depends in particular on connecting the Inn with Buffalo Bill. Many famous people stayed at the Sheridan Inn, but Buffalo Bill's 'celebrity status' and his spectacular Wild West show are certainly more commodifiable. But Buffalo Bill traveled to many towns across the United States. What is so special about Sheridan? The key in producing the Sheridan Inn's heritage narrative is to claim Buffalo Bill as one of their own. In this case, Sheridan is connected to Buffalo Bill through the heritage site itself. The Inn was one of his *many* business ventures; he also auditioned acts for his Wild West show at the Inn (Atkins 1994). Buffalo Bill, and his connection to Sheridan's history through the Inn, therefore, is the heritage produced for commemoration at BBD. Moreover, the myths and narratives of Buffalo Bill – the frontier life, the West, the pony express, the Indian wars – may be readily incorporated into existing tourism discourses promoting Wyoming as *the* state that epitomizes Westernness. Therefore, Buffalo Bill conjures up recognizable imagery of Westernness that connects to the larger myth of the West, and BBD draws on these images and narratives.

Considering how this imagery of the West is constructed, I suggest that 'place' itself also factors into the cultural production of heritage. Edre observes:

The nice thing about Sheridan is that you got all the pieces here, it's just a matter of contracting people and putting them together and seeing how it works. We've got the buffalo, we've got the long horn, we've got the Indians, we've got rope, we've got everything here, it's just putting it together. Fort Phil Kearney (site of the Fetterman Battle) is also nearby and is something we could recreate in the show.⁶

Hence Sheridan as a place is made up of all 'things' Western which cumulate in the production of heritage. 'Place' is also significant because it connects with personal experiences. Locals, and their ancestors, have experienced the history of Sheridan. Edre states: "Everything happened within 100 miles of here and you can touch people whose grandparents were involved, and you can do it right here in history."⁷ Some have more specific connections and memories of Buffalo Bill and histories of the West. Tammy Burr's grandfather, for example, traveled and performed with BBWW show. Tammy also feels a certain affinity for Calamity Jane, who stayed with some of her relatives when she was ill.⁸ Participating in BBD allows locals to re-experience their history, validate memories, and authenticate their sense of Westernness.

Reenactment is an important aspect of establishing Western heritage at BBD.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett suggests that "heritage is created through a process of exhibition," be it as a museum display or a performances, where it is given new meaning and value (1995:269, 370). In other words, heritage may be further entrenched through exhibition and performance. While the Sheridan Inn is not an exhibition or "living history" site per se, Western heritage is produced at BBD via reenactment. Edre confirms this goal: "Our concern was just having people here having *historical experiences* during the 3 days...and we can have that happen during Buffalo Bill days, and they can get the true feeling of the west and not Hollywood, or Eurodisney."⁹ Reenactment is a feature of BBD in general. From the Wild West show, historical ball, and parade to the pony express reenactment, these performances of Westernness are forms of

⁶ Interview with Edre.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Interview with Tammy.

⁹ Interview with Edre, emphasis added.

exhibition that work to solidify selected representations and discourse as well as the historical significance of the Inn, Sheridan, and Western identity.

NATIVES IN THE WEST?: PAN-INDIAN IDENTITY, AGENCY, AND “PERFORMATIVE EDUCATION”

Within this metanarrative of Westernness, is there any room for alternative narratives? References to Native history and their contributions to ‘the West’ at BBD are absent. It is this very absence of or limitedness of Native participation that is significant. American Wild West reenactments are promotion driven but not as concerned with spectacle as with *commemoration*. But what exactly is being commemorated? Which histories are told, and whose identity(s) are valorized?

