

Good morning. My name is Amanda McCullum and as the title of this presentation is American Reality Shows: Bodily Agency and the “other”, you may not be surprised that I am going to spend the next 15 minutes presenting a perspective that discusses bodily agency within American staged reality. However, before I do that, I would like to show you two video clips to provide you with a frame of reference for my discussion.

In the first clip you will see two Native American dances from the Sioux tribe. In the video these dances are staged for performance in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. The first dance shown is the Ghost dance. Before Buffalo Bill’s traveling show it was originally performed by the Sioux tribe for the purposes of reuniting the living with the dead and to bring peace and prosperity to the tribe. The second dance is the Buffalo Dance which was performed in conjunction with a festival and feast that celebrated the return of the buffalo herds to the hunting lands. These videos were shot by the Thomas Edison Film company and can be viewed online in the Library of Congress’ American memories archives.

The second clip is from season one of MTV’s Jersey Shore. And while at first glance it may seem that these two clips have nothing in common, I promise that there is a method behind my madness.

Hopefully this method will become a little clearer to you later in my presentation. This clip is from episode 4, entitled “Fade to Black” and features America’s favorite Guidette, Nicole Polizzi, or as she is more commonly known, “Snooki”. In this clip Snooki attempts to “go all out and wild” in order to redeem herself from getting embarrassingly intoxicated the first night that the roommates were in the house. I will take a moment to warn you that the culture of the members of Jersey Shore does include the loose use of profanity, and that this clip features some adult language.

Keeping those two clips in mind, I would now like to discuss the bodily agency that is displayed by these two differing cultures as well as the confines in which it is presented. The term “bodily agency” is being used to reference the social mores which have been presented as a cultural marker of a society. It therefore aids in what is perceived as the social construction of identity for that particular society. This may include a specific style of dress, speech, or social customs. In this lens, I am focusing on the bodily agency found within the dancing bodies of the Sioux tribe and the Jersey Shore cast members. These dances are occurring within the confines of what I will term as staged reality - or a performed version of reality that is shaped by creative forces often with the purpose of conveying a certain narrative to audiences. This is a term that I am using synonymously with reality television.

The trend of staged reality for America can be traced back to our frontier days. This was the hey day of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. The Wild West show was a touring show organized by Bill Cody that painted a picture of the frontier life of the American Cowboy. Take a second now to close your eyes. Recall pictures of aspects of what you would assume the cowboy life entails. If your pictures include lassos, guns, bucking broncos, and "Indians" know that is it because you have been encoded with the images portrayed through Buffalo Bill's traveling show. The Wild West Show was the predecessor to modern rodeos and the American Western. I also argue that this show served the role of America's first reality show.

Cody utilized real frontier guides, scouts, and cowboys. His use of actual buffaloes, bucking horses, as well as live Native American drew crowds into the "authentic" experience of the Wild West. By 1885, he had even managed to employ its most famous Native American cast member, the Hunkpapa Lakota Sioux leader, Tantanka Iyotake, or more commonly known as Sitting Bull.

What is highly ironic is that at the same time that white people were paying to view Cody's staged version of the Ghost dance and the Buffalo dance in his wild west show, there was legislation being passed by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to outlaw the performance of Indian War Dances.

However, the fact that the dances were being “staged” as opposed to occurring with “actual” ceremonial intent offered a scapegoat from this outright racist governmental policy.

It is in this “staging of reality” by Buffalo Bill that his collection of “historical pageants, living tableaux, and the rodeo” lead *The Wild West Show* to become considered as an accurate picture of American life on the frontier. It is also in this “staging of reality” that the performance of the Ghost dance and the Buffalo dance, among others, were allowed to continue to be performed and as we have seen today, even be documented on film.

Although Native Americans were able to legally perform their dances in *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show*, these performances were subjected to being shaped by Western performance principles. A big component in molding what was performed for the audience was the hegemonic forces embedded in the Delsartian philosophies of the time. The steady, syncopated, rhythmic footwork that traveled the Natives around the arena during performances was blended with upright bodily posture that was considered to be close to God. These practices were intended to make the performance more readable or “universal” to the mostly European descendant audience members.

In affect the authenticity of the Native American dances were upset by blending European choreographic aesthetics into traditional ritual forms. The presentation of these dances served as a double edged sword for Native Americans because the legal performance of the dance within Buffalo Bill's theatrical context arguably lead to the preservation of those cultural practices. Conversely, this this exposure outlined what the audience identified and perceived to believe as the performance of traditional Native American dance. However, it is through these performances that the dances were kept alive and passed down to the next generations of Sioux performers. It is arguable that without the Wild West Show the anti-native American political agenda of the late 1800s very well could have eradicated these dances from history.

It is proposed by author and historian Bobby Bridger that, "arguably, the unprecedented relationship between Buffalo Bill and the American press is the genesis of modern pop culture and the coast – to – coast fascination we have with showbiz celebrities [today]." So with that said, we can blame Buffalo Bill for America's ridiculous infatuation with the loveable, but wildly ridiculous cast of the Jersey Shore.

