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(Un)Following in Winnetou's Footsteps: Representations of North American Indigeneity in Central Europe

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For me, growing up in Ottawa in the 1950s, "Indians" were peripheral. Aside from Tecumseh and his followers, lauded as allies of the British in the War of 1812 (their bloodier exploits were elided), they were largely absent from our history books. The only major exception was their role in the Northwest Rebellion (now billed as the Northwest Resistance), but even there they were depicted as having been misled by that arch villain Louis Riel. As far as the present was concerned, they seemed largely absent, at least in my part of Canada. (I was vaguely aware that this was not true in the Canadian West or in northern Canada, but these were distant regions beyond my personal horizons.) I first observed an "Indian" in person around the age of thirteen or fourteen when paddling past a reserve on Golden Lake, situated about 120 kilometres northwest of Ottawa. The YMCA summer camp I was attending at the time was located at the other end of the lake. Called On-Da-Da-Waks, it was one of dozens of similar summer camps across the country whose names were intended to invoke a sense of their being part of some pre-European age of harmony with the natural world, a feeling strengthened every evening by the ritual campfire, which included (undoubtedly fake) "Indian" elements. These camps, and of course the canoe itself, an iconic object at all summer camps and omnipresent in cottage country, were reminders of a world that had been, rather that one that was. And this was the same impression I had when, around the same time, my family visited the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford in southern Ontario, and witnessed a dance performance that left me sorely disappointed: surely this endless shuffling and strange, sing-song muttering was out of place in today's world.

Later, of course, the present caught up with me. I was surprised to learn that the Indigenous soldiers serving in the Canadian Armed Forces in Korea had been preceded by thousands from earlier generations who had enlisted in the Second and even the

First World War. When James Gladstone was appointed as a Senator in 1958, the first treaty Indian to hold such a position, I was taken aback to read that he was a highly successful farmer and rancher, with almost 300 hectares under cultivation and 400 head of cattle. I was enchanted by a gorgeous painting by Norval Morrisseau hanging above the fireplace in my best friend's Toronto living room, and by the exquisite Haida silver jewellery given to my wife by a cousin in British Columbia, who had commissioned it from a First Nations friend. Much to my astonishment, I discovered in the late 1980s that there were actually young Indigenous students attending CEGEPs in Gatineau, Quebec, just across the river from my hometown. Not long after, I was bowled over by Douglas Cardinal's stunning Canadian Museum of Civilization (now the Canadian Museum of History) in that same city.

These were mostly manifestations of the "bright side" of the Indigenous revival/renaissance that began hesitantly in mid-20th century Canada and has accelerated steadily over the following decades. But it was only when I started reading Indigenous Canadian literature in the late 1980s that I began to understand more about the "dark side" of life for Canada's First Nations, a sad and at times shocking reality that was also being gradually revealed over the years through screaming newspaper headlines on the one hand, and the painstaking work of such official bodies as the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1991–96) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2008) on the other. The culmination – so far – of all these efforts came with the 2021 declaration of September 30 as a statutory holiday: the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, which, in the words of the Bill by which it was created, "seeks to honour First Nations, Inuit and Métis Survivors and their families and communities and to ensure that public commemoration of their history and the legacy of residential schools remains a vital component of the reconciliation process." The country had come a long way since the notorious White Paper of 1969, which envisaged the total assimilation of the First Nations in the wider Canadian polity.

Why do I go into all this personal detail? First, to give some idea of the widespread ignorance in the past on the part of most Canadians, even those who were reasonably well educated, of the true state of Canada's Indigenous peoples and how this had come about. Second, to suggest that the situation has improved in many ways over the past half century: things do "get better", though haltingly, and of course so much still remains to be done. (OK, I admit it: I'm a liberal, and I believe slow but steady progress is the only kind that works and has a chance of being permanent.) And finally, to give some sense of just how puzzled I was when I came to work in Czechoslovakia – and, later, travelled in the Central European region – and came to realize how peoples' image of "Indians" was so different in these parts, and that there was an entire discourse about "Indians" of which I was totally ignorant.

I am referring here, of course, to what has been termed the "Winnetou syndrome", a whole set of attitudes to Indians and the White-Indian relationship that derives ultimately from the highly popular novels of the 19th-century German author Karl May – a writer whose work is totally unknown in both Canada and the United States. Thanks to May and his imitators and acolytes, an image of North American "Indians" has been created that has always been totally at odds with reality, yet at the same time so attractive (and flattering to Whites) that it has enjoyed a life of its own, returning again and again even when exposed as false. And it this weird Central European cultural revenant that forms the subject of *(Un)Following in Winnetou's Footsteps*.

