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Ruth Ellen Gruber

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Beyond Virtually Jewish: New Authenticities and Real Imaginary Spaces in Europe

RUTH ELLEN GRUBER

I strived for authenticity but never got beyond verisimilitude.

Lee Lorenz¹

A FEW YEARS AGO, I was sitting at one of the Jewish-style cafes in Kazimierz, the historic Jewish district of Krakow, Poland, which is now a major center of Jewish-themed tourism. I was there for the annual summer Festival of Jewish Culture, a nine-day extravaganza that already in 1992 had been described as a “Jewish Woodstock.”² As I sipped my coffee, Lorin Sklamberg, the vocalist of the American klezmer group The Klezmatics, came running up, excitedly holding out what looked like a rolled-up poster. “You have to see this,” he exclaimed.

Lorin unrolled the poster to reveal the menu for a restaurant he had come across on Krakow’s vast and elegant main market square, the Rynek Główny. The restaurant was called “Sioux.” Printed in sepia ink on a tan background, the menu was illustrated with old photographs of Wild West towns, tepees, Plains Indians in full regalia, a stagecoach, cowboys in a saloon. The fare on offer included “Rio Bravo,” “Big Sioux,”

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1. Cartoon in *The New Yorker*, June 25, 2007, 77.

2. Among the many articles about the Krakow Jewish Culture Festival, see my essay “The Jewish Culture Festival, Krakow,” in *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, vol. 16: *Jewish Popular Culture and Its Afterlife*, ed. M. C. Steinlauf and A. Polonsky (Oxford, 2003), and my article “A Jewish Woodstock in Krakow,” *International Herald Tribune*, July 19, 1995. Cf. Aviva Kempner, “Jewish Woodstock in Cracow,” *Washington Jewish Week*, July 16, 1992.

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and “Big Sheriff” steaks, “Nevada” pork, and other dishes named after Jack London, Fort Knox, Alaska, and the fictional Apache Chief Winnetou, who was the hero of wildly popular adventure tales by the nineteenth-century German writer Karl May. “All dishes have original Wild West names!” says the Sioux website.³ The restaurant itself, I discovered, was one of a chain, with several branches around Poland. It was decorated to resemble a movie set Wild West saloon, all wooden beams and tables. Sioux sold T-shirts with a Native American in a feather headdress on them. The waiters were dressed as cowboys, and the waitresses wore fringed mini-skirted uniforms, like some stylized Pocahontas. As the website puts it, “All of it is happening in [the] Wild West where Indians, handsome cowboys, and beautiful squaws walk around all the time!!!”

The irony was inescapable.

The “Jewish” cafe at which I was sitting, like several of its neighbors, wrote its name in Hebrew-style letters. Just as Sioux provided a stylized image of the Wild West, the cafe’s old-fashioned décor, with candlesticks and menorahs, shtetl scene paintings, and portraits of rabbis on the wall, evoked a literary image of the lost Jewish past. Klezmer music played in the background, and the menu featured dishes called “Rabbi’s Salad” and “Yankiel the Innkeeper of Berdytchov’s Soup.” Moreover, the founders and organizers of the Jewish Culture Festival were not Jewish, and neither were some of the artists nor the overwhelming majority of its spectators and workshop participants.

NEW AUTHENTICITIES

Since the early 1990s, I have been investigating and interpreting the ways in which contemporary non-Jews in Europe relate to Jewish culture in countries where, more than half a century after the Holocaust, few if any Jews live today. I have explored how—and why—non-Jews adopt, enact, and transform elements of Jewish culture; how they use Jewish culture at times to create, mold, or find, their own identities. I coined the term “virtually Jewish” to describe how non-Jews “fill” Europe’s so-called Jewish space.⁴

Over the past few years, partly prompted by my work on the “virtually Jewish” phenomenon, I have been exploring another virtual world in

3. See http://www.sioux.krakow.pl/index_eng.php, accessed May 5, 2009.

4. See my book *Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe* (Berkeley, Calif., 2002). In the years since this book was published, various scholars have written on the idea of Jewish space and virtually Jewish space. See, for example, Julia Brauch, Anna Liphardt, and Alexandra Nocke, eds., *Jewish Topographies: Visions of Space, Traditions of Place* (Aldershot, 2008).

Europe, one that I call the Imaginary Wild West. This is a surprising and remarkably multifaceted Far West subculture that, stoked, marketed, and even created by popular culture, forms a connected collection of “Wild Western spaces.” Just as klezmer music forms a soundtrack to the virtually Jewish world, country western music of all sorts, from bluegrass to hard-driving country rock, is a constant soundtrack to the many rodeos, festivals, saloons, Wild West theme parks, and similar attractions—like the Sioux chain of restaurants—that draw hundreds of thousands of people each year. Specialty shops feature western lore, western clothing, souvenirs, and Native American spirituality. European truckers model their lifestyle on the rugged individualism of the resourceful (often fictional) rider of the range, and trucker fans dress in ritualized cowboy garb while listening to German country singers singing, in German, about plying the Autobahn.⁵ As a hobby, tens of thousands of Europeans study and even live like Native Americans, trappers, or other American frontier archetypes. Many take to the woods on weekends to live in tepees or sleep “cowboy style” around a campfire under the stars.

There are major differences, of course, between the “virtually Jewish” phenomenon in Europe and the “virtually western” European response to the American frontier saga. One has to do with a real, traumatic issue: coming to terms with the Holocaust and its legacy of guilt and loss. The other is the embrace and elaboration of a collective fantasy and its translation into personal experience.

But in certain ways I see them as analogous phenomena. Both have to do with identity, and the ways in which people use other cultures to shape their own identities. In addition, in both “virtually Jewish” and “imaginary western” realms, one keeps circling back to the issue of “authenticity,” as well as to the distinction between creative cultural appropriation and “epigonism”—what the dictionary defines as undistinguished imitation.⁶ In certain senses, too, fantasies about the Far West

5. On the German western scene, see the thesis by Frank Theis written for the sociology institute at the University of Hamburg, “Freizeitkultur: Die Lebenswelt der deutschen Country & Western Szene.” Viewed online at <<http://www.frank-theis.de/diplomarbeit.html>>. A new book deals at length with the phenomenon in East Germany. See Friedrich von Borries and Jens-Uwe Fischer, *Sozialistische Cowboys: Der Wilde Westen Ostdeutschlands* (Frankfurt, 2008).

6. See Max van Elteren, “Dutch Country Music: Between Creative Appropriation and Mere Epigonism,” *Popular Music and Society* 22.1 (1998). For more on the Klezmer music scene, see, for example, the influential 2000 lecture on Klezmer in Germany by Heiko Lehmann, “Klezmer in Germany/Germans and Klezmer: Reparation or Contribution” at <<http://www.sukke.de/lecture.html>>. See also recent work by Joel Rubin and Rita Ottens, and Magdalena Waligorska.

may also be a way of dealing with a powerful, if more subtle, traumatic experience: could they perhaps constitute a means of relating to the mightiest country ever to emerge on earth, a country whose influence is felt in every corner of the world, and in every sphere of life?⁷

More than thirty years ago, in his essay "Travels in Hyperreality," the Italian semiotician Umberto Eco wrote of mindsets where, for "historical information to be absorbed, it has to assume the aspect of a reincarnation." These in turn led to instances where "absolute unreality is offered as real presence."⁸ He described "instances where the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake; where the boundaries between game and illusion are blurred . . . and falsehood is enjoyed in a situation of 'fullness'"⁹ Eco's postmodernist excursion, published in 1975, was about the United States, but this assessment by now is also very well applicable to Europe and Europeans.

Indeed, I would take it a step further. Both the virtually Jewish and imaginary Wild West phenomena deal in constructs, or reconstructions, often stereotypes: what is *meant* or *signified* by "Jewish" or "western" or "Native American" or "frontier" can be paramount. In both cases, I believe that what we actually have is the creation of "new authenticities"—things, places, and experiences that in themselves are real, with all the trappings of reality, but that are quite different from the "realities" on

7. For Italians over the past fifty years, the Italian sociologist Massimo Teodori wrote in *Maledetti Americani* (Damned Americans), the United States "has been an active and constant presence we have had to deal with in every aspect of civil, political, and economic life, both internal and external . . . The inventions and goods we cannot do without, even if we detest them, are American: the car, the telephone, the airplane, the cinema, television, and, further, the atomic bomb, the exploration of space, the computer, Coca-Cola . . . In the past half century, global TV and cinema have made the USA familiar, almost a part of our daily existence and a fixed reference of modernity."

8. Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. W. Weaver (1976; New York, 1986), 7. Eco was describing an American predilection for creating "real" copies of "real things," a practice that "suggests that there is a constant in the average American imagination and taste, for which the past must be preserved and celebrated in full-scale authentic copy; a philosophy of immortality as duplication. It dominates the relations with the self, with the past, not infrequently with the present, always with History and, even, with the European tradition" (p. 6).