MTV premiered *Jersey Shore* in December of 2009 and the highly controversial show not only recorded four successful seasons, it now even has two spin off shows.

According to its website, MTV described its motivations for creating this show as follows,

“MTV has focused its lens on various subcultures and rites of passage, uncovering a host of memorable characters in the process. With its newest series, Jersey Shore, MTV peels back yet a different curtain to follow eight young adults as they move into a summer share to indulge in everything Seaside Heights, New Jersey, one of the most popular summer hot spots, has to offer. Jersey Shore uncovers sometimes surprising, often hilarious and usually over-the-top personalities as they juggle work, love, nightlife, friendship and the drama that ensues. In the end, viewers see that there is more to these tan and buff individuals than hair gel.”

As stated the series follows eight characters: Pauly D, “Snooki”, Mike aka “The Situation”, Ronnie, Sammi aka “Sweetheart”, Vinny, Jenni aka “Jwoww”, Angelina - who was replaced in Season 3 by Deena. These big personalities have one defining characteristic in common – the fact that they all distinguish themselves as part of a “guido” identity.

In the very first episode you are introduced to the characters by hearing each cast member’s definition of a “guido” lifestyle. Each cites the importance of an Italian heritage, house music and dancing, tanning and working out. These trademark

characteristics of a “Guido” or “Guidette” are all part of the bodily agency displayed through the lens of MTVs cameras.

Throughout this show you get a glimpse at the socialization of contemporary social mores and practices for this subculture of American identity.

It becomes very clear that there are defined gender roles, expectations for appearance, and a particular set of bodily movements. As we discussed a bit earlier, there are also verbal language practices unique to the “guido” identity being portrayed. It is the defining of these social norms within the storylines of the show that designates the “guido” identity as an “other” , a subculture for American youth.

In her book, *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing*, Jaqueline Shea Murphy cites the world renowned anthropologist, Jane Godall in the proposition that, “...the performance act itself provides opportunities for destabilizing narratives of victimization and capture. ‘As bodies engaged in performance, they had opportunities to exercise very significant forms of control in their relationship with spectators.’” This opportunity to “destabilize the narratives of victimization” is present in the dances of both Native Americans in *The Wild West Shows* and the fist-pumping personas of *Jersey Shore*.

Where the differences lie for these two groups is the intention behind their dance performances. Maureen Needham references the intention behind Native American

dance in her Introduction to *I See America Dancing* by saying, “Ancient Native American dances were fully integrated, communal, ceremonies that combined chants, prayers, and music, as well as ritualistic movement, and this traditional blend continues today”.

This is different for the members of *Jersey Shore* as the dance embodied on the show serves a social or popular function of their society, like the redemption that Snooki sought in the clip we watched.

Obviously, Snooki’s personal standards of public conduct and have not been confined by the Delsartian principles which infiltrated the Native American dances. What does shape the way that the lives of these young individuals are portrayed however, is the editing by the producers of the show. According to Rolling Stone magazine, traditionally in American popular culture, the term “guido” was used as a derogatory reference for people who identified with this particular subculture. The producers and cast members of *Jersey Shore* have found a social agency for this term through the airing of the show.

While the *Jersey Shore* and *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show* are interesting to note, they are merely examples of a bigger plot within my own personal agenda. This is that the performance of American staged reality engages in the use of dance as an important purveyor of cultural relevancy. By displaying the social bodily values of both the Native

Americans and America's favorite "Guidos" and "Guidettes" the formation of their identity was made accessible to the American public.

Often this is also the choreographer's goal in the performance of concert dance, to relay to the audience through the medium of the body what is particular and relevant to our own identity as artists, citizens, and individuals.

I want to conclude by stating that I am not arguing that staged reality in the forms of the Jersey Shore and The Wild West Show are ideal methods for bodily agency, but rather I am arguing that central to the social agency that has been found for both examples *is* their dancing. *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show* allowed for the preservation of Native America dance, but required the permeation of Western bodily principles. *Jersey Shore* comes with its own set of controversies, often about the presentation of blatant disregard for certain social morals. This comes especially from those who claim an authentic Italian-American heritage. Nonetheless, this has not prevented the fist-pumping dance portrayed on the show from becoming a pop culture craze all over America.

Social commentator Frank Furedi cites that, "what is distinctive about today's celebrities is that they are promoted as both special and utterly ordinary." I would

argue that it is this concept that is true for America's attraction to both the stars of *Jersey Shore* and *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show*.

While their reputations as historical figures and big personalities may have catapulted them into fame it is the bodily agency that we are both accustomed to and astounded by that preserved the culture of the Native Americans and serves as a cultural identifier for the Jersey Shoreheads. It is this bodily agency that serves as the underlying purpose behind, what I and other artists and choreographers in the concert world do today.