Presented by Karen Ramirez:

Unlike some of our esteemed colleagues who have used the past president’s address to take up the theme and issue of the current conference (and we particularly recall Bill’s address on Tara’s theme of feeling western), Nic and I have decided to invoke the past in our address today and take up last year’s theme of western collaborations. This is partly because we have been so actively thinking about and enacting collaboration and also because it certainly fits for a shared talk. The title for our talk is an invocation of the series of panels at last year’s conference that specifically focused on different aspects of western collaborations. We envision today’s talk as the tenth (thus the roman number 10) of this series of panels.

Collaboration is a generally positive word—at least in the US. It is a fundamentally democratic principle that suggests teamwork and cooperation … the possibility of layering individual ideas, talents, abilities, and time from more than one person or group to create a more complex, complete, and interesting product. Collaboration implies a willingness to work with others and offers the promise of bringing different or even opposing people or organizations together through a common interest. It suggests the opportunity to generate something together that might not be possible separately because collaboration involves drawing on people’s varied talents toward a single goal.

Of course, in practice, collaboration is frequently a complicated process of negotiation and communication. Have you ever been to a mule pull at a rodeo or state fair? In this event, teams of mules are paired up and harnessed to pull a weight that is greater than either of them can pull individually, but which collectively they can pull with relative ease. A perfect equine example of the ideal of collaboration, isn’t it?! Of course getting two mules to work together to pull at the same time, is … well, we’re all familiar with the idiom, “stubborn as a mule,” right? Sometimes one pulls and then the other pulls, back and forth, never really moving the weight at all—an excruciating (maybe entertaining) reminder of the struggle that collaboration can also imply.
Collaboration has its hazards, and not just for mules. Perhaps you remember Mark Twain’s tale in *Roughing It* of how he and his partner, Higbie, were “absolutely and unquestionably worth a million dollars, once, for ten days” (299)—but *only* ten days since they each over-relied on the other partner. When Higbie discovers that the Wide West Company’s rich gold and silver strike was actually a “blind lead,” Higbie, Twain, and their “strong friend” (the foreman of the Wide West Company) partner together and claim the blind lead, thereby forming what Twain refers to as the “smallest and compactest organization in the district,—and the easiest to manage” (289). But, their easy management falls apart pretty quickly when each partner expects the other to stay and work the vein and thus fulfill the understood “law” of the district that claimants do a “reasonable amount” of work on their claim within ten days of locating it. Twain leaves Higbie a note on the cabin table and Higbie, “being in a hurry and not seeing [Twain], had tossed [his own] note into the cabin through a broken pane” (296)—and only after the ten days expire do they find each other’s notes. As Twain puts it, “It came out that Higbie had depended on me, as I had on him, and as both of us had on the foreman. The folly of it!” (296). Twain humorously reminds us that collaboration fails without clear communication and clarification of tasks (and luckily for us today email is a bit more reliable than tossing notes through cabin windows). I admit that over the past few years, there have been times I found myself thinking, “oh, I bet Nic will take care of that”—but fortunately, we never had a “Higbie- and-Twain” type of collaborative disaster.

While acknowledging the potential for collaboration to falter or fail, today we want to explore more closely the notion of what we’re calling the generative power of collaboration—a discussion which we’ll pass back and forth, which will hopefully generate more than indigestion (a definite danger while speaking after lunch)!

**Presented by Nicolas Witschi:**

Although Karen and I have been discussing this talk for quite some time, I will confess that as recently as two-and-a-half weeks ago, I was still fretting and wringing my hands over the prospect of having all by myself to produce a text for today’s event. Or at least that’s how it seemed to me at the time. Karen and I had already begun to confer about how we might approach this historically solo genre as a duet, as a collaboration, and I thought we had come up with some good and important ideas. But faced with the blank page, I still suffered from the typical moment that I suspect one or two of you have experienced as well. I did find a measure of assurance when I looked back at our colleague Linda Karell’s excellent 1995 book on collaboration in western American literature, *Writing Together/Writing Apart: Collaboration in Western American Literature*. In the introduction (in which, it turns out, she too begins with a scene of isolated writing), she observes: “[A]ll literary writing is inevitably collaborative, both regardless of the circumstances of its authorship (that only one individual literally ‘wrote’ a text, for example) and because of the circumstances of its authorship (that authorship is actually a form of production that invariably reveals the presence of others)” (xx). By observing that no one truly writes alone, this brief passage reminded me that while Karen and I did relatively little cowriting, what we wrought through our combined energies, conversations, and ideas had resulted in a conference that was surprisingly satisfying. And by this I mean specifically that it was surprisingly easy for me both to claim a measure of responsibility for it and to abjure all credit, to defer it onto everyone else who showed up to make it so much fun. This result, to me, goes to the heart of what collaboration could generate.
But this recognition didn’t exactly absolve me of the need to put pen to paper and produce my share of today’s text.

