Imagining “Indianer”: Karl May’s *Winnetou* and Germans’ Enduring Fantasies about Native Americans

by

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Introducing Winnetou,
The Vanishing Protagonist

Sporting events like the 2006 World Cup are modern proxy battles. Nations spar with former enemies and the media encourages expressions of a bellicose national spirit. In Germany, the impulse to identify with one’s nation remains fraught; the desire for glory and pride contends with the ghosts of history. Writing about the 2006 World Cup in Der Spiegel, Dirk Kurbjuweit mused about German national identity and heroism. “There are German poets and thinkers, the German forest, the German coziness, German efficiency, the German longing for Italy, and there is Winnetou. . . the quintessential German national hero, a paragon of virtue, a nature freak, a Romantic, a pacifist at heart. But in a world at war he is the best warrior, alert, strong, sure.” By this account, Winnetou not only epitomizes the German spirit, he is apparently the nation’s key to victory: “Eleven Winnetous, and on July 9th we would be world champions” (Kurbjuweit).

Soccer fans from other countries might be surprised to hear of this legendary World Cup contender. In Germany, however, Winnetou is a household name. His status resembles that of Superman or Paul Bunyan in America. But unlike comparable figures in the American imaginary, this German national hero is not “one of them.” Winnetou is a fictional Mescalero Apache chief, the title character in the Wild West adventure trilogy Winnetou I-III (1893), by Karl May (1842–1912). A formidable fighter and Romantic pacifist, the chief is best known as the handsome sidekick and blood brother to Charlie (or Sharlih, as Winnetou calls him). Charlie, a young German immigrant, earns the moniker of Old Shatterhand and a reputation for out-gunning, out-riding, out-hunting, and generally out-doing the seasoned frontiersmen
of the Wild West. Although he and the Apache are initially enemies, after Old Shatterhand avenges the murder of the tribe’s school teacher, Klekih-Petsa, he endears himself to the entire tribe, including chief Intschu tschuna, his son Winnetou, and his beautiful daughter Nscho-tshi. Once allied, Old Shatterhand and Winnetou overcome their cultural differences to battle corrupt Yankees and rival tribes and forge a bond that climaxes in Winnetou’s deathbed conversion to Christianity. When Winnetou, “the truest example of his race,” dies, the Apache are consigned to their unfortunate fate, already declared inevitable at the beginning of the trilogy (Winnetou I 4).

Winnetou’s representation is widely acknowledged as stereotyped: he speaks in simplified German, wears sparse clothing, demonstrates ferocity and loyalty, and exhibits an intimate connection to nature. May’s first-person narrator sympathizes with the “dying nation,” and adopts the gaze of the sympathetic observer throughout the narrative: “It is a serious matter to stand at a deathbed, but it is a hundred times more serious to stand at the deathbed of an entire race” (Winnetou I 3-4). Despite Winnetou’s stereotyped representation, blatant inaccuracies about the American West, and the grim subject matter—Native genocide—these stories are May’s most beloved and have proved especially compelling to generations of German children.

May was a fascinating character and legendary fabulist. Born into dire poverty, May learned from an early age to get what he wanted through thievery, swindles, fraud, and extravagant impersonation. In his attempts to acquire a glamorous persona, May impersonated a fur trader, an eye doctor, and a plantation owner, and conned townspeople across Saxony. He spent the majority of his young
adult life in jail, where he developed an obsession with Native America. Once released from prison, May redirected his imagination into a prolific literary career. He published nearly seventy novels over a thirty-eight-year span, fifteen of which feature Winnetou and Old Shatterhand. Although he turned his back on his criminal past, May never kicked his habit of conning; he claimed that Old Shatterhand’s adventures were his own, faked fluency in numerous languages, furnished his home with Native artifacts (purchased from traders), and referred to himself as Dr. May for an added layer of prestige. At sixty-six, he visited America for the first time, but the closest he ever came to the Wild West was Buffalo, New York.

Although May’s Oriental Reiseerzählungen (travel narratives) and Indianerromane (Indian novels) are virtually unknown in the United States, he may well be the most popular author in German history. His works have sold more than 100 million copies and far more contemporary Germans have read the Winnetou trilogy than the works of Thomas Mann. His diverse admirers include Albert Einstein, Fritz Lang, Franz Kafka, Kaiser Wilhelm II, and even Hitler. For children, the obvious point of entry is through May’s early novels, his easiest and most exciting reads. Children can visit the popular Karl-May-Museum in Radebeul, which occupies May’s former estate, Villa Shatterhand, and see his personal collection of Native American artifacts in a log cabin in the backyard called Villa Bärenfett (Villa Bear Fat). German children enthralled by the totem poles and wax figures of “Indians” at the Karl-May-Museum can beg their parents to take them to the Karl-May-Festspiele, a yearly summer festival in Bad Segeberg dedicated to recreating May’s Wild West.
Another opportunity to embody Winnetou’s legendary adventures is provided by “hobbyism,” also called “Indianism.” Over 40,000 Germans belong to May-oriented “hobby clubs” like the Cheyenne Indian Club, the Wild West Club, and the Western Club Freising, in which they can dress up in “authentic Indian” garb (usually resembling that of precolonial Plains Natives), organize “pow wows,” trade handicrafts, and practice their own peculiar, ill-informed brand of native religion. The practice of Germans “playing Indian” predates the formal establishment of hobbyism. Hobby clubs have existed since 1913, but the popularity of their activities rose precipitously in the 1960s after the debut of the Winnetou films. The “shockingly earnest” adults playing dress-up do not look to contemporary Native communities as models; rather they take their cues from Winnetou. May’s works (in their filmic and artistic interpretations) have inspired fascination and provided recreation across generations of Germans (Indian Country Today). “These are intelligent men and women—computer programmers, truck drivers, interior decorators—for whom the American West offers another identity necessary for their mental stability, a means of going back into history to make sense of a world in which they often alienated” (Indian Country Today).

May’s character and extensive body of work also provide compelling objects for study. For over fifty years, the Karl-May-Gesellschaft (Karl May Society), a body of independent enthusiasts and researchers, has dedicated itself to research on May’s biography, influences, and body of work. The society produces annotated collections of May’s texts and letters, publishes its own May-dedicated journal, conducts annual
symposia, and constitutes the board of the Karl-May-Museum. In 2018, KMG even offered a guide to teaching Winnetou I in schools.

As one might imagine, not everyone likes May. Professor Jeffrey Sammons, for example, calls May a “psychopathological writer” with a vivid imagination but a vocabulary “limited to 3,000 words, like a tabloid magazine” (Sammons 1998 229–32). Sammons is among many scholars of German literature who seem fatigued by the mythos surrounding May’s work and even irritated by his success, given his simplistic style and shameless plagiarism. May is loved and hated, but never ignored. Nonetheless, May’s cult following has not translated into a comprehensive body of thoughtful criticism and interpretation focused on his racial representations.

Indeed, while the amount of attention given to May’s work and character is notable, most of that attention takes the form of uncritical nostalgia, and few serious scholars consider him worth studying. The German social and cultural historian Hartmut Lutz remarks, “The incomparable success of his works is one of the most astounding phenomena in German literary history, yet literary scholarship does not question his ignorance” (Lutz 2002 320). Few, if any, critical literary and cultural-studies considerations exist of May’s use of stereotypes of Natives and his image of the American West. May’s works are dismissed as Trivialliteratur, or pulp fiction, and the nostalgia he occupies in the German collective imagination often goes un-interrogated. In the proceedings from the 2009 symposium, Karl May: Werk, Rezeption, Aktualität, for example, only one of the papers offers a critique of May’s racial representations (Schmiedt and Vorsteher). A largely uncritical model of textual appreciation dominates what passes for scholarship on May, perhaps because the
German academy is a relative latecomer to critical whiteness studies and post-colonial theory (Gallagher 181).

The *Winnetou* series is overdue for a process of de-familiarization. Although May’s representations of Native America emerged predominantly from fantasy, and most readers of the trilogy are young, the *Winnetou* trilogy deserves serious scholarly scrutiny. May’s literary treatment of indigenous identity was not informed by personal experience, but it was shaped by representations of Native people in German and translated American literature popular during his time. May’s representations epitomize colonial fantasies that existed in mainstream German culture and reflect a great deal about the imaginative preoccupations of Germans during the precolonial period (1770–1870).

The fact that May’s specific fantasies about interracial blood-brotherhood and Native resistance were embraced during New Imperialism (1871–1918) and the Wilhelminian era of nationalism suggests that his Native stereotypes struck a particular chord in German society at that time. For context, New Imperialism refers to the period between unification and the abdication of Wilhelm II during which the German state developed a strong army and navy, built a colonial empire, and rapidly increased its industry. Perhaps unexpectedly, the popularity of the *Winnetou* trilogy indicates emotional and imaginative investment in Native identity during this period of national growth and expansionist anxiety. Germans’ attachment to tribal polycentrism, their idealization of Native resistance, their patronizing sympathy for a “dying race”—in short, their perception of affinity between themselves and *Indianer*—reveals much of Germans’ view of themselves in the late nineteenth

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century. Further, the fact that May’s stereotypes remain popular in contemporary German society indicates that Winnetou’s appeal has hardly anything to do with Winnetou the character. Some questions that arise include: what types of Indianer were recognized by the German public? How were common understandings about Native Americans produced and disseminated? What ideological conditions allowed May to take an interest in and claim authority about the American West? Were German representations of Native Americans different from American representations, and if so, how? And can colonial literature produce colonial subjectivity, or the sense of self that revolves around colonial acquisition?

My first chapter concerns the history of German Native American connections and the transnational formation of the Indianer stereotypes in the context of nineteenth-century German nationalism. To contextualize the ideological fascination with Native Americans, I offer a brief explanation about Germany’s lack of formal colonial participation and eventual entrance into the period of New Imperialism. I draw for my initial understanding of the German white man’s construction of the Indian and primitivism on Robert F. Berkhofer’s history of Native stereotype, The White Man’s Indian (1978). Additional insights come from Mary Louise Pratt’s authoritative study Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (1992). For German perspectives on the formation of Native stereotypes in Germany, I refer to Susanne Zantop’s Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, Family, and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770–1870 (1997) and Hartmut Lutz’s “Indianer” und “Native Americans”: zur sozial- und literarhistorischen Vermittlung eines Stereotyps (1985). This chapter focuses on versions of the native fantasy consumed by Germans of all
class backgrounds, including the political rhetoric of tribalism, media representations of the so-called “Indian Wars,” and Völkerschauen (human zoos).

Chapter Two analyzes of key aspects of May’s biography and literary influences to illuminate his ideological formation and his relationship to empire. This chapter refutes the relatively uncritical interpretations of May’s biography promoted by the Karl-May-Gesellschaft and departs from Sammons’ somewhat dismissive interpretation of May’s work as “fantasy.” My study offers a different critical perspective because it focuses greater attention on May’s perceived oppression by the German state (including his class and disability status), his aspirations to acquire legitimacy through “German-ness” and Christianity, the desire for an untamed life engendered by his incarceration, and his fantasies of liberated male friendship. To explore the intimate connections between May and his protagonist, Old Shatterhand, I utilize Pratt’s concept of a “seeing-man” to understand May’s retreat into his alter ego. Finally, I consider the literary influences and imagery that inspired Winnetou.

While most, if not all, English translations of Winnetou edit out the racial language, my third chapter uses my own translations to convey (rather than sidestep) May’s disturbing racial language, ideological framework, and gendered Native stereotypes. I find Renato Rosaldo’s concept of “imperialist nostalgia” particularly helpful in framing Germany’s complicity in and sympathetic identification with American settler-colonialism. Drawing from Richard Slotkin’s source and Rayna Green’s “The Pocahontas Perplex” (1975) and "The Tribe Called Wannabee" (1988), I interrogate the colonial logic inherent in Winnetou’s representations of Apache characters and argue that May’s Indianerromane is a story of “feel-good” genocide.
Although May’s *roter Gentleman* lends the series his name, I suggest that Winnetou embodies the “vanishing Indian” in a literal way: Winnetou’s absence from long stretches in the text normalizes the “disappearance” of the indigenous for the German public. After exploring *Winnetou’s* sympathetic, paternalistic representations of Natives, coded representations of western territory, and normalization of genocide, I ask whether this beloved novel provided mainstream ideologies that supported German participation in the period of New Imperialism.

In conclusion, I offer an overview of *Winnetou*’s position in German consciousness after the period of New Imperialism and into the modern era. I briefly explore the *Winnetou* stories’ position in the Nazi regime, East Germany (GDR), West Germany (FRG), and the contemporary German nation state. *Winnetou*’s enduring legacy offers further evidence that May’s representations still hold unique cultural power in Germany and therefore deserve continued study.

A critical examination of *Winnetou* as a literary work is necessary because, as numerous scholars of German cultural and literary history suggest, German images of and preoccupation with “Indianer” go to the very core of what it means to be “German” (Penny 2013 6-8; Lutz 1985 3-7; Zantop 16). The German preoccupation with *Indianer* is not only comparable to Americans’, it is a reflection and refraction of our own national obsession with the so-called “vanishing Indian.” A serious analysis of Germany’s history of *Indianer* as a cultural production, with a specific focus on *Winnetou*’s racial representations, can prove illuminating for Germans and Americans alike. My examination de-familializes our “natural” perceptions of Indigenous peoples, disrupts our understandings of American exceptionalism, and shows how
literary models of colonial subjectivity can provide blueprints for actual colonial ventures.

This study does not claim to get to the root of German Indianthusiasm (Lutz’s term for German obsession with Native America) in all German historical contexts. The German state has found different justifications for this identification in different ideological contexts. Nor does this examination assert that Winnetou provided the primary ideological impetus for Germany’s entrance into the period of New Imperialism or the sole factor in Germany’s desire to be a colonial power. However, Winnetou’s significance as a mainstream anti-conquest narrative and its tremendous resonance with German constructions of national identity cannot be overstated. A critical literary investigation of Indianer fantasies in Germany’s precolonial period sheds new light on the distortions and constructions that persist in German and American culture. By dismantling Winnetou’s (mis)representations of Native Americans, I provide a new perspective on May’s imperial subjectivity, unearth the unacknowledged roots of Indianthusiasm, and hypothesize about the ways Native fantasies informed German national identity and offered possible justification for colonial policies in the period of New Imperialism.
Chapter One: 

Indianer Fantasies and German National Identity

In *Kindred by Choice: Germans and Indians since 1800* (2013), H. Glenn Penny contemplates the relationship between Native imagery and the German landscape, using the *Elbsandsteingebirge* (Elbe Sandstone Mountains in Saxony) as a foremost example. The sandstone pillars, canyons, valleys, and impressive outcroppings offered natural inspiration to Romantic artists and continue to draw thousands of people every year as Saxony’s foremost tourist attraction. The *Elbsandsteingebirge*’s most visited outcropping is “The Apache’s Face,” a rock face which nineteenth-century German viewers identified as the profile of Winnetou, Germany’s most famous *Indianer*.

Surrounded by the picturesque Saxon landscape, nineteenth-century visitors engaged in a collective fantasy about “Indians” (despite the fact that many of them had never been to America). By integrating “The Apache’s Face” into their national landscape, Germans demonstrated that they not only understood the image of *Indianer* well, but also considered these images compatible with German history. May’s fictional chief had become a feature of Germany’s collective imagination and a symbol of German power over the images of Native Americans. Why was this image of *Indianer* already so familiar to and welcomed by the German public in the late nineteenth century? Fundamentally, what were fantasies about Native Americans doing for Germany in this time?

Before I address these topics, it is crucial to outline my terminology and theoretical framework. In the vein of Hartmut Lutz, Robert Berkhofer, Philip Deloria, and many other scholars, I use the term “Native American,” individuals' names, or the
names of specific tribes to describe living or historical people. The term “Indian” or “Indianer” refers the American and German fantasies of essentialized, Native American identity. Other terms, including “squaw,” and “Rothäute” (“Redskins”), are derogatory and do not refer to Native individuals; they are only used in the context of textual analysis.

Although Lutz’s authoritative theory of Indianthusiasm (Indianertümerlei) has proved quite useful in my investigation of Winnetou, I depart from this theory in significant ways. Indianthusiasm is more concerned with individual experience than collective, political experience (Lutz 2002). Lutz focuses on the historical formation of the “noble savage” stereotype in Romantic literature and American popular culture, rather than on the ways these stereotypes translated into collective desires or shaped colonial discourse. For the purposes of this study, I am less concerned with enthusiasm and more interested in the frameworks of desire and fantasy.

Desire, in my understanding, is more applicable than enthusiasm because it has an object and is associated with subconscious wants or needs. That is, desire is not merely excitement about, but longing for and craving for. Borrowing from Susanne Zantop’s theory of colonial fantasy, I use the word “fantasy” to describe the German relationship to Native Americans rather than “stereotype,” “fiction,” or “myth.” Fantasy, according to Zantop, highlights colonial stories’ “purely imaginary, wish-fulfilling nature and their unconscious subtext, which links sexual desire for the other with desire for power and control” (Zantop 3). Fantasies in many forms are crucial to the consolidation of national identity, for example, in the collective longing for founding myths or genesis stories (Williamson). Unlike in the American context,
in the precolonial period, German fantasies of Native Americans existed in the “pure” realm of the imagination, rather than originating in experience. German fiction did not always reflect the regenerating relationships between colonizer and colonized Slotkin identifies in American colonial literature (Slotkin 1973 191). Works like *Winnetou* represented imagined relationships and dormant colonialism. Both German and American colonial literature was tied to social reproduction, but in the German context, literary fantasies helped to relieve unrelated internal tensions and served as a “Handlungersatz [substitute for action]” (Zantop 6). In other words, they could offer testing grounds for actual colonialism. Beyond this use, fantasies about Native Americans contributed to the much-needed construction of a positive German self-conception during the nineteenth century (Zantop).

To understand *Winnetou*’s relationship to class identity, colonial desire, and nation-building, we must investigate the forms that Native fantasy took in the precolonial period. Lutz suggests that Romantic literature was the key component in the formation of German racial ideology. But not all German classes would have had access to these works, or even wanted to read them. My investigation highlights fantasies about the “noble savage” or “blood-thirsty Indian” that were disseminated to the German public through other, more accessible venues. This chapter focuses on three different currents in Germans’ collective Native fantasy: tribalism as a component of German national identity construction, the fascination with *Indianerkriege* (the Indian Wars) in German-language newspapers, and the tremendous popularity of *Völkerschauen* (human zoos).
Germany’s Tribes: The Origins of *Schicksalgemeinschaft*

As Edward Said theorized in his landmark study *Orientalism* (1978), the colonialist mentality is produced by a “battery of desires, repressions, projections, and investments” (8). One of the crucial desiderata during the period directly preceding Germany’s entrance into New Imperialism was a culturally and politically unified nation. Ideas about an ethnically defined German nation began during the Renaissance, found expression in precolonial Germany (1770–1870) through the 1848 workers’ rebellion, and further intensified during the German Empire (1871–1918). In comparison to their neighboring European powers, Germany came late to both the nation state and imperialism. Before its 1871 unification under Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, the German states retained distinct cultures, political structures and goals. These states had long established sea trade networks. However, there was not a formal German navy before unification, which essentially precluded Germany from participating in the imperialist grab for outside territory. Other European nations, like Britain, France, and the Netherlands, had long-established colonial projects, but in the early nineteenth century Germany struggled with exterior enemies, grappled with the anxieties and dislocation that accompany industrialization, and strove to unite divisive social and economic groups.