Historically, Native performers were an integral part of BBWW show. I asked Edre what she thought about Native participation at BBD. She admitted that they are “missing the Indian contingent,” and may need to add more of that.¹⁰ Edre says that they are certainly interested in presenting a more historically accurate show by incorporating reproductions of historic acts (*ibid*). The only problem is that Native participation in historic Wild West shows included “whooping war dances” and “savage attacks.” This presents a complicated situation in terms of staging reenactments of Native history. Thus, a concern for political correctness curtails Native inclusion in BBD reenactments. For this reason, there are no Indians in deerskins and headdress at the pony express reenactment, or at the Sheridan Inn events, or at the Wild West show (except for two white actors playing Indians on bareback horses who chase a pony express rider). The omnipresent stagecoach is robbed by bandits rather than Indians. But because the goal of BBD is to commemorate *Western history*, *Native history* is subsequently downplayed.

Although BBD does not incorporate performances of Native history, it does include performances by a professional Native troupe. This limited inclusion of Nativeness is nonetheless important. Contemporary performances by Native Spirit Productions¹¹ (hereinafter referred to as NSP) provide a sharp contrast to the historical reenactments and costumed characters of Buffalo Bill, Annie Oakley, Wild Bill and Calamity Jane. Brian and Lane, professional performers and powwow dancers, challenge stereotypes and misconceptions through their performances. Dressed in powwow regalia rather than traditional deerskin Brian asks, “Have you heard this song before? Heya heya heya heya. Well I can guarantee you that an Indian did not write that song.” Brian plays his flute and talks about traditional and contemporary music. He also speaks plainly about stereotypes and the fact that Native communities live and thrive today. Lane’s performance of the fancy dance and Brian’s hoop dance demonstrate their cultural vitality. This insertion of contemporary performance in combination with an educational agenda brings Native culture and identity into the 21st century. In this way, Brian and Lane exert some degree of agency within the confines of a heritage tourism that restricts Native voices and alternative readings of history. While *Native history* is absent in these commemorative events, *Native present* is celebrated.

Edre noted the disjuncture between Native past and present identity constructions. “It was definitely a representation of contemporary Native culture, because that’s what you see at powwows,” she says. She also mentioned how she was disappointed at first to hear that Brian and Lane were going to wear their brightly colored powwow regalia. Commenting on their modern look, Edre says that she is sure that their regalia would look great at night under

¹⁰ Interview with Edre

¹¹ For more on Native Spirit Productions and their presentations and products, visit their website <http://www.nativespiritproductions.com/index.htm>. Since conducting this research, NSP has updated their website.

fluorescent lights, but that it is not “true Indian dress.” In other words, it’s not ‘traditional (authentic) Indian’ clothing. Even though the hoop dancers are more in tune with what Edre suggests is required for an exciting Wild West show, their inclusion concerned her. She felt that it would disrupt the historical picture they were attempting to create. However, Edre admitted that NSP’s presentation was exceptional and that the audience loved that part of the Wild West show; they “stole the show,” she said. In fact, when I asked Edre what her favorite part of the show was, she replied “the hoop dancers!”

Presenting Nativeness as it exists *today* is one of the goals of NSP. I asked Brian how he felt about perhaps playing a ‘traditional Indian’ in this type of venue and possibly reenacting historic Wild West performances. He replied:

The way we do it here [at BBD], we’re not going back to the 1880s. A lot of the other stuff in the show is 1880s; we show who we are today. We are not showing what it was like in the 1800s, we are showing what we are today. So when somebody wants me to throw on a headdress and dance around a fire, I’ll tell them no that’s not what they really want, that we can do it another way which would give them the same energy and give them a better effect.¹²

Brian’s statements reveal how it is possible to negotiate representations of Nativeness without sacrificing the entertainment value or spectacle appeal. Significantly, it demonstrates how performances of Nativeness may be included, even at historic tourist sites.