Continuing in my refresher read through Linda’s introduction, I came across the following passage:

Despite the preponderance of the myth of the individual white male conquering the West—the explorer, the cowboy, the gunslinger, the cattle baron—recent cultural histories and rereadings of historical documents tell us many more stories of collective achievement, governmental dependence, and group rather than individual domination. (xxvii)

She proceeds to mention such various items as the Mormon settlement of Salt Lake City, railroad and mining operations, and the collaborative nature of Lewis & Clark’s Corps of Discovery as historical examples. Reflecting further on the catalog of individuals that I just read out —“the explorer, the cowboy, the gunslinger, the cattle baron”—reflecting, specifically, on what I know of the collaborations that perhaps defined members of this list, I found myself wondering: isn’t train robbery also a collaboration? Are not the James brothers (Jesse and Frank) and their partners the Younger brothers (Cole, Jim, John, and Bob) essentially collaborators in the redistribution of wealth? This framing of what has often been debated as “social banditry” (Hobsbawm, White) is, I will admit, rather facile. But here’s something that is not: Jesse James and Cole Younger, each in his own way, authored publically rendered texts that were without a doubt collaborative endeavors.

For that matter, so did Wild Bill Hickok, Buffalo Bill Cody, Wyatt Earp, and Calamity Jane. They, and many others who had found themselves the subjects of public scrutiny or celebration, discovered the usefulness of not merely responding to the media but enlisting the help of those same newspaper writers in crafting their own personal narratives. In 1895, for example, Martha Jane Cannary Burk gave an interview to the local newspaper upon the occasion of her return, for the first time in sixteen years, to Deadwood, South Dakota. More commonly known as Calamity Jane, Burk had in the intervening years worked in a number of professions, including teamster, mail and freight delivery agent, dance hall girl (whether that’s a euphemism or not is uncertain), and frontier scout and guide. During these years, she had also become a Wild West celebrity, a personage hailed both in Deadwood and throughout the nation as one of the colorful characters who first brought all-American enterprise, violence, vulgarity, and civilization to a booming gold camp. Her name had been featured prominently in a series of extremely popular Deadwood Dick dime novels and, just as significantly, in daily and weekly newspapers. In October 1895, Jane was interviewed for the Deadwood Black Hills Daily Times, and in his lead, the reporter offers, “‘There is probably not a newspaper nor magazine published in the United States’… that has not printed stories ‘about Calamity Jane and her thrilling experiences and exploits of the western borders’” (Mc Laird 145). In this interview, Jane even laments that “she did ‘not like newspaper notoriety’ because so many writers had ‘faked interviews with her and written up a lot of lies’” (Mc Laird 146). She concludes by assuring her interviewer that “since her life had ‘never been written up, authentic,’ she might ‘narrate the numerous incidents … to some good writer sometime and have it published’” (Mc Laird 146). With the assistance of an impresario for a traveling circus from Cleveland, she did just that. In an autobiographical
pamphlet published only months after her widely publicized return and timed to coordinate with her appearance
on stage, she recalled,

My arrival in Deadwood after an absence so many years created quite an excitement among my many friends
of the past, to such an extent that a vast number of the citizens who had come to Deadwood during my absence
who had heard so much of Calamity Jane and her many adventures in former years were anxious to see me.
Among the many whom I met were several gentlemen from eastern cities, who advised me to allow myself to
be placed before the public in such a manner as to give the people of the eastern cities an opportunity of seeing
the Woman Scout who was made so famous through her daring career in the West and Black Hill countries.
(Burk 6–7)

