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Staging the West

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INDIAN ON HORSE, WESTERN CITY (DASING, GERMANY)

All photos in Staging the West by Jeremiah Ariaz

STAGING THE WEST

Kansas has been called the “Gateway to the West.” As a visual artist I am interested in the West as both a location and a state of mind. Through various photographic projects, I have sought to draw attention to contradictions between factual and fictional depictions of the West and to contemplate the presence of this lore in contemporary culture. With the series *Staging the West*, I became interested in exploring how outsiders—people living in other countries—interpret this mythology.

Beginning in the mid-1860s, cowboys drove cattle from Texas to Kansas over the Chisholm Trail. By the late 1880s overland cattle drives had largely come to an end due to the expansion of the railroad. In just two decades a major American archetype was constructed: the cowboy. Though this was a brief window of time, the mythology created around the cowboy endures, continuing to occupy the imagination of people living in the United States and abroad.

In 2012 I was granted an international press pass to photograph the Karl May Heritage Festival in Radebeul, Germany. Karl May (1842–1912) was a German author whose most popular works included adventure novels set in the Old



KARL MAY FESTSPIELE (ELSPE, GERMANY)

American West. May had purportedly seen *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* show in Germany in 1890 and thereafter fashioned himself after the famous frontiersman, complete with a fringed buckskin jacket and wide-brimmed hat. The central characters to Karl May's Western stories are Winnetou, an Apache chief, and his white friend and blood brother, Old Shatterhand. These books have gone on to sell over 200

million copies worldwide and continue to be popular in Germany.

Upon arrival in Germany, I visited Karl May's Radebeul home, now a museum containing objects from the writer, as well as Native American artifacts. In the backyard a tepee was erected. Inside, a German man dressed as a Native American was telling stories to children. From the museum I boarded a train that transported me



SHOWTIME IN GERMANY

the short distance through the quaint suburb of Dresden to the edge of town where the festival was held. I was immediately struck by the large number of people of all ages in attendance; most were costumed in western wear dressing, either like cowboys or, more often, Indians. Cowboy hats, fringed leather pants, feathers, and face paint were commonplace. I myself had worn a blue, western-style, pearl-snap shirt,

thinking I might fit in, or perhaps even stand out as an "authentic" man from the West. After all, I am from Kansas. I was wrong; in this imagined West recreated on the outskirts of a small German village, I was the outsider. Though I understood the visual codes, I could not understand what people said, and even more perplexing, what Germans found so compelling about this era in American history.



KARL MAY FESTSPIELE (ELSPE, GERMANY)

Walking through the festival, I considered the history of German settlers in the American Midwest. My mother's side of the family had roots in Germany and eventually homesteaded in Kansas. Many towns in the state were established by German immigrants, including Bunker Hill, founded in part by my family, the Harbaughs, in 1871. Just a decade later, romanticized tales of the American frontier would be performed for audiences on the east coast and

eventually across Europe, most famously by Buffalo Bill, whose childhood was spent in Leavenworth, Kansas. Here in a small European town, I watched crowds of Germans engage in this mythology. I passed encampments of tepees and watched people take workshops in leather and bead work. At night participants gathered at a frontier-style saloon to listen to country-western music and line dance. The climax of the festival was a "Pow-Wow" where members of a

Native American tribe from the United States spoke in their native language (interpreted in German for the audience) and danced around a fire.

I was confounded by what I witnessed that weekend. I wondered about the origins of the fascination many Germans had with Indians. Their affinity to Native Americans seemed to suggest a sense of shared fate. Yet I was conflicted when I considered the parallels of the historic treatment of Native Americans in the United States with the Jewish experience in twentieth century Germany. I wondered what it meant that Germans identified with the victims of our systematic genocide of native peoples. (I would later discover Hitler was a fan of May's books and had a special set printed that he distributed to his generals in WWII.) On a more personal level, I was interested in how such spectacles shaped peoples' views of America and how the United States continued to capitalize on the language of the Old West, particularly in rhetoric

concerning U.S. foreign policy.

These questions would compel me to return to Germany in the summer of 2013 to make additional photographs. I was surprised by the depth of Germans' affinity for First Nations people, and by the longevity of German reenactments of the West. I visited an exhibition honoring the 100th anniversary of the Munich Cowboy Club that contained photographs of Germans dressed as cowboys and Indians from the early 1900s lassoing and camping in tepees. I traveled through Germany visiting six locations where permanent "Western" stage sets have been created and Karl May's stories are reenacted each summer. The largest of these theaters in Bad Segeberg seats 10,000, with room for 4,000 standees. The stadium was originally built by the Third Reich for Nazi rallies, but it has been used for the annual performances of Karl May stories since 1952.

The photographs included in *Staging the West* feature the actors who



COWBOY #10
(RADEBEUL, GERMANY)

perform for audiences of thousands in open-air theatrical productions. The black and white images include the props and stage sets that complete the spectators' western experience, though few contextual clues are given to set

the scenes in either time or place. My hope is that viewers find themselves initially unsure whether they are looking at a foreign scene or something more familiar, perhaps lodged in their memory, like the Pow-Wow I attended



COWBOY #15
(RADEBEUL, GERMANY)



MAN WITH WOLF SHIRT
(RADEBEUL, GERMANY)

as a youth in Medicine Lodge, Kansas.

I attended nearly a dozen performances, and though I never understood the dialogue, the themes were similar and easily understood. In these stories there is one critical twist from the "cowboy and Indian" narrative most Americans would recognize: the whites are villains and the Indians, portrayed as "noble savages" uncorrupted by modern civilization, are

the heroes. Each summer, thousands of Germans carry on this tradition, propagating their own mythology of the American West.

Today, the end of the cowboys' journey along the Chisholm Trail in Kansas is a stark contrast to their onetime starting point, where places like the stockyards of Fort Worth, Texas, are a major tourist attraction. I prefer the starkness of the prairie and the work



one's imagination has to do to envision its rich history. There is little to block one's view of the sweeping landscape once crossed by cowboys, as little has developed on the Plains in the passing century and a half. Here, land and sky meet, forming a horizon that stretches uninterrupted across the Flint Hills. The austere land provides a place to contemplate history as well as consider how competing interests and beliefs, such as those portrayed in Germany, have been projected onto the American West.

In the Bunker Hill cemetery stands a marble headstone for Pawnee Indian Chief Spotted Horse, a Native American who, before his death in 1874, chose to be buried in the white cemetery of the newly created town on the Plains. I have been told my Harbaugh kin sang at his funeral service. It is difficult to untangle fact from fiction in the stories passed down

through the generations. Perhaps truth always remains illusive, and the importance is in remembering, in telling the stories, and in my case, making the photographs. In such ways the mythology of the West endures.

At the Symphony in the Flint Hills, sitting in the prairie for hours, listening to the music and watching the sun set beyond the tall grass, we are invited to escape our modern lives and imagine the Old West. And on that evening, little separates the twenty-first century from the West of our imaginations.

Jeremiah Ariaz, Associate Professor of Art at Louisiana State University, creates artworks that explore both the geography and ideology of the American West. Jeremiah is a Kansas native. He received his BFA from the Kansas City Art Institute and MFA from the State University of New York at Buffalo.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
KARL MAY FESTSPIELE
(RADEBEUL, GERMANY)