9. Ibid., 8. Life imitating art imitating artifice imitating life . . . See a more recent, and very lively, discussion of this postmodern take, in Clive Sinclair, *Clive Sinclair's True Tales of the Wild West* (London, 2008). Sinclair travels through the West, creating a narrative that mixes fact, fiction, reenactment and fantasy in a "po-mo" genre he calls "Dodgy Realism." The tagline of the book reads: "Today's Wild West is not what it was, through it wishes that it were."

which they are modeled or that they are attempting to evoke.¹⁰ This process, which can be seen as “creating” something new in itself rather than “re-creating” something that once existed, has led to the formation of its own models, stereotypes, modes of behavior, and even traditions.¹¹

JEWISH MODELS AND MENUS

By now, the reality of the annual Jewish Culture Festival and of Jewish-themed tourism in Kazimierz goes back more than twenty years. The physical development of the district as a site of Jewish-themed tourism got off the ground in the early 1990s, after the fall of communism and on the heels of an interest in Jewish culture that had already been growing in Poland for more than a decade. The festival, organized by non-Jews for an overwhelmingly non-Jewish audience, was founded in 1988 and by 2007 it had expanded to encompass as many as two hundred concerts, lectures, performances, workshops, tours, and other events.¹² The Kazimierz district, meanwhile, had evolved from being a desolate Jewish graveyard to a popular tourist and nightlife venue, centered on what is the most extensive and important complex of Jewish sites in central Europe: synagogues, cemeteries, homes, marketplaces, and other buildings and monuments, almost all of which had been abandoned or in ruinous condition in 1990.

Today’s Jewish Kazimierz is built on this architectural skeleton, but—with its dozens of Jewish-style and other cafes, pubs, and clubs, its bou-

10. Along the lines, perhaps, of Jean Baudrillard’s “simulacra”—where the simulation can become the thing in itself. “Simulacra and Simulations,” in Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. M. Poster (Stanford, Calif., 1988), 166–84.

11. When I coined the phrase “virtually Jewish” I also clearly wanted to relate the phenomenon to the cyberspace concept of virtual worlds and virtual communities exiting today on the Internet. This is another new authenticity or real imaginary space that has developed rapidly in recent years. Second Life, for example, is now “inhabited” by more than nine million “residents” and maintains an active economy. In Second Life, “residents” assume visual “avatars” of their own design, as well as screen names in a similar way, for example, that members of various Wild West clubs and associations, especially reenactor or so-called hobbyist groups, choose “western” or “Indian” names and identities and dress the part. The different here is that these people do it in the flesh, and by doing so may be ridiculed by mainstream people rather than hailed as part of the cutting-edge technological society. For a fascinating discussion of the “virtual Jewish world” on Second Life, see Julian Voloj, “Virtual Jewish Topography: The Genesis of Jewish (Second) Life,” in *Jewish Topographies*, 345–56.

12. Including the launch of my book *National Geographic Jewish Heritage Travel: A Guide to Eastern Europe* (New York, 2007).

tiques, its galleries, its restored synagogues, its constant tour groups—it bears little resemblance to the teeming district it was before World War II, when it was home to about 65,000 Jews. Kazimierz again teems with people—especially during the Jewish Culture Festival (and late at night when new music clubs are jumping)—but today, only about 200 Jews are believed to live in all of Krakow. Indeed, few of the tourists and none of the students who crowd the new clubs and groove to klezmer jazz at the Festival of Jewish Culture can remember a time when Jewish Kazimierz actually *was* a district whose population was largely Jewish. Nor can most of them remember a time when the festival, the Jewish-theme tourism, the hype, and the marketed nostalgia were not there. By now, in Kazimierz, the new “Jewish” cafes, bookstores, museums, and Jewish culture centers, and even their attendant kitsch, are not just, as Eco put it, “offered,” they actually *are* all part of both the reality of the city and the reality of the experience of those who live, visit, and amuse themselves there: The Jewish Krakow scene in itself is real, an authentic, living phenomenon, even though it may not be “authentically Jewish” according to traditional definitions of “Jews,” “Jewish,” or “Judaism.” What is more, over the past twenty years, the scene as a living phenomenon has created its own tropes and traditions. These include, for example, the almost codified “Jewish look” of the café decor and menus, and the festival’s own huge outdoor final concert, “Shalom on Szeroka,” parts of which are broadcast on national television, that draws as many as 15,000 spectators annually. Sometimes the artifice can be compellingly, even shockingly, complex. On a visit to Kazimierz in 2006, I saw a newly renovated building that included, on its brand-new doorpost, a newly made groove reproducing a scar like those not long ago found on many derelict buildings in Kazimierz showing where a mezuzah had been affixed before World War II: gentrification has by now done away with many, if not most, of the “real” scars.

Jewish-style cafes resembling those in Krakow now exist in Kiev, Lublin, St. Petersburg, Lodz, Warsaw, and a number of other places.¹³ Dining rooms are furnished with antiques, or reproductions, and walls are covered with paintings, many of them showing Jewish themes. Lights are low, and klezmer music plays in the background; menus offer dishes with “Jewish” names. “Jewish” has now come to represent something bygone

13. I have written more extensively on these models in the chapter “Non-Jewish, Non-Kosher yet Also Recommended: Beyond ‘Virtually Jewish’ in Post-Millennium, Post-Communist Central Europe,” in the forthcoming *Philo-Semitiism in History* (Cambridge University Press).

but fondly remembered. The low-lit and sepia-toned, yet slightly exotic cafe offers a lost world, with the overlay of lost possessions, lost comforts. These aesthetic conventions—and by now they are conventions—play on nostalgia, but also on the imagination. These places may represent what people wish that the Jewish world had really been once upon a time. Homage may be paid to the Holocaust, but it is rarely explicit anymore. The results can be painfully crass, but, in the best cases, the effect is achieved with sensitivity and good taste.¹⁴ In rare cases, there's even a little reflexive humor: the menu of the “U Fryzjera” restaurant in the Polish town of Kazimierz Dolny marks dishes as “Jewish” and “not Jewish”—and also marks some of them as “non-Jewish, non-kosher, yet also recommended.”

The Anatewka restaurant in Łódź is one of the establishments that has gone furthest in creating a new (and to me, uncomfortable) authenticity from codified conventions. Clearly modeled on the Jewish-themed restaurants in Krakow, Anatewka seems more about marketing than about Jews in any sense of the real world. It offers “Jewish” as a brand—but also “nostalgia” as a brand. Its decor consists of an almost standardized set of items that spell out “Jewish” as a commercial category (figure 1).

On my first visit, in March 2005, a giant carved wooden Jew greeted us at the door. A waiter dressed up in Hasidic costume, including a black hat and ritual fringes dangling from under his white shirt and black vest, seated us at a round table and brought something to munch on—matzoh, accompanied by flute glasses of sparkling wine. Paintings of bearded sages and saintly rabbis looked down from the walls; they were “old style” but looked so freshly finished I could almost smell the paint. There were candles, old furniture, a piano, old books, an old sewing machine: all off-the-shelf markers signifying the “Jewish” brand. Anatewka, of course, is the name of the fictional shtetl where Sholom Aleichem's Tevye the Milkman lived. In the main room, a sort of thatched roof affair stretched across one wall. Beside it, on a platform attached to the wall, a

14. Jews sometimes use them, too. The Café Tuwim in Łódź, a kosher restaurant located in the city's Jewish communal complex, opened in April 2005. The dim light, antiques, and old photos form an ambiance resembling that of the Krakow cafes, and the Tuwim hosts Jewish cabaret programs and concerts of klezmer music. Proprietor Malgosia Keller admits the influence but stresses that there is a difference. “Many of the people who have cafes in Krakow's Kazimierz are our friends,” she told me a year after the cafe opened. But, she added, “Our style I think is from [actual] remembrance; the photos and furnishings come from our parents, our grandparents.” Her own great-great-grandfather, she told me, had run a hotel in Lublin. “It's good that the tradition has moved on to me.”



Figure 1. ŁODZ, POLAND—On my first visit to the Anatewka restaurant in Lodz, the waiters were dressed as Hasids, tsitsis and all.

young woman sat playing Yiddish tunes on a fiddle. Aha! I opened my notebook to record the “Jewish style” names of dishes on the menu, but the proprietor came over and stopped me: “You don’t have to write anything down,” he told me, “everything is on our website.” True virtuality!¹⁵

15. <http://www.anatewka.pl>.

It was Friday night, Shabbos, and the place was crowded with prosperous-looking Łodzers enjoying a pseudoexotic dining experience in an ambiance whose characteristics they recognized as “Jewish” in the same way that patrons of the “Sioux” chain recognize boots, spurs, swinging doors, and Stetsons as trappings of the American frontier. Everything, I remember thinking, could have come off the shelf, filed under “J” for “Jewish.” A write-up on a local website underscored this: “Celebrate Łodz’s rich Jewish heritage in this superb effort found tucked just off Piotrkowska. Mannequins complete with prayer shawls and Hassidic locks, a couple of menorahs and general brick-a-brac lie scattered around, while Klezmer tunes play in the background . . . A must visit.” It was so standardized that I wondered if, and when, Anatewka might become a chain like Sioux. And, in fact, Anatewka did indeed launch a second branch at a huge new shopping mall, Manufaktura, which opened in May 2006 in the transformed former textile factory of nineteenth-century Łodz’s wealthiest Jewish industrialist, I. K. Poznański. Describing it as the “sister restaurant” of the original Anatewka, the same website advised, “You can expect a clone of the original; from the same top-mark food, to a Jewish-themed interior that comes with menorahs, stirring Klezmer anthems and lacy frills. An absolute hit.”¹⁶

When I visited Anatewka again, in April 2006, the waiters no longer dressed in Hasidic costume. But at each crowded table miniature figurines had been placed for patrons, like party favors to be given out as souvenirs. They were tiny little “Jews,” that evoked a range of physical and subjective stereotypes (figure 2).

The one I took with me was typical. He was a little more than an inch in height, a jolly figure smiling behind his red beard and sidelocks—and clutching a real Polish coin in his hands. The coin, a one-grosz piece, came up above his waist, like an apron. He was a good luck talisman, someone explained to me later, whose power was rooted in the Jews’ supposed special relationship with money.¹⁷

16. <http://www.inyourpocket.com/poland/lodz/en/category?cid=60491&chid=704>. In 2007, I was told that a Jewish-style cafe in Krakow had recently opened a branch in Wrocław.

17. My experience at Anatewka was my first with that particular line of money-clutching Jewish figurine, but identical figures are now for sale by the score in certain venues in Krakow and Warsaw. Jews and their supposed special association with money are a long-standing, often negative, stereotype and the frequent subject of paintings and other imagery. Poles have explained that there is a “tradition of Polish people placing pictures of Jews with money in their hands near the entrance doors of their homes as a good luck omen.” See my essay



Figure 2. Three miniature Jews. In the middle, a miniature of a caricature Jew clutching a Polish coin that I was given as a “favor”—good luck charm—at the Anatewka restaurant in Lodz, Poland. It is flanked by two Jewish men made out of marzipan that I bought at the kosher pastry shop in Budapest. They are destined for the Jewish market, as decorations for bar mitzvahs or other festive events.

WILD WESTERN SPACES

Some critics like to call Kazimierz and other Jewish quarters that have been developed as tourist attractions examples of a “Jewish Disneyland.”¹⁸ For the most part, I tend to avoid the term. The various real Disneylands, including the European Disneyland near Paris, are theme parks, built as such, not spaces developed, changed, or newly used amid the physical places they try to evoke, recall, or emulate. They are, as Umberto Eco put it, “born from nothing, out of pure imitative determina-

“Non-Jewish, Non-Kosher”; also Erica Lehrer, “Repopulating Jewish Poland—In Wood,” *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, vol. 16, 336

18. See, for example, Iris Weiss, “Jewish Disneyland: Die Vermarktung des Jüdischen,” in *HaGalil*, April 2001, viewed at www.hagalil.com/archiv/2001/01/jewish-disney.htm. For a description of how the European Disneyland was conceived, including how it played on already ingrained dreams of the Wild West, see Andrew Lainsbury, *Once upon an American Dream: The Story of Euro Disneyland* (Lawrence, Kansas, 2000).

tion.”¹⁹ A big difference between some of the real imaginary spaces in today’s virtual Jewish world and those found in the Imaginary Wild West is, indeed, that the virtual Jewish world, even when so reified as Anatewka, exists where Jews actually once lived—and died. The Imaginary Wild West, on the other hand, fulfills the “Disneyland” label; its sites are purposely built on territory where, outside the Wild West show arena, movie sets, or people’s imaginations, cowboys never fought Indians or usurped their territory, and stagecoaches never rolled across the desert.

Wild Western spaces in Europe are rooted in a sort of transformative nostalgia for something that may never have existed in the first place. They can be actual physical sites that people can enter and interact with, but they can also be interior states of mind or other strictly personal expressions. Big or small, public or private, commercial or “pure,” they are inhabited, physically and emotionally, by tens of thousands of Europeans who feel totally at home in the mythology of the American West, who feel, in fact, that they own it, regardless of whether or not they have lived in, or even been to, North America,²⁰ developing their own “western” conventions and traditions. In a sort of reverse emigration, they have taken quintessential American roots and popular imagery and not only appropriated them but transformed them into their own hybrid realities.

Many of the ways in which Europeans embrace and embellish the mythology of the West echo the ways in which Americans themselves do so: the clothing, the hobbyism, the music, the theme parks, the urban cowboyism, and so on.²¹ But Europeans approach their idea of the West from a different, and, in a way, more disinterested direction than do Americans. The West “is received in Europe today as pure style, as a historically detached play of signifiers—and perhaps it has always been thus,” John Dorst wrote in a 1993 essay on Wild West imagery in theme parks.²² Europeans, wrote Englishman David Hamilton Murdoch in his

19. *Travels in Hyperreality*, 40. Eco makes the distinction between places such as ghost towns in the American West, where real existing places form the core of what we see developed today, and those that are “born from nothing.”

20. See Edward Buscombe and Kevin Mulroy, “The Western Worldwide,” in *Western Amerykanski: Polish Poster Art and the Western*, ed. K. Mulroy (Seattle, Wash., 1999), 64.

21. About Wild West theme parks and reconstructions in the United States, see Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, 40, and Sinclair, *Clive Sinclair’s True Tales* (passim).

22. John Dorst, “Miniaturising Monumentality: Theme Park Images of the American West and Confusions of Cultural Influence,” in *Cultural Transmission and Receptions: American Mass Culture in Europe*, ed. R. Kroes, et al. (Amsterdam, 1993). Dorst notes that the Wild West or frontier America is “perhaps the single most common theme park imagery,” 256.

book *The American West: Creation of a Myth*, “are outsiders looking in—at an image of a world they never had—and for them, the mythical West has been the best kind of escapism. The *trappings* of the myth for Americans are its *essence* for others.”²³ In other words, the inauthentic dream becomes a new, authentic reality.

In some cases, Europeans use western fantasies to mirror themselves and so to reclaim a piece of the New World. A hobbyist in Germany, for example, described dressing up as a trapper or Indian as a means of exploring not America but “European colonial history.” Some of the people I’ve interviewed, sounding a bit like transsexuals, describe how they “feel” or “are inside” really a Texan, or an Apache—or Jim Bowie.

Europeans get their images of the American West from a wide variety of sources.²⁴ America’s frontier saga has been described as “the most successfully marketed national epic in history.”²⁵ But in addition to American exports, from Buffalo Bill to Garth Brooks and *Bonanza*, homegrown European creations have also long been extremely important. Several catalysts coincided a bit more than a century ago and still have a powerful impact. Key among them were the then-new moving picture, the phenomenally successful tours made all over Europe by Buffalo Bill and his Wild West, and the immensely popular western adventure tales by the German author Karl May, the most popular and enduring of numerous nineteenth-century European writers of westerns.²⁶ May went to America only once, toward the end of his life, and never set foot west of Niagara Falls. His work is almost unknown in the United States. But his two main western characters, the noble Apache chief Winnetou and his sidekick, a German immigrant adventurer called Old Shatterhand, set the template for the look, sound, and ethos of the West for millions; moreover, they triggered movies, festivals and other popular spin-offs and continue to do so.

At much the same time that May was writing, Buffalo Bill brought a physical reality to the dreams. Between 1887 and 1906, he took his cow-

23. David Hamilton Murdoch, *The American West: The Invention of a Myth* (Reno, Nev., 2000), 119.

24. See, for example, Ray Allen Billington, *Land of Savagery, Land of Promise: The European Image of the American Frontier in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1981).

25. Buscombe and Mulroy, “The Western Worldwide,” 64.

26. On European writers of westerns, see Richard H. Cracroft, “World Westerns: The European Writer and the American West,” in *A Literary History of the American West*, ed. T. J. Lyon (Fort Worth, Tex., 1987). There is a large body of work on Karl May.

boys, stagecoaches, and Indians, in the flesh, all over Europe, as far east as present-day Ukraine. Drawing huge crowds and wide publicity, his shows helped codify signifiers of the West and make them familiar, allowing “the memory of this entertainment spectacle [to] become, for its audiences, the memory of the real thing.”²⁷ Buffalo Bill’s legacy persists to this day in the sometimes elaborate shows put on at country western festivals, Wild West theme parks, and other venues in Germany, France, Austria, and elsewhere. The first of hundreds of “western” clubs of all sorts was founded in Munich in 1913 and is still in operation. And countless western fans still cultivate a “Buffalo Bill” look, with flowing hair, cowboy hat, fringes, and pointed beard. One such person, the proprietor of a Wild West–style saloon near Dresden in Germany, calls Buffalo Bill one of his heroes. The man himself could not speak English and had never visited the United States, but, he told me proudly, his grandfather had performed in the Dresden-based Sarrasani circus, which, influenced by Buffalo Bill when his Wild West played in Dresden in 1890, presented a group of Sioux Indians in its own “Wild-West-Schau.”²⁸

Movie westerns, meanwhile, followed by westerns on TV and other media, further deepened this appetite and at the same time refined the image and codified the idioms and values that define the American frontier and American experience. In addition to American exports, hundreds of European-made products, including the “spaghetti westerns” and East- and West-German “Indian films” of the 1960s and 1970s put their own European spin on the frontier saga. Particularly influential was the series of films based on Karl May books, released in the 1960s, starring the French actor Pierre Brice as Winnetou. The fact that they were shot in Croatia in landscape unlike any in the U.S. West, and where a medieval Dalmatian town stood in for Santa Fe, only added to the hyperreality.²⁹

All of these elements get mixed together in the vast variety of today’s European Wild Western constructs. One of my favorite artifacts of the

27. Joy S. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West: Celebrity, Memory and Popular History* (New York, 2000), 85.

28. Karl Markus Kreis, “Indians Playing, Indians Praying: Native Americans in Wild West Shows and Catholic Missions,” in *Germans & Indians: Fantasies, Encounters, Projections*, ed. C. G. Calloway, G. Gemünden, and S. Zantop (Lincoln, Neb., 2002). Also see *Indians & Europe: An Interdisciplinary Collection of Essays* (Lincoln, Neb., 1989). For a further, illustrated analysis of the German relationship with the Wild West, see Pamela Kort and Max Hollein, eds., *I Like America: Fictions of the Wild West* (Munich, 2006). The book accompanied a valuable and comprehensive exhibition in Frankfurt, October 2006–January 2007.

29. See Christopher Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone* (London, 1981/1998).

Imaginary West is a T-shirt I saw on sale at the Equiblues country music festival and rodeo in the small town of St. Agrève in southern France. Equiblues annually attracts 25,000 people. Country music blares from loudspeakers in the streets, American flags flutter everywhere, and shop windows are decorated with American and Wild West displays. Visitors and townspeople alike stroll about—or line dance—in costume. Vendors sell everything from flouncy skirts to special Equiblues wine. The T-shirt highlighted the potent emotional amalgam merging the Far West, the Open Road, cowboy culture, Native American spirituality, and trucks. It shows a romantic Native American warrior against the background of Monument Valley. A big diesel truck is roaring by, and a shaman is praying. Across the top, in big letters, runs a slogan: “Heritage Authentic.” At the bottom, in smaller print, it reads, “Authentic-American-Truck label. European Exclusive, licensed in France” (figure 3).

Given the arrangement of the design, the phrase “Heritage Authentic” can be read in more than one way. “Heritage” is the main word, written in big blue letters that arch over “Authentic” placed just below in a decorative frame. That can be read as “Heritage: Authentic,” with “authentic” as a subtitle, indicating that what is evoked on the shirt is somehow the real thing. On the other hand, the words are in English, but the word order, with the adjective after the noun, is French. That could reflect the way everyone, regardless of what language he or she speaks, can feel at home in the Far West mythology.

DREAMS

In the months before I prepared this essay, I zigzagged between the virtual Jewish world and the Imaginary Wild West, spending time in several real imaginary places that constitute the type of new authenticities I’ve described above. I took in Wild West towns called Pullman City in Germany—a big, commercial operation billed as a “living western city” and “home to cowboys and country music”—and Halter Valley in the Czech Republic, a small, one-street set-up owned, built, and operated by a private individual enamored of the Wild West (figure 4).

I attended the annual Karl May festival in Elspe, Germany, one of at least a dozen outdoor summer festivals where spectacles based on Karl May’s stories are performed, annual rituals like Christmas pantomime shows in England. Elspe, founded more than forty years ago, is one of the oldest and biggest: with permanent grounds and its own little Wild West town, it attracts some 180,000 spectators a season. I attended country music festivals in France, Poland, and the Czech Republic, including the “Country Fontana” in Prague that this year marked what would have



Figure 3. ST. AGRÈVE, FRANCE—This T-shirt, on sale at the 2004 edition of the Equiblues rodeo and country music festival in France, sums it all up. Under the banner “Heritage/Authentic” one sees a truck, Monument Valley, the head of a (romantic) Native America warrior, and a shaman. The text at the bottom reads: “Authentic-American-Truck Label. European exclusive licensed LPS France.”



Figure 4. PULLMAN CITY, GERMANY—Czech American Indian hobbyists perform at the Pullman City Passau Wild West theme park in southern Germany, 2004.

been the sixtieth birthday of a Czech country star named Michal Tučný, whose death in 1995 cut short a career singing Czech-language country music that spanned three decades. I also attended the Banjo Jamboree in central Bohemia, Europe's oldest bluegrass festival, where, two years earlier, some sixty-five Czech banjo players had taken the stage to set a sort of world record for unison banjo playing. And I listened to German country artists Truck Stop, Tom Astor, and Dagmar ("the Lady of Country Music") with thousands of western types in full regalia at a so-called Trucker and Country festival in Bavaria, held each year at what has been described as the biggest truck stop in Europe (figure 5).

During this time I also visited Jewish Kazimierz and the Festival of Jewish Culture and spent several days at the annual Yiddish Summer festival in Weimar, Germany, a month-long series of workshops in Jewish dance, klezmer music, and Yiddish song, whose participants were mainly non-Jewish performers. The evenings in Weimar featured public klezmer jam sessions by the students, held in open-air city cafes: the excited strains of East European Jewish music billowed amid the staid Baroque buildings of a town known more for Goethe (and its proximity to



Figure 5. BERLIN—German Civil War reenactors relax under the Confederate flag, during the annual Country Music Messe (Fair) in Berlin, 2007.

Buchenwald) than Gebirtig, while dancers threaded among the tables across the cobbles.

Germany has what is probably the biggest and richest klezmer scene in Europe, but, as I discussed at length in *Virtually Jewish*, most klezmer musicians in Germany, and their audiences, are not Jewish. The attraction is deep and springs from many sources, partly, of course, but only partly (and less so as time moves on), from an underlying guilty legacy from the Shoah. More than a dozen years ago, the German clarinet player Christian Dawid told me that after much self-searching as to why he was so attracted to klezmer music, he concluded simply that klezmer was just as much “his” music as any another other. “I’m not a Jew, and I also don’t want to copy something or say, well, this is my music, or that I want to look Jewish, or to sound Jewish, things like that. But as a musician, I just have very, very deep feelings for this music. I just like it a lot. It’s very meaningful to me,” he said, “to play the music that I just love very, very much.” I first met Dawid in 1995, at a klezmer and Yiddish workshop in northern Germany that was conducted mainly by a teaching staff of North American Jewish performers for mainly non-Jewish European

musicians. Since then, Dawid has evolved into one of Europe's most admired klezmer musicians. He and his Dutch wife, an accordionist whom he met at the 1995 workshop, perform together as a duet, and both were teachers at Weimar.

"What we've been doing in Weimar is motivated by the questions of what is musical authenticity, of what is appropriation, of what is the music of 'others,'" the festival director Alan Bern told me. The American Bern, based for more than twenty years in Berlin, has been a luminary on the klezmer revival scene over the past two decades. Best known perhaps for his work with the group Brave Old World, he is also a thoughtful observer of the sometimes uneasy cultural dynamics between Jews and non-Jews in contemporary Europe. "There is no such thing as culture per se, but rather cultural interactions," Bern told me. "You define culture through interactions . . . what defines something is often the point of view from which you regard it."

In Weimar, as part of a symposium on "music of the other," I presented a talk on country music and bluegrass in Europe, playing for the audience of non-Jewish klezmer musicians and Yiddish singers tracks by the German band Truck Stop, whose members dress up in gaudy cowboy garb and sing in German about how their hearts beat for the Wild West. I played a track by the Polish country singer Lonstar in which, in the persona of a truck driver, he describes how Willie Nelson's words describe exactly his feelings. I played a track by Druha Trava, one of the leading bands in the Czech Republic's thriving bluegrass scene; the band merges American roots music and bluegrass instrumentation with Czech sensibilities to create a new form of music some call "Czechgrass." And I played perhaps my favorite of all European country songs—a song by a German American singer named Don Jensen that describes a German who has never been to the United States but loves country music, takes his kids to rodeos, hangs a picture of Willie Nelson on his wall, and in short creates a sort of German Wild West dream world in which he actively lives out his fantasies. Jensen calls his song "Sauerkraut Cowboy." The chorus runs: "He's a sauerkraut cowboy, with Georgia on his mind, livin' on Tulsa, livin' on Tulsa, livin' on Tulsa time . . ."