In this perfectly emblematic moment, a western “author” collaborates with someone in order to craft,
retrospectively, a persona. In the case of Jesse James, the collaboration in the service of persona-shaping
occurred contemporaneously. Over the course of his career as the ostensible leader of a gang of outlaws, he
frequently collaborated with John N. Edwards, an editor at the Kansas City Times, who helped James by editing
and publishing James’s newspaper letters, epistles that sought to provide a compelling combination of denial
and justification for the crimes with which he was associated. Mostly, James appears to have been interested in
denial. A typical letter to the Times, this one from September 1872, begins: “I have just read an article in the
Independence Herald charging Frank and myself with robbing the ticket office at the Kansas City Exposition
grounds. This charge is baseless and without foundation” (Wybrow 5). And a July 5, 1875, letter to the
Nashville Banner also begins, “As my attention has been called, recently, to the notice of several sensational
pieces copied from the Nashville Union and American, stating that the James and Youngers are in Kentucky, I
ask space in your valuable paper to say a few words in my defence” (Wybrow 4). In this letter, James also
demonstrates that he’s got the autobiographical bug: “I will give a true history of the lives of the James and
Younger Boys to the Banner in the future; or rather a sketch of our lives. … Probably I have written too much,
and probably not enough, but I hope to write much more to the Banner in future” (Wybrow 4–5). This
autobiographical component of James’s letters points to a deeper political concern he had. As T. J. Stiles
demonstrates in his recent biography, James’s letters reveal a complex, astute political figure who, with the aid
of his mentor and ostensible publicist Edwards, usually sought to present himself as a noble Southern Democrat
dedicated to redressing the economic and social wrongs inflicted upon the South in the wake of the Civil War.

In late 1879, three years after the disastrous events of the Northfield, Minnesota, raid and at a moment when
James was beginning to appear again in the news, the Kansas City Evening Star received and printed a letter
that was signed “Jesse W. James, Bandit Chief.” There is some question, though, as to whether or not this
particular letter is authentic. For one, the author describes himself rather implausibly as having been living in
California and about to board a steamer bound for Spain (from which, he points out, he cannot be extradited).
More significant, however, is the signature. James is often thought of as a thief who targeted railroads for their
predatory business practices, and yet only once, late in his career, was he heard during a robbery as explicitly
referring to his actions as being anti-railroad. But he was by this time already widely known in the popular
imagination as a “Bandit Chief” who was both admired and feared all along the rails. I would argue that with the signature on this letter, we see a collaboration between audience and author. If indeed James wrote it, then he has begun identifying himself in the terms by which he has become famous. But regardless of the historical authenticity of this final letter from James, its very existence testifies to the extent to which readers of James’s exploits and self-justifications have begun to collaborate themselves in the construction of a public figure known as “Jesse James.”

Jesse James was murdered in 1882 by a member of his own gang, not a development in a collaborative relationship that any of us would welcome. As for his partner, Cole Younger, he was wounded and captured in Northfield, Minnesota, in 1876, during a botched robbery that ended the James-Younger gang’s collaborations. Cole was paroled in 1901, and one of the conditions of his release was that he was barred from ever appearing in public in any sort of performance or representation of his criminal past. This, however, did not stop him from touring with an old colleague as comanager of a show called The Great Cole Younger & Frank James Historical Wild West. Over the course of several years of this show’s existence, which was generally a flop better known for the grift that followed in its wake than for its entertainment value, Younger never violated the letter of his parole injunction, as he was technically a behind-the-scenes operator with no public duties. However, during each performance, Frank James would at one point announce that a certain private citizen was about to stroll by the front row of the grand stand, and the audience would catch its glimpse of his notorious partner in crime. At other times, Younger worked as the ticket taker, giving each person passing through the turnstile a quick but viscerally thrilling brush with celebrity. As far as collaboration is concerned, it is at this moment that he too begins to collaborate with his audience in the performance of himself for the sake of public memory.

Presented by Karen Ramirez:

I want to move from Nic’s discussion of texts that reflect collaboration between audience and a single author to consider a community performance, called the Ramona Outdoor Play, which not only blurs the line between text and audience (by involving the community as performers in a play about a region’s history), but which, much like the popular stories told of Calamity Jane or Jesse James, has become a narrative of public memory.

The Ramona Outdoor Play is the longest running outdoor drama in the US and enacts the story of Helen Hunt Jackson’s 1884 novel Ramona. It takes place every year on three consecutive weekends in a huge outdoor amphitheater in Hemet, California—a town of about 60,000 located 40 miles east of Riverside in southern California. It is truly a community production—involving an all-volunteer cast of about 400 community members with a production and support team of another 400 community members. The Ramona Pageant has been produced annually since 1923, with the exception of five years during the Depression and WWII.

Today, I want to discuss two ways that this outdoor play reflects collaboration. First, I’ll consider the play as an example of the collaborative enterprise of community outdoor theater, or pageantry. And second, by focusing on the evolving role of American Indians in the play, I’ll discuss the Ramona Pageant as a contemporary site of public memory where publics engage ongoing debates about whose version of the past to authorize.
The Ramona Pageant is a testimony to American pageantry, which had its heyday at the turn of the twentieth century. American pageants were secular community rituals (Prevots 9). They were large-scale productions (involving anywhere from 200 to 5,000 community members, [Prevots 3]) generally performed outdoors in a setting that would stand as a physical symbol of the communal event being staged. Pageants typically enacted a story that celebrated an occasion or person deemed “important” to the community such as a “Trail Breakers Pageant” staged in Baker, Oregon, in 1912 (Glassberg 181); or a later example that hits close to home for me: a 1958 historical pageant called the “Boulderama,” which was staged every night for a week in Boulder, Colorado, as part of its centennial celebration [1] (Pettem).

Pageantry began as a Progressive Era art form, and frequently pageant organizers deliberately sought to generate community consolidation and social reform through the performance. As Naima Prevots explains in her study *American Pageantry* (1990), the leaders of American pageantry saw community performance as a democratic art form—“art of the people, by the people, for the people” (1). By bringing varied community members together (rich and poor, recent immigrants and long-time residents, men and women) to create a community performance, they very specifically hoped to “break down social, cultural, and economic barriers” (2). To an extent, the “text” was community consolidation, and the “audience” was the community members who themselves were enacting the performance.

Community pageantry, especially historical pageantry, is a form of public memory, which John Bodnar defines as “a body of beliefs and ideas about the past that help a public or society understand its past, present, and by implication, its future” (15). Clearly, early twentieth-century pageantry intended to establish certain beliefs about the past that would reinforce dominant Anglo-American economic and ethnic power dynamics on a local level. The stories deemed “important” to enact in this format told a local version of a national story of Anglo-American “progress” and enterprise. Historical pageants generally highlighted a set of chronological episodes, or stages, in the region’s development. These stages frequently included Indian inhabitation, a pioneering era, a town-building era, and an era of technological progress—each set up as a separate scene and punctuated by a dance or music interlude [2] (Prevots 4).

Historical pageants aimed to contain how residents would remember and interpret the places they inhabited, but public memory is always dynamic; it is constantly evolving by engaging competing ideas of what is important to be remembered or forgotten or whose version of the past to authorize. As David Glassberg points out in his study *American Historical Pageantry* (1990), in the case of historical pageants “the desire to display the illusion of consensus through mass participation sometimes leads civic officials to include dissenting voices in their public historical representations. These voices, in turn, can subvert the overall impression the officials are trying to communicate” (2).

So, with these ideas of historical pageantry and public memory in mind, I want to return now to *Ramona* —a literary event that functions to create and perpetuate public memory in a particular place. The Ramona Pageant started in 1923 not only with the progressive ideals of community consolidation but also with a consumerist
goal of tourism. In case you aren’t familiar with *Ramona*, it tells the story of forbidden love between the half-Indian, half-Anglo Ramona Ortega and the displaced Luiseño Indian Alessandro. Although Jackson wrote Ramona in 1884 as a protest novel to condemn the removal of the southern Californian Indians and Californios, the novel’s popularity has rested on its love story and its romanticized presentation of southern California’s pastoral Californio heritage. [3] Between 1887 and the early 1920s, a Ramona-centered tourist industry sprouted in southern California, inspiring the Hemet Valley Chamber of Commerce to start a pageant in hopes of bringing tourists to the remote San Jacinto Valley, one of many places referenced in Jackson’s novel. [4] While the pageant was sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce, it was written and directed by the well-established California outdoor dramatist Garnet Holme, who brought progressive ideals about community pageantry and insisted that it be an outdoor performance staged by local performers (Brigandi 36, 43). Holme scripted Ramona much like other historical pageants—around three distinct “eras” of Ramona and Alessandro’s lives (first at the Moreno rancho, then at a Luiseño Indian village, and finally on the run into the San Jacinto Mountains to escape advancing American settlers). Each era is highlighted by a spectacular element of dance, music, or motion: a Californios fiesta, an Indian Elder Blessing of Ramona and Alessandro’s first child, and a dramatic horseback posse chase for Alessandro’s murderer.

