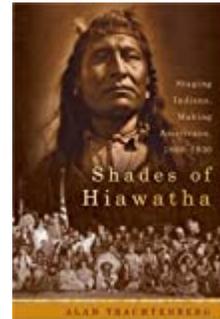




**Alan Trachtenberg.** *Shades of Hiawatha: Staging Indians, Making Americans, 1880-1930.* New York: Hill & Wang, 2004. xxv + 369 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-29975-0.



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*Shades of Hiawatha* is an ambitious book. Trachtenberg starts with two deceptively simple observations about what we might see as the “cultural moment” between 1880 and 1930. The first is that these were years when Americans were fascinated with things Indian. They were interested in ways that had a lot to do with being American and less to do with Indians themselves. (This latter fact is of course not particularly new.) His second observation is that these were also the years when millions of new immigrants landed in the United States, irrevocably changing the face of America both literally and figuratively. Trachtenberg takes these two self-evident observations and poses an original question: what is their relationship? This is an important question with implications for cultural history and the history of identity. Trachtenberg’s answer refers exclusively to the United States, yet his two starting observations could just as easily be made of Canada. His question deserves to be posed in a Canadian context, and for the scholar who seizes the opportunity, this work will provide a stimulating starting point for exploring the nexus between cultural representations of Indians and immigrants north of the border.

Trachtenberg’s method is to establish something of a taxonomy, holding up a wide array of cultural artifacts for display: poetry, theatre, travelogues, photography,

and department store displays to name a few. Many of these were produced by well-known characters from the historical annals of American high culture: Robert Frost, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Henry James, and Edward Curtis to name a few. Others were produced by figures who will be less familiar to readers: Yehoash, the Russian poet who translated *The Song of Hiawatha* into Yiddish, and Joseph Kossuth Dixon, who led Indian “expeditions” for the Wanamaker department stores. The book is much more about these non-Indian “stagers” of Indians than about Indians themselves. Trachtenberg’s interest lies in the implications of these cultural artifacts for Americanness rather than in their impact on Indian lives. The one Indian author to whom Trachtenberg devotes significant attention is Luther Standing Bear, someone who will be well known to students and scholars of American Indian history.

During the decades under consideration, the stories Americans told about Indians shifted. Where they had previously narrated these stories in the trope of exclusion, they now told them according to the trope of incorporation. In terms of policy, this took shape in boarding schools and allotment; in terms of rhetoric, it took shape in performances of *The Song of Hiawatha* and in the photographs of Edward Curtis. Americans made this incorporative gesture during the same decades as the in-

flux of new immigrants confronted them with fresh anxiety about the incorporation of aliens into the American body. This anxiety about new immigrants was in turn a catalyst in the American chemistry of what we might call “Indian thinking.” This was an alchemy that converted exclusion into incorporation, annihilation into assimilation, and enemies into wards. There is an irony here, one that Trachtenberg might have drawn more sharply given that it lays at the crux of his project: it took a perceived “alien” threat from Europe to facilitate the Americanization of the supposed “aliens” at home, the Indians who had been there all along. Through representations of Indians, and the subsequent representations of representations of Indians, Americans were working out how Indianness might be positioned in relation to, rather than in opposition to, Americanness. And the purpose was pedagogical: “For a new immigrant, Indians decked out as first Americans offered a pedagogy of Americanization” (p. 33). Throughout the Americanized “shades of Hiawatha” lurked the shadows of immigrants from central and eastern Europe.

The chapters do not expose these shadows to the light as fully as they might, but they are nonetheless highly suggestive and often fascinating. They range impressively, although unevenly, across the dual thematic of Indians and immigrants. Representations of Indians take center stage, while the presence of the new immigrants ebbs and flows throughout the book.

The introduction is a roaming chapter that mulls over the following question: “Who, then, qualifies as ‘American’?” (p. 9). It moves eclectically from poetry through painting to policy to unearth the paradoxical meanings of words such as “native” and “alien,” “nation” and “tribe” in the U.S. context. Situating Indian, immigrant, and American as “mutually constitutive fictions” (p. 10), Trachtenberg provides a brief history of the relationship between notions of Indians and definitions of the American.

Chapter 1 offers an in-depth analysis of Longfellow’s *The Song of Hiawatha*, its initial reception in the mid-nineteenth century, and its revival at century’s end. Trachtenberg considers a range of literary issues, including questions of ethnographic accuracy (or lack thereof), as well as the various enactments of the poem. The participation of Indian students in the consumption and performances of the poem carried a double lesson: simultaneously lending increased authenticity to the poem itself and indoctrinating the young students in “American” (as opposed to Ojibwa or Lakota, for example) Indianness.

Chapter 2 turns explicitly towards questions sur-

rounding immigration and aliens from Europe. It uses Henry James’s *The American Scene* (1907) as its primary conduit into questions about the distinctiveness and recognizability of Americanness. Lewis Hine, Theodore Roosevelt, and John Dewey weigh in, each in his own fashion, on language, cultural coherence, foreignness, and citizenship.