In 1884, nine years before the *Winnetou* trilogy was published, Bismarck sat among thirteen representatives from European and American empires to claim Germany’s share in the so-called “scramble for Africa.” The Berlin conference marked Germany’s formal entrance into the period of New Imperialism and resulted in the establishment of *Schutzgebiete* (protectorates) in New Guinea, Cameroon, and
Namibia (as well as Samoa). Before the acquisition of their recognized colonies, Germans imagined themselves as “uninvolved observers,” entitled to judge the actions of others (Grewling 93). In the spirit of Old Shatterhand, enterprising German individuals traveled abroad, established themselves as “protectors,” overrode Native authority, imposed German values, and encountered resistance. Germany’s participation in the New Imperialism reflected the expansionism inherent in Bismarck’s unification strategy. But the longing to “venture forth, to conquer and appropriate foreign territories, and to (re)generate the self in the process” had existed in the German consciousness long before the creation of the German nation state (Zantop 2). Historically, the specter of Empire has loomed in the background of Germans’ self-conception because of Germany’s geographic proximity to the early colonial powerhouses and its diasporic relationship to America in the nineteenth century.

As a result of the anxieties associated with rapid industrialization, and in part due to its late coming to colonial participation, Germany developed a national inferiority complex in the nineteenth century. “The sentiment was ironically coupled with a certain amount of self-assurance, originating in the belief that Germany was different than other European nations” (Grewling 92). Germans perceived other European nations, particularly France, as socially disconnected and “over-civilized” (Lutz 2002). In an effort to dispel feelings of inferiority induced by late national consolidation and lack of colonial participation, nationalists seem to have created their own version of “German exceptionalism.” Germans differentiated themselves from other Europeans by identifying with their “primitive,” “earthy,” or “natural”
ancestors, whom they identified as similar to the groups subjugated by European colonial powers (Gruen).

Faced with the reality of tremendous cultural diversity in German-speaking areas, many German nationalists envisioned their new state as an “aggregate, based, in many cases, on a collection of tribes [Stämme]... defined in a variety of ways as regional, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups” (Penny 32). To imagine a basis of unity, many German intellectuals sought to trace their ethnic and cultural identity back to the ancient Germanic tribes. Whereas other European nations, like France and England, referred to Rome as their cultural antecedent, German nationalists distinguished themselves from their neighbors by identifying with the Germanic tribes who had resisted Roman conquest. Intellectual fascination with Stämme was crucial to the formation of German national identity and had significant implications for Germans’ affinity for and identification with Native American tribes. By identifying with the groups like the Teutons, nineteenth-century Germans could feel unified by indigeneity, connect themselves to a mythic past, and embrace a form of acceptable primitivism (Sammons 1998 91–92). In contrast to oppressive modernity, the Germanic tribes could be imagined as a fundamentally free people—militaristic, ferocious, loyal to their clans, and resistant in the face of invasion.

The primary source of information about these tribes was Germania, an ethnological account written by a Roman senator, Cornelius Tacitus, around 98 C.E. Germania is the sole surviving full-scale monograph by a classical author on a largely unknown people and one of the earliest, most comprehensive examples of travel writing based on reports from the “contact zone” (Pratt 4). Like many ethnographies,
Tacitus’s seemingly objective report is colored by the ambitions of the dominant metropole and does not always accurately reflect the realities of the observed subject. *Germania* describes formidable, forest-dwelling natives whose simple, noble qualities present a stark contrast to the perceived failings of the citizens of Rome.

Germans’ political and cultural identification with Germanic tribes and the connection between primitivism and Indianthusiasm has been previously theorized by Hartmut Lutz, H. Glenn Penny, and others. My investigation, however, offers a different intervention by focusing on a close reading of Tacitus’ descriptions of the “Native” in *Germania*. By delving into specific passages of this ethnology, one can better understand the connections Germans perceived between their ancient pasts and Native American presents. I refer in this section to Alfred John Church and William Jackson Broadribb's 1877 translation of *Germania*.

Tacitus begins with a description of Germany’s undeveloped, isolated territory and describes the Germanic tribes as “not mixed at all with other races through immigration or intercourse.” He repeatedly underscores the absence of intermarriage, particularly in reference to the Germans’ physical appearance: “All have fierce blue eyes, red hair, huge frames . . .” Although the National Socialists would later attach a different, more obviously racial significance to Tacitus’s physical descriptions, the notion of the “distinct, unmixed” German body was useful to nineteenth-century nationalists because it implied a coherent German character and ethnic identity. These descriptions affirmed what many longed to believed: the Germans resembled no one except themselves (Gruen 162).
The tribes are described as *silvatici*, a Latin word that contains the root of the French *sauvage* and the English *savage* (Lutz 2002 172). Like Germans’ idealized images of Plains Indians, the Teutons are horse-soldiers. Tacitus underscores their militarism, saying that their weaponry is “what the toga is for us.” Interestingly, he records scant evidence of class differentiation (Gelderloos 46). The tribes have a “soft hierarchy” that was largely “non-coercive,” a stark contrast to the Roman statist approach (Gelderloos 47). The Germans are also characterized by their lack of materialism, the judicious rule of their kings, and their abstinence from the “allurements of public shows.” These observations indirectly express Tacitus’s disapproval of Roman frivolousness.

Tacitus also stresses, however, that the tribes are deeply inferior to civilized Romans. “They live scattered and apart, just as a spring, a meadow, or a wood has attracted them” like animals and reside “in filth and sloth.” A peripheral tribe, the Fenni, are characterized as “strangely beast-like and squalidly poor.” Tacitus even veers into fantasy when he says, “The Hellusi and Oxiones have the faces and expressions of men, with the bodies and limbs of wild animals.” The Germanic tribes occupy a heterogeneous stereotype; they are at once loyal, unspoiled, ungoverned, and naturally superior fighters, and heathenistic, beast-like, depraved, and deeply incompatible with Roman civilization. This dual stereotype constitutes “the conceptual reservoir from which German Romantics, and not just Germans, constructed the twin stereotype of the Indian as a ‘red gentleman’ and a ‘bloodthirsty red devil’” (Lutz 2002 173). Germans invoked the logics of empire used against their ancestors and applied them to the idealized tribal people of another continent.
The nineteenth-century revival of Tacitus’ ethnology offered a desirable image of German “ethnic identity” and inadvertently established an ideological basis for Schicksalsgemeinschaft (a sense of shared fate) between Germans and Indianer. Although the tribal societies described by Tacitus bore little resemblance to the precolonial German state, many nationalists felt that they were the Indianer of Europe: a resistant tribal people oppressed by colonial rule. By identifying with a legacy of colonial subjugation and employing the rhetoric of Stämme, German nationalists construed their history as anti-imperialist and, therefore, oppositional to their neighboring nations (Lutz). By asserting a shared identity with Native Americans, Germans could claim the moral high ground while unreflectively engaging in colonial fantasy.

As the plot of Winnetou illustrates, part of this colonial fantasy involved imagining a unified “Native” state synonymous with the unified “German” state. While Germany engaged in the nationalist project to unify its so-called tribes, May dreamed up a unifying figure for Native Americans. Perhaps based on historical figures like Tecumseh and Geronimo, Winnetou acts as the sole “inheritor of his race,” whose greatest task is to unite his people (Winnetou I 109). But May reveals from the very beginning of his narrative that Winnetou’s destiny can never be realized. The novel’s introduction already makes it clear that Winnetou will be murdered before he can unite his nation. May’s musings about Native unification epitomize the sympathetic perception of shared destiny and sympathetic allyship. But like many who harbored colonial fantasies, a German author like May could use his literary authority to define the acceptable boundaries for a colonial subject. German
citizens should sympathize with the Native “plight,” but Winnetou demonstrates that
the fantasy of a Native state could easily be displaced by the reality of the German
state.

**Germans in Indian Country: the German Press and New Ulm**

Along with the popular rhetoric of *Schicksalsgemeinschaft*, mass-produced
literature, images, and ethnological accounts shaped immigrants’ impressions of
“Yankee” character and fantasies about Indianer. Because Frankfurt am Main was
Europe’s printing hub during the nineteenth century, information about America’s
population, flora, fauna, and geography were quickly disseminated in Germany (Lutz
2002 245). Images and descriptions created by Alexander von Humboldt (1769–
1859), the ethnographer and explorer Prince Maximilian zu Wied-Neuwied (1782–
1867) and, his illustrator, Karl Bodmer (1809–1883), and the travel novelist Friedrich
Gerstäcker (1816–1872) were ubiquitous in German popular media and scholarship.

Because representations of America and Native Americans were
disproportionately produced by their own countrymen, German citizens felt distinct
familiarity with and ownership over the “New World.” Images of America and its
inhabitants, like those produced by von Humboldt and Prince Maximilian, were
colored by European cultural sensibilities. In the current of German Romanticism,
these images often imagined Native Americans as idealized, mildly erotic Arcadians
set in pristine nature. Illustrations were usually accompanied by scientific
descriptions of geography and landscape. Even seemingly objective scientific
contributions about America communicated a Eurocentric world view, as well as “drama, struggle, and a certain sensuality” (Pratt 121).

Germans also formed impressions of America by reading travel fiction during the precolonial period (Penny 2013). Gerstäcker’s popular works of colonial fantasy sentimentalized Natives and criticized the excesses of American imperialism. James Fenimore Cooper’s and Gerstäcker’s critiques of imperialism and sympathy for Native characters meshed well with existing rhetoric about Native Americans in Germany. The literary influence of James Fenimore Cooper’s literary works on German impressions of America cannot be overstated (see Plischke, Barba, Thorpe). No fewer than thirty German publications made Cooper’s works available and his stories inspired German imitators, most notably May himself (Plischke). His “more realistic” and “positive” representations of resistant Natives like the Uncas and Chingachgook proved highly appealing, particularly to Germans already chafing against the German state (I further explore the influence of Cooper’s works on Winnetou in Chapter Two).

Thanks to this tremendous volume of images and information about the “New World” available in Germany, many Germans perceived America as a familiar extension of the homeland. In the period preceding German unification, Germans were attracted to America's promise of vast, "uninhabited" land and religious freedom; this promise coincided with emigration from Germany due to land shortage, religious persecution, lack of economic opportunity, or political oppression. Some emigrants congregated in urban centers and hoped to return eventually to their families across the Atlantic, while others came to farm and envisioned America as a
permanent home. Four million people fled the German Empire for America before 1914 (Calloway 47). This massive *Amerikaauswanderung* resulted in the emergence of new German outposts in America. For those hoping to settle indefinitely in America, ethnic enclaves in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, Nebraska, Iowa, New York, and Ohio made immigration feel more feasible. As cultural hubs formed in the Midwest, transatlantic communication boomed. “With about 2.7 million German-born people living in the United States during the decade of the 1890s, and some four million letters sent from America to Germany every year,” it is a “very conservative estimate that an equal number of persons in Germany were direct recipients of letters from America over a five-year span” (Helbich 126).

In “Historical Encounters across Five Centuries” Colin G. Calloway suggests that Germans possessed a somewhat marginalized identity in the U.S. that “prompted Indians to identify themselves [to Germans] sometimes as friends, sometimes as intermediaries with other, more aggressive Europeans, sometimes as prime aggressors in frontier conflicts” (48). I hesitate to assert that Germans enjoyed a unique relationship with Native Americans in comparison to other European settlers. Generally, Germans’ behavior towards Native Americans, and the behavior of Native Americans towards them did not differ significantly from the experiences of other settler-colonialists. For Germans who came to America, the realities of settler-colonial life usually trumped sentimental fantasies about *Indianer*. Even when their relatives experienced conflict with Native Americans, Germans who had remained in Europe continued to idealize Native resistance to the point that they ideologically distanced themselves from their own émigré countrymen. As an example of this
disconnect, let me cite the peculiar example of the Dakota “massacre” of the German New Ulm settlement in Minnesota and its representation in German newspapers.

It should be noted that the word “massacre” is inherently fraught; whites’ accounts of victories of Native peoples against settlers often refer to “massacres,” while whites’ accounts usually characterize victories of settlers over Native peoples as “battles” or “conflicts.” I call attention to these terms to point out that throughout German colonial history Germans have been both victims and perpetrators of “massacres.” My use of the term should not be understood as an assertion of German settler-colonists’ victimhood or innocence.

In the 1850s, German settlers occupied lands of the Dakota (including those of the Mdewakanton, Sisseton, Wahpeton, and Wahpekute bands of the Great Sioux Nation) in southwestern Minnesota. In 1851, the U.S. government and Dakota leaders negotiated two treaties in which the Dakota ceded large tracks of land in exchange for money and goods. Under conditions of coercion, the Dakota were relocated to a twenty-mile-wide reservation on the stretch of the Upper Minnesota. Soon after, the Dakota suffered diminished crop yield and tensions with the New Ulm settlers heightened. The Mdewakanton Dakota chief Taoyateduta (Little Crow, 1810–1863) told the treaty commissioners, “You gave me that line,” but “your Dutchmen have settled inside of it.” Taoyateduta called the Germans iasica, or “bad speakers,” referring to their disrespectful language (Wilson 193). Dakota “regarded the German settlers as representative of the forces that we would today recognize as global capitalistic forces, which were inherently ethnocidal and potentially genocidal” (Penny 85). The settlers were oblivious to this perception. Despite their obvious
participation in colonialism, the settlers of New Ulm considered themselves outside of “American” structures of imperialism, land theft, deception, and violence.

By 1860, New Ulm was a flourishing community of 635 people (633 of whom were German-speaking) and its newspaper, The New Ulm Pioneer, had a circulation of more than twelve hundred (Penny 74). The New Ulm Pioneer reported many encounters between the Germans and Dakota, and issued reports on the Dakota worldview, laws, customs, habits, tales, and warfare. These reports were widely republished in mainstream German periodicals like Das Ausland, Globus, and Über Land und Meer. But like many settler ethnologies, descriptions of the Other were usually based on assumptions gleaned from infrequent interactions. The New Ulm Pioneer lamented the demise [Untergang] of the “authentic Indian,” for whom “civilization is their death . . .” (March 18, 1858). The paper reported that “Indian Wars” were merely a plot to put money in the pockets of corrupt officials (Penny 2013 77). The New Ulm Pioneer condemned America for its attempts at Aussrottung (extermination) and noted that Native revenge against the U.S. government was understandable, even reasonable. But in the same breath that New Ulm residents lambasted the U.S. genocidal policy, they were blind to the deep fissures they themselves were producing in Dakota social, economic, and cultural worlds.

After months of mounting tension, conflict erupted in August of 1862. According to Wamditonka (Chief Big Eagle, 1827–1906), several branches of Dakota Sioux were prompted to action when they noticed the high rates of settler enlistment in the Civil War: “It began to be whispered about that now would be a good time to go to war with the whites” (Holcomb and Wamditonka 387). Dakota warriors, led by
Little Crow, attacked and defeated a detachment of Minnesota militia and a recruiting party of Civil War volunteers. Eventually, they appropriated farms in the Minnesota River valley and killed indiscriminately. Accounts focus on the mutilation of the bodies, the destruction of homes, and the hundreds of captives. The successful retaliation of the Dakota peoples had a devastating effect on the New Ulm settlers and has even been categorized as subaltern genocide.

In response to the horrors in Minnesota, the Midwestern German-language press called for a *Vernichtungskrieg*: a war of extermination. These newspapers previously published sympathetic accounts about the U.S. treatment of Native nations, but when their own were targeted, an ideological switch was flipped. The *New Ulm Pioneer* called the Dakota “cannibals” and “barbarians” and pressured the state of Minnesota to enact a “war of eradication [*Ausrottungskrieg*] against the Redskins, so that we can protect the land that has been conquered by culture” (August 30, 1862). With this explicit endorsement of genocide, U.S. soldiers captured and jailed over a thousand Dakota, many of whom were not belligerents. On December 26, 1862, 38 Dakota men were hanged in Mankato in the largest one-day execution in American history.

Germans “back home” were fascinated by the events in New Ulm and followed them closely. German newspapers covered the stories extensively and provided ethnological information about the character, population, and environment of the Dakota Sioux peoples. German readers devoured accounts of the strength, “primitivism,” and resistance exhibited by the Sioux against their oppressors. In the wake of the 1862 trial and executions, *Das Ausland* published a three-part series
about the battle and offered sympathetic accounts of the Dakota tribes. Their coverage faulted the United States government and the settlers themselves; it emphasized the “white men’s” failure to deliver payments and adhere to treaties, the unfair treatment of the Dakota at the hands of traders and farmers, the violent letters from the Minnesota governor, and the desecration of Native bodies. There was significant attention to detail in coverage of the New Ulm “massacre.” Yet these reports seemed to forget that New Ulm’s settlers were German (Penny 93).

By “forgetting” New Ulm’s German identity, the German press reframed this conflict as a justified exhibition of Sioux military prowess in retaliation against Yankee injustice. As a result of the devastation they perpetrated, the Dakota Sioux became emblematic in Germany for their strength, warrior spirit, and tenacity. *Globus*, a popular illustrated geographical periodical, devoted an ethnological essay to the Dakota Sioux peoples. *Globus* commended their culture, calling them “the mightiest of the Indians,” and reminded readers that Sioux had fought valiantly in New Ulm (Vol. 6, 1864). In comparison to the ethnological accounts dedicated to the “California Indians” and the “Mandan People,” the stories about the Dakota Sioux were by far the most laudatory (see “Die kalifornischen Indianer,” Vol. 8, 1865; “Ausrottung der Indianer in Nordamerika. Ein Blick aus dem Volk der Mandan,” Vol. 16, 1869).

The events in New Ulm fueled Germans’ appreciation for Native Americans’ resilience and strength in the face of oppression. Enthusiasm for the Sioux and support for their victories in “the Indian Wars” persisted in the German press. In 1867, *Globus* published an article about the progression of Indian-white conflicts:
“with almost unheard of sacrifices, the Indians, of whom there are only 350,000 left, could be tamed by extermination. But this will be by no means easy” (‘der Indianerkrieg in Nordamerika,” Vol. 12). American treatment of Sioux peoples and “the whole treatment of brown people” was described as distasteful, vile, and barbarous. The unforgettable victories of the Dakota Sioux in Minnesota and the triumph of the Sioux in the Battle of Little Bighorn impressed Germans considerably. Rhetoric about the “noble Sioux” may have created an ideological distinction between noble, resistant tribes and passive, accommodationist ones. This distinction becomes highly evident in Winnetou; the Apache are coded as respectable for resisting white encroachment, while tribes like the Kiowa and Comanche are scorned for their assimilation and willingness to adopt settler customs. Indeed, the media representations of admirable, justified retaliation created false dichotomies between tribes that deserved Germans’ respect and tribes that did not.

Germans viewed themselves as uninvolved observers and passed judgment from a distance about Native resistance, despite the fact that their own countrymen were actively engaged in colonial subjugation. “Germans took the role of uninvolved observer, who were able to judge the decisions and actions of [imperial nations], and fantasize about being better colonizers themselves. Partly due to their imagined connection to the colonized, they envisioned themselves as humane and more understanding leaders” (Grewling 93). Once immigrants journeyed across the Atlantic, Germans often became transformed into Yankees or simply “whites” in the eyes of those who stayed behind. Events like the New Ulm “massacre” furthered
identification with Native peoples and enabled Germans to imagine themselves as more ethical than their Yankee and other European counterparts.