While the Ramona Pageant does not glorify nationalist progress as overtly as many other early nineteenth-century historical pageants, it is nevertheless a nationalistic narrative that hinges on a sympathetic but tragic construction of Indians and Californios. Tellingly, the play ends with an epilogue that dramatically proclaims, “Mourn now ye vales and splendid snow-capped hills. Your old time friends go forth—mark their farewell” and then finishes somewhat incongruously appealing for justice for the Indians.

Not surprisingly, the Elder Blessing scene, which, as I mentioned is the spectacle scene that punctuates the Indian-village era of Ramona and Alessandro’s lives, became for generations—from the play’s inception in 1923 through the late 1990s—a venue for “playing Indian” (to borrow Historian and American Indian scholar Phil Deloria’s term), or an occasion for Anglo-Americans to dress as Indians and act out a spectacle of the vanished Indian. Though the scene changed from featuring men with painted faces and little clothing who performed basic circle dances in the 1920s to southwestern hoop and eagle dances (performed, interestingly, by residents of the nearby Indian boarding school, the Sherman Institute, from 1938 to 1941) to featuring headdress- and buckskin-clad members of the local Boy Scout troops’ Order of the Arrow, who learned the “Indian” dances and songs as part of their scouting “woodcraft” activities (from the 1950s through the ’80s)—the scene nevertheless consistently displayed widely recognized signifiers of Indianness that clearly positioned Indians as outside of contemporary experience. As Deloria writes, one central characteristic of playing Indian is the perception of Indians as “racially different and temporally separate … [;] objects of desire, but only as they existed outside of American society and modernity itself” (135).

In sum, by the 1990s, when the play’s director, Dennis Anderson, and a Native American advisory board, made up of representatives from the local Cahuilla and Soboba reservations along with American Indian performers in the play, began revising the Elder Blessing scene, the play reflected a deeply entrenched public memory of
romanticizing and commodifying Indians. Not only does the play provide an experience of imperialist nostalgia through the Ramona story it tells, but also the play’s very longevity created its own nostalgia—a community ritual that engendered its own expected representation of Indians over the seventy-five years of its running by 1998. [5]

Over the past twelve years, the Elder Blessing scene has been the focus of considerable local attention and revision—it has been a visible example of how public memory engages competing ideas of what is important to be remembered and whose version of the past to authorize. The scene has moved down from an upper terrace to the front of the large outdoor amphitheater; it’s been expanded from seven to about sixteen minutes, and it has begun featuring a volunteer group of mostly local Native American dancers and musicians. The scene now combines a mixture of intertribal pow-wow style drumming and dancing with music and dance indigenous to the area (specifically permitted Cahuilla Bird songs and dances, which are part of a creation song cycle that tells the migration story of the Cahuilla people). The scene also continues to feature at least one hoop dancer.

These changes reflect collaboration between the Ramona Pageant staff and some local American Indian residents, in particular a sharing of the decision making about the story being communicated through the scene. However, and not surprisingly, the changes do not reflect consensus either within the diverse American Indian communities or within the equally diverse non-Indian communities of the area. So many complicated questions get raised through these revisions. To what extent should the scene be “accurate” to local Soboba and Cahuilla cultures, parts of whose history was both reflected in and influenced by Jackson’s novel, Ramona? Would accuracy mean reflecting aspects of those tribal cultures from the 1850s, the timeframe of the play, or today? Are the elements of hoop dancing and pow-wow style drumming and dancing (which are flashier in terms of regalia and movement and are not indigenous to the area) a pandering to audience expectations of Indians or of Ramona Pageant Indians, or are they a chance for the diaspora of American Indians in the area to maintain and share their culture?

Bill Madrigal, a Cahuilla cultural educator and bird singer who served on the play’s Native American advisory board and participated in the play for several years told me that in the early years of the revision process, the scene was a “celebration and we did our own version.” However, he later became frustrated and stopped performing in the play when there was what he saw as a “regression” back to eastern pow-wow dancing and the inability for the Indian performers, as he put it, “to tell our own story” rather than having “them tell our story for us” (Madrigal). Nevertheless, the current participants, whom I interviewed in 2009, used similar language in describing their current involvement in the play, indicating that they are sharing their own story or, as the leader of the primary dance and drum group put it, they are “demonstrating something that belongs to us” (Alvarez).