In spaces of spectacle and entertainment such as these, I suggest that presenting a pan-Indian identity is not only acceptable but preferred. Performances of pan-Indian identity are occasions for *self*-representation.¹³ Some scholars critique pan-Indianism, as it assumes a homogeneous Indian cultural expression (Jackson and Levin 2002:301-2), or argue that it is a result of the loss of tribal knowledge (Howard 1983:74, 78). I argue that pan-Indian identity is a unifying expression of Nativeness, rather than a homogenizing expression, that does not exclude tribal or local identity. For example, NSP provides “educational entertainment” drawing from powwow dancing.¹⁴ The NSP website outlines their intertribal approach. Brian Hammil is of the Ho-chuck Nation (southern Wisconsin) and based out of Phoenix Arizona, however “the dances represent various nations from all across the United States as well as Canada.”¹⁵ The powwow dances NSP draw on are now social dances suitable for the public (*ibid*), but these pan-Indian dances do not replace their local identity or tribal affiliation. That is, pan-Indian styles and regalia cut across tribal affiliations *and* local tribal expressions are part of powwows to varying degree (c.f. Herle 1994:76-8). Still, powwows encourage members to imagine themselves as part of a larger community in solidarity and comradeship (Herle 1994:79). Thus, NSP draws on powwow expressions as a form of unified Native identity that sustains strength and solidarity. Pan-Indianism is a *shared* experience, not a homogenizing process.

A pan-Indian identity is also expressed through identity markers such as powwow regalia. Elaborate and brightly colored powwow regalia is a recognizable sign of Nativeness, but it is not the Plains attire associated with ‘traditional Indian’ imagery. Without question, Brian and Lane’s powwow regalia is more meaningful to them than this ‘traditional dress’ found in historic Wild West shows perceived as ‘authentic.’ In this way, NSP draws on a contemporary Native identity

¹² Interview with Brian.

¹³ See for example Buddle 2004, Herle 1994, Ellis (ed.) 2006, Lerch 1996, 1992, and Maddox 2002.

¹⁴ NSD provide a variety of dances as part of their show presentations such as Hoop Dance, Eagle Dance, Traditional Dance, Grass Dance, Fancy Dance, Jingle Dress Dance and Fancy Shawl. At the Wild West show in Sheridan, Lane performed a Fancy Dance and Hoop Dance.

¹⁵ <http://www.nativespiritproductions.com/index.htm>

to subvert more stereotypical representations of romantic Indians from the past. In addition, a more intertribal or pan-Indian identity has more socio-political and cultural force in that presenting pan-Indian identity provides an opportunity for cross cultural exchange and education.

I further suggest that pan-Indian identity is a form of agency in that it may be employed for negotiating Native – non-Native interactions in public “contact zones.” Like powwows, entertainment spaces of spectacle and cultural performance, I argue, are productive sites for cross cultural exchange. Brian formed NSP in 1997 with this intention in mind: “[it is] a way to share native culture and dances with various people from all across the United States as well as overseas.”¹⁶ Lane echoes this sentiment: “A lot of people...think it’s a really big deal to see Native American dancing and Native American singing.”¹⁷ Participating in the Wild West show at BBD provided Native performers with the opportunity to inform the public on contemporary Native music and explain the significance of dance. As stated previously, it is also an opportunity to correct stereotypes. Through their performances of contemporary Nativeness, NSP provides opportunities for cross cultural exchange and public education.

Central to presenting alternative views of Nativeness in this “contact zone” is a conscious strategy that I call “performative education.” Certain elements are integral to a “performative education” strategy: performances are didactic; performances are professional, highlighting performers’ skills and reliability; and performances emphasize cultural continuity. First, since one of the goals of NSP is to educate the public, NSP provides “educational entertainment” ranging from dances, music, artist demonstrations, videos, CDs and lectures at a variety of venues such as from corporate events to rodeos and fairs, special public events and celebrations to schools and museums. In our interview, Brian clearly states the didactic priority of NSP: “We offer a good dance show and we also educate. The main thing is education through dancing, through talking, whatever. We want a show where people have a better understanding of our culture.” This educational agenda explicitly aims to increase cross cultural understanding, confront stereotypes, and correct misconceptions.