**Indianer in Germany: Showmen and Elusive Authenticity**

For many Germans, it was not enough to read about the exploits of “noble Sioux” in newspapers, adventure accounts, and journals: many longed to see Indianer in the flesh. As steamboat travel made transatlantic journeys safer and faster, Völkerschauen (human zoos, or commercial ethnological exhibits), brought increasing numbers of Native Americans to Germany. Völkerschauen capitalized on public interest in racial science, cultural difference, and human history by displaying tribal members in publicized tableaus. Between 1875 and 1930, over 400 such shows exhibiting tribal peoples toured Germany (Dreesbach 79). Thus, precolonial Germans of diverse class backgrounds were exposed to highly artificial representations of “potential” colonial subjects, manifestations of their Indianer fantasies in the flesh.

This exposure to colonial subjectivity was not new. Although not in the form of “ethnological display,” Germans had seen British colonial subjects and enslaved people brought to Europe and exhibited by human traders since the 1600s. Völkerschauen trace their roots to these informal tours. But by the mid-nineteenth century, the German public had sufficient infrastructure, increased trans-Atlantic mobility, and a growing interest in ethnology to create formal exhibits. All of the principal colonial powers staged similar exhibitions, which purported to celebrate society’s progress and the riches of civilization, displaying their colonial subjects as “savages on show” (Corbey 341). As Corbey puts it, often “the natives figured as categories in Western representations of Self, as characters in the ascent to
civilization” (341). Germany’s commercial ethnologic exhibitions fulfilled similar purposes, but the Völkerschauen did not display Germany’s colonial subjects. Rather, these shows helped to create an appetite for colonial participation and stoked German fantasies about the sensual, conquerable body of the other. Völkerschauen toed a unique line between science and authenticity, myth and fantasy (Ames 105). Because these shows allowed for close (or closer) contact between Natives and Germans, Völkerschauen furthered the public’s affinity for Indianer. Native Americans performed as both “bodies of data on the verge of extinction,” and as “living embodiments of figures from the novels of authors such as James Fenimore Cooper and Friedrich Gerstäcker” (Ames 105). That is, these performers embodied scientific and literary colonial fantasies.

Carl Hagenbeck staged the first Völkerschauen in 1874. Hagenbeck, a wild animal dealer based in Hamburg, began exhibiting Sami, indigenous Finnish people, as “purely natural peoples” (reine Naturmenschen) in cities across Germany. Hagenbeck exhibited many types of ethnic Other, including so-called wilde Weiber from the Amazon, women from Samoa, Ashanti groups, and Irish villagers. The German press wrote very negatively about the appearance and “brutality” of Africans, in particular (this judgment can be attributed to the specific context of Algerian soldiers serving in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–71). The stated intent of these displays was to expand the cultural horizons of Germans and stimulate national enthusiasm for colonial expansion. Hagenbeck’s exhibitions were popularized through widespread ephemera—posters, postcards, and sensationalistic newspaper articles—and quickly attracted copycats.
In 1879, Charles Reiche recognized the interest in Native Americans and brought Iroquois to Germany: nine men, one woman, and one girl. Descriptions in the *Leipziger Illustrierte Zeitung* emphasized their physical qualities: the men were “strong” with “naturally proud bearing” and the women were “graceful and fine” (see “Rothäute in Deutschland” in Penny 57). Spectators admired the Iroquois’ traditional dances, burial ceremonies, and mock battles. For some Natives, “playing Indian” and performing their culture for German audiences could be interpreted as defiance: “At a time when their cultures were under siege back home and they themselves targeted for assimilation and disappearance, some Indians found in Wild West shows an opportunity to celebrate their cultures in arenas far from the prying eyes of Indian agents” (Calloway 73). Whether Germans interpreted these performances as defiance or as mere entertainment, thousands came daily to witness the Native performers.

Not all groups elicited equal excitement, however. Germans condemned instances of Europeans in ethnic drag or “fake Indianer” (Mason 552). But they reserved their harshest criticism for Natives whom they deemed not “native enough.” For example, when Hagenbeck exhibited nine Nuxalk, or Bella Coola, Germans were severely disappointed. The Bella Coola did not exhibit the visual signifiers that the German public had come to expect. In other words, because they did not look like Plains Indians, Germans did not acknowledge them as Indianer. By the 1890s, *Völkerschauen* and other forms of colonial fantasies employed a narrow set of scripted roles and imagined identities for Native Americans. The affinity Germans felt for Native Americans pertained overwhelmingly to a fantasy, rather than to the
actual Native individuals who made the transnational journey. Indeed, there were few spaces in Germany that did not require Native Americans to perform as Indianer.

In the wake of the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre, the German press felt emboldened to address what it saw as the Native Americans’ battle against Western civilization. The German public became eager to see the resilient Sioux before the alleged closing of the frontier. In April 1890, Rocky Bear was the keynote speaker in a group of seven Native Americans at the Munich Anthropological Society. “I was the enemy of the whites. But I had to be one. I fought against them; I took their scalps, because they had taken my land.” Rocky Bear noted the similarities between himself and his audience: “Look at my hand,” he said, “it is black, but the heart in my breast beats like your heart” (cited by Penny 57). German newspapers reprinted his speech in full. For a German audience willing to identify with Native peoples’ plight, Rocky Bear’s words affirmed what many wanted to hear: our struggles and our hearts are not so different.

Everywhere in Imperial Germany, Native Americans occupied the German imagination, the result of Germans’ identification with Native “primitivism,” knowledge of Indian affairs from German-language newspapers from the American Midwest, or close observation in ethnological exhibits. These newspaper accounts were made more potent by the popular literary representations of Natives. Images and accounts of Native Americans were ubiquitous in Europe, but only in Germany were the strength, resilience, and loyalty of Indianer incorporated into the national identity. Fantasies about Native peoples, particularly the Sioux, found their way into aspirational images of German national character. By the 1890s, tropes of Native
character, fascination with Native bodies, and knowledge of Native political resistance turned up frequently in Germany. Because of the new accessibility of print culture, fascination with *Indianer* even transcended class. Indeed, nationalist intellectuals, children, immigrants, and spectators from all class backgrounds were enamored of the “noble savage,” whom they longed to both embody and save.
Chapter 2:
Karl May, Father of Fantasy

Cattycorner to the Radebeul Lutheran Church, in an otherwise unremarkable suburb of Dresden, stands one home quite unlike its neighbors. Behind this ornate villa, a totem pole and carved wooden canoe grace the front of an American-style log cabin. A marble statue of a weeping angel stands nearby. Villa Shatterhand, as the bronze plaque identifies it, is a material monument to the life and values of Karl Friedrich May. May’s estate might be taken for the home of a well-traveled, spiritually enlightened scholar. The extensive library boasts maps, indigenous language dictionaries, volumes of history, novels in many languages, and religious texts from most major faiths. May’s home and backyard ethnological museum are crammed with souvenirs from travels abroad. Both Villa Shatterhand and Villa Bärenfett (the backyard cabin) prominently display photographs of May wearing leather chaps and holding a lasso, or dressed in a turban and robe; he appears confident, iconic, even larger than life. These images and their setting are an enticing and attractive lie.

May never traveled to the Wild West or to the Ottoman Empire (not to mention “conquered” them); he did not live the adventures of his alter egos, Old Shatterhand and Kara Ben Nemsi. Nor was he any of the other people he pretended to be in his life of imposture: a police lieutenant, eye doctor, notary, travel writer, fur trader, or devout Catholic novelist. Instead, May was the impoverished, disabled son of weavers with a grandiose sense of his own importance, pathologically narcissistic tendencies, and fantasies of achieving limitless success. He became at an early age a criminal, skilled impersonator, and master conman armed with charm and a vivid
imagination. Although he later wore the costume of a solid German citizen, May had once seethed with resentment at the state that had locked him up. To escape this past, May retreated into Old Shatterhand, a hero who possessed everything that May lacked: opportunities for exotic adventures, an acceptable background, a close-knit tribe, boundless physical strength and skill, and loyal male companionship. May did everything in his power to maintain the charade of dual identity. He corresponded with fans to answer their detailed questions and fiercely defended himself against readers who noticed that, for example, he displayed a gun in his home that he had allegedly buried with Winnetou. Despite his blinding self-confidence, critics repeatedly caught May in lies about his adventures. May seemed to believe the narrative that he had crafted for himself and perhaps could not separate his true identity from the stories he told about himself.

The details of May’s unique life story have provided a rich source of study for members of the Karl-May-Gesellschaft and others. Schaper’s *Karl May: Untertan, Hochstapler, Übermensch* (2011), Bugmann’s *From Savage to Saint* (2016), Walther’s *Karl May: eine sächsische Biografie* (2002), and May’s autobiography, *Mein Leben und Streben* (1910) have provided useful background for my studies of May’s ideological formation and relationship to German empire. Unlike previous biographers, I focus critical attention on May’s class, disability, and experience of incarceration as formative factors in his desire to write himself into a colonial daydream. Since I focus on Germans' fantasies about Native Americans as a means to boost their self-image and model colonial subjectivity (desire for identification with the colonizer), my analysis centers on May’s experience as a subject (*Untertan*) of the
German precolonial state and the ways in which this experience stimulated his desire
to lose himself in colonial fantasy.

May provides a useful case study of a German precolonial subject because
many of his experiences were those of the “everyman”: he grew up in the period
following the 1848 revolutions, was a devout Lutheran, contemplated emigrating to
America, idealized the Imperial German Army, and consumed press accounts about
Native Americans. These experiences both shaped May’s understanding of himself
and stimulated his imaginative configurations of the Other.

“Into the Abyss”: Becoming Karl May

May was born on February 25th, 1842 in Ernstthal, a small town on the edge
of the Saxon Ore Mountains. The only surviving son in a family of weavers, he
describes himself as a “beloved child of need, worry, and grief” (Mein Leben 24). He
was one of fourteen children born to Henrich August May and Christiane Wilhelmine
Weise, nine of whom died in early childhood. “Unemployment, malformation,
inflation, and revolution, these four words explain it all. We lacked almost everything
for our bodies’ nourishment and needs” (Mein Leben 105). Like many who came of
age during Germany’s rapid industrialization, May endured dire childhood
conditions. Malnutrition, lack of exposure to sunlight, and rickets left him with a
number of disabilities that plagued him for the rest of his life. He was bow-legged and
had weak bones, faulty vision, and physical deformity, including a broad, partially
unformed skull (Bugmann 10). As an adult, he masked these differences with
elaborate costumes. But in childhood, his body made him a pariah. As a substitute for
childhood friendships, May used his imagination to distract himself from his dire poverty and physical shortcomings.

May’s experience of childhood blindness played a particularly formative role in the development of his identity. According to him, May faced total blindness and almost complete isolation from shortly after birth until the age of four. He claims that his only solace during these times came from stories from Der Hakawati, a mysterious volume of “Oriental” fables he allegedly discovered in his attic. Not surprisingly, the Karl-May-Gesellschaft cannot trace any known copies of Der Hakawati. It must have been one of May’s many fabrications intended to make his life seem more wondrous than it really was. In truth, May’s grandmother, Johanna, entertained him with typical German folklore. “Grandmother was a poor, illiterate woman, but she was a poet of God’s glory” (Mein Leben 81). As was the case for many young Germans, fairy tales fueled May’s affinity for fantasy and fostered his belief that stories could grant him salvation, even from the direst conditions. He learned that there was “an intimate connection between Heaven and Earth, a victory of Good over Evil” (Mein Leben 80-81). Spiritual lessons and fantasy were potent medicine; according to May, after four years of total blindness and care from his grandmother, he regained his vision.

Much debate has taken place among researchers in the Karl-May-Gesellschaft about the causes, cures, and likelihood of May’s childhood blindness. It is rare, if not unheard of, for total blindness to be cured without an operation. Most likely, May suffered from partial blindness due to vitamin deficiency from malnutrition, which gradually responded to a more wholesome diet. At any rate, May returned to the light.
with unique gifts. If one believes May’s account, a childhood of blindness made him a natural genius and spiritual sage. “When someone would speak, I would hear not their body, but rather their souls. Their interiors, not their exteriors, would approach me. For me there were only souls, nothing but souls” (Mein Leben 84). He reframed his disability as ability, a natural genius that differentiated him from others and aligned him with the Christian principle of refraining from judging others. May would have been familiar with the passage in Matthew: "Judge not, that ye be not judged . . . Thou hypocrite, first cast the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote of thy brother's eye" (The Bible King James Version, Matthew 7. 1–5). According to May, he removed his own "mote" and therefore possessed the unique capacity to see others' true characters. For the rest of his life, May boasted about his unique (almost Christ-like) view of others’ souls. “And so has it remained, from the time I was a child to today. That is the difference between me and others. That is the key to my stories” (Mein Leben 84). May believed that few people had the authority to judge him and only those who had ascended from blindness to light “possess[ed] the capability to criticize [his] works!” (Mein Leben 85).

In addition to his medical complications, one of the foremost struggles of May’s early childhood (in retrospect) had to do with the workers' uprisings of 1848. Despite the widespread support the revolutions had enjoyed in his hometown, as an adult May abhorred the idea of rebellion against the state. He characterized the revolutions as a violent siren: “She was to blame for everything. She is called anarchy and lives in the deepest forest. But at night she came to the cities to tear down the
houses and burn the barns; such a beast! Fortunately, our fathers were all heroes, none of whom were afraid of anything, not even that rude anarchy” (*Mein Leben* 107). May’s idealized, heroic father who stood against the revolution was one of many wishful fabrications. His father actually founded one of Ernstthal’s left-democratic unions, which took arms against the King and the Vaterland (Karl-May-Wiki).

According to May, his father’s participation in radical disruption and abusive behavior towards his family were not his fault. “My father was a man of two souls. The one soul was decidedly mild, the other was tyrannical, full of excesses in scorn, incapable of restraining itself” (*Mein Leben* 35). May avoids any vivid descriptions of his father’s addiction or subversive politics, focusing instead on his flawed soul. But if one strips away May’s prose, it is clear that Henrich was an abusive alcoholic who often spent the family’s paltry funds to indulge his addiction. One of Henrich’s foremost concerns was his son’s ascension to the *Bildungsbürgertum* (the educated middle class). He beat his son and forced him to spend hours copying books by hand so that he would be able to improve himself. Despite these “pedagogical tasks,” May’s education resembled that of other working-class children in Ernstthal. He supplemented his minimal schooling with self-paid private lessons in piano, French, and English (Walther 15). Apparently these lessons were financed by his father (Scott 18).

After escaping the tyranny of his father in 1856, May seemed to have a promising future. He aspired to become a writer and was training as a teacher in a seminary. But he soon faced a triple disgrace: his first story (an *Indianerroman*) was rejected, his sixteen-year-old girlfriend revealed that she was pregnant with another
man’s baby, and he was expelled from the seminary for stealing candles from the Christmas service (Bugmann 9). After losing the guiding light of his church, May succumbed to the darker aspects of his personality. In his words, “There were all kinds of characters inside of me, and they all wanted to be a part of my worries, my work, my creativity, my writing and composing” (Mein Leben 269). The “characters inside” began rather harmlessly, but quickly their hold over him became relentlessly destructive.

Perhaps as a nod to his own suffering in childhood, May began posing as an eye doctor, Dr. Heilig (Dr. Holy), then expanded his repertoire and conned travelers under a variety of fantastical pseudonyms: Hermes the engraver, Police Lieutenant Wolframsdorf, and Albin Wadenback, the son of a plantation owner in Martinique. In Glauchau, May was fired from a teaching position because of an affair with the local grocer’s wife. After moving to Alchemnitz, May was arrested for “borrowing” a fob watch from one of his students. His schemes were plentiful, but his misdemeanors caught up with him quickly. In 1865, May rented a hotel room under a pseudonym, ordered two muskrat coats from a furrier, then slipped out the back door with his loot. The fur coat swindle was the final straw for local authorities. May was sentenced to four years in a reform prison called Waldheim, located in Oberstein Castle, near Zwickau.

In a rare stroke of luck, May was assigned to work in the prison library. Oberstein Castle had over 4,000 books, including travel diaries, religious texts, works of fiction, histories, scientific glossaries, and geographic studies. He had not had access to so much educational material in his entire life. May likened his time in
Zwickau to the experience of ascetics, scholars, and saints: “I may say that I learned a great deal and that reading in the quiet, lonely cell has brought me much further in my relationship to human psychology than I ever would have come without this captivity” (*Mein Leben* 306). Prison was not just May’s university, it was also his monastery. He became better acquainted with human psychology through literature, his life almost monk-like in its isolation. To legitimize this (forced) asceticism, May reframed all humans as fellow inmates. He asked: “Are only the inhabitants of a penitentiary imprisoned? Is not really every person a prisoner?” (*Mein Leben* 317). Incarceration became one of May’s favorite allegories for the state of the human soul.

May had been fairly submissive to subjugation, but in prison he became obsessed with enacting revenge on the German state. “I should have revenge, revenge on the owner of the pocket watch who turned me in... revenge on the police, revenge on the judge, revenge on the state, on humanity in general, on anyone!” (*Mein Leben* 278). After years of what he considered unjust imprisonment, May longed for the freedom that his society had taken from him. He felt that he had been tricked and conned out of his true life. May did not blame his conditions on his abusive upbringing, God, or himself. The focal point of his fury was German society. Instead of channeling this fury into class consciousness, he escaped into a realm of pure fantasy. At this point, May became infatuated with Native Americans and America’s promise of Arcadian freedom. While devouring vast quantities of literature, May shed his past and planned for his new life. He literally re-wrote his traumatic experiences into something desirable. Inspired by the ideals of essential freedom, wildness, and tribal companionship, May wrote 137 short stories during his
incarceration, many of which feature Native figures. He also composed numerous sketches for future stories that he hoped would ensure his literary success.

Prisoner 402 left Waldheim at the age of 32, a grown man who was still very much a child. May’s release documentation reads: “Wants to emigrate to America” (Bugmann 20). But this dream was never realized. May either could not scrape together the funds or could not tear himself away from his old habits for long enough to follow through with immigration. In 1869, shortly after his release from prison, May returned to the path he knew best. In the months that followed, he filched food from a local grocer, made off with billiard balls from a tavern, and stole a horse. As if anticipating May’s arrival, shortly after his release from Waldheim, the German press law was overhauled and newly formulated. This change, along with the rapid economic progress of the soon to be reorganized German empire, led to a dramatic increase in entertainment and family publications. May was eager to enter the literary playing field, and advancements in the technology of the printing press could accommodate his breathless prose.

In 1874, May published his first novel, Die Rose von Ernstthal, a romance, and began working as an editor for a publishing company where he would eventually find commercial success. Despite minor brushes with the law, May remained relatively stable during this period and married for the first time. His relationship with his wife, Emma Pollmer, was highly tumultuous and he believed that she was unfaithful to him from the beginning; May's mistrust of women became a reappearing motif in his fiction (Scott 21). In the mid-1870s May began writing Western-themed stories, like “Inn-nu-woh, der Indianerhäuptling” in publications like the Deutsches
Familienblatt and wrote raunchier versions of his stories under a pseudonym, “D. Jam” (Scott 22). In 1892, May was contacted by Friedrich Ernst Fehsenfeld, who commissioned him to compile his successful newspaper columns into a full-length novel, Karl Mays Gesammelte Reiseromane (collected travel stories), which both ensured his financial success and aligned him closely with his protagonist Old Shatterhand. Winnetou I-III debuted as a part of the Gesammelte Reiseromane in 1893. By 1900, May had amassed a fortune in royalties and could provide himself with the lavish lifestyle he had always envisioned; Villa Shatterhand became compensation for the impoverishment May had faced in his childhood and legitimated him as a successful member of the German Bildungsbürgertum.

Because Winnetou I-III is part of the collected stories, its narrative consists of scraps pieced together from years of newspaper columns and short adventure stories (Karl-May-Gesellschaft). As a result, the trilogy’s plot often meanders and the action seems confusing. The first volume in the trilogy is by far the most coherent: Winnetou and Old Shatterhand’s relationship is the centerpiece of the story and most of the narrative takes place in identifiable geographic locations. In Winnetou II and III, however, Old Shatterhand travels through largely unspecified locations in the West with a revolving cast of characters; Winnetou himself reappears infrequently in and at odd moments in the story. Evidently, while May cobbled together different plots and battles, he neglected crucial components like character development, complex relationships, and cogent plot. May obscured Winnetou himself in the narrative that bears his name. As a result, my examination focuses on the sections of
Winnetou I-III in which Winnetou is most present: the first volume of the trilogy and the climactic death of Winnetou in Volume III.

In the face of tremendous financial and social disadvantage, May displayed almost unimaginable loyalty to his father, his faith, and the fatherland. Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) identifies a pattern we see in May: his spiritual indoctrination in the merits of individual achievement negated any possibility of his criticizing the economic system that had oppressed him. Instead of identifying with the workers’ revolution, May remained largely subservient to the German state, and idealized the goals of economic achievement, personal success, and elevation to the *Bildungsbürgertum*. His Lutheran education taught him that hard work and frugality were essential to success and that belief contributed to his almost pathological dedication to writing. His lifetime output would consist of five pulp fiction novels of thousands of pages each, twenty-six lengthy travel novels, numerous children’s adventure stories, contributions to periodicals, poetry collections, philosophical lectures, and his autobiography.

**Inhabiting Shatterhand**

Millions of readers have bought into the fantasy that May lived Old Shatterhand’s adventures. Readers often bought this myth in a literal sense: many purchased images of May in trapper’s regalia, paid to see May’s ethnological collections in Villa Bärenfett, and bought *Winnetou*-themed toys, illustrations, and memorabilia. The commercial success of his novels, particularly the *Winnetou* trilogy, assured May that he would never again live in poverty. Whatever May felt
about the German state, he adapted well to the economy that had once thwarted him. But the ghosts of May’s experience of abuse, his disability, and the shame of incarceration endured in his writings and did much to shape his fantasies of colonized people. In this vein, Old Shatterhand’s essential masculinity, cultured social status, physical prowess, and religiosity are best understood as compensations for May’s own perceived failings as a disadvantaged subject of the German state.

In the first chapter of Winnetou I, May introduces his young protagonist, Charlie, by illustrating the differences between an educated man (a greenhorn) and an experienced person.

A greenhorn is a man who does not get up from his chair when a woman wants to sit down; who greets the master of the house before the Mistreß [mistress] and Miß [miss] have made their bows; who sticks the plug, then the bullet, then the powder into the muzzle loader. A greenhorn either speaks no English or speaks a very pure, sprightly English; he dislikes Yankee English and backwoods idioms (this language refuses to go into his head or stay on his tongue). A greenhorn mistakes a raccoon for an opossum and a passably pretty mulatto woman for a quadroon. (5)

Charlie, the young German immigrant who later grows into the formidable Old Shatterhand, is new to the West, but he is no “greenhorn.” In this extended riff on the difference between formal learning and experiential knowledge, May suggests that schooling does not necessarily produce an ideal character or useful knowledge in the context of adventure. A man who “has studied astronomy for ten years can stare into the starry heavens and not know what time it is” (Winnetou I 6). Because May had little opportunity for formal training, he felt driven to assert the legitimacy of the school of life. May’s (re)vision of himself, Charlie, has both a formal education and an adventurer’s spirit. He belongs to the cultured, sophisticated Bildungsbürgertum, but has not been feminized by his education.
May makes it plain that Charlie emigrates not to escape from dire economic conditions or a criminal record; rather, he chooses to come to America due to “inconvenient circumstances and an innate thirst for action” (*Winnetou* I 7). Charlie’s adventurous spirit leads him to find work as a railroad surveyor in “Indian territory,” near the Rio Pecos, where he meets a cast of Yankee frontiersmen. May’s American characters are hardly flattering: they call Charlie a “Dutchman” as a term of abuse and leave him to do all of their work while they lie about in a brandy-induced stupor. Christian values are evoked over and over in *Winnetou* and always in association with German identity. When introducing himself to the Apache schoolteacher, Klekikh-Petra, Charlie establishes his selfhood in terms of his nation and his religion.

“I am not an American.”
“Why is it that that question bothers you?”
“It does not. I have no reason to hide my Vaterland, which I love so much. I am German.”
“A German?” He quickly looked up. “Then I should welcome you, compatriot! That must have been what drew me to you so quickly. We Germans are a specific type of person. Our hearts recognize that we are related before we can tell each other that we are countrymen—if only we could become a united nation! A German who has become a full-fledged Apache, doesn’t that seem remarkable to you?”
“Not extraordinarily so! God’s way often seems wonderful, but it is quite natural.”
“God’s way! Why do you speak of God and not of providence, destiny, facts, or kismet?”
“Because I am a Christian and my God never leaves me.” (*Winnetou* I 106)

Charlie’s conceptualization of himself as a German subject and disciple of God clearly reflects May’s loyalty to his faith and state. In *Winnetou* I–III May reimagines himself as a shining example of his nation, a hard-working German man who offers an obvious contrast to lazy Americans. This fantasy soothed May’s extreme discomfort with his criminal past: his alter ego has no reason for shame, exhibits a
faultless work ethic, and pursues acceptable forms of employment. Charlie’s legitimacy, and by extension, May’s legitimacy, hinges on his education, work ethic, and embodiment of Lutheran beliefs.

Although his hard work, education, and religious piety make him an ideal German man, Charlie becomes a hero because of his tremendous physical prowess. Over the course of forty pages in *Winnetou I*, the reader hears about Charlie's lifting a grown man with one hand, mastering a herd of bison, eating pounds of meat from the bison he slaughtered, taming a mule with a lasso, and taking down a grizzly bear using only a knife. Through these feats, Charlie earns his powerful moniker, “Old Shatterhand.” Given Charlie’s youth, the “Old” part of “Old Shatterhand” obviously does not refer to his age. In May’s fantasy, “Old” is a term of respect in the Wild West.

In light of May’s history of physical disability, Old Shatterhand’s extreme physical power has an added layer of meaning. Old Shatterhand rarely shows weakness, except in extreme situations, such as when he contracts tetanus or witnesses Winnetou’s death. May was careful to emphasize, however, that one should not be ashamed about an imperfect body: he includes characters like Klekih-Petra, who are noble despite their disabilities. After an ignorant Yankee mocks him for his appearance, Klekih-Petra retorts, “You should thank God if you have healthy limbs! At any rate, your body matters less than your heart and soul” (*Winnetou I* 89). By portraying Klekih-Petra with dignity, May impressed upon his readers that physical differences were no laughing matter.
Old Shatterhand is not only a product of May’s personal insecurities; the character also embodies Germany’s values during this period. For the many who experienced extreme disruption and economic insecurity as a result of Germany’s rapid industrialization, it would have been validating to see a successful hero in a non-threatening, preindustrial landscape. Unlike workers who were forced to develop new skills in high-pressure work conditions, Old Shatterhand needs only strength and cleverness to succeed in the Wild West. Though he is a God-fearing subject of Germany, Old Shatterhand is subservient to no one but himself. Like the ideal German, he possesses the necessary power to dominate, but because of his superior morality opts out of subjugating others. He is a “seeing-man,” a German subject whose “imperial eyes passively look out and possess” the foreign people and territories that he encounters (Pratt 7). Old Shatterhand presents an ideal version of a sympathetic observer: he acts benevolently, yet calmly asserts his physical dominance in unfamiliar territory.

**Developing Winnetou**

The most critical component in May’s fantasy of Old Shatterhand is, of course, Winnetou. Although it is hard to say which of the figures May imagined first, their representations are clearly a package deal. One of May’s primary struggles throughout his life was his isolation and lack of meaningful relationships. Therefore it makes perfect sense that May developed his ideal of blood-brotherhood and male companionship at Waldheim, in a context of extreme loneliness. Not only did May experience extreme solitude in prison, he also had unprecedented access to exciting,
new information about America and Native Americans. Thus, it should come as no surprise that his vision for an ideal friendship involved an Apache chief.

While working as a librarian at Waldheim, May pored over travel accounts, newspaper reports, and translations of American literature, which offered him ample material to craft his fantasies of the Wild West. One of the resources in the Waldheim prison library was the travel logs of Maximilian, Prince of Wied-Neuwied, a German aristocrat and ethnographer (1782–1867). In 1833, Wied documented his encounters with the Sioux, Mandan, Minitari, and Crow tribes and “claimed to have learned all the Indian languages, studied their culture, and forged friendship with a young, strong Indian chief called Si-chi-dä” (Schaper 75). According to Wolfgang Büscher, the author of Hartland—Zu Fuß durch Amerika (2011), May certainly encountered Wied’s travel diaries at Waldheim.

May also relied heavily on visual imagery to inform his representations in Winnetou. For example, images created by the Swiss ethnographic artist Karl Bodmer (1809–1893) suggested a prototype for the Apache chief, Winnetou. Bodmer’s ethnological drawings were omnipresent in German media and scientific publications during the nineteenth century. Indeed, a painting from 1839 of Mato-Tope, the second chief of the Mandans, bears a striking resemblance to May’s descriptions of Apache tribal members. Mato-Tope is bare-chested, holding a weapon, and equipped with a Cheyenne knife, a split turkey feather, six colored wooden sticks, and painted owl plumage on the back of his head. Prints like these formed a basis for May’s understandings about Native aesthetics. The Apache characters in Winnetou wear adornment similar to Mato-Tope's, including weaponry, feathers, regalia, and body
paint. But May neglected to incorporate the correct symbolic meanings in his characters’ appearances. If one examines the physical descriptions of Intschu tschuna and Winnetou, May’s reliance on the visual trope is obvious.

The older man was slightly more than average height, but very strongly built. His countenance was noble and his movements showed his great physical agility. His serious expression was that of a true Indian, but his face was not so sharp and angular as most Reds. His eyes had a calm, almost peaceful expression, the expression of a silent interiority that distinguished him as superior to his typical tribesman. His head was uncovered; he tied up his dark hair in a helmet-like tuft, into which he stuck an eagle feather (the symbol of a chief). His costume consisted of Mokassins [sic], frayed Leggins [sic], and a leather hunting jacket, all very simple and well-made. There was a knife in his belt and on it hung many pouches, which held the accessories that are necessary to all Westmänner.

The younger man was clothed exactly like his father, except that his suit was more gracefully made. His Moccasins were adorned with porcupine bristles and the seams of his leggings and leather jacket were decorated with fine red stitching. As well, he wore a medicine bag on his neck and a kalumet. His weaponry, like his father’s, consisted of a knife and a pair of rifles. He, too, wore his head uncovered and his hair tied up, but without a feather as decoration. His hair was so long that it fell richly and heavily down his back. Surely, many women would have envied such glorious, blue-shimmering hair. His face was almost more noble than his father’s, and the color of it a matte light brown with a soft hint of bronze. He was, as I then guessed and later would learn, the same age as me, and today, as on the first time I saw him, made a deep impression on me. I felt that he was a good person and must possess extraordinary capabilities. We gazed at one another with a long, searching glance. I thought I noticed in those serious, dark eyes, with a velvety glow, a gleaming friendly light for a brief moment, like a salutation that the sun sends the earth through the parting of the clouds. (Winnetou I 91–93)

May simplified Native aesthetics and erased most of the complex, symbolic meaning from the visual signifiers he selected for his characters. Although he identifies eagle feathers and medicine pouches as having particular significance, May sentimentalized the physical appearance of his Apache characters without paying attention to the specific attributes of Mescalero Apache.
In addition to visual authenticity, May was intent on creating an air of legitimacy around the “languages of the West.” According to Dr. Andreas Graf, a Karl May researcher, May drew particular inspiration from the works of Albert Samuel Gatschet (1832–1907). Gatschet, a Swiss-American ethnologist and linguist, published *Zwölf Sprachen aus dem Südwesten Nordamerikas* (1876), which initially appeared in various geographical newspapers, was allegedly available at Waldheim, and was later found in the Villa Shatterhand library. Using this dictionary, May injected bits of Apache lingo into his narrative to give himself the appearance of a true world-traveler. For the most part, May used Apache words only for characters’ names (for example: he translates Intschu tschuna as Good Sun and translates Klekih-Petra as White Father). The name “Winnetou” comes from Gatschet’s discussion of the Wintun peoples, whose names the author represented as “Winton.” Although the Wintun are geographically and culturally distinct from the Mescalero Apache, May borrowed freely from disparate native cultures and assumed that his German readers would not notice.

The Native figures in *Winnetou* occasionally use expressions borrowed from *Zwölf Sprachen*, but for the most part they are represented on the page in *Hochdeutsch* (standard German) with May's imagined "Indianer inflection." When Intschu tschuna addresses Old Shatterhand, for instance, the latter notes:

> I was astounded by this Indianer. I had read many books about the red race and heard many speeches by Indianer, but never one like this. Intschu tschuna spoke in a clear, articulate English. His logic and style of expression were like an educated man. Did he have Klekih-Petra to thank for these advantages? (105)
Despite Intschu-tschuna's and Winnetou’s “unique” expressiveness in comparison to other Native figures, they still are identifiable as Native because of their use of “Uff, uff” and “Howgh;” the latter, according to May, is “an Indian word of affirmation that means more or less Amen, basta, and that’s final, and so it is, and nothing else!” (105).

While May’s fantasies of linguistic style and physical appearance were shaped by myriad sources, perhaps the greatest influence on Winnetou’s Native representations was the translated works of James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851). Before May’s Indianerromane swept the nation, Cooper’s frontier novels had already achieved international fame. Cooper was the most translated American author in Germany by a significant margin and his representations heavily shaped German perceptions of America and Native Americans (Penny 35). Various May scholars, including Richard Cracroft and Martin Kuester, note that Cooper’s writings had a paramount influence on his works. Winnetou and The Last of the Mohicans have many similarities.

There are two father-and-son pairs of Indian chiefs: Chingachgook and Uncas, the last of the Mohicans, and Intschu-tschuna and Winnetou, the last great Apaches. The Indians are accompanied by white backwoodsmen mediating between the vanishing red and the dominating white cultures: Natty Bumppo and Old Shatterhand. (Kuester 217)

Both stories are parables about retreat from "modernity," and they have similar constellations of characters. The narrative structures of these works are quite different, however. In The Last of the Mohicans, Cooper speaks through an omniscient narrative voice. Although both novels arrive at the same conclusion (that the noble Indian race is vanishing), the prophesies in Cooper’s story come from the
Mohicans themselves. Third-person narration creates distance between the reader and the imperfect protagonists and one understands that Cooper’s views are not necessarily the views of his characters (Kuester 219).

May’s first-person narration deviates from Cooper’s model and largely simplifies it. He aligns himself completely with Old Shatterhand and represents his protagonist as infallible. “His view of Indians is the only one brought forth with any claim to authority . . . When [this view] is not expressed by himself, it is formulated by one of his fellow Germans who turn up almost everywhere in the West” (Kuester 219). May adopts significant elements of Cooper’s story (Old Shatterhand himself even admits to reading Cooper!), but imposes far more narrative control. May has no moral objections to or ironic distance from Shatterhand, nor does he disapprove of his violent behavior. Shatterhand acts as the white spokesperson for Apache peoples, prophesies the Natives’ futures from his own perspective, and eventually succeeds in converting Winnetou to Christianity. Although he insists upon the Apache right to territorial sovereignty and self-determination, May writes from a position of absolute authority that deprives his Native characters of their cultures and future.

One final question about Winnetou’s development remains: why Apache? As I illustrated in Chapter One, specific tribes, like the Dakota, were popular in the German media because of their acts of resistance. It would make sense for May to select the Dakota or even Cooper’s Mohicans as his literary inspiration. Christian F. Feest, on the other hand, argues that May’s selection of the Apache tribe was an intentional nationalist choice.

May had been inspired to write about adventures in the American-Mexican border region of the Southwest in the course of his translation of Gabriel
Ferry’s *Le coureur de bois*, in which the Comanche were depicted as the allies of the French in their battle against the Apaches. If one’s enemies’ enemies were one’s friends, it followed that shortly after the Franco-German War of 1870–1871, the Apaches must be on the side of the Germans. (25)

It is possible that May’s decision to make Winnetou an Apache chief was a deliberate assertion of German national pride, or at least of anti-French sentiment. It remains equally possible, given the lack of care May expended on creating Apache authenticity, that May selected that tribe out of mere convenience. There might have simply been more information about Southwestern tribes available in the Waldheim library or in the time preceding *Winnetou* I-III’s literary debut.

Despite obvious intersections between *Winnetou* and existing Native literary, scientific, and visual representations in Germany, May adamantly refused to acknowledge that his characters were constructions (rather than actual figures). For most of his career, May described Winnetou as a real-life figure and answered questions from his fans about their time together. Once it became apparent that Winnetou was fictional, May began using the language of “discovery” and “divine inspiration” to legitimize his portrayal. He wrote that Winnetou’s spirit had come to him in the prison library, in the form of a holy vision (*Mein Leben* 320). This assertion, evidently, is far from the truth. Winnetou’s representation changed greatly between his debut as *Inn-nu-woh der Indianerhäuptling* (1875) and his more polished literary embodiment in *Winnetou* I-III (the version considered in this examination). Inn-nu-woh was a chief of the Sioux, not the Apache, and was originally much older, but after May obtained more information about Native America, he re-wrote his fantasy to better fit his needs. Indeed, he paid very little attention to accuracy or consistency in the development of Winnetou, and May’s research about Native
America was highly generalized. But the German public did not demand authenticity. May’s fantasy proved sufficiently convincing and tantalizing to a German public in search of masculine fantasy and sensationalized adventure in the nineteenth century and for generations to come.
Chapter 3
Unpacking Winnetou

Winnetou, the Mescalero Apache chief has gone through myriad iterations since his debut. On the cover of *Inn-nu-woh der Indianerhäuptling* (1875), Winnetou’s earliest incarnation, his massive body blurs with crashing waves and, astonishingly, a Bengal tiger leaps towards him from a ship (perhaps the illustrator mistook Winnetou for an East Indian). On the 1898 cover, Winnetou exudes the tension of a coiled spring, standing amid trees with his blood brother, Old Shatterhand, and holding his famous *Silberbüchse* (Silver Rifle). In 1910, May’s reworked his book covers to reflect his mystical period and appear more “serious” for adult audiences. May’s artistic muse, Sascha Schneider, represents Winnetou during his ascent to Christianity, floating nude above darkness and into the rays of a brilliant cross (which resembles a white-washed, crude totem pole). His splendid body and heavenly gaze appear Christ-like, but he differs from Jesus in his waterfall of black hair and eagle feathers.