Chapter 3 takes as its remarkable subject a 1910 Yiddish translation of *The Song of Hiawatha*. It is here that the book’s two subjects literally come together. Trachtenberg places the translation within broader debates over Yiddish in the early twentieth century and argues that advocates for the translation believed it would naturalize Jews into other European immigrants and create a sense of international solidarity. Yiddish *Hiawatha* stands as evidence of immigrants’ understanding, incorporation even, of the American grammar of “Indian thinking.” For Trachtenberg it also stands as a moment of optimism: “when becoming American in Yiddish, by creating an Indian mediation for a Yiddish-American identity, seemed a plausible prospect” (p. 169).

Chapter 4 takes up Edward Curtis’s well-known epic photography project funded by J. P. Morgan. Not surprisingly, Trachtenberg reads Curtis’s work as a prescriptive expression of American identity. Trachtenberg writes that the work of such images was to teach those who saw them, especially immigrant children, “the difference between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ whites and redskins. It was to reaffirm whiteness as the color of the United States” (p. 196). In offering up images of a supposedly “pure” Indianness frozen in the past, Trachtenberg argues that Curtis provided an antidote to contemporary fears of racial and national pollution by blacks and immigrants.

Chapter 5 offers a bizarre popular counterpart to Curtis’s project. Running nearly contemporaneously with Curtis’s, the Rodman Wanamaker Expeditions to the North American Indians turned the principles behind Curtis’s high art towards mass commercial advertising. The photographic records produced by Wanamaker’s project adorned the walls of his department stores, commodifying the vanishing Indian as the first American. Wanamaker sold American products and American looks; representations of Indians came to be among the inventory. Wanamaker likewise turned his hand (or rather his bankroll) towards a number of other “Indian projects,” including a film production of *The Song of Hiawatha*.

In Chapter 6 Trachtenberg closes the book with an incorporative gesture of his own, turning his analytic eye

away from non-Indian producers of Indianness towards an Indian view of the nexus between American and Indian. Trachtenberg sees Lakota writer Luther Standing Bear as a “bridge between two worlds,” and in giving him the “final say” (p. xxiii) endorses Standing Bear’s vision. For Trachtenberg, it is Standing Bear’s belief in a nation that draws strength from the human gifts of all its inhabitants regardless of race that Americans should take up as their banner in order to lay the shades of Hiawatha at last to rest and to renovate the name “America” (pp. 309-310). This is a noble note on which to close, yet it ignores the degree to which the incorporation of Indian imagery into the American cultural imaginary was a gesture of appropriation and annihilation that silenced indigenous voices even as it shored up American identity. As Philip Deloria has recently shown, the window of opportunity for Indians that Standing Bear and others opened soon “swung back towards the sill.”[1] Absent the reconfiguration of power and authority that has long privileged Longfellows over Standing Bears, the optimism of Trachtenberg’s closing note rings hollow to me.

Although the chapters proceed roughly chronologically, the transformation that Trachtenberg traces from “Indian as other” to “Indian as us” did not occur in linear fashion. Certainly there is some linearity here: Longfellow had to write *The Song of Hiawatha* before interest in it could be revived; and neither the Yiddish *Dos Lid fun Hayavata* nor the Wanamaker Department store film could have appeared without this revival. But in other respects the relationships between the cultural forms on display are less direct, more horizontal than vertical. Trachtenberg wears trifocals as he moves through the cultural stacks, simultaneously investigating how Americans thought with/through Indians; how Americans thought with/through immigrants; and how Americans thought with/through race. Indians, immigrants, and race were overlapping conceptual lenses through which Americans attempted to bring their own identity into focus. And although each lens had its own ob-

ject, they shared a common ocular form. Evidence of what another scholar has termed the “exhibitionary complex” runs throughout Trachtenberg’s examples.[2] Thus, these decades of transformation are part of a cultural moment tied together by this performative thread. The examples Trachtenberg considers are more like undulating varieties of cultural ambivalence than progressive steps on a march of historical change. Some of the most suggestive relationships between the cultural artifacts he displays are the most tenuous ones, the moments when Trachtenberg identifies discursive links that the authors or artists themselves may not even have seen. He does this, for example, when he links Luther Standing Bear’s characterizations of race and nation to W. E. B. Du Bois’s (p. 307). In this sense, Trachtenberg is not drawing a chronological line so much as a family tree for a historical moment.

It is this sense of the collective moment, of the genealogical connections between the cultural artifacts on display that I would have liked drawn out more explicitly. If Trachtenberg had used heavier ink to draw the branches of this family tree, the trifocal perspective would have been clearer throughout. These branches, the connections between the chapters and between the myriad cultural producers are crucial to the book’s originality. Taken individually any single chapter, though skillfully rendered, does not in and of itself cover a great deal of new ground. It is in the fresh arrangement of material that Trachtenberg’s book urges us to re-think the stories Americans tell about Indians, immigrants, and American identity.

#### Notes

[1]. Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), p. 226.

[2]. Tony Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” in *Representing the Nation: A Reader, Histories, Heritage and Museums*, ed. David Boswell and Jessica Evans (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 332-370.

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