Brian also expressed the importance of providing a “professional face” and employees who are reliable.¹⁸ This meets the requirements of their clients, such as Edre, who are looking for professional, appropriate, and reliable performers. Brian is an all around performer; he is a hoop dancer, musician and storyteller. He works with a core group of people that he can depend on as *ambassadors* of Nativeness, people that have “exceptional skill and dance quality” (ibid). Having a professional face on Native dancing and performance in general means that *skills* are the highlighted feature – skills as dancers, musicians, storytellers, and artists. By focusing on Native performers’ skills, NSP highlights their view on what are significant markers of Native identity. Besides emphasizing the skills and accomplishments of contemporary Natives, this professional face in itself also defies misconceptions that Native people just don’t work. Their didactic and professional approach to performing Nativeness, I argue, is essential for their ability to negotiate power in the politics of representation and wield some degree of agency.

Another way pan-Indian identity is a form of agency in Native – non-Native interactions is that, like powwows, entertainment spaces provide opportunities to make statements of cultural survival. I have pointed out that BBD’s limited inclusion of Native participants contributes to the erasure of Native history. However, the significance of the ‘past’ is not completely disregarded by NSP. Brian and Lane emphasize cultural continuity in their performances, linking the past

¹⁶ NSP website, <http://www.nativespiritproduction.com/bhammill.htm>

¹⁷ Interview with Lane

¹⁸ Interview with Brian

and present. Their dances have historical roots and modern influences.¹⁹ Brian confirms that the dances we see are not only educational presentations, but representative of dances that “have survived thousands of years” (ibid). Native culture not only survives, but thrives. He proudly proclaims that “the Native culture is a living culture” (ibid). Thus, Native performers at BBD yield a great degree of agency in their performances of contemporary Nativeness and expressions of pan-Indian identity because their performances are statements of cultural survival and continuity.

In addition, the passing on of knowledge and skills to others, as well as information to the public, is a way of keeping their culture alive (ibid). It also promotes a sense of personal satisfaction and pride:

“It makes you feel better, that you’re performing for people. I don’t know, it’s not just performing like show wise, it’s how you feel, how you feel about yourself. And if you’re doing something good, you know, keep on doing it know.”²⁰

Beyond the personal satisfaction that comes from dancing and performing cultural continuity for the public to witness, cultural knowledge may be passed down through performance. Lane’s performances are inspiration for the youth:

“Well the best part is, I would say for myself, is to see the young generation keep on going and you know passing it on, passing it along. And I see a lot of different kids out there that we dance with sometimes; we dance with a couple of school kids and stuff like that... I work with some kids, you know, they really wanted to dance but they get really into it. I just try to help them along and do the best that I can.” (ibid).

In sum, pan-Indianism is not so much about cultural revitalization, as this implies a sense of loss of some pristine culture, but rather an expression of pride and cultural continuity that are simultaneously tribal, intertribal, and pan-Indian expressions. Ellis insightfully notes that pan-Indianism reminds us that Native people do not live like their ancestors or like whites, “but their values and communities live on, separate from mainstream America” (1990:26).

CONCLUSIONS

Performing history and identity through reenactment often leads to the construction of a partial history and a selective identity. I have argued that “heritage making” at BBD generates preferred metanarratives of Westernness by producing the Inn as a ‘valuable site’ through narratives of Buffalo Bill and Western history, and solidifies these Western narratives by using reenactments. In such processes where heritage is actively constructed, the main issue centered on questions of inclusion and exclusion – both histories and identities. Historically, Native people were an essential component of Wild West shows. The reenactment of history and identity is complex, and challenging stereotypes through performance appears to be a challenging task for historic sites and museum. Rather than confronting stereotypes and misconceptions, Native performances are excluded from *historical* reenactments at BBD. Yet museums and heritage sites that engage in historical reenactments are ideal spaces for a critique on historical relationships and stereotypes (Tivers 2002). While BBD does not commemorate Native history, Native participants performed contemporary Nativeness as a form self-representation at the Wild West show. Native performers exerted a great degree of agency by drawing on pan-Indian expressions to negotiate Native – non-Native interactions, challenge stereotypes, and make statements of unity and cultural continuity. In sum, tourist performances are important spaces where historical narratives are created and perpetuated and identity politics are worked out.

¹⁹ www.nativespiritproducton.com/dancing/htm

²⁰ Interview with Lane

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