Even if Winnetou’s “exotic” image was altered, the essential narrative has remained the same. Much like the German folk tales of May’s youth, the *Winnetou* trilogy largely rehashes fairy-tale tropes: beautiful people are good, ugly (often dark or malformed) people are bad, animals are helpful, love occurs at first sight, greed is punished, the hero can accomplish seemingly impossible tasks, and so on. Uncomplicated morality comforts the reader while relentless pace and tantalizing details of Western life energize the story. Although Old Shatterhand’s battles are waged in a foreign landscape, these stories acted as therapeutic adventures in Germany, soothing economic and cultural tensions.
May relies on flowery descriptions of scenic geography, often inaccurate, and “authentic” American slang to create a lively setting. May's German text is dotted with exclamations spoken by Westmänner like “Zounds,” “Thunderation,” “Woe to me,” “Good lack,” “Mesch’schurs,” and “S’Death.” The catchphrase he considers typical of the West is “p’shaw,” a term expressing exasperation, appreciation, or agreement (Cracroft 254). German readers may have accepted these expressions as genuine. Indeed, few Germans learned English in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. For the most part, May stuck to familiar linguistic territory, writing in conventional German and injecting “yes,” “no,” and “well” for occasional flavoring.

*Winnetou* is comforting not only in its narrative familiarity, but also because its racial representations are far from radical. A contemporary reader could not mistake the patronizing, imperialistic attitude of *Winnetou*. May's portrayal of Winnetou self-consciously stages erasure and subordination and conveys messages about the “rightful” German place in the world. Because the Apache are defeated and Old Shatterhand inevitably returns from his travels to tell the tale, German-ness retains its “rightful” position on the global stage and the hegemony of the German state is unthreatened. Indeed, Germans love Winnetou because he resists, but they love him more because he dies.

May crafts a feel-good adventure story about the genocide perpetrated on Native Americas, one that casts Germans as sympathetic heroes. While Americans have dealt with the persistent “threat” or “irritant” of Native resilience and land ownership, German culture is concerned with the Apache only as a symbol and a self-
reflection. Winnetou’s Native representations reproduce uniquely German anxieties reflective of Germany’s standing during the precolonial period: concerns about Christianity, about Germany's international position, about “opposition” to imperialism, heroism, and primitivism. These questions persist in German society, and accordingly Winnetou’s character lives on. Yet the trilogy’s omnipotence means that contemporary Natives Americans remain trapped in the amber of the German imagination, forced forever to embody irreconcilable contradictions.

Relentless Pace and Constant Threat: Plot Sketches of Winnetou: Volumes I-III

Winnetou: Volume I

Fresh off the boat and hungry to make his fortune, twenty-year-old Charlie from Saxony arrives in St. Louis to work as a private tutor. Soon, however, Mr. Henry, a Western weapon maker, sees Charlie’s potential as a Westmann. Charlie receives a Bärentöter (bear slayer gun) and is sent off to work as a railroad surveyor with Sam Hawkens, a German immigrant, and a band of Yankees. Charlie rises in the ranks, revealing a bevy of skills he learned from German adventure novels. He soon earns the moniker “Old Shatterhand” because he can knock a man out with one punch. Shatterhand meets Klekih-Petra, the German teacher of the Apache Chief Intschu-tschuna, and his son, Winnetou. In an act of rage, one of the other surveyors tries to murder Winnetou, but Klekih-Petra jumps in front of him to take the bullet. His dying wish is that Shatterhand stay with Winnetou, be his faithful friend, and convert him to Christianity.
Soon after, Winnetou and Intschu-tschuna are taken captive by the Kiowa and Shatterhand risks his life to free them. Shatterhand is wounded and Winnetou’s beautiful sister, Nscho-tschi, nurses him back to health on her brother’s orders. Although he is an enemy to the Apache, she falls deeply in love with Old Shatterhand. After proving himself through physical feats, Old Shatterhand is admitted to the Apache tribe as a chieftain, and Old Shatterhand and Winnetou swear blood brotherhood. The young German trains as an Indian, learns the Apache language, and acquires physical endurance through a series of tests.

But the Apache’s safety comes under threat when a secret Apache gold mine is discovered by a band of Yankees. Santer, the leader of these villains, murders Intschu-tschuna and Nscho-tschi. After this climactic tragedy, Winnetou and Old Shatterhand face their greatest challenge yet: to avenge the deaths of their dearest loved ones.

Winnetou: Volume II

This volume picks up with Old Shatterhand working as a detective in New Orleans and Winnetou in Mexico. Along his journey, Shatterhand meets another German Westmann, Old Death, and fights the loathed KKK. Once Old Shatterhand reunites with Winnetou, they travel through Mexico and Winnetou leads victorious battles in the Mexican War of Independence. At the end of the book, Winnetou departs once again to pursue Santer (who is still on the loose, terrorizing the West).

Winnetou: Volume III

In the third and final volume, Shatterhand finds a fortune of diamonds on the prairie, but his party is attacked and the group’s treasures are stolen by bandits.
culminating battle, Winnetou is separated from Shatterhand. Santer shoots Winnetou, then escapes with his gold and Winnetou's last will and testament. As Winnetou lies dying in his blood brother’s arms, he confesses that he believes in the Savior and has become a faithful Christian.

Old Shatterhand and Santer face off in the cave filled with Winnetou’s treasures, but “the Great Spirit” intervenes: the cave crumbles and Santer is crushed along with Winnetou’s riches. Old Shatterhand climbs through the rubble to recover Winnetou’s will; he learns that the noble chief’s riches would have been used to reduce poverty in the Indian nations so that they might have peace instead of revenge. But Winnetou’s treasures have been destroyed and his dream of uniting the Native people will never come to fruition. Old Shatterhand ends his tale with a solemn lamentation that this great work was thwarted and that the Apache will “disappear.”

“Deutschland über alles!”: Transculturation and the Teutonized Indian

Many literary frontiersmen possess superhuman strength, taste for adventure, natural intelligence, and Christian virtue. But only Old Shatterhand possesses the ingredient essential to his domination and popularity: German blood. When Charlie leaves his life in Saxony, he enters a version of “America” that is essentially a transplanted version of his home. Indeed, May’s West is so heavily inflected with German identity that it makes America seem like a German vassal state. Shatterhand and his German-born companions “drink German beers, hear German music, sing German songs, and read (authentic) German newspapers” (Cracroft 257). This national stamp seems fitting. At that juncture, Bismarck and the Hohenzollerns were
busy inaugurating a new era for a united, proud Germany. Germanic presence in the
trilogy is not limited to products apparently available on the American frontier; May’s
ardent nationalism shows itself in the innate superiority of his German characters. It is
not enough to be European-born or a Christian; to be a true hero of the West, you
must be “made in Germany.”

Given the large waves of migration following the failed 1848 revolutions,
May’s representation of a disproportionate German presence is not so far-fetched.
The unbelievable part about May’s German characters is not that they are so
numerous, but that they are uniformly moral and upright. Although their names do
not sound German (Charlie, Henry, Klekih-Petra, Old Death), their ideals, virtues,
and priorities are immaculately Teutonic. In May’s wishful construction of history, all
Germans are anti-imperialists, devout Christians, advocates for Native Americans,
and even easily incorporated into tribal nations. Their essential German
characteristics are made more obvious by their stark contrast to the failings of other,
non-German characters.

Winnetou’s villains are essentially a “who’s who” of Germany's economic and
dgeo-political competitors in the Wilhelminian period. Thieving, greedy Yankees,
racist Southern Klansmen, sinful Mormons, brash “half-breeds,” and ostentatious
Spaniards provide foils to the honorable Germans. Non-German settlers repulse the
reader with their bloodlust, intemperance, boastfulness, greed, vulgar treatment of
Native women, and hypocrisy. May’s two biggest charges against these characters are
those of racism and over-civilization. Unlike the Spanish and French-born figures of
the American frontier, Old Shatterhand is austere and not feminized by his cultural
education. He is learned, but not afraid to get dirty. Further, Old Shatterhand abhors the racial slurs flung by Southern and Yankee characters: his anti-racist ethos opposes the notion that “the Reds are just thieves, conmen, and robbers!” (Winnetou I 93).

Differences in nationality are not just evident in behavior, they are also represented physically in the text. For instance, Winnetou’s murderer, Santer has “genuine, crafty Yankee features” (Winnetou I 86). While Old Shatterhand is well equipped to defend himself against these villains the immorality of non-German settlers is portrayed as a threat to the Natives.

Many tribes are described as “tainted” by their proximity to American settlers. At several points, Shatterhand muses that if an “Indian” was wicked and cruel, the palefaces would carry the blame. He laments the absolute destruction wrought by Yankee cruelty:

It was not just a hospitable welcome, but a godlike reverence that the first palefaces received from the Indians. What reward was repaid to them? The land that indisputably belonged to them was taken from them. Anyone who has heard the history of those “famous” Conquistadors knows how the blood flowed and the cruelties that occurred. From this pattern, the story has been carried forward. The Whites came with sweet words on their lips but with sharpened knives in their belts and weapons in their hands. They promised love and freedom and delivered hate and blood. The Reds had to give way, step by step, further and further. From time to time, they were granted “eternal” rights to “their” territory, but after a short while they were driven from their grounds. Always the same. Whites “sold” them their land, but did not pay them or only offered them worthless trinkets, that they could not use for anything. But the stealthy poison of “Fire Water” was given to them intentionally, as well as the smallpox and many other worse and more disgusting diseases which eradicated entire tribes and depopulated entire villages. (Winnetou I 6)

May’s introductory description of the eradication, subjugation, and dispossession of Native Americans is highly sympathetic, yet colored by distinctly Eurocentric and patriarchal ideology. For instance, the “god-like reverence” that welcomed white
conquerers is a massive generalization. Further, in May’s account, the mechanics of genocide are attributed entirely to the Conquistadors and the “Whites.” The German reader would not identify with these groups, even though Germans experienced significant indirect profit from American expansionism. Contact with American civilization is envisioned as a corroding force. Yet May asserts that Native contact with Germans leads to beneficial cultural exchange.

Relationships between Germans and Indians are not clear-cut instances of acculturation or deculturation. That is, May does not visualize either a complete cultural appropriation or a complete loss of culture in the interactions between German and Native peoples. Rather, these interactions meet the definition of transculturation. Transculturation, a term coined by the anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in 1940, designates transmutations of identity in Cuba following the commercialization of tobacco and sugar in the Americas. Transculturation, as opposed to acculturation or deculturation, refers to “the process of transition from one culture to another” and “carries the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena, which could be called neoculturation” (Ortiz 102–03). In May’s West (and in many cases on the actual frontier) white encroachment created more porous barriers between cultural groups. Tribal nations and individuals could adopt and alter Western practices to best fit their needs. Whites, in turn, purposefully or incidentally adopted Native practices that they found desirable. It is crucial to note that while transculturation offered some autonomy, such processes of cultural exchange took place under conditions of significant power differential.
Evidence of transculturation is unmistakable in *Winnetou*: most of the Native warriors mentioned use both traditional weaponry and rifles and muskets, Native nations engage in commerce with Americans, and high-ranking individuals speak in English to the *Westmänner*. But May attaches different significance to these cultural exchanges. Some earn his approval and some evidence the “decline” of the Native. Native use of whites’ weaponry is not explicitly condemned. But the most valiant Native warriors do not use settler’s weapons and are considered superior because they can defeat the Palefaces without using “modern” weaponry. Further, speaking English is an assumed skill in the United States, but speaking German evidences “refinement.” Yet May judges negatively other forms of adoption of colonial culture, like the consumption of alcohol. May’s representations suggest that adoption of German culture by Native Americans elevates them, whereas practices of “American culture” are associated with debasement. In other words, if tribes take on American ways (drinking “fire-water,” looting trains), they have lost themselves. But if they incorporate “German” ways (Christianity, education), they are on the path to higher enlightenment.

By the time Old Shatterhand meets Winnetou and Intschu-tschuna, they have already been thoroughly Teutonized. Their physical descriptions imply a contrast between the *noble* Indians (the chief and his son) and the *others*. Because Winnetou was raised under the tutelage of Klekih-Petra and the chief, he has benefitted from a syncretic German and Apache education. May emphasizes the simultaneous “Indian-ness” and “German-ness” of the young warrior; his “Indian-ness” becomes apparent in the physical descriptions of his bronzed cheekbones and strength, but May
alternatively suggests similarities with a young European prince or a Greco-Roman statue. Klekih-Petra notes, for instance that “if he were the son of a European ruler, he would become a great general and even a prince of peace” (Winnetou I 109). While May represents members of the Kiowa, Oglala, and Ponca tribes as speaking in pidgin German and using phrases like “Uff, uff,” Winnetou speaks Hochdeutsch, the High German dialect of Saxony on which Luther drew for the language of his Bible translation. Winnetou hardly ever uses Apache vocabulary. He talks like an educated, middle-class German, except in his occasional use of “Howgh, ich habe gesprochen” (I have spoken). He is, in May’s fantasy, a spiritual child of Germany.

This Teutonic Apache prince repeatedly surprises and impresses Old Shatterhand with his grace.

He stood next to me in a light, fine robe. He held no weapons and clasped a book in his hand, on whose binding Hiawatha was visible in golden script. Apparently, this Indian, the son of a people who were counted as “savages,” was not only literate: he possessed the sense and taste for the higher things. Longfellow’s illustrious poem in the hands of an Apache Indian! I never could have dreamt it! (Winnetou I 250)

Unlike Rousseau’s or Cooper’s “noble savages,” Winnetou is a civilized human being, a Teutonized Indian who willingly embraces the best of European culture and blends it with German stereotypes of Apache culture. An imagined transcultural figure, Winnetou reflects the version of Germany that nationalists longed to see: high culture, infallible ethics, warrior spirit, refinement, and boundless strength.

Yet May also endows Winnetou with contradictions: while he possesses the strength and grace of a European prince, he is also subjugated by greedy, drunken Yankees. His strength and dominance are unmatched by any settlers. But Winnetou is also characterized by his invisibility. May fetishizes his body for its quintessential
manliness, but in many moments Winnetou seems incorporeal. He lurks evasively in the shadows, imperceptible to white senses, and disembodied in his stealth. Even when the reader knows he is there, Winnetou seems to vanish off the page. Although the trilogy bears his name, for much of the three volumes Winnetou is absent, pursuing vague revenge missions or engaging in unspecified Apache battles. Indeed, for the majority of Winnetou II, Winnetou is out of sight and out of mind, leading troops to victory in the Mexican-American War (despite the fact that his sister and father have just been murdered). May might have focused on battles in Mexico and Winnetou's emotions after this tragedy. Instead, he dedicates the second volume to Old Shatterhand’s time as a detective in New Orleans. When Winnetou reappears in the primary narrative in Winnetou III, for large sections of the text his only action is to listen dutifully.

Winnetou’s imbedded cultural contradictions seem to necessitate his disappearance from the narrative; German figures, on the other hand, are elevated by their adoption of “Native ways.” For example, when Shatterhand first meets Klekih-Petra, the border between “civilized” and “savage” is blurred:

We looked in the direction from which we heard the words and saw a man emerge from behind trees. He was small, haggard, and hunchbacked and dressed and armed like a red man. One could barely tell if he was white or Indian. His sharp, angular face was stern and the color of his deeply suntanned face had probably once been white. He wore his head uncovered; his dark hair hung over his shoulders. His outfit consisted of Indian leather pants, a hunting jacket of the same material and simple Moccasins. He was only armed only with a pistol and dagger. His eyes seemed exceptionally intelligent, and he did not make a humorous impression, despite his deformity. After all, only coarse and unintelligent people could wrinkle their noses at an undeserved physical defect or deformity.

(Winnetou I 88-89)
Klekih-Petra wears the garb of Indians, carries Native weaponry, and his skin is darkened by sun exposure. As the reader soon learns, this appearance is his choice; Klekih-Petra assumed this out of a feeling of duty. He confides to Old Shatterhand the shame he feels for having taken part in the anti-authoritarian revolutions of 1848. Klekih-Petra calls himself a “thief” and a “murderer.” Filled with guilt for having disobeyed his family and his nation, he had contemplated suicide on numerous occasions, but was saved by the grace of “God’s hand” (*Winnetou I* 107–109). After returning to God’s path and repenting his sins against the Vaterland, Klekih-Petra “fled from the world” and came to the West to atone for the murders he had committed by alleviating “the destiny of the Red Man” (107). Klekih-Petra laments that he could not save him, but “could do what was possible: to relieve his death and in his last hours let the gaze of love and reconciliation fall on him” (109).

Klekih-Petra’s life mission is the Germanization of the Apache (with the explicit goal of Winnetou’s conversion). Like some true-to-life missionaries in Indian Country, Klekih-Petra plays Indian as a full-time job. As Green notes in her analysis of settlers’ desire to play Indian:

> They have to. They are surrounded. And they are absorbed with dealing with the Indians. Even, perhaps, doing these things that went beyond necessity. Maybe it was fun… Perhaps, more than just a little bit, did they come to enjoy the loosening of European boundaries, the *frisson* that comes with acting out a different role? We do know they took the role with alacrity and vigor. (Green 1988 32)

Certainly Klekih-Petra goes beyond what is expected of a German missionary and teacher; his embodiment of Apache culture is absolute. Yet May represents this appropriation as a sacrifice; like many contemporary German hobbyists, Klekih-Petra believes adamantly that “playing Indian” is not a game. The teacher’s “sacrifice” for
“his” tribe is compelling: he literally takes a bullet for his pupil and transfers the task of Winnetou’s conversion to Old Shatterhand. Old Shatterhand must pass the torch of Christianity to the Apache.

Although he begins as a railroad surveyor and facilitates the project of American Empire, Old Shatterhand quickly moves beyond the ignorance of his Yankee co-workers. He has already learned all necessary frontier skills from German adventure novels. His co-workers hate his superiority: “Damn you and your books!” (Winnetou I 33). Soon the only people who have anything left to teach him are the Apache. Shatterhand’s experience is what Green calls the “semi-Indian life,” one that is staged and self-conscious. His appropriation of their culture, however, is not as thorough as Klekih-Petra’s. Although Old Shatterhand is committed to learning the skills of the American West and fulfilling Klekih-Petra’s dying wishes, his strength lies in his essential German-ness. For Klekih-Petra and Old Shatterhand, the adoption of Apache traditions and the drive to “play Indian” are deliberate and seemingly ethical choices. Both German men retain their core “German-ness,” while choosing to adopt the Apache practices that suit them (clothing, tracking practices, medicine).

“Playing Indian” in these cases expresses a conscious choice to retreat from white civilization’s decadence; it also offers the sole opportunity they see to save the “Native.”

May’s representation of cultural exchange epitomizes Rosaldo's concept of imperialist nostalgia in which “someone deliberately alters a form of life and then regrets that things have not remained as they were prior to his or her intervention” (108). There is a wistfulness and guilt implicit in Winnetou's representations of
transculturation; although the American frontier is not a familiar place for May, he
nevertheless longs for and sympathizes with the Apache. May crafts an imaginary
past, in which Germans could “play Indian” in harmony with refined Apache princes.
Rosaldo recalls the root of *nostalgia: nostos* “to return home” and *algia* “a painful
condition” (108). German readers can “return home” to *Winnetou’s* Germanized
frontier and feel good about lamenting the Apache “decline” because May makes it
clear that Germany is not complicit in Native genocide.

