

**Alina Dana Weber.** *Blood Brothers and Peace Pipes: Performing the Wild West in German Festivals.* Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2019. 424 pp. \$89.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-299-32350-9.

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## Nees on Weber

At a historical moment in which racism, xenophobia, sexism, and other forms of discrimination fuel division and erode humanity, the prospect of transcultural connection built upon empathy and admiration and fostered by live performance offers hope. This comforting refrain lies at the core of A. Dana Weber's *Blood Brother and Peace Pipes: Performing the Wild West in German Festivals*. Viewing these performances in Germany as purveyors of bridging alterities via "a sympathetic drive that can potentially make a psychological and moral difference and therefore have real-life consequences," Weber offers a phenomenological study that explores the cherished place Karl May festivals hold for many Germans and the ways in which they compose meaning for audiences and participants (p. 30).

Weber focuses primarily on one form of entertainment featured in these festivals: plays that feature May's most famous characters, Old Shatterhand and Winnetou, and their adventures and camaraderie on the nineteenth-century American frontier. In her examinations of these festivals, Weber positions these entertainments as part of a larger "May-verse" that operates in ways unique and significant to Germany. *Blood Brothers and Peace Pipes* considers Germans' enchantment

with the American frontier, particularly Native American cultures therein. Recognizing May's creation of, and the namesake festivals' contributions to fantastical renderings, Weber acknowledges the "cultural dissonance and tensions" that form between German and (Native) American receptions of these performances (p. 23).

As a German-speaker with a "German-Romanian cultural background" who "binge-" read May's works growing up, Weber's particular position in relation to this subject provides intimate knowledge of May within German culture (p. 20). Weber's ethnographic field work is expansive: visits to six festival sites; observations of plays and rehearsals; archival research; and interviews with over two hundred participants, producers, visitors, and May enthusiasts. An interdisciplinary theoretical approach that incorporates history, performance studies, theater studies, folklore studies, and literary studies informs her observations and understandings of these shows.

Structurally, the book is divided into five chapters, each dedicated to one of the festivals, plus an introduction and a conclusion. Each chapter begins with a sumptuous description that geographically, historically, and culturally locates the drama. Using various theoretical approaches,

Weber analyzes a given aspect of each chapter's case study, using phenomenological and historical lenses to do so. Supplementing each chapter are an array of photographs (including one of each stage space) culled from the author's personal collection, as well as archives.

One of the most effective analyses within the book takes place in chapter 1, in which Weber engages a historiographic analysis of the shifting ideologies reflected in the play located in Rathen during three key political regimes: Nazism, socialism, and reunification. This breakdown feeds a wider consideration of visual iconography of "Indian" characters manifested in the play that traces a history of stereotyped depictions of Indian figures that shaped German notions of Indian alterity. This type of historical groundwork appears at various points of the subsequent chapters and help to frame readers' understanding of the audience conceptions of the American West and "Indians." Weber links these contexts to theatrical practices that establish these plays as a genre within the German theatrical landscape. Weber not only identifies similar conventions that undergird the dramatic form, but speaks to the variety within the genre as well. Whereas most of the dramas are commercial enterprises, the case studies in chapter 3 are amateur performances: a semi-improvised show put on by adults for young audiences and a show performed by children and teenagers.

Weber's unpacking of Old Shatterhand and Winnetou's "blood brother" scene and its significance within German culture in chapter 2 aids in readers' understanding of the gravity of the characters' bond. Her use of a gender analysis to look at the relationship as written by May, and the theatrical revision of that relationship provides fascinating insights to her examination of the various ways in which this "foundational narrative" of blood brothers has infused audience's understanding of the story's messages. Weber connects her assessment of the scene's cultural significance to her

reading of an annual Peace Pipe Ceremony that accompanies the Star Ride, a multiday horseback trek that is part of the Karl May Days festival in Radebeul (hence the title, *Blood Brothers and Peace Pipes*).

While reading the book, a question persisted for me: what are potential impacts of these portrayals on Native Americans today? Weber nods to this concern at various points by acknowledging the exoticization at play in these performances. In chapter 5, she focuses on the Karl May Days in Radebeul, which she describes as including the most Native American participation of the festivals she researched. Her explication of this festival includes interviews with Native American participants, during which many expressed concern and discomfort at, as well as conflicted responses to, the representations performed. And while Weber reminds readers of the "ambivalences" of the meanings constructed by these performances, and contextualizes nineteenth- and twentieth-century displays of people (*Völkerschau*) within performances of racial constructs, she frames the tensions that emerge from contemporary festival productions as "cultural misunderstandings." Throughout, she claims that these plays are not political, though some of the issues she raises, such as the use of makeup in the practice of blackface and redface in chapter 3, suggest otherwise. Weber avers that to call for these (mis)representations to cease "reflects a misunderstanding about the long history and cultural rootedness of these activities" within German culture. This suggestion that the longevity of reliance on Indian imagery in German thought elides the encumbered power differentials attendant to these relations. Weber ultimately argues that because the misrepresentations are "favorable" and created with positive intentions, they carry the "potential [for] change" and that Karl May festivals provide the space for enacting "respectful negotiation of cultural differences" (p. 291). Specific

and material results of these hoped-for changes, however, are not identified.

As Weber points out in her introduction, there is “much specialized nonacademic knowledge” about Karl May festivals, but little academic study has been dedicated to this topic (p. 26). Weber provides insightful reflections on the popularity and prevalence of performances of Old Shatterhand and Winnetou’s (particularly the latter’s) frontier adventures in Karl May festivals within German culture, as well as Germans’ attitudes toward the narratives therein. I am left wondering, though, about the impacts of these

(mis)representations, however well intentioned, in the material realities and lived experiences of Native Americans today, as well as the power imbalances that affect the cross-cultural exchanges ascribed to these festivals. While I share Weber’s hope that “festival producers and spectators will become more sensitive to problematic modes of cultural representation” (p. 314), the comforting refrain of transcultural unification and mutual admiration that underscores *Blood Brother and Peace Pipes* masks the effects of settler colonialism that continue to gravely impact Native individuals and tribal nations.

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