In fact "Central European" is perhaps slightly misleading, since at present this term is generally taken to refer primarily to an assortment of ex-Communist countries east and south of today's Germany. But Germany is at the heart of the Winnetou phenomenon, which is rooted in what it is perhaps more accurate to call Mitteleuropa, that broad band of territory stretching from the Baltic in the north to the Adriatic and northern Italy in the south in which the German language and German culture formed the dominant cultural force for centuries before World War I. *(Un)Following in Winnetou's Footsteps* reflects the peculiar obsession with "Indians" of this wider Mitteleuropa, both in the topics dealt with and the authors and countries represented.

The book is neatly framed by an Introduction and Afterword. Sanja Runtić's Introduction explains the genesis of a project (of which this book is one of the outcomes) that set out "to contribute to a broader understanding of the perception of North American… Indigenous cultures in the geo-cultural context of Central Europe, with special emphasis on the history and forms of Indigenous representation within those Central European locales that have so far received little or no critical attention" (2). This is followed by an examination of critical theories useful for carrying out such an examination, and a discussion of the book's topicality based on the furore created in 2022 by the decision of a German publishing company to withdraw two children's books linked to a film about the young Winnetou, and all the misunderstandings and media manipulation this engendered. The book closes with Jana Marešová summing up the relevance of the topics discussed in the book, analyzing the reasons why "the 'Indian' trope is not a benign image" and suggesting "what we, as non-Indigenous scholars, can do about it (247) – "minor steps that, in my opinion, might be taken to help bring contemporary (Central) European perception and awareness of Indigenous cultures a bit closer to reality" (253).

This arc from theory to practice emerges naturally from the ten chapters (one of them an interview with the Canadian Métis and storyteller Bruce Sinclair) that form the body of the work. These cover a long time span, ranging from the experience in Europe of two Lakota Natives with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show at the beginning of the twentieth century to Sinclair's 2019 participation in the Prague Quadrennial,

the world's largest and most prestigious event in the field of scenography. The topics discussed are very heterogeneous, suggesting the complex ways and varied channels through which Central Europeans' highly romanticized, stereotyped depiction of Indigenous peoples finds expression and can be approached.

The series of chapters leads off with an essay by the distinguished German scholar Hartmut Lutz exploring *Indianertümelei* or "Indianthusiasm"[1] – the German fascination with "Indians" in general and with Karl May's fictional character Winnetou in particular. Based on his deep research and more than fifty years of personal involvement in Native American and Canadian First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies, in Native fashion Lutz tells a "story", the story of his own naïve induction as a boy into the world of North American Indigeneity through deeply problematic adventure novels with a Nazi subtext (which did at least have the merit of "inoculating" him against the "kitschy, stereotyping, colonialist" Winnetou volumes, which advocated the "petit bourgeois values of the German *Kaiserreich*" (21)) and then his gradual exploration of the iconographic and narrative development of the "Indian" stereotype, a cliché that is functionalized politically and commercially and leads to a "distortion of the European perception of Indigenous North Americans as contemporary citizens of the world" (21). Intertwined with the story of his gradual discovery of his own family's involvement with the Nazi regime, Lutz's fascinating text functions simultaneously at the historical, scholarly and personal levels.

Two chapters in the book draw on the visual arts as a means of analyzing the European/Indigenous encounter. Following a revealing exploration of how the fascination with "Indians" has differed radically in West and East Germany, Nicole Perry turns to a close "reading" of *East vs. West*, a complex painting by the Canadian First Nations painter Kent Monkman. This inventive reworking of an American West landscape scene by the 19th-century German-American landscape painter Albert Bierstadt both mocks German Indianthusiasm and offers a sarcastic take on the post-1989 relationship between the "two Germanies". Looking back almost a century, Gloria Bell offers a close examination of various visual publicity materials promoting Buffalo Bill's Wild West Tour of Europe in the early 1900s, showing how they reveal two Native American stars of the show, depicted on several postcards, to be more at home and cosmopolitan in the European milieu than one might at first assume.

Turning to literature, Františka Schormová focuses on a 1977 Czech popular novel for juvenile readers whose young protagonist emigrates to Canada in the 1930s, where he ends up in the North, comes of age and encounters a range of individuals – native-born Canadians, immigrants, mixed race persons and Native Canadians. She shows convincingly how the layers of racial and gender hierarchy reveal that even a novelist from a country like Czechoslovakia, with no colonial or

1) Both terms are Lutz's own coinages.

imperial past, can construct Whiteness in a Czech protagonist through racialized minor characters. Another popular literary (and also visual) genre among Czechs is comics; Petra Stražovská looks at "one particular subgenre that has been around since the beginning of Czech comics history" (219) – the adventure comic, inspired by life in America – and focuses on its depiction of the Indigenous characters. She traces five types of approach to these characters in the course of its development, types that in fact can overlap and be present at any given time: stereotyped, overly idealized "Indians", à la Winnetou, part of the much beloved "Wild West" landscape; attempts, though overly romantic, to describe genuine Indigenous lifestyles; "Indians" as fighters for freedom against their colonizers; idealized Natives living lives in harmony with nature; a more complex and objective view of Indigenous life. This last phase was, apparently, brief: post-2000 there has been a return to idealization, this time associated with nostalgia. Lastly, in the literary category, Marek Paryż examines a recently emerging trend in Poland: non-fiction accounts of the American West and of the life of North America's Indigenous peoples, both historically and at the present time. He examines three books by Polish authors, showing how they share a number of features: a conscious balance between impartial observation and personal impression; an awareness of their roles as intermediaries between Polish and American Indigenous cultures; and the importance of revealing specific historical contexts in recounting the North American Indigenous past.

The immensely popular West German and East German Winnetou and *Indianerfilme* from the 1960s to the 1980s as well as their later offspring are reflected in two contributions from Croatia, where the films were shot. Sanja Runtić and Ivana Drenjančević trace a long historical development: the mass-mediated consumption of Native identity in the United States; its mirroring in Karl May's novels (with their foregrounding of Old Shatterhand, originally from Germany and "by far the strongest, bravest, most intelligent, and the most attractive character" (71) in the books); the German Winnetou films made in Croatia in the Cold War period, the 1990s and, their most recent avatar, 2015, films that were "bogus and flawed in every way" (80); the current exploitation of the scenes where these films were made, which continue to attract nostalgic (and "ostalgic") German tourists; and finally, Sanja Runtić's personal experience of the repercussions of the 2022 controversy over the publication of the young Winnetou books mentioned above. Following this broad sweep, in his chapter Nikola Tutek focuses closely on one particular film, and the impact that one of its episodes being filmed there had on the town and its people. He examines the cultural impact of the Winnetou series on the individuals involved, the sense of shared identity of the community, and the relation of this to the Winnetou-related tourism that subsequently developed, as well as broader issues of the appropriation and commercialization of Native cultures.

Among the chapters there remain two "outliers". In the first, Alessandra Magrin Haas explores the surprising – at least to me – relationship between Italian fascism and North American "Indians". It seems that Mussolini's regime appropriated an already existing Italian Indianthusiasm for Native Americans to celebrate the "nobility of the race" and its belonging to a "spiritual aristocracy" with "natural leaders" at its head (136) as a means of promoting similar fascist values, and ensured that prominent Italian Fascist figures were "adopted" by Indigenous tribes when visiting the United States (139). The hidden (and at times not so hidden) agenda behind all this was to strengthen fascist propaganda efforts aimed at discrediting the USA and Britain. Given this atmosphere, it is no surprise that an enthusiastic welcome was given to Chief White Elk (aka Tewanna Ray) on his "Italian Tour" of 1924–25. In fact he turned out to be a French-Canadian born in Rhode Island, and had such a long record of similar scams, dating back to at least ten years earlier, that according to Haas "for the scale of his pretense, he can be compared to a Ponzi of ethnicity" (143). Go Canada!

Finally, there is Jana Marešová's brief but refreshing interview with Bruce Sinclair. In it, he speaks about his reaction to the Central European fascination with "Indians", revealing a relaxed, amused and tolerant attitude. And a straightforward curiosity as to why "[Europeans'] own tribal origins were just not pursued, because everybody is indigenous from somewhere, and that was the biggest thing for me – just understanding why a whole group of people would, in a way, not follow the ways, or the history, or the stories from their own original indigenous peoples" (241). Or is this perhaps a sly example of First Nations humour? In any case, Sinclair comes across as a thoughtful, original thinker, open to a wide range of experiences, with few if any prejudices or preconceptions and a simple pride in his identity: "We have survived hundreds of years of oppression and extermination and assimilation policies, including the residential schools, which took our children and attempted to take away our languages and our ways of life, but we're still here. That's the message" (243). Definitely someone one would like to get to know.

(Un)Following in Winnetou's Footsteps offers a rich variety of approaches to understanding the Central European "Winnetou syndrome", without for the most part being schematic or restrictive; there is a genuine attempt to reveal how the phenomenon originated, and why it has continued down to the present. As such, the book is definitely to be recommended. Though in closing, I would raise one small dissenting voice. Curiously enough, very seldom is there mention of what I believe is a key factor in Indianthusiasm in this part of the world: the specific character of Central European societies and Central European space, both complex products of thousands of years of development. Sometimes, and for some people, this is just too much. Perhaps this feeling has been expressed most sweetly by Central

Europe's most central literary figure, in a fragment from his at times enigmatic collection of texts entitled *Meditation*:

> If only one were an Indian, instantly alert, and on a racing horse, leaning against the wind, trembling again and again briefly over the trembling ground, until one shed one's spurs, for there was no need for spurs, until one threw away the reins, for there were no need for reins…

A beautiful glimpse into Franz Kafka's depths, his desire to let go, to free himself from all the constraints – physical, social, ethnic, familial – imposed by the closely textured fabric of Central Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. Yet at the same time this internalized metaphor for freedom also, alas, returns us to *(Un)Following in Winnetou's Footsteps*, for despite its anguished longing, it is yet another instance in a long line of European appropriations of "the Indian".