“I Can’t Be Tied to an Indian Girl”: Frontier Love and Miscegenation Anxiety

In *Winnetou* nearly incessant, violent battles for control of the West take
place. The villains are unambiguous and the means of “winning” are clear. But May’s
*Westmänner* also wage quieter, more complex wars: over their own lust. As May
portrays it, desire on the frontier is problematic: frontiersmen sublimate it and express
it in inappropriate, murky, and violent ways. As in many literary representations of
the Wild West, the specters of miscegenation, rape, and homosexuality hover in the
background of *Winnetou*. These possibilities are at once tempting and threatening to
the male-dominated community. Although May never experienced frontier life, he
was familiar with the treachery of lust. His own Wild West, Waldheim Prison, had
taught him about the temptations and brotherhood found in masculine environments.
Against the backdrop of his own experiences, May chose to depict a world almost
devoid of women. The romantic plot elements in *Winnetou* are therefore de-
emphasized. Although desire is highly sublimated, the reader gets glimpses of the
potential for entrapment, betrayal, and violence in intimacy.
May worked within the conventions of his age and place, meaning that he had specific guidelines for the types of romances that he could represent. Interracial relationships and homosexual relationships were coded as corruptive, abhorrent, and at odds with the mission of civilization. Coercion, while expected in every other facet of Native–white relations, was considered unacceptable in a romantic situation. In the text, rape and mistreatment of Native women are hinted at but portrayed as the actions of villains. The core characters and heroes seem incapable of such behavior. Same-sex desire lurks as an unarticulated but constant presence in the relationship between Shatterhand and Winnetou. While homosexuality and miscegenation anxiety infiltrate Winnetou more often than explicit sexual violence, all forms of interracial relationships are represented with significant ambivalence and discomfort. Desire is always downplayed and disarmed. We encounter no steamy romances or expressions of passion, but desire seems to constitute an ever-present threat on the frontier.

In a household terrorized by his father’s alcoholism and abusive behavior, May survived his childhood only because of women. Yet he refused to create female characters endowed with complexity or nuance. The women in Winnetou adhere to a strict binary: they are princesses or “squaws.” Although today we identify this term as an ethnic and sexual slur, May uses it consistently to refer to Native women from all tribes. May’s European readers probably knew the term and would assume it was “authentic.”

Rayna Green illuminates the colonial logic inherent to May’s princess–squaw dichotomy in her essay “The Pocahontas Perplex: The Image of Indian Women in
American Culture.” Green focuses on representations of Native women in early American literary works such as James Nelson Barber’s *The Indian Princess, or, La Belle Sauvage* (1808), which was translated widely in Europe. Barber’s text and the subsequent commercialization of Pocahontas offered Americans and Europeans an alternative model for Indian-white relations. The Indian princess is young, leaner in the Romanesque rather than Greek mode, and distinctly Caucasian, though her skin remains slightly tinted in some renderings. She wears the loose, flowing gowns of statuary rather than animal skins, and Roman sandals grace her feet. (Green 1975 702)

In addition to her civilized beauty, the princess is elevated by her proximity to power. As the daughter of the chief, she has the potential to bear warrior sons. She is Mother, Queen, and Lover, simultaneously sexual and pure. To “solve” this paradox, the princess either proves her purity by betraying her tribe or falls from grace. To remain pure, “she must defy her own people, exile herself from them, become white, and perhaps suffer death” (Green 1975 704).

In Green’s typology, a princess who has fallen from grace is relegated to the category of “squaw.” She is the anti-Pocahontas, a woman who preys on white men’s virtue and debases herself. The “squaw” represents the descent to the “Ignoble Indian:” she exchanges her body for money, smokes tobacco, and carries the burdens of age and work. Princesses exist only in a romantic rescue narrative, but “squaws,” or non-princesses, exist on the real frontier. Their existence poses a threat to the alleged purity of the white race and intrudes on the white consciousness. Although white men seem repulsed by her, the allegory of the princess’s descent to a “squaw” is ceaselessly reiterated in songs and physicalized in cigar-store statues. “Some had corrugated places on their hips to light the store patron’s matches” (Green 1975 712)
The “squaw” and the princess exist in opposition to one another because of their relationships with white men: “As the Squaw, her physical removal or destruction can be understood as necessary to the progress of civilization, even though her abstracted sister, the Princess, stands for that very civilization” (Green 1975 714). Although their categories are at odds, they are complementary in colonial logic; both the princess and the “squaw” must be destroyed.

This sexist dichotomy come into play in Winnetou when Shatterhand contracts Tetanus being stabbed in the tongue. Winnetou inflicts the wound on his enemy, then mercifully allows him to recover in the Apache camp.

In a corner by the entrance sat two Indian women, there for the double duty of nursing and observation, one old and one young. The old one was ugly, like most old, red squaws who have been overworked throughout their lives. Women had to bear the most strenuous work, because the men spent their time at war, living on the hunt, or otherwise idle. (Winnetou I 253–254)

This unnamed woman, the first “squaw” Shatterhand encounters, is coded as repellent, even animal-like. Like the fictional black Mammy of the Jim Crow era, the “squaw” is visualized in terms that stress her undesirability: coarse, matronly, and obese. She is there to nurse Shatterhand back to health and, like the Mammy, she seems content to serve this white man. Because the older woman does not speak English or German, she does not and cannot talk back. Her only contribution is “uff, uff” or bits of broken Apache dialect. Desexualized, this woman exhibits a monstrous form of motherhood that distinguishes her from “refined white women.” The “squaw” also serves colonial logic by offering proof that so-called Indian ways are crueler than the division of labor in a European marriage. Evidently, the “unequal” division of labor is a primary concern for May, since he includes this issue in his first description.
of a Native woman in the entire trilogy. Unlike a delicate *Fräulein*, in this typology, Native women are “forced” to engage in manual labor and pick up the slack of their “idle” husbands. By criticizing the “unjust” labor of Apache women, May ventures to justify hetero-patriarchal oppression intrinsic to capitalism and again reminds his German readers—male or female—of their superiority.

In contrast to the unnamed old woman, Shatterhand is deeply impressed by the young Indian girl who also nurses him:

The younger woman was beautiful, genuinely very beautiful. If she had been dressed in a European manner, she would have drawn attention in any salon. She wore a long, light blue, chemise-like robe with a high neck and a belt fastened around her waist made from a rattlesnake skin . . . Her only adornment consisted of her long, magnificent hair, which fell in two thick, blue-black braids past her hips. This hair reminded me of Winnetou’s. Her face, too, was very similar to his. They had the same velvety black eyes, which hid under long, lush lashes, as if they held an unfathomable secret. Instead of prominent Indian cheekbones, she had soft and full cheeks that merged into a chin with dimples that many European girls would have envied. She spoke quietly with the old woman, surely so that she would not wake me. When she opened her well-arched mouth for a smile, I saw a flash of teeth like the purest ivory between her red lips. Her finely structured nose seemed to indicate Greek ancestry rather than Indian. The color of her skin was a light coppery bronze with a silver tint. (Winnetou I 254)

Nscho-tschi, who, Shatterhand learns, is indeed Winnetou’s sister, epitomizes Green’s princess trope. May’s princess has distinctly European beauty: she lacks stereotypically “Indian” features—a stoic expression, high cheekbones, and a pronounced nose. Nscho-tschi seems like a goddess transported from European antiquity. Her teeth are not just white, they are expensive “ivory,” and her skin is not merely brown, it is “light coppery bronze with a silver tint,” a description that evokes the kinds of mineral riches found in Western soil. In May’s typical classist fashion, the “noble” part of “noble savage” is linked intimately to wealth and antiquity.
Unlike the older woman, Nscho-tschi manifests elegance and eloquence. She speaks to Shatterhand in crystal-clear English (represented by *Hochdeutsch*), but she communicates primarily through her “secretive,” velvety-black eyes. While Shatterhand is still feverish, she speaks about his planned torture “without a trace of doubt,” in a “callous” way (*Winnetou* I 259). Soon, however, her most determined efforts fail her and she can no longer resist her malnourished German detainee. Nscho-tschi’s body becomes altered by her love for Shatterhand: her eyes pine and her heart aches. As Shatterhand restores his physical dominance in the Apache camp, he simultaneously drains Nscho-tschi of her power. The princess becomes tormented by infatuation, torn between her affection for the enemy and her allegiance to her entire community. To persuade him to marry her (which would surely save him from death), she makes the case that “squaws” are less barbarous than white women:

Don’t your squaws keep birds in cages in their bedrooms? Do they not know what kind of torture this is for the birds? Do they not sit in the thousands to watch racing horses be ridden to death? Aren’t your squaws there, watching boxers get mauled? I am a young, unexperienced girl, and I am called one of the ‘savages.’ But I could identify many things that your tender squaws do without shuddering that I could not. Count the many thousands of delicate, beautiful, white women who beat their slaves to death and stand with smiles watching a black handmaiden be lashed to death. (*Winnetou* I 321)

May conveys his anti-slavery (though not abolitionist) stance through the beautiful, wise Nscho-tschi. Once again, the burden of “barbarousness” falls on the shoulders of American and “white” civilization, while the German subject stands in judgment. Although history contradicts this, May’s critique implies that the white women who “beat their slaves to death and stand with smiles” could not be Germans. Even in her
moments of frustration with whiteness, Nscho-tschi remains graceful and proud, always fighting for Shatterhand’s best interests.

When all is resolved between Shatterhand and the Apache, there still remains the problem of Nscho-tschi’s love. Like the Teutonic knight, Shatterhand must be respectable and chivalrous. He may appreciate Nscho-tschi’s beauty for its aesthetic value, but he must not be romantically motivated or drawn to her sexually. Although Winnetou offers to transform his sister into a learned “white squaw,” Shatterhand still cannot be allowed to enter into a mixed marriage. Nscho-tschi plans to go to a white school in St. Louis and learn how to give her husband “all the things that a red girl cannot offer” (*Winnetou* I 363). But even cultural transfer cannot erase the racial differences between Nscho-tschi and her white prince.

Despite May’s approval of cultural exchange between Germans and Indianer, he envisions a strict divide between culture and race. *Winnetou* undeniably expresses the pervasive racial theories of late nineteenth-century Germany. May and his readers likely drew their understandings of race from Charles Darwin’s distinctions between “civilized” and “savage” races. *Winnetou* adheres to the common German understanding that racial groups could be classified along a spectrum of complexity and refinement. If one had evolved, one could not or did not return to a primitive state. The spectrum usually adhered to strict colorism: African peoples ranked at the bottom, Native Americans in the middle, and the Anglo-Teutonic imagined to be the most advanced. *Winnetou*, on its surface, seems more concerned with tribes and culture than with race. However, scientific racism is central to May’s view of interracial romance and the “dangers” of miscegenation.
Nscho-tschi exhibits the potential to receive the German cultural heritage and promises to become a “delicate, beautiful squaw” fit for her German lover. But there is a racial component to their potential romance that May simply cannot countenance. No amount of schooling in St. Louis could make Nscho-tschi “truly white” enough. A marriage between Nscho-tschi and Old Shatterhand would imply procreation (and the dreadful prospect of “half-breed” children). Although this fear is not expressly articulated, May cannot let Old Shatterhand jeopardize his respectability and taint the “sacred” German bloodline. Hybridity would constitute a blight on Teutonic blood, a theme reiterated throughout German history. The alternative to marriage would be extra-marital sex, which, however, would disqualify Nscho-tschi as a princess and relegate her to the category of “squaw.” To “solve” the problem of miscegenation and save her purity, May’s colonial logic dictates that the princess must die.

However, one must note that in earlier versions of Winnetou I (before it was revised in the collected volume), the princess did end up with Old Shatterhand. Ribbanna, the 1876 version of Nscho-tschi’s character, was more of a temptress and less of a princess. But in his move away from adult literature, May felt he had less room for sexuality and moral ambiguity. Thus Nscho-tschi’s death becomes inevitable in Winnetou; even her name, which translates to “beautiful day,” implies her transience. In a departure from the classic trope that Green illustrates, Nscho-tschi does not kill herself. Suicide, according to May’s faith, would have barred Nscho-tschi’s entry into heaven. Instead, she and her father are murdered by greedy whites and victimized by the very “civilization” that promised her salvation. Nscho-tschi is shot in the heart and dies with Shatterhand’s name on her lips. Her death not only
removes the danger of racial hybridization, it also provides the protagonists with a new revenge plot. Shatterhand ruminates ceaselessly about how to destroy her murderer, but he does not think about Nscho-tschi often. He finds a different outlet for his longings and desires.

Shatterhand’s primary sexual object is Nscho-tschi’s doppelgänger, her actual brother, Winnetou. In *Sitara und der Weg dorthin: Eine Studie über Wesen, Werk und Wirkung Karl Mays* (1963), the writer Arno Schmidt offers a Freudian analysis of the homosexual themes and imagery in *Winnetou* and May’s “Orient” stories. This widely read but often disputed text grounds its argument in May’s use of sexually suggestive landscapes. For example, Schmidt identifies a “devil’s pass syndrome,” noting that characters are entrapped by their enemies in circular, “anal” formations. Although his symbolic interpretations are farfetched, Schmidt provides a useful backdrop for the manly love between Winnetou and Shatterhand. Winnetou’s and Shatterhand’s guns, which Schmidt calls phallic symbols, are originally aimed against one another in competition. But as their relationship progresses, Old Shatterhand and Winnetou are united in love and violence.

Winnetou’s feminization is evident in the initial descriptions of his hair and skin. The emasculation of Winnetou’s body is furthered by the constant association of Winnetou with his sister. Unlike his cool diffidence toward Nscho-tschi, Shatterhand’s attitude toward Winnetou has an obsessive and fetishistic quality. He thinks of Winnetou constantly when they are apart and always wonders how he can best carry out his wishes. Shatterhand displays dominance and composure, yet his
thoughts about Winnetou seem uncontrollable. His mind always “wanders” or “drifts” to thoughts of the Apache chief. As he reflects after his initiation ceremony:

We were a soul with two bodies. We understood one another without having to communicate our thoughts, feelings, or decisions. We only had to look at one another to know exactly what we would do; indeed, even this was unnecessary. Rather we handled ourselves in such a way that even when we were far from one another, we worked with truly astounding consensus and there was never, never any difference between us. This was . . . a truly natural consequence of our intimate, shared affections, tenderness, and attunement of one to the outlook and individuality of the other. (Winnetou I 346)

Notions of “oneness” and merging are heightened in the original German (repetition of Eingehens, Einlebens, and Einen). Indeed, the intensity of the two characters’ connection is unmistakable. Conveniently, Shatterhand understands Winnetou without consulting with him (perhaps a more idealized version of the relationship Mark Twain imagines between Huck and Jim). Shatterhand knows what his blood brother wants because they share one soul. Therefore, they need no one but each other. In fact, both reject the companionship of women and seem to lack passionate feelings for anyone else.

Homosexuality as an identity marker would not have existed in May’s imagined world. Same-sex attraction, however, was likely familiar to May. As Schmidt and other scholars note, May’s artistic muse and close friend Sascha Schneider was an out gay man. Given the criminalization of homosexuality in Germany during this period, the term “out” does not fully encompass the degree to which gay people were forced to conceal themselves. Schneider was out in that he had a long-time male partner and did not deny his attractions to his friends. Given that Schneider lived in Villa Shatterhand, it is likely that May knew of his friend’s
sexuality. Some scholars of the Karl-May-Gesellschaft maintain that the two had a sexual partnership, but I understand these accounts as mostly speculative.

The relationship between Winnetou and Shatterhand would not necessarily have been read as gay in the trilogy's original period. Readers saw no threat in their mystical, romantic brotherhood. The perception that the blood-brothers’ intimacy was nonsexual apparently endured in Germany, since Winnetou was not banned by the Reich Chamber of Culture (Reichskulturkammer). Perhaps the relationship between Winnetou and Old Shatterhand evoked the familiar dichotomy of ancient Roman sexuality: active/dominant/masculine and passive/submissive/feminine. Binaries like this would have been familiar to Germans in the nineteenth century. Brotherhood found in battle, for example, would have resonated with the heavily militaristic society. The cult of virility was a palatable version of male homosexuality, one that emphasized the beauty of the male form and the power of dominance. Given May’s obsession with antiquity (Roman noses, warrior virtue, and so on), it is more likely that he was writing within a framework of Roman manly love, rather than our contemporary understanding of homosexuality.

Evidently, for May a fantasy of same-sex love was more acceptable than a fantasy of love that threatened miscegenation. This might seem contradictory, given that Winnetou is also Apache. But Winnetou’s relationship with Shatterhand has a different colonial logic. When Shatterhand loves Winnetou, he remains uncorrupted by the “squaw” and in turn does not corrupt the princess. He maintains his purity and position of dominance by not giving in to his lust, but does so in sublimated, culturally permissible way. Each of these relationships relies on a binary of colonial
possession. The white man wields sexual power over others to subdue them. But in a homoerotic relationship, Shatterhand does not encounter the question of procreation. He can display unabashed love for and intimacy with the Apache body without “tainting” the purity of the Teutonic blood line.

**Destined for Desecration: The Vanishing Landscape of Winnetou**

Winnetou and Shatterhand spill blood and share love amid the beautiful, mythical landscape of the West. The representation of American topography is heavily shaped by May’s understandings about the effects of colonial dispossession.

He writes with passive sympathy for “the Reds,” for instance:

> The wild herds of mustangs, from whose midst he once boldly retrieved his riding horse, where have they gone? Where does one see the buffalos which populated the prairies by the millions and nourished him? What does he live on today? On the flour and meat that you give him? Look and see how much plaster and other nice things you can find in this flour; who could possibly enjoy it! And if a tribe was promised a hundred “extra fat” oxen, then they are actually given two to three old, emaciated cows, from which a vulture could barely tear a bite. Or is a Red supposed to live on agriculture? Can he depend on his crops, he without rights, who is continually displaced and never allowed an enduring sanctuary?

> What a beautiful, proud sight he used to be, flying over the whole savannah, blown with the mane of his mustang. And how miserable and degenerate he appears now, in rags that cannot even cover his nakedness. He, who once brimmed over with strength and fought the terrible grey bear with only his fists, now slinks around in the corners like a mangy dog, begging or sneaking a shred of flesh, hungry! (Winnetou I 3)

Territory, possession, and rights occupy the forefront of May’s narrative. He sympathizes with the “noble Indian,” whose land has been stolen by greedy whites. However, in his expressions of futility and lamentations about the loss of culture and loss of strength, May denies the fundamental resiliency of Native peoples. For him, there is a simple correlation between disenfranchisement and corruption: as land is
stolen, the “Indian” is transformed from “a proud, bold, valiant, truth-loving and always sincere hunter” to a “sneaky, mistrustful, [and] lying man” (3).

Although he reveres the resistance of the Apache against their white nemeses and tribal tyrants, May cannot imagine a large-scale Native uprising to reclaim land. Armed insurrection, while imagined between tribes, appears unimaginable as a mechanism by which Native nations could defend themselves against the genocidal expansion of the American government. Violent forms of resistance are purged from May’s colonial fantasy. Revenge of this sort, in May’s logic, cannot happen because the “weaker must give way to the stronger” (Winnetou I 2) He laments this “cruel law,” but sees it as merely a fact of nature (an idea which would have tremendous resonance with Nazi agendas). Like the bison and mustangs, the Natives must “succumb” (weichen) to the will of the strong (Winnetou I 2). May’s logic not only affirms colonial heteropatriarchy, it is also factually incorrect. The bison and mustangs were not completely eradicated, nor, obviously were indigenous peoples. May’s genocidal argument erases Native resiliency and conflates territorial possession with existence. His discourse of inevitability (that America was destined to become the graveyard of its indigenous inhabitants) is an idea quite widespread in American literature at this time (Pfister). Indeed, May was likely schooled in the discourse of inevitability by consuming popular American fictions like Helen Hunt Jackson's Dishonor (1881) and Cooper's The Last of the Mohicans.

