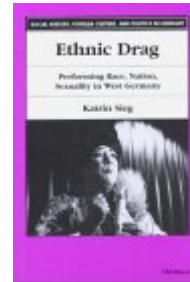


Katrin Sieg. *Ethnic Drag: Performing Race, Nation, Sexuality in West Germany.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002. vii + 286 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-11282-1.



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Ethnic Masquerade on Stage

This book by Katrin Sieg is an enticing, superbly documented, and exceptionally well-written account of the phantasmatic self-representations and impersonations of ethnicity in late-twentieth-century Germany. The culture industry of racial formations is staged, in Katrin Sieg's words, as "a sophisticated orchestration of forgetting" (p. 84) by a simultaneity of evocation and displacement, which is ultimately centered on the restoration of white masculinity in the post-fascist era. But the issue, as a further read quickly reveals, is not quite that simple. Much of the work focuses on socially critical drag acts. Embedding her analysis in feminist, queer, and critical race theory, Sieg shows how the German emulation and usurpation of ethnicities is linked not only to racial reification but also to performative attempts at transformation. Katrin Sieg, in short, has produced an exceptional historical ethnography of postwar German ethnicities in the making.

Based on a selection of intriguing case studies, Katrin Sieg seeks to unravel the tension-fraught performances of race, nation, and sexuality in West Germany after 1945. Chapter 1, entitled "A Prehistory: Jewish Impersonation," offers a crucial cultural context to what Sieg calls "ethnic drag" by tracing the classical and travestied traditions of

Jewish impersonation from the eighteenth century onward, thereby setting the stage for the remainder of her study. While "pointing to the long history and diverse emplotments of ethnic drag in Germany" (pp. 31-32), Sieg does not aim to construct a simple trajectory of continuities. Rather, her careful examination of societal specificities (politics, ideology, identity, authority, and power) of Jewish impersonations allows us to glimpse a multiplicity of shifting meanings. In the province of the Jewish imposter, Sieg shows "the German actor's conceit of universal performability, the white body's ability to transcend its gendered and racial coordinates" (p. 32). Her examination of fascist drag reveals the racial gaze as Jewish impersonation becomes part of "a cultural technology in the service of a violent, antisemitic state" (p. 33). Moreover, in critically considering biologically correct casting, Sieg shows how such performances "may abet a counter-hegemonic agenda" (p. 33). Finally, by a focus on Bertolt Brecht's concept of estrangement techniques, Sieg points to ways of marking "identity as a construction, to historicize it, and enjoin spectators to engage in the political labor of critique and transformation" (p. 33). In her conclusion of this complex chapter, Sieg takes Jewish impersonation to the postwar period, highlighting the uneasy

tensions between philosemitism and antisemitism in the performances of ethnic drag: “Although productions paraded a forgiving Jew, this figure could not but remind German spectators of horrific wrongs, shame, and complicity; other dramas were able to rework this scenario of stark antagonism into visions of harmony and redemption” (p. 71).

In the subsequent chapters, Katrin Sieg examines how, shortly after 1945, mass culture and popular practices facