

A Confidence Man in Africa: Karl May and the German Colonial Enterprise ¹

DOMINIKA FERENS

University of Wrocław, Poland

Uniwersytet Wrocławski, Instytut Filologii Angielskiej
ul. Kuźnica 22, 50-138 Wrocław, Poland

dferens@poczta.onet.pl

Abstract. This paper argues for the importance of studying the German popular fiction writer Karl May (1842-1912) from a postcolonial studies perspective, both within the context of the nineteenth century German imperial project and the Euro-American tradition of ethnic impersonation. May's ethnographic adventure stories were, and to some extent still are, a considerable cultural force in Germany and Poland, where they are regularly reprinted, televised, parodied, and read aloud to children. Focusing on the power-knowledge nexus in May's travel narratives, this paper explores the role May's fiction played in the formation of German national identity, May's ambivalent attitude towards the colonization of Africa, his strategies of building ethnographic authority, his contradictory attitudes towards the racial Other, and his own lifelong performances of Otherness.

Keywords: Karl May, colonialism, travel, power, knowledge, popular ethnography, German national identity, primitivism, ethnic impersonation

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We go to the exotic other to lose everything, including ourselves – everything except the privilege that enabled us to go in the first place.

(Jonathan Dollimore)

1. Introduction

The fiction of Karl May (1842-1912), while familiar to many Europeans, is virtually unknown in the United States. Presumably because his Yankee characters are uniformly unlikable (having to serve as foils for the German hero), and because there were plenty of home-grown writers of Wild-West fiction, Americans chose to ignore the German writer, though one or two of his novels did get published in translation. What little scholarship on May has appeared in English-language periodicals was written in or before the 1980s, with two notable exceptions: Jeffrey Sammons's study of German writing about the U.S. (1998) and Jerry Schuchalter's on German representations of the American Frontier (2002), each of which includes a chapter on May. Nor is there much awareness outside Germany of the German colonial enterprise: postcolonial studies has overwhelmingly focused on regions that were under British, French, and Spanish rule. German colonial history and literature are only now becoming legitimate fields of interest in Germany itself. My account is therefore an attempt to contextualize May's fiction as a cultural phenomenon, as well as to analyze it from a postcolonial studies perspective. I focus on May's 'African' novels because they have drawn little critical attention to date (the bulk of May criticism concerns his 'American' fiction). What I hope to demonstrate is both the peculiarity of May as a novelist of the colonial age and the similarity of some of his strategies of ethnic impersonation to those employed by his contemporaries outside Germany. Exploring the power-knowledge nexus in May's travel narratives, I attempt to tackle such questions as: What role did May's fiction play in the formation of German national identity after the emergence of a unified German state? What was May's attitude towards the colonization of Africa? Why did his protagonist never set foot in the German colonies, preferring instead to travel across territories under French and British rule? How did May build his ethnographic authority? What is the racial Other to May and how can we interpret his performance of Otherness, both in the fictional world and in real life?

2. The (Anti)colonialist

May, known to most Germans as Dr. Karl May, the renowned explorer, wrote most of his novels set in exotic locales long before, as an elderly man, he first set foot in

North Africa, the Middle East, and the United States. He shared Chancellor Bismarck's and the German aristocracy's contempt for the colonial ambitions of the rising middle class. A small-town schoolteacher who occasionally impersonated doctors and lawyers, May began writing from the position of almost complete disempowerment, in prison, while serving a sentence for fraud. Nevertheless, he managed to colonize with his pen almost every region of the world, from Turkey, Egypt, and Tunisia, through North and South America, to China.²

This paradox is echoed in the ideological ambiguity of May's novels. On the one hand, his tales of one white man's triumphant progress across the Third World reinscribe colonial discourse. On the other, they convey a decidedly anti-colonialist and pacifist message. Their German protagonist, who goes by the name Kara Ben Nemsi in the 'African' novels discussed below, despises those who profit from the exploitation of other races, and swears he has no interest in power. At the same time, by traveling light across British and French territories he is repeatedly put in positions of power by natives who acknowledge his great knowledge and bravery. He has no steady source of income and relies on the patronage of local rulers or gifts from grateful tribespeople. After fulfilling his mission – solving a criminal case, restoring law and order, saving a black village from a slave raid or a Bedouin princess from captivity – May's white hero inevitably resigns from the position of leadership and moves on.

Kara Ben Nemsi's attitude towards people of color is as ambivalent as his position in relation to centers of power. It was May who imparted to a broad European reading public his fascination with difference, exoticism, and 'primitive' peoples. Those who read May in their youth invariably remember that May propagated the brotherhood of the white man and the red man. Yet actual power relations between May's white man and people of color belie this. In fact, the Indians, Egyptians, Bedouins and Chinese in May's stories invariably play the roles of faithful followers, ruthless foes, or victims dependent on the white hero for protection. They ask questions so that he might answer them. He so desires contact with his racial Others that he absorbs ethnographic knowledge about them in

² Elleke Boehmer points out that "the transferability of empire's organizing metaphors is one of the key distinguishing characteristics of colonialist discourse – one that made possible the intertextuality of writing under empire. Itinerant and adaptive, focusing on colonial myths, activating imperialist agencies, what we shall call the travelling metaphor formed an essential constitutive element of an intensely imagined colonial system. Because of metaphorical movement between different places, colonial territories came to be interpreted, as it were, as series of reflecting mirrors, which repeated, reinforced, and at times reversed (though within the same symbolic system) cultural significations emanating from England and Europe" (Boehmer 1995: 52). This formulation might help to explain how May achieved literary success by recycling the tropes of colonialist travel narratives from around the globe.

German libraries and then crosses oceans to become a part of their exotic worlds.³ At times, he even becomes the exotic Other by slipping on a deerskin coat and moccasins, or a Touareg turban. May himself regularly posed for publicity photographs as his narrator Old Shatterhand, dressed as a frontiersman or a Turk, publicly performing the role of the Other. But while such transformations are presumably natural for the German adventurer, no person of color in May's fiction is able to turn into a European, nor does any Other become an authority for Old Shatterhand. Even though Winnetou teaches him elements of Indian culture, it is Winnetou's conversion to Christianity and his adoption of German ways that are foregrounded in the novel.

3. Why Study Karl May?

Old Shatterhand's readers also learned a good deal from him, much of it subconsciously. As narrator, he generously shared his encyclopedic knowledge of geography and ethnography. Consuming May's fiction, German workers in the nineteenth century constructed their first vision of the world beyond Europe. In the twentieth century, May's novels were reclassified as juvenile fiction. Once a valued source of popular ethnographic knowledge, today May's fiction has to compete with countless other representations. It might appear that May has grown irrelevant, and indeed, in a 2002 article entitled "Sorry Winnetou," Polish sociologist Adam Krzemiński announced the death of May's fiction (Krzemiński 2002: 45-46).

Yet I would suggest that this dismissal is premature. The sheer number of May's publications is astounding. His full bibliography compiled by Paul Hainer is over 200 pages long; he is the author of at least 70 novels, many of them still in print. In the words of critic Jeffrey Sammons, May is a writer whom "everyone read [. . .] from Albert Schweitzer to Albert Einstein" (Sammons 1998: 250). As late as the 1960s, the employees of the State Department in Washington were encouraged to read May's novels in order better to understand how Germans perceive America and Americans (Cracroft 1967: 258). New translations of May's novels keep appearing on the Polish book market, parents continue to read their childhood favorites to their children, and the West German Winnetou series are shown on Polish television every few years.

³ In representing the white adventurer's desire for the exotic Other, May treads a fine line between homosociality and homoeroticism. A queer reading of his African novels is beyond the scope of this paper, but the tools developed by Joseph Bristow for studying sexuality in British colonial fiction would be very useful.

When the German filmmaker Michael Herbig made his parody of the Winnetou series *Der Schuh des Manitu* in 2001, he relied on his public's familiarity with this pop-cultural icon. In 2007, the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin put on a major exhibition titled "Karl May: Imaginary Journeys," reconstructing May's life and work within their historical and aesthetic context. What the curators managed successfully to convey is a sense of the heavy traffic in exotica in the nineteenth century: travelers bringing home countless stories, trophies, paintings, and photographs of their encounters with non-Western peoples; circus side shows and performances in metropolitan zoos and botanical gardens featuring Indian braves and African warriors. While some of the exhibit captions developed a critical perspective on May's entanglements with Orientalism and imperialism, the overall tone of the exhibition was celebratory. The very scope and sumptuousness of the exhibition suggested that the curators were interested in May not just as an anachronistic curiosity but as a fascinating larger-than-life figure who may have some embarrassing episodes of fraud and impersonation on his conscience but whose imaginary journeys are a national legacy. During the exhibition, bookstores around Berlin carried boxed sets of May's newly reprinted novels. In view of May's lasting presence in European culture, it seems worth considering some of the reasons for the mass appeal of his fiction.

4. Germany and the Colonial Race

May began his career in the 1870s with short magazine stories and serial novels. By 1875 he was already the editor of the working-class magazines *Deutsches Familienblatt* and *Schlacht und Hütte*, and in 1879 he also briefly edited the Catholic *Deutscher Hausschatz* (see fig. 1). It was only a few years earlier, in 1871, that Chancellor Bismarck proclaimed the formation of the German state. According to all sources, the Chancellor himself was so absorbed in matters on the home front, such as creating a social security system, that he initially took virtually no interest in the colonial race. He claimed that "a colonial policy would be just like the silky fur coats of Polish noblemen who have no shirts" (McKichan 1992: 98) – a luxury Germany cannot afford. Those Germans who *were* interested in African exploration or trade traveled at their own expense or joined Belgian expeditions (King Leopold II, unlike Bismarck, had strong colonial ambitions).

It is all the more surprising that when the European powers met in 1884 to divide Africa among themselves they did so in Berlin. Germany declared itself the protector of four African regions: the present-day Togo, Cameroon, Tanzania and Namibia, as well as parts of the Pacific. Establishing actual control over these

territories took a good deal more time and brute force. On paper, though, German colonies “extended over [. . .] more than four times the area of the Reich, briefly making Germany the third largest colonial power” (Blackshire-Belay 1992: 238). Historians have long puzzled over this sudden shift in German foreign policy. They point to the rapid rise in Germany’s population, which almost doubled between 1850 and 1900 (Berman 1996: 51), the desire to compete with other European powers, but most importantly, to pressures from manufacturers and merchants eager to increase their sales by establishing new markets in Africa and Asia – preferably markets over which Germany had political control.



Fig. 1.

The rapid acquisition of colonies in Africa took place with little public control or even awareness. Symptomatically, an eyewitness of colonization of Togoland cited in a 1992 issue of *Journal of Black Studies* complained: "Each time a war breaks out with the natives [. . .] the people at home are told nothing about it but that a war has taken place, that it is now over and they have to foot the bill. There is never any mention of the whys and wherefores. [. . .] According to the telegraphic message, all is quiet in the protectorate" (Blackshire-Belay 1992: 241).

When I began researching the colonial context of May's fiction in 2001, I found it odd that so little had been written about the German colonies in comparison with the Spanish, British, and French ones. Nina Berman was the only literature scholar to have discussed May as a colonial author in her book *Orientalismus, Kolonialismus und Moderne* (1996). German historians of the 1990s seemed to be as circumspect about the colonies, as nineteenth-century newspapers were. But a sea change has occurred in recent years due to the rise of postcolonial studies in Germany, a fact Izabela Surynt notes with some satisfaction in the present volume. Among the scholars who have begun to take stock of the German colonial enterprise and to fill the problematic gap are Susanne Zantop, who has written about the ideological underpinnings of the German colonization (1999). Mirhan Dabag, Horst Gründer, and Uwe-K Ketelsen, in their edited volume *Kolonialstädte: Europäische Enklaven oder Schmelztiegel der Kulturen?* (2004) presented a wide spectrum of cultural studies approaches to the German presence in the Third World and discussed the imprint of colonial representations on German culture.

5. Ethnographic Knowledge and the Production of German National Identity

The general lack of interest in colonial policy in nineteenth-century Germany did not mean a lack of interest in the exotic. From the beginning of his literary career May specialized in stories of travel and adventure for a relatively new readership – German workers – about people who were racially and culturally different. One of the first stories listed in Plaul's bibliography exploits the exoticism of a local ethnic group – Gypsies. In subsequent decades May often returned to Indian and Oriental themes. This was a time of intensive national identity construction, with the Romantic theories of Johann Herder and Johann Fichte serving as foundational texts. Both intellectuals and working-class people sought definitions of German national distinctiveness. As Fichte argued:

Those who speak the same language are joined to each other by a multitude of invisible bonds by nature herself, long before any human art begins; they

understand each other and have the power of continuing to make themselves understood more and more clearly; they belong together and are by nature one and an inseparable whole. Such a whole, if it wishes to absorb and mingle with itself any other people of different descent and language, cannot do so without itself becoming confused, in the beginning at any rate, and violently disturbing the even progress of its culture. (Fichte 1968: 19)

While some tried to articulate what was quintessentially German, others defined national identity by juxtaposing it against identities that were decidedly *not* German. The latter found an invaluable resource in the countless descriptions of non-European peoples supplied by travelers, missionaries, merchants and colonial administrators throughout the nineteenth century. Ethnographic and geographic accounts as well as maps were collected in private archives and national libraries. Karl May studied such materials avidly in order to construct the background against which his protagonist's adventures could unfold, at the same time popularizing knowledge that had been accessible to a very limited readership.

6. Second-Hand Ethnography of Other Nations' Colonies

The fact that in the 1880s May, writing the 'travel narrative' of Kara Ben Nemsî (alias Old Shatterhand, alias Karl May) took his hero right across French and British North Africa rather than to the territories under German jurisdiction may be interpreted in many ways. Perhaps Orientalist literature on North Africa was simply more readily available, while the Orient was generally perceived as more interesting, mysterious, and therefore more appealing than 'Dark Africa.' More importantly though, this choice of setting allowed May to adopt an oppositional stance in relation to imperialism without the need to criticize German colonial policy. Early ethnographers claimed that their expeditions to study exotic peoples were non-invasive; they apparently observed without being seen and left the "primitive" worlds unaltered. May's hero Kara Ben Nemsî makes the same disingenuous claim: "I travel to get to know the country and the people" (May, *Królowa pustyni* 23), yet we soon see that he is far from politically neutral. He sets aright a disordered world plagued by robbers, confidence men, and slave traders. His ethnographic account is merely a by-product. Besides meddling in local affairs he occasionally becomes a player in international politics, for instance by aligning himself with a Sudanese desert tribe, the Beni Sallah, against the British and their puppet government in Egypt. When, by accident, he comes across a caravan bearing 300 brand new British rifles buried in the desert sand during a storm, he

deduces that the rifles were intended for the Beni Suef, a tribe the British were inciting to rise up against the *khedif* Ismael Pasha. Kara Ben Nemsî, who is an incorrigible pacifist and knocks his enemies unconscious but never kills them (hence the name "Old Shatterhand"), initially decides to let the guns lie in the sand but eventually hands them over to the anti-British tribe Beni Sallah.

"I travel to get to know the country and the people" is also misleading because there is little Kara Ben Nemsî does not know about them. He knows them like the back of his hand from literature. Going out into the 'field' he merely verifies his geographic, ethnographic, and linguistic knowledge. For Kara Ben Nemsî knowledge is a form of goods to be exchanged, a solid German product whose value greatly increases when it is exported to Africa. There it becomes a source of income as well as a tool for maintaining power. Wherever he goes, he astounds the 'natives' by addressing them in their local dialects. Skilled in orientation, he effortlessly finds his way in the desert terrain and gives Africans information on the customs of neighboring tribes. Writing about May's hero's exploits in North America, literary critic Jeffrey Sammons aptly points out that though Old Shatterhand arrives without practical experience, he "can from the beginning outshoot, outride, outsurvey, and outthink the most experienced trapper. He has nothing to learn and makes no mistakes" (Sammons 1998: 231). The same holds true in the African context. The explanation May gives for these amazing feats is that – not unlike himself – his hero has come to know distant lands like the back of his hand by reading books about them. One day he overhears two Egyptians talking about him:

'I vouch that there is no question he could not answer. All branches of knowledge come together in his head.[. . .]

'Yes, but he is still a foreigner. Do you think that a German who has been here three or four times can understand local relations as well as an Egyptian?'

'I believe he can. Every one of those learned Christians has many books about foreign countries and nations; besides, they have great book collections that belong to the state yet anyone can use them. Before such a foreigner goes abroad, he reads every book that exists about the country and so comes to know it better than a native. [. . .] They speak our language and have such accurate maps that they often know the way better than we do. No wonder they manage so well under any circumstances and need not rely on Allah as we do. If you consider that this *effendi* is one of the most distinguished of his countrymen, then you will agree with me that by enlisting his help I can expect results.' (May, *Prawo pustyni* 30-32)

7. Colonial Power vs. Ethnographic Authority

Thus May invests his hero with considerable authority and, even more importantly, conveys the message that Kara Ben Nemsî is not just welcomed by the 'natives' but is useful to them. This justification of his presence in Africa is repeated throughout the cycle of African novels entitled *Im Lande des Mahdi*. For instance, the black chief of the Goks addresses him thus:

Sir! You come from a nation of famous and great men. I hear that you blow down your enemies like feathers off the palm of your hand and no-one can defeat you. [. . .] Ibn Asl is the most devilish of all the slave hunters. Some of his men are worse than jackals. We cannot possibly defend ourselves against such an enemy. Yet now that you are among us we can rest in peace, for you are as strong as a thousand men. I shall therefore arm all my warriors and ask you to take command over them. Will you fulfill this humble request? (May, *Decydujące starcie* 79)

Significantly, Kara Ben Nemsî never seeks power. It is entrusted to him by helpless Africans who recognize his superiority. Like a Medieval knight, he is the embodiment of chivalry and intelligence, Christian faith and cunning, but the quality that makes him distinctive is his self-confidence.

This image of the German hero clearly appealed to the readers of serial novels. It was an image they could identify with and that boosted their self-esteem and national pride. It is not surprising, then, that May's hero was not welcomed by Americans. According to Sammons, this was not because the publishing marketplace was saturated with homespun stories of adventure but because Old Shatterhand/Kara Ben Nemsî is a German patriot and intellectual. Together with the honest, simple German pioneers he fights against the greedy and unprincipled Yankees who violate Indian rights and covet Indian lands (Sammons 1998: 250). Richard H. Cracroft points out that May's nationalism is most apparent in his representations of villains: "the half-breed, the Mormon, and the Yankee are a means of reflecting and glorifying by comparison and contrast the Germanic nobility of Shatterhand and his thoroughly Teutonized Indian sidekick" (Cracroft 1967: 257). While Old Shatterhand is not an aristocrat, he adheres to a rigidly hierarchical social order that is at odds with American egalitarianism. His education and his rather elite profession as a writer may have alienated the readers of dime novels (Sammons 1998: 225). Yet these were the very features that made Old Shatterhand/Kara Ben Nemsî popular in Germany. They reinforced his – and Karl May's – ethnographic authority.

8. Confidence Man or Confident Man?

Besides presenting himself as a noble, highly-principled Christian, and claiming to have been everywhere his hero had, May used a number of other strategies to build up his authority.⁴ The photographs and lithographs reproduced on the frontispieces of his novels and in press advertisements served this end. He usually posed for them dressed as a trapper, cowboy, Turk, or Arab, always with a necklace of animal fangs around his neck (see fig. 2). To persuade readers that



Fig. 2.

Old Shatterhand's adventures really were his own (perhaps with a few creative touches) May's figure, copied from the photographs, often appeared in the illustrations of his books. For instance, in fig. 3 he stands next to a group of Indian warriors. By contrast, in the opening of *Der Mahdi* (1891), a novel set in Egypt, there is a portrait of May posing as a European explorer in a frock coat, bow tie, and mo-

⁴ "I can speak about the subject with authority because I have been there," is the conventional claim nineteenth-century Orientalist travelers made to assert discursive authority. Having "been there" remains the ethnographer's most powerful claim to representing other people and places. For further thoughts on "being there" see Clifford (1988: 22) and Behdad (1994: 100).



Die nun folgende Ceremonie der Friedenspfeife wurde mit größter Feierlichkeit vorgenommen.

Fig. 3.

noche (see fig. 4). By changing costumes May alternately reduced and increased the cultural distance between himself and the exotic others. While the authenticity of his narrative was guaranteed by the claim of having been 'in the field' and studied the exotic cultures, he could not risk being accused of losing objectivity or 'going native.' The academic career of American ethnographer Frank Hamilton

Der Mahdi.
Reiseerzählung von Karl May.
Erster Band. Am Nile.



1. Kapitel.
Ein Chajjal.

Die Siegreiche, El Kähira' und Ban-
waabe el bilad esch
schar', das Ober des
Orientes, so nennt der
Egypter die Hauptstadt
seines Landes. Wenn
die erstere Bezeichnung
längst nicht mehr am
Platz ist, so bezieht die
zweite doch zu vollem
Recht. Kairo ist wirklich
die Pforte des Orients.
Als solche ist diese Stadt
dem Ausdrange occi-
dentaler Einflüsse am

meisten ausgesetzt, und die einst Siegreiche ist so altersschwach
geworden, daß sie demselben kaum mehr zu widerstehen vermag.

Fig. 4.

Cushing was marred by precisely that accusation.⁵ Thus May occasionally posed for publicity photographs dressed as a scholar, and signed them "Dr. Karl May" to strengthen the effect.⁶ In addition, the first-person narration suggests that May's

⁵ Curtis Hinsley discusses this fascinating case in "Zunis and Brahmins: Cultural Ambivalence in the Gilded Age" (1989). Cushing spent many years in a Zuni village in New Mexico. When he published his ethnographic account, he was accused of overly identifying with his subjects, while the poetic prose in which he attempted to render elements of Zuni culture was read as a sign of methodological subjectivity.

⁶ According to his biographers, besides claiming to have a Ph.D., May also posed as a physician and a lawyer.

novels are largely autobiographical. If, however, the narrator of a travel narrative is to be viewed as an authority, his voice has to sound confident. Perhaps this accounts for the omniscience of May's protagonist-narrator who "has nothing to learn and makes no mistakes" (Sammons 1998: 231).

9. Among Other Confidence Men (and Women)

Although May's commentators often treat him as a literary confidence man, an exception to an unwritten rule that authors always are who they appear to be, his strategy was not uncommon. By looking at analogical historical figures we can throw light on some of the political aspects of his writing and analyze his public image. The strategy of constructing the public persona of a traveler or a racial Other is not new. Anthropologist Susan Stewart discusses a seventeenth-century confidence man, Psalmanazar, also of German descent, who made a remarkable career by posing as a native of Formosa (today's Taiwan). He not only invented his own autobiography but also wrote a full ethnographic description of Formosa, complete with drawings of local costumes and a basic grammar and vocabulary. Having once established his authority, Psalmanazar made a living by writing for English publishers about Formosa and other lands he claimed to have visited on his travels. Significantly, even when a courtier found glaring inconsistencies in his grammatical system and his deception was disclosed, publishers continued to press him to write (Stewart 1989: 44-73). Karl May's publishers must have used the same strategy; while they must have been aware of his being a confidence man of sorts, they assisted him in maintaining his literary persona because it sold his books.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, several Canadian and American writers resorted to a similar strategy in response to the increased demand for authentic accounts by ethnic and racial 'Others.' Some posed as Indian braves and princesses. Winnifred Eaton, the Canadian-born daughter of a Chinese mother and English father, became a bestselling author by posing as a Japanese or half-Japanese noblewoman named Onoto Watanna and writing romances about Japan, the Japanese, and relationships between Americans and Japanese. It is clear from the hundreds of reviews she clipped from the daily papers that her novels and stories were largely read for their ethnographic content. Her readers, fascinated by Japan's rapid modernization and military successes, looked to Onoto Watanna for explanations of the Japanese 'character.' In her private life Eaton drove her own car, lived in New York, wore fashionable hats and lace collars. As a writer at the height of her popularity she wrote her autograph in Japanese characters and occasionally posed for publicity photographs dressed in a kimono. The illustrated

magazines were eager to print her articles on traditional Japanese holidays, plays, or growing bonsai, while during the Russo-Japanese war they interviewed her on the Japanese national character. Just like Karl May, Eaton did not set foot in the exotic places she wrote about; initially, she could not afford to travel while later in life she had other priorities. Instead, she relied on public libraries which stocked up on travel accounts and guidebooks about Japan. It appears that at least some of her publishers were aware that the Japanese persona was fake, yet like Psalmanazar's employers, they continued to commission 'Japanese' fiction and resisted Eaton's efforts to write about other subjects.⁷

Both Eaton and May owed their success largely to the great demand for authenticity and exotica in the newly industrialized countries in the times of mass production and the homogenization of culture. As Dean McCannell noted in his sociological study of tourism, modernity forced people to seek authenticity elsewhere, far from home; to find its reflections in things poor, ostensibly pure and virgin; in 'Others' (McCannell 2002: 64). Likewise, anthropologist Brian Spooner, observing the construction and commodification of 'authenticity' by modern Western societies, observes that "authenticity cannot be determined simply by retailing the objective material attributes of the artifact. It has to do not only with genuineness and the reliability of face value, but with our desire for it" (Spooner 1986: 199-200). As Western societies became increasingly heterogeneous and traditional social structures collapsed, McCannell argues, tourism – particularly visiting premodern worlds – became a form of collective striving to transcend the modern totality. Tourism was a means of overcoming the discontinuity of modernity through the incorporation of its fragments into the individual experience (McCannell 2002: 19). The experience of traveling continues to help Westerners to impose order on their disorderly reality by turning it into a sequence of representations much like photographs in a family album (McCannell 2002: 23). Writers like May and Eaton enabled their white working- and middle-class readers to travel vicariously to worlds accessible only to the moneyed elites. It was relatively easy to 'unmask' May and Eaton – and indeed both of them were forced to defend themselves against such exposure in the press and in court – but their readers were far more interested in maintaining the illusion of authenticity.

⁷ For a discussion of Onoto Watanna/Winnifred Eaton see Diana Birchall, *Onoto Watanna: The Story of Winnifred Eaton* (2001) and Dominika Ferens, *Edith and Winnifred Eaton: Chinatown Missions and Japanese Romances* (2002).

10. From Confidence to Agency

May's German protagonist does not merely travel through exotic lands; he actually becomes the 'Other.' As narrator he always distances himself from the roles he plays but as a character he takes on 'primitive' identities as easily as he changes costumes. One day he and his Egyptian companions find themselves in the territory of the hostile Gok tribe; the leader of the Egyptians additionally irritates the Goks by making a long, pompous speech they cannot understand. To save the day, Kara Ben Nemsî becomes a 'savage' and does what 'savages' are commonly known to do:

Barely pausing to think, I dug my heels into the sides of my ox and galloped towards the leader of the Goks, circling him several times and whooping wildly. Finally I slid off the saddle. [. . .] Having recovered my breath, I stretched out my arms like a preacher and, in a loud voice, I began to recite Schiller's 'Song of the Bell'!

During this odd recitation I did not stand still as artists performing on stages are wont to do; instead I used all my energy to illustrate each idea, raising first one foot, then the other, waving my arms in the air, squatting and jumping up and down. [. . .] My performance made a stunning impression. (May, *Decydujące starcie* 76)

In this scene Kara Ben Nemsî plays the role of a 'primitive' man as it was understood by nineteenth-century scholars inspired by the writings of Rousseau. According to Simon During, primitivism in the modern era enabled "constructing or finding a self as another or by identification with others" (During 1994: 47). Another commonly used strategy was "self-spectacularization [. . .] becoming the exotic object of public attention" (During 1994: 62). Interestingly, Rousseau himself for many years wore an Armenian costume with a characteristic long skirt; he also took up embroidery as a sign of his identification with women. Self-spectacularization was a strategy adopted by many late nineteenth-century Orientalists like Karl May. Among the best-known were the Frenchman Pierre Loti, the Englishman Sir Edwin Arnold, and the Greek-American Lafcadio Hearn, all of whom "went native" in Japan: they wore kimonos, mingled with the Japanese, married local women, and later wrote books about their experience of the exotic for white readers. In India, according to critic Parama Roy, the British officer Sir Richard Burton was one of the best-known impersonators of native inhabitants. Fluent in Arabic and quick to pick up Indian dialects he was able to pass successfully, first for pleasure and then as a spy for the British authorities. Dressed as a native, he enjoyed roaming the quarters inaccessible to the British. To this day he is known as the author of many boastful autobiographical accounts, including the first relation of a white man's visit to Mecca. Burton claimed that he was able to reach

this city only thanks to his ability to impersonate people of colour. Another figure that might serve as an analogy for Karl May was the Frenchwoman Isabelle Eberhardt, studied by Ali Behdad. Raised in Algeria, Eberhardt resorted to the strategy of cross-dressing in order to escape the confines of the role of middle-class woman into which she was born. For many years she roamed the desert as an Arab boy-pilgrim, studying the Koran under famous Muslim scholars.

11. Ethnic Impersonation and the Dark Side of Agency

The examples of Burton and Eberhardt help to sensitize us to the power relations in which whites visiting and writing about the 'Orient' became entangled during the colonial era. It might seem that as people who traveled light and were not a burden to anyone they did not disturb the local order of things, yet upon closer examination it becomes apparent that both their careers took a more disturbing turn. On the road in colonized territories, neither Burton nor Eberhardt were able to remain politically neutral and each, however reluctantly, contributed to the reinforcement of colonial rule. As Roy demonstrates, Burton combined business and pleasure by writing reports of his escapades for his superiors. Among other things, he reported on attitudes towards the British in various parts of the city and on male brothels frequented by British soldiers; the latter report had grim consequences for all involved (Roy 1995: 191). Eberhardt too became a spy, though she did so against her will, when she was forced to report to the French military authorities on the numbers and location of tribal armies (Behdad 1994: 152).

Both Karl May and Richard Burton were convinced that whereas a 'civilized' man can successfully imitate 'primitive' people, a 'primitive' man can only give a poor imitation of whites.⁸ "Burton seems to have affected, on occasion, the exulting self-confidence in his own knowledge and cunning" writes Roy (Roy 1995: 190). Whether impersonating an Iranian or a Pathan, "he stages his identity in the most flamboyant ways, constantly drawing the attention of his Muslim companions to

⁸ In his influential essay "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" Homi Bhabha considers the insidious effects of European colonial discourse's insistence on the colonial subject's being doomed to mimicking the colonizer yet never quite mastering the act – even as the colonizer, in desiring the Other, is involved in mimicry: "Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both 'normalized' knowledges and disciplinary powers" (Bhabha 1984: 126).

his learning, his linguistic facility, his skill with medicine, his sexual charm, and his unusual courage. He corrects Muslim divines on points of Koranic law" (Roy 1995: 198). That very same confidence characterizes the narrative of Kara Ben Nemsî, who, like Burton, is confident that he can be a better native than the natives themselves.

In the nineteenth century, when the traffic of Western explorers, missionaries, soldiers, colonial administrators, and tourists drastically increased, 'going native' acquired contradictory meanings. Missionaries saw it as something abominable, for it signaled the loss of Christian values; anthropologists warned that close contact with other races would lead to the degeneration of the white race – yet tourists seeking alternatives to the homogenizing and restrictive aspects of modernity began to think of 'going native' as highly desirable, for it allowed them to feel as if they could travel back in time. Both academic and popular sources claimed that as a result of 'overcivilization' the white race had lost its vitality and manliness. This calamity could only be overcome by imitating the 'primitive' peoples who live closer to nature and by emphasizing the physical development of young boys. These ideas led to the growing popularity of eugenics and boy scout movements. May's contemporary, Theodore Roosevelt, soon to become president of the United States, made skilful use of primitivism to boost his public image. Interestingly, he reached for the very same strategy of self-representation as May, though he did so in the name of imperialism, and not as an anti-imperialist gesture like May. According to historian Gail Bederman, this ambitious young politician running in local and then Congressional elections was perceived as an effeminate greenhorn. To change this image he bought a ranch in South Dakota and published two books on frontier life in short succession. In a newspaper interview given in 1884, he said, "[i]t would electrify some of my friends who have accused me of representing the kid-glove element in politics if they could see me galloping over the plains, day in and day out, clad in a buckskin shirt and leather chaparajos, with a big sombrero on my head" (Bederman 1995: 175). A lithograph from this period shows Roosevelt dressed as a trapper, in an Indian-style tasseled leather jacket, holding a gun across his chest – the spitting image of Karl May (see figs. 5 and 6). Only their hats differ (Roosevelt wears a fur cap), yet we know from the above-mentioned interview that he was also partial to sombreros. Neither Roosevelt nor May stopped at appropriating elements of Indian clothing. According to Bederman, to construct his new virile image Roosevelt also needed a war experience, which he acquired in Puerto Rico, and an East African safari, both of which were widely publicized in the press. After winning the presidential elections in 1901 and 1904, Roosevelt went down in history as the most imperialist-minded American president after McKinley. Meanwhile, Karl May only took up his gun in photographers' studios, but he continued the literary colonization of the Far West, North Africa, South America, and Asia.



Fig. 5.



Fig. 6.

Travel and sightseeing in the colonies, as shown by the examples of Karl May, Sir Richard Burton, Isabelle Eberhardt and Theodore Roosevelt, are thus profoundly entangled in the structures of power-knowledge so sensitively explored by Michel Foucault. No less problematic is identification with or passing for the racial other. In the words of Leslie Fiedler, “born theoretically white, we are permitted to pass our childhood as imaginary Indians, our adolescence as imaginary Negroes, and only then are expected to settle down to being what we really are: white once more” (Fiedler 1972: 134). To restate Jonathan Dollimore’s words from the epigraph: “We go to the exotic other to lose everything, including ourselves – everything except the privilege that enabled us to go in the first place” (Dollimore 1997: 9). As Fiedler and Dollimore make clear, both ethnic transvestitism and white people’s travel among their racial ‘others’ always produce an

asymmetry of power relations along racial lines, and no matter how sincerely the sightseer identifies with the other, he or she does not give up the privilege of returning 'home.' Seeking exotic difference can be the effect of more than a 'simple curiosity' about the world; it may also be motivated by a sense of alienation, marginalization, disempowerment, low self-esteem, or the will to change one's public image. Travel can take many forms: going on a safari like Roosevelt, entering another culture for many years like Eberhard, or reading travel narratives in the prison library and fantasizing about exotic worlds.

The agency afforded by knowledge of other people and places can also take many forms. By dressing as an Arab pilgrim Eberhard left behind the confines of French middle-class femininity, though she subsequently lost her freedom and agency when her knowledge about the Saharan tribes turned out to be useful to the French authorities. Roosevelt came to power partly due to his social background, solid education, and exceptional abilities, yet he constructed his image of the virile politician by appropriating attributes of the 'primitive' and traveling to exotic worlds. Consorting with the 'primitive,' even if only in the sphere of the imagination, meant economic and social mobility for Karl May. It also allowed him to dominate the way several generations of Europeans imagined non-Europeans.

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