Like many American authors of colonial fantasy, May invokes the authority of God to give his arguments about “natural law” legitimacy. To sublimate and ameliorate the destruction of the Indianer for German readers, he used religious terms
like “destiny” (Schicksal) and “reconciliation” (Versöhnung) (Winnetou I 109). Religious vocabulary lends a justification to the desecration he describes. May distances himself from this ruination, saying he can only “complain . . . [he] cannot bring the dead back to life” (Winnetou I 4). May transports the German reader into this landscape of destruction: “We stand compassionately in his miserable den to shut his eyes. To stand at a deathbed is a serious thing, but it is a hundred times more serious to stand at the deathbed of an entire race” (Winnetou I 3). Thus, the Wild West is envisioned as a landscape of death, a final resting place for a “dying man.”

This introduction, which has been excised from several contemporary versions of Winnetou, sets the stage for the epic meta-narrative of the story and for Germans’ role in this battle. Winnetou battles against Manifest Destiny and the physical intrusion of “civilization” into pristine lands. He must protect his land and unite the tribes against the villainy of whiteness, which May represents as a monolithic category that somehow excludes German immigrants. Although it is Winnetou’s land to preserve, May never allows the reader to glimpse this land from Winnetou's perspective. Instead, the sacred homelands of the Apache are aestheticized by Shatterhand’s colonial gaze. Physical spaces become abstracted and symbolic. Homelands become landscapes, terrains altered and designed to please and compel the German reader.

Unlike other colonial writers, May does not characterize America as terra nullius, or “nobody’s land.” He adamantly reiterates throughout the three volumes that the territory he describes belongs to the Apache. However, he wavers in his opinion about whether it should be Indigenous land. Of the progression of what he
calls “Indian civilization,” May says that “the Reds have not found the time [to develop themselves] because they were not granted it” (Winnetou I 2). May adheres to the classic colonialist ideology of what constitutes “modernity” and “progress”; his understanding privileges technology, industrial agriculture, and the transformation of land into landscape. Apache territory, according to May, reflects an absence of development: he describes it as natural, virginal, reminiscent of the way German lands used to be. May focuses considerable attention on the forests, a landscape intimately tied with German national identity. For example, the Dresdner Heide, a forested area close to May’s childhood home, once consisted of hunting grounds like those surrounding his imagined Apache village. Following the rise of commercial agriculture and industrialization, however, stretches of the Dresdner Heide were cleared to make way for suburbs, military districts, and forest parks. In the time during which May was writing, German forests had lost much of their intrinsic wildness. Thus, when he emphasizes the wild, uncontrollable beauty of the Apache land, he gives German readers an opportunity to mourn what they have “lost.”

Romantic representations of nature go hand in hand with the desire to “develop” or “intrude upon” nature. The first intrusion portrayed in Winnetou is that of the railroad, or Fire Mustang (Feuerroß), that Old Shatterhand helps to construct. The Apache resist this infringement on their territory; they have not been consulted about the project, their land has not been purchased, and they are already enraged by the whites’ decimation of the bison. In a speech to the Yankee surveyors, Intschutschuna condemns their hypocrisy and exposes their false Christian ethics, comparing the situation to that of Cain and Abel. “Your laws have two faces and you use only
the one that is to your advantage” (Winnetou I 103). Despite his contributions to the railroad project, Shatterhand quickly identifies himself as a sympathetic bystander: “I’m just here as surveyor, not a lawyer . . . I have to measure [the land], but I don’t have to talk” (Winnetou I 104). Obviously, the construction of the railroad depends on Shatterhand’s measurements. But once he is adopted by the Apache, he demonstrates a passive, wistful attitude toward the Fire Mustang. Like many tragedies in Winnetou, this encroachment is portrayed as an unfortunate inevitability.

Not all territories are equally desirable. The landscapes of New Mexico, Texas, and Arizona are considered romantic, but large swaths of the West are described as barren, ungodly, and uninhabitable. May dwells on the terrors of the Mapimi Desert of Chihuahua, presented as the ugly stepsister of the beautiful Apache forests. Mapimi is deadly, with a “breakneck” descent that opens to the “flaming sky,” a place where skeletal jackals and vultures hunger for human flesh (Winnetou II 292). Native landscapes, like Native women, exist for May in a sharp dichotomy: they are either beautiful, fertile, and vulnerable or ugly, infertile, and impenetrable. The desert cannot be farmed, or “improved,” and it offers no secret riches. Mapimi, according to May, does not have value and does not need to be protected. Hostile land, like the “squaw,” exists to destroy the white man.

The lands most vulnerable to intrusion are lands with treasure, especially mines. Nugget Hill and the silver mine both belong to the Apache, and both are shrouded in mystery. The Apache do not “use” the mines as white men would; they draw from them only when they absolutely need to (for example, to fund Nscho-tschi’s St. Louis schooling). Treasure-filled caves, mines, and secret riches appear
frequently in May’s West. Valuables are found in yonic spaces: their exact locations remain mysterious, they are hidden deep in the earth, and they contain secretive riches. These spaces do not connote feminine power; rather, they imply penetrability and the possibility of desecration. The Apache and Shatterhand do not disrupt the land; they allow riches to go “undiscovered.” May, on the other hand, built his professional life around the acquisition of wealth and literally profited from the decline of the “noble Indian.” He displaces his own lust for riches onto the villains in the Winnetou trilogy, who always end up with the loot they seek. Like May, the “bad guys” take money and treasures where they can find them.

Although he laments the desecration of Native land, wherever Shatterhand turns, destruction follows. Shatterhand remains nothing more than a spectator to theft and destruction: he observes, filled with sympathy for the Natives, the desecration of sacred spaces, theft of Apache land, and “improvement” of profitable territories. Although he is endowed with boundless physical powers, Shatterhand knows that the task of saving the “dying men” is not in his hands (Winnetou I 5). He makes no attempt to save the “vanishing” Indian or protect the land of the West. Shatterhand has allegiance only to Winnetou, “the best, truest, and most faithful of my friends, a true example of his race . . .” (Winnetou I 4). After he watches the loss and desecration of the Apache homeland, Shatterhand saves Winnetou the only way that he knows how, by converting him to the Christian faith.

Onward, Christian Soldiers: Winnetou’s Ascension and the Fate of the Race
In *Winnetou*, “salvation” carries a double meaning. On the one hand, salvation refers to the deliverance from sin brought by Christ’s sacrifice. But in the context of the narrative, salvation also refers to the preservation of the “noble Indian.” For Shatterhand and May, these meanings collapse into one. By converting Winnetou, Shatterhand believes, he can confer salvation on the entire Apache “race.” Although Intschu tschuna, Winnetou, and Nscho-tschi epitomize the “noble Indian” because they have accepted German education, “nobility” in *Winnetou* is inferior to Christianity. The “Christianized savage,” in other words, is superior to the “noble savage.”

Given the deep knowledge of the Christian faith that Winnetou displays, a first-time reader might assume that he has already been converted. He is not only well-versed in Christianity, he is also more pious, spiritually enlightened, and moral than any of the non-German Christian settlers. Winnetou regularly points out the hypocrisy of these “so-called Christians” who claim to act in love, but who enact destruction (*Winnetou* I 351). May makes it clear that while Winnetou received a spiritual education from Klekih-Petra, his religiosity and soulfulness are inherent in his character. Unlike the average disciple of Lutheranism, Winnetou does not follow the teachings of Christ; instead he unknowingly reenacts them. A self-sacrificing savior and spiritual warrior, Winnetou embodies May’s vision of an Apache Jesus.

While it may seem sacrilegious for a believer like May to invite such a bold comparison, at the beginning of the text he suggests a similarity between Winnetou and the young Christ. In his introduction, May describes how Winnetou was born with the weight of an impossible destiny. He rhapsodizes about the inevitable death
that he faces: Winnetou will sacrifice himself and die trying to save his people from imminent destruction.

[He] was the most genuine type of his race . . . and exactly as they perished, so too did he perish, his life extinguished by the murderous bullet of an enemy. I loved him as I have loved no other person and still today I love his dying nation . . . I would have given my life to preserve him, as he had done hundreds of times for me. But this was not granted to me; he went as he always was, a savior to his friends. But he is said to be gone only bodily and lives on here in the pages, as he lives in my soul, WINNETOU, THE GREAT CHIEF OF THE APACHE. (Winnetou I 4)

Here May does not merely introduce Winnetou, he resurrects him, suggesting that, as in biblical scripture, a holy spirit becomes manifested in the text of Winnetou. The text is divinely inspired, commands respect, and speaks in accessible language. May wants to convince his readers that the story of Winnetou is not just true, it is holy and eternal. Although they take place in a specific moment of history, Winnetou’s life and death seem timeless. Because the narrative is written in gripping present tense, Winnetou is forever saving Shatterhand, eternally avenging his family, and the Apache nation is always “dying.” Like Christ, Winnetou’s death forms the focal point of his life. With this end point as its focus, Winnetou’s story is collapsed into illogical pieces that are loosely strung together: the reader witnesses his many deeds and miracles, but these actions do not follow a rational timeline. Winnetou’s life appears as merely a succession of moral fables that precede his death. Similar to Jesus’s, Winnetou’s origins are mythical; he does not seem to have had a childhood and never ages. He just is Winnetou, fixed and infallible.

Although Winnetou understands the teachings of Christ intimately, he does not call himself a Christian. He, like all Natives in Winnetou, worships the “Great Spirit” (Winnetou I 351). This monotheistic deity, also called “Manitou,” is an
essentialized version of diverse Indigenous practices. Natives from all tribes in
*Winnetou* praise, invoke, and curse the “Great Spirit.” Like the Judeo-Christian God,
the “Great Spirit” functions as both a protector and a punisher. He blesses those who
are kind, respectful, and courageous, and he inflicts his wrath on the greedy, weak,
and vengeful. If one pleases the “Great Spirit,” one is allowed to occupy the “Happy
Hunting Grounds” in the afterlife. In May's version, this utopian place is nearly
identical to heaven but more aligned with the divine in nature. The “Great Spirit” and
the “Happy Hunting Grounds” bear a suspicious resemblance to a Lutheran
interpretation of God, indicating that May ignored his ethnological texts when it came
to religion. He also rejected more realistic representations of diverse Indigenous
religious practices. Instead, he erased complexity and whitewashed Apache religious
practices.

This choice not only exemplifies May’s complicity in European hegemony, it
also brings up an interesting question about what types of cultural difference were
considered acceptable. Winnetou’s body and Apache lingo seem calculated to appeal
to a nineteenth-century German readership. But “heathen” practices were deemed too
transgressive for a Christian audience. To neutralize the taboo of polytheism, May
constructs a religion that is Christianity by another name. In fact, even his Christian
settlers use the term “Great Spirit” to refer to their God. May’s approach offers an
example of typical colonialist problem-solving. May simplifies the “problem”
(diverse religious practices) so that he can offer a broad-brush “solution”
(conversion).
Like all other Natives in the story, Winnetou lives by the “Great Spirit.” He is a deeply spiritual man and a critic of Christian hypocrisy. Before his conversion, Winnetou expresses his doubt about believers in Christ:

Your faith might be the right one, but we Red Men cannot understand it yet. If the white men had not displaced us and exterminated us, we would think that you and your teachings were good . . . But he who is slowly and surely forced into death cannot believe that the religion of his murderer is a religion of love. (Winnetou I 352)

When Shatterhand tells Winnetou to “distinguish between the religion and its followers,” Winnetou retorts that all white people ask to be the exception:

I try to be a good person. And perhaps I’m even a Christian, a better Christian than those who call themselves such, but have no love and act only in their own interest. So, do not speak to me ever again about faith and don’t try to make me into one of those men who call themselves Christian, because it will not be! This is my request and you must honor it! (Winnetou I 351)

Winnetou abhors the hypocrisy of Christian colonialists, but he sees himself as a believer in the powers of righteousness and love. The Apache chief does not follow blindly, rather he uses his rationality and innate morality to determine which religious practices are “best.” He also relies on the guidance of two other men, men who share a spiritual bond and common mission.

Winnetou and his two teachers form a version of the “Holy Trinity”: the son (Winnetou), the father (Intschu tschuna), and the holy ghost (Klekih-Petra). Though physically distinct, these three men are united in their souls by one mission, the salvation of the Apache peoples. They are distinct persons, but their “essence” is combined. Unlike the holy trinity of traditional Christian doctrine, in this holy trinity the three once possessed separate bodies of flesh and bones. In the gospel of Winnetou, two of the three (Klekih-Petra and Intschu tschuna) quickly transition from
corporeal bodies to spiritual bodies. After the father and holy ghost are murdered, the trinity’s unity, while no longer physical, remains joined in purpose. The two older men assume a purely spiritual form, yet their “essence” continues to guide Winnetou’s behavior and mission. Winnetou does not act for himself; he acts for the three men’s common commitment.

May visualizes the three central Native figures in Winnetou in a traditionally Christian configuration. Klekih-Petra (the Holy Ghost figure) acts as the protector and source of prophecy. His primary task is to transmit European conceptions of “humanity” to the Apache peoples. But Klekih-Petra also acts as the mediator of fate:

[The Apache’s] fate was chosen; I could not save them; I could only do what was possible for me, lighten their deaths and in their last hours grant them the radiance of love and reconciliation . . . (Winnetou I 109-10)

Klekih-Petra conveys to Shatterhand that their meeting is a “divine stroke of fate” (Gottesfüngung) and predicts his own death, in which he “joyfully” takes a bullet for his “spiritual child” (Winnetou I 110). Like the Holy Ghost in Christian doctrine, Klekih-Petra functions more as an advocate than as an agent. By contrast, Intschutschuna takes a far more active role in the narrative. He is the immense life-giver, the authority, and the protector (both of Winnetou and of his entire Nation). His children are not only Nscho-tschi and Winnetou, but also every tribal member. When Shatterhand joins the Apache, he does so by appealing to and communing with the Father. Intschutschuna responds to the needs of his children and acts in their best interests, but will not refrain from cruelty if necessary. Unlike the Christian Father, the Apache chief is not worshiped, exactly. He commands awe and reverence from everyone he encounters (white or Native). Upon his death, the respect he commands
and the accompanying responsibility become Winnetou's. Thus, the fate of the Apache passes into Winnetou’s capable hands.

One of the earliest acts of Winnetou’s leadership is to induct Shatterhand into the Apache tribe (according to Klekih-Petra’s dying wishes). To secure his tribal membership, Shatterhand performs a ceremony to symbolically transform his body and soul. In a way, this ritual represents the first religious passage in *Winnetou*; Old Shatterhand is “converted” to romanticized “Apache-ism.” This transformation has a distinctly Christian character. According to May, it is the tradition in many “savage or half-savage societies” that Winnetou and Shatterhand must cut themselves and drip their blood into special chalices filled with water from the Pecos River (*Winnetou* I 344). The chalices are blessed with a prayer (or benediction): “The soul lives in the blood. The souls of these two young warriors may merge with one another to create one soul” (*Winnetou* I 345). After the two men drink the blood and water, Shatterhand becomes “the blood of our blood and the flesh of our flesh” (*Winnetou* I 344). Once Shatterhand officially joins the tribe, the men become a single soul housed in two bodies. Unlike his blood brother, however, Winnetou does not get much out of the trade. After their blood mixes, Winnetou loses his potency and his narrative becomes secondary. Indeed, his marked absence in the second volume (despite his relatives’ deaths) and the lack of dialogue for much of the third volume indicate that once Winnetou mixes blood with Shatterhand, he loses an essential part of his vitality. This communion enriches Shatterhand’s strength and saps Winnetou's vitality; he belongs to his brother and is demoted from hero to sidekick.
Given the colonialist literary precedent of Native “cannibals,” May must justify this ceremony for pious readers so that his “noble Indians” are not misunderstood as “blood-thirsty savages.” Shatterhand tells the reader “this was not pleasurable either for the Apache or for me, [the ceremony] had a purely symbolic, and thus figurative meaning” (Winnetou I 346). While physical “mixing” of races is not condoned in Winnetou, intimacy is acceptable if it receives a religious patina. Shatterhand and Winnetou do not like drinking the blood; it merely enables spiritual awakening and transfiguration. Like the taking of the Eucharist, the consumption of “blood and body” brings spiritual enrichment rather than enjoyment. Lutherans believe in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and affirm that the actual blood and body of Christ are present in the form of consecrated bread and wine. In the case of the blood-brotherhood ceremony, May stresses that the consecrated drink is true blood. The sacrament does not have to go through a process of symbolic transformation because it is already pure. Communion affirms that one truly believes in Christ; the communion in Winnetou fulfills a similar purpose. Shatterhand and Winnetou consume each other to affirm their dedication to a shared love.

However, Winnetou’s greatest aspiration never comes to fruition. When Winnetou dies unceremoniously from an enemy’s bullet, his dying wish is for Shatterhand to sing him the “Lied von der Königin des Himmels,” or Ave Maria. “I lay my last living plea / Grant me a believing end / And a blessed resurrection! / Ave, ave Maria!” (Winnetou III 404). As the life drains from Winnetou, “his eyes slowly opened and rose to the heavens with a mild, serene gaze” (Winnetou III 403). Winnetou takes Shatterhand’s hand and places it on his chest, and “with the last of his

There we buried the Indian with Christian prayers and with the honor that demonstrates what a great chief he was: he sits with all his weapons and the entirety of his war decorations upright on his horse in the interior of the mound... On this hill, scalps of slain enemies do not wave in the wind (as one customarily sees on the grave of a chief). Instead there stand three crosses. (Winnetou III 408)

Winnetou’s burial site serves not merely as a monument to his conversion. As May explains, his grave becomes a hub for the continued growth of Christianity for all people, most prominently new settlers. The bell from Winnetou’s grave is reused to found a chapel. Whenever it rings “the pious settlers sing out Ave Maria, they think of the Apache chief and are convinced that he has been fulfilled by the prayers from his dying lips” (Winnetou III 406).

Winnetou's Christian legacy flourishes, but his legacy as a Native leader suffers. In the dramatic events in the cave, Winnetou’s will and testament is destroyed, but Shatterhand deciphers the scraps of the will. He learns that in a final act of sacrifice, Winnetou hoped to divide his wealth to ease the poverty of his people and convert everyone to Christianity (Winnetou III 532). Like that of Jesus, Winnetou’s greatest act is his sacrificial death. But unlike the Christian savior's, Winnetou’s death does not ensure the salvation of his peoples. Winnetou intended his legacy, the Apache riches, to buy back ancestral lands and to convert his people to Christianity. When the cave collapses, the treasure is consigned to oblivion.

Winnetou’s death and the destruction of his wealth, according to May, essentially
ensures the demise of the Apache. In May's capitalist imagination, without money, tribal sovereignty and resistance to the settlers become impossible. The conversion of the Apache is nearly as critical as the commodification of the Apache: according to May, the Apache cannot become members of the elect because they do not put “spirit” into capitalism, nor were they born into Christianity.

Although May blames the predicted downfall of the Apache on white encroachment, Winnetou’s final destruction is not caused by a settler. Rather, the collapse of the cave is brought about by the hand of God himself. May absolves the settlers of responsibility for the losses (both monetary and humanitarian) that they have caused and shifts the blame by making it an act of God. Genocide thus becomes a natural, even divine, intervention. By ending the narrative with the collapse of the cave, May chooses purposeful destruction over reparations or reconciliation. Civilization kills the “unique nature” of the Indian, but Christianity “saves” his soul (Winnetou I 4).

May of course chose the resolution of this narrative, but pretends that the story's outcome eludes his control. As an author, May paradoxically confines himself to acting as a passive witness to the decimation of generational wealth and the loss of the Apache “Christian future.” As the trilogy ends, May envisions the West as a memorial to all Native peoples:

He who stands between the Gros Ventre mountains on the Metsur River before the grave of the Apache will say: “This is the final resting place of Winnetou, a red man, but a great man!” And when the last of the shreds have rotted away between bush and water, only then will a legitimate generation of thinkers and feelers stand before the savannahs and mountains
of the West and say: “Here lies the red race; which did not become great because they were not allowed to become great!” (Winnetou III 534)

According to May, only wealth and conversion would have allowed the “red race” to “become great.” The West becomes not only a symbolic memorial to the lost destiny of these people but also a Holy Land where Winnetou’s sacrifices are written into the topography. May’s readers can contemplate this landscape to mourn the loss of “what once was,” and reflect on their position as members of the elect. Indeed, Winnetou’s spiritual salvation reaffirms Christian-colonial hegemony for all of May’s readers. They receive validation in their beliefs and affirmation of their understanding that the German, Christian people constitute the truly “great” race—greater than non-German whites and greater than the “unfortunate” Apache whom May writes out of existence. Winnetou’s conversion and tragic legacy do not merely enshrine Lutheran beliefs for May’s readers, they also grant May his own form of divinity. By conveying the gospel of Winnetou to his eager listeners, May ensures that he, too, will live on.
Afterword:
“Winnetou Lives!”

“My role is to die.”
Kopit (1969)

May’s adventures suggested to generations of Germans that “given the opportunity, even a book-educated German lower-middle-class adventurer and would-be pioneer could become a powerful colonialist,” and in this way May's imperial imagination anticipated imperial realities (*German Indianthusiasm* 175). May consolidated stereotypes of the ethnic “other” that positioned him as a sympathetic observer and distilled imperial complexities into a digestible, enjoyable form for the German reading public. *Winnetou* was not unique in its use of Native stereotypes, but the trilogy's extraordinary popularity created a form of collective consensus in German society about the ideal relationship between colonizer and colonized (or, more specifically, about the special “kinship” between Native Americans and Germans). The actual connections between indigenous Americans and Germans were tenuous at best, but May’s vision of a conquerable, Germanized landscape and submissive subject established a new tradition of colonialist fantasy that endured long after the death of Winnetou himself. This fantasy, in essence, is that the greatest Apache warrior is literally dying to become a Christian German.

Precisely because of its simplistic morality, its familiarity to German readers, and its compelling protagonists, May’s American West became a uniquely transferable paradigm for German readers. Thus, reconfigurations of May’s *Westmänner* and *Indianer* turn up in unlikely contexts. As Philip Deloria notes in
Indians in Unexpected Places (2004), literary stereotypes create a descriptive shorthand that can manifest itself in action (8). Indeed, Winnetou provided the nineteenth-century German public with a model for idealized, interracial co-operation and the fantasy of a “Germany away from home” fueled the desire for imperialist enterprises in Africa and the Pacific. May not only helped prepare Germans for “adventures” abroad, he also contributed a vision of positive German heroism during a period when Germans suffered from perceived inferiority, economic and social divisions, and unease at rapid modernization. In the nineteenth century, Winnetou facilitated German regeneration through imagined colonization. However, May’s fantasies have transcended their original intention and have been mobilized in ideological contexts that he could not have anticipated.

In his 1940 polemic, “Karl May: Hitler’s Literary Mentor,” Klaus Mann claims that “it is hardly an exaggeration to say that Karl May’s childish and criminal fantasia [has] actually—though obliquely—influenced the history of the world” (393). Mann’s central charge is that May’s “evil influence” contributed to Germans’ acceptance of the Nazi geopolitical agenda: “He had poisoned their hearts and souls with hypocritical morality and the lurid glorification of cruelty . . . The Third Reich is Karl May’s ultimate triumph, the ghastly realization of his dreams” (400). Mann’s dramatic interpretation suggests that Winnetou’s ethics and aesthetics are both un-American and “hopelessly estranged from art”: criminal, foul, and morally perverse (400). This harsh condemnation would not have been challenged by many American readers, since few had any familiarity with May’s work.
Although first conceptualized in the period preceding Germany’s New Imperialism, Winnetou undoubtedly proved resonant for the self-image and cultural agenda of the Nazi party. May’s obvious bravado and his fixation on physical superiority aligned well with Hitler’s conception of the Master Race and obsession with blood purity. For example, May’s rhetoric about the Apache as an unfortunate casualty along the path of Western civilization could easily have been read in alignment with Mein Kampf’s understanding of Lebensraum (“living space,” or the historical destiny of the Germans to expand eastward). Hitler apparently conceptualized Nazi territorial conflicts as battles in terms of May’s imagined American frontier, with the Nazis situated as the conquerors and Russians envisioned as the “dying race.” Allegedly, Hitler referred to the Red Army interchangeably as “Redskins” and Reds (Payne 28). As a man from similarly humble beginnings, Hitler admired May’s self-made prominence and his protagonist’s bravery in unfamiliar contexts. According to Albert Speer’s Spandau: The Secret Diaries (1976), when Hitler sent troops to the African theater, he looked to May as proof that one did not have to be well traveled to know the world (cited by Wood: Speer 384). Despite its obvious inaccuracies, Hitler viewed Winnetou as a historical document and “might well mention Napoleon and Old Shatterhand in the same sentence” (Speer 63). The Westmänner might seem the obvious heroes to racist Nazis, but Hitler also admired Apache warriors as models of militarism and shared the German affinity for resistant yet doomed Indianer.

While Winnetou’s Christian ethos, pacifism, and messages of interracial intimacy might have seemed threatening to the Nazi agenda, the novels’ romantic
justification of ethnic genocide and ardent militarism served the Party’s needs. Beyond his personal affinity for May, Hitler understood that Winnetou was inextricably linked to German Volk identity. The Nazi party formally encouraged the Hitler Youth’s identification with Indianer and sponsored their trips to the Karl-May-Museum. The Party also recommended translated works by contemporary Native authors, including Charles Eastman, and reprinted historical accounts of the New Ulm Massacre (Penny 167). Despite the strict doctrine of racial superiority, Nazi Germany continued to identify with Native Americans. The fantasy of the “Fascist Indian” was an imaginative adaptation of a paradigm already familiar to the German public.

After the fall of the Third Reich, a collective overhaul of massive parts of the national consciousness took place. Whole generations had to relinquish nostalgia for certain aspects of German culture, knowing that many otherwise happy memories were colored by genocide and fascism. But Winnetou never disappeared from German consciousness. The “Fascist Indian” was merely replaced by the “Socialist Indian” of the German Democratic Party (GDR) and the “Democratic Indian” of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG).

East Germany's political elites felt uneasy about May due to his great popularity during National Socialism. On the other hand, May had also been a favorite of anti-fascists like Karl Liebknecht, held up in the GDR as a martyr (Penny 173). Although the Cultural Ministry faced indecision about May’s place in socialist society, even strong supporters of the new state understood that just because an author had been read by fascists it did not mean that everyone who read that author was a fascist. Complaints, petitions, and letters about May’s merits poured in to the Cultural
Ministry from Young Pioneers and adult East Germans. Still, the ministry adopted a position of official equivocation about May. *Winnetou* would not return to library and bookstore shelves, but the government assumed that the novels would still be read in secrecy. The ruling Socialist Unity Party understood that even if May’s texts posed problems, the topic of Native resistance against American imperialism could serve the regime’s propaganda purposes. Indeed, the GDR perceived “critical interconnectedness” between its own state history—cast as “the culmination of heroic struggles against a series of oppressors”—and the history of Native Americans (Penny 177). In the 1950s, socialist writers responded to the perceived affinity between themselves and Native peoples and produced novels touted as “historically, ethnologically, and ideologically superior” to May’s (Penny 177–179). These authors (and later filmmakers) understood their stories as more honest, socially aware, and authentic than *Winnetou*, but East German interpretations of Native stories still veered into the territory of paternalism and stereotype.

Unlike the GDR’s, West Germany’s government had no qualms about the continued consumption and publication of May’s works. For the most part, West Germans mobilized the stereotype of the “Democratic Indian” for the same reasons that East Germans adopted the stereotype of the “Socialist Indian”: both of these models assuaged guilt and offered escape from the mundane into an exotic yet ideologically unproblematic moral universe. In effect, *Winnetou* allowed Germans to see themselves once again as the "good guys." The FRG’s filmic interpretations of *Winnetou* were massively popular predecessors to the spaghetti Westerns. Eleven films featuring Winnetou, played by the French actor Pierre Brice, and Old
Shatterhand, usually played by Lex Barker, debuted in the period from 1962 to 1968. The films were so popular that their budgets increased each time. The 1960s Winnetou films offered a return to normalcy and familiarity; they also proved useful for instructing the next generations about racism, economic inequality, and the dangers of war. Like their socialist counterparts, West Germans also used the framework of Westmänner and Indianer to criticize geopolitical developments, especially the American intervention in Vietnam. As Penny notes, the stereotypes about the "eradication" of Native Americans were so versatile that they allowed West German intellectuals to “equate the Americans, or at least the American ruling class, with fascists” (181). In both political contexts, Winnetou helped Germans interpret transnational conflict and their place in structures of enduring imperialism.

In the 1970s, the German relationship to Winnetou had become both nostalgic and radical. The American Indian Movement (AIM) offered a model of revolutionary, anti-imperialist resistance for both East and West Germans. Although divided Germany represented two different visions of modernity, the two societies shared an affinity for and identification with AIM. Germans in both states understood the movement’s leading figures as more or less modern incarnations of Winnetou: proud, calm resisters to American imperialism and the desecration of land. Such frameworks for imaginative understandings of Native peoples by the German public went largely unchallenged, but increased global connectivity allowed new networks of activism between Germans and Native Americans to form, with liberating possibilities. Savvy Native activists, including Russell Means, Winona LaDuke, and Clyde Bellecourt
could instrumentalize Germans’ admiration for their own purposes and forge new alliances to fight nuclear power, military occupation, and environmental destruction.

Germans have also extended their affinity for *Winnetou* beyond the realm of activism or political mobilization and into the sphere of imitation. Today German hobbyists, for example, gather to recreate May’s stories and perform what they believe to be an authentic “Indian lifestyle.” These practitioners, an estimated 40,000 hobbyists from all areas of Germany, range from children playing dress-up to rather earnest attempts by adults to replicate existing indigenous cultures. Christian Feest, who refers to this phenomenon as “cultural transvestism,” has argued that hobbyism did not simply arise from the popularity of May’s works (38). However, the links between *Winnetou*’s paternalistic sensibility and the German layperson’s desire to “play Indian” are undeniable. As I have suggested above, May’s widespread acceptance added legitimacy to existing desires to don ethnic dress-up in order to escape from modernity’s economic pressure and social isolation. As Eric Lott explores in *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, embodying the racial Other can facilitate working out the anxieties of those in positions of cultural power or those who lack economic power. “Playing Indian” in Germany, similar to “playing cowboys and Indians” or the minstrel tradition in America, offers a way to explore the Other and to renegotiate one's sense of self.

German and American histories are often conceptualized in terms of key periods and events, economic developments, and state relations. But history does not take place entirely on the national or state stage; fantasy can compel as much emotion and action as actual experience. Fantasies like *Winnetou* create agency, incentive, and
legitimacy. Indeed, literature often crystalizes or creates the sentiments and ideologies that drive genocide, domination, and affinity. Thus, it is irresponsible to ignore Winnetou’s profound significance for German culture on the basis that it is not “serious literature.” To understand the logic of conquest and the feelings of identification, adventure, sympathy, and inevitability that accompany colonialism, one must unpack the history of Native fantasy in Germany. The Winnetou trilogy is one of many examples of colonial fantasy that deserves consideration. But it stands out as the most evocative, most beloved, example in German history. To say it has withstood the test of time would be an understatement, for this imaginative fiction has itself shaped history. Winnetou has provided a litmus test for generations of German citizens; regardless of ideology, they see themselves and the best version of their nation in the Apache chief.

German fantasies of Indianer, whether in the “Third Reich,” the socialist East, the democratic West, or the contemporary German nation state, have unfailingly (either self-consciously or unreflectively) referred to May’s works as their imaginative antecedent. Winnetou was created in a specific moment of nationalism and social rupture, but this trilogy has been weaponized over and over again to negotiate other crises of modernity. Winnetou and German “Indianthusiasm” have undoubtedly contributed to the evolution of German national identity and the longing for colonies, but these phenomena have significance beyond the German context. By comparing the construction of Germans' understanding of Native Americans with the corresponding American view, we can better de-familiarize our own deeply engrained stereotypes about indigeneity.
Americans may chuckle at German hobbyists who dress in “Native” garb and play Winnetou, but we fail to see how our own perceptions of Native peoples are equally remote from reality. There is no Winnetou in America, but we have Pocahontas, Tonto, Chingachgook, Chief Wahoo, and countless other literary, filmic, and artistic figures whose constructed images have colored perceptions of and justified violence against Native people. The cultural production of Indianer in Germany and the cultural production of the “Indian” in America both serve as ideological tools to justify power.

Since the first instances of colonial contact, both nations’ representations of Native people have been informed by romantic notions derived from Rousseau’s homme naturelle, “objective” anthropological accounts of “bloodthirsty savages,” and sympathetic literary representations of “noble savages” (Lutz 2002 258-74). Even when authors have sought to represent “authenticity” in Native life, they have usually chosen to speak in place of the people they wish to represent. In both cases, their essentialization of Native identity has been not merely “problematic” but intrinsically destructive. Stereotypes reframe complex humans as simplistic objects and rationalize indirect violence, which can take the form of idealization and discrimination, as well as direct violence, in the form of genocide and dispossession. In America, “Indians” were often killed discursively through the use of stereotype before they were systemically eradicated by governmental and capitalistic measures. Like Winnetou, American representations of the West often write genocide as destiny, conveniently justifying violence.
Both Germany and America wage ideological genocide against Native Americans through the ceaseless reiteration of racial stereotypes. These stereotypes do not derive from indigenous peoples; they do something to them, but have very little to do with them. The usefulness of these stereotypes—these weapons—stems from the needs of a nation at any given time. Specifically, representations of “the Native” have helped Americans and Germans create national identity. But these stereotypes had different ramifications. Because America’s economy relied on the theft of Native land (and the exploitation of Black labor), the ideological genocide of Native peoples found expression in assimilationist policies, destructive military efforts, “education,” and outright eradication. Germans, or, Germans who did not emigrate to America, did not experience frontier life themselves. This distance allowed them to sympathize with Native Americans at the same time as they profited indirectly from American genocide: many invested in the ventures of westward expansion while lamenting the “unfortunate destiny” of the Indianer. Few Germans came in contact with Native Americans, but their fantasies about Indianer provided an ideological framework for subjugation and violence in other colonial and racial contexts.

Germans and Americans grappled with collective guilt, which was assuaged by imagined intimacies between themselves and Native Americans. These fictional friendships, illustrated in an extreme form by Winnetou’s and Shatterhand’s quasi-romantic blood-brotherhood, revolve around interracial cooperation, affection, and identification. This genre can reveal a society’s desires for idyllic peace between the conqueror and conquered. In most instances, the figure imagining peaceful
compatibility is the conqueror, so true equality is rarely actualized on the page. *Winnetou* offers one example of fictional friendship between Native Americans and Germans. In America, we have myriad examples of imagined personal reconciliations that act as stand-ins for systemic reconciliation. Examples include Tonto and the Lone Ranger and any number of interracial “buddy cop” films in popular culture. Stereotyped representations of Native Americans, like the “Indian sidekick,” are reflections and justifications of a society’s needs. Genres themselves can become ciphers, or encoded ways of understanding a nation’s wants or needs in a particular moment.

By realizing the similarity between German and American imaginaries of “Indians,” one can further dispel the myth of American exceptionalism. Neither American stereotypes nor American stories are wholly unique to our nation. Rather, Europeans have constructed very similar imaginaries about Native American peoples (although none, perhaps, with as much gusto as the Germans). While the purposes of stereotyping might be different in each national or cultural context, in all scenarios, fantasies about “Indians” or *Indianer* exist because they are doing ideological labor. Americans mobilized literary genocide against Native peoples to justify massive land theft, eradication, cultural erasure, and the associated needs of a settler-colonial capitalist society. Germans, on the other hand, adopted stereotypes about the “inevitable” decline of the “noble *Indianer*” in the nineteenth century that distinguished Germans as more humane than their European imperialist neighbors and more humane than other non-German white Americans. Beyond that, these stereotypes and identifications connected Germans to the resilient, resistant tribes of
North America. As colonial ventures became increasingly possible, Germans’ “noble Indianer” stereotypes could also act as a model for idealized conqueror-conquered relations.

Much scholarship has been written on Karl May and the sources of information for Winnetou, but Germans and Americans have largely failed to take Winnetou or European interpretations of the Western adventure novel seriously enough. A popular work like Winnetou can seem too obvious, or too nostalgic, to deconstruct. But a series so beloved and so ubiquitous deserves consideration because of the way it has created and transmitted sentiment across generations. The interrogation of the German canon has implications for Americans’ perspective on their own cultural productions. By examining European, particularly German, constructions of the “Indian,” American can better equip themselves to dispel our own deeply ingrained myths about ourselves and the Other.

My work on the formations, ideological uses, and legacies of Winnetou in nineteenth-century Germany and the series’ relation to American traditions of Native stereotyping advances an important project-in-progress. Gerd Gemünden, for instance, has considered the use of cliché and appropriation in East German Indianerfilme, while scholars like Katrin Sieg and Marta Carlson have written on the phenomenon of ethnic drag, Indian impersonation, and hobby culture in Germany as an effort to dodge the role of perpetrator. The connection between Indianthusiasm and Nazi racial doctrine has also been variously explored (see Wood and Haible). Yet many vital questions about German “Indianthusiasm” and the legacy of Indianer fantasies remain unanswered or even unasked.
Author’s Note: To clarify, there are various versions of *Winnetou* I-III in circulation. Online, the Karl-May-Gesellschaft offers both the *Winnetou* I-III *Erstausgabe* (first edition) and the *Ausgabe letzter Hand* (definitive edition); various abridged or altered versions of the trilogy are also in circulation. As noted in my analysis, contemporary editions of the text often write out *Winnetou*’s racial language and usually cut out the introduction to the trilogy. Because I am concerned with colonial fantasies in the period of New Imperialism, it is most relevant for me to examine the most-read version of *Winnetou* in this time. Thus, my analysis draws from the definitive edition of *Winnetou*, the most popular version of the text, republished in 1908 by Friedrich Ernst Fehsenfeld.

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