And for the non-Indian population, some who have been involved in the Ramona Pageant all their lives, what happens to the story of Ramona as a romance of the Californio era if the play starts emphasizing the Elder Blessing scene? As director Dennis Anderson told me, he’s received criticism, mostly from an “older crowd,” that the scene sticks out as too modern within a play set in the 1850s. He has felt compelled to balance the Elder
Blessing scene’s length and intensity with the Fiesta scene (Anderson).

These are all significant debates. They reflect the complex question of “authenticity”—both as it specifically pertains to Indian populations and as it pertains more broadly to public memory. These debates also point out that collaboration can generate dissent. Collaboration can be threatening because it may restructure the known parameters and therefore be a potential source of power disturbance.

But what I find most fascinating about the evolution of the Elder Blessing scene is the way that it reflects as the coming together of separate narratives, not only the collaboration of individuals or of representatives from different groups, but a collaboration of narratives. The Elder Blessing scene is housed within the nationalist narrative of the Ramona Pageant, and no matter what the scene presents of local or intertribal culture and experience and cultural survival, the salient narrative of the play remains one of colonization. Furthermore, the songs, dances, and even the relationships that the Elder Blessing scene volunteers bring to the play exist outside of the play itself—as a separate narrative of cultural survival. And this is also a narrative of public memory in that it represents a constantly evolving (and contested) body of beliefs about the past that “help a public … understand both its past, present, and by implication, its future.”

What happens when these two distinct narratives from different yet intersecting publics come together in this play? Is this truly collaboration at all? Can collaboration occur between competing narratives with such distinct power differentials? The only absolute answer, I think, is that debate, discussion, and dissent happen in the intersection of these narratives—and that is what I see as the deep substance of collaboration, or what I would call the “generative power” of collaboration.

The Ramona Pageant is far from an ideal vehicle for sharing or interpreting southern California Indian cultures. [And I haven’t even touched on the play’s presentation of Californio culture, which if the play continues into the future, will likely be due for its own set of revisions, especially considering they have received an NEA grant to help offer two performances in Spanish next year to cater to the changing demographics of the area.]

But the collaboration of narratives initiated by the Elder Blessing scene revisions has started conversations, it’s made people angry; and it has necessarily increased the visibility of American Indians and their diverse cultures to non-Native audiences. Last spring I asked Charlene Ryan, the former founder and director of the Soboba Cultural Center, whether or not she would like to see the play continue, given its long history of objectifying and misrepresenting the Soboba and Cahuilla people. She indicated that “it would be a tragedy” to lose the play because it “is a story about the events that took place.” For Charlene, there are too few vehicles to communicate about the Soboba people and their history, and she sees this communication as vital to their survival. So while she agrees that “there may be issues with” the play, she sees it as a vehicle for sharing and learning nonetheless (Ryan). Of course, not everyone from Soboba agrees with Charlene.

The disruption and evolution of public memory that comes from including silenced narratives within nationalist narratives, however imperfect and uneven that collaboration starts a conversation. And a conversation necessarily involves recognition, acknowledgment, a voicing. I am reminded of Simon Ortiz’s prose poem in
from Sand Creek, “repression works like shadow, clouding memory and sometimes even to blind, and when it is on a national scale, it is just not good” (14). The un-clouding of memory doesn’t occur in books and classrooms alone; it happens through the evolution of public memory—a slow and incremental process involving local collaborations and conversations. Across the American West, we harbor so many narratives that have been written onto the landscape and subsequently into the public memory that repress and silence people, and certainly not only American Indians. Such narratives of public memory may take many forms—from historical pageantry based in a literary event, like Ramona, or living history experiences like the one discussed in John Dorst’s book Looking West (1999), or interpretive programs at national monuments like the Little Bighorn Battlefield as discussed in Michael Elliot’s essay “Indian Patriots on Last Stand Hill” (2006). Studying these evolving narratives of public memory may expose (and potentially challenge) the power structures that are embedded in those very narratives.

**Presented by Nicolas Witschi:**

As Karen so magnificently shows us, approaching a variety of historical narratives and situations as collaborative certainly makes possible the analysis of “how power circulates in specific historical moments and circumstances” (Karell xx). And if the examples we’ve touched on today serve as any indication, thoughts about collaboration also turn quite neatly into thoughts about performance.

In our earliest deliberations over how to approach the Boulder conference and our chosen theme, we considered at one point using on our poster and call for papers a photograph, no doubt many of you have seen it, of Sitting Bull and Buffalo Bill Cody standing side by side before a fake studio backdrop representation of a forest—it was taken in Toronto as a publicity still for Cody’s Wild West, which had just pulled into town. In the image, both men have a hand on the barrel of a rifle that stands stock-down on the floor between them. With his other hand, Cody points to a place up and to the right of the frame (that is, to his left) while Sitting Bull looks off into some middle distance that is not really tied to the direction of Cody’s gesture. Most frequently, this image is read as indicative of the attitude toward Native American subjugation typical of the age of conquest (and here I’m reminded of something Charles Bowden said in his keynote last night about our cultural history having made a fetish out of a brief moment of conquest—this image may easily be read as one such instance of fetishizing). That’s not to say that the Cody/Sitting Bull image only reflects a one-sided allocation of power. In his extraordinary study of scopophilia in western American popular culture, Dorst gives us in Looking West a detailed reading of this photograph; among the insights he offers is the idea that while it may at first glance appear as if Cody is the dominant figure in the image, a more complex power dynamic may be discerned, one not easily explained by the standard narrative of Cody as an exploiter of Native American representations. By sharing the hold on the weapon but by refusing to follow the almost manifest gaze of his partner, Sitting Bull in fact has exercised his own prerogative, his own performance of such authority and power as he has available to him. Which is to say, there is nothing other than cultural familiarity and conditioning to tell us that Cody’s gaze represents the more authoritative or centralized performance of power.

All that said, it should go without saying that after some discussion and debate, Karen and I concluded that
using this image would raise far more complications than it would inspire assurances about the kind of collaboration we had in mind for the conference. And so we ultimately settled on the image of the Jefferson Peace Medal that graced the center of our poster and other printed materials. To be sure, a medallion associated with the Lewis & Clark expedition also carries with it the potential for some conflicting interpretations, but that’s not necessarily bad, and it wasn’t our point. Rather, I think it’s safe to say that we ultimately preferred the image of two hands shaking over an image of two hands sharing hold of a weapon. The discussion that led us to this point, one that we had very early in our collaboration, helped to set the stage for what became our own particular performance of a mode of working together, a performance that after two more years of preparation and planning and discussion, brought many of you and quite a few others together to help complete the conversation.

And so now we find ourselves adding one more chapter. As I stared down that figurative blank page a few weeks ago, I did what I’m sure a number of our predecessors had done, and that was to take a peek at the archive of past-presidents’ addresses on the WLA Web site. What I saw were essays by some truly outstanding scholars and writers, from Glen Love to Bob Thacker and Laurie Ricou, from Suzanne Bloomfield and Gary Scharnhorst to James Work, Judy Temple, Susan Maher, Bill Handley, and Ann Putnam. And though they are not archived, vivid in our memories are also the recent addresses by Susan Kollin, Krista Comer, and Tara Penry. Reading through and reflecting once again upon these richly varied addresses, two things came to mind: first, that the bar has been set extraordinarily high, and second, that Karen and I have truly been standing, if you’ll pardon the cliché, on the shoulders of giants. More to the point, as we look back through the history of this conference as it is written in these addresses, we see the seeds of what we have become; we see the collaborators who have helped to define both us and the association, the collaborators whose generative power has made for very rewarding professional and personal relationships—not to mention a great many truly outstanding ideas.

Which way West?

Our answer is through, and with, all of you. Thank you.

Notes

1. This pageant involved 500 participants who acted out Boulder’s history on a stage set up at the Boulder High School football field.
2. Bodnar explains that before World War I, pageants were a primary means for “mass distribution of historical information” and that most historical pageants dramatized local history as a story of “progress in stages from a point where Indians occupied the land, through a period of pioneer settlement, to an era of modern states, schools, victorious military campaigns, and technological progress” (171).
4. See Dydia DeLyser’s Ramona Memories (2005) for a thorough account of the development of the Ramona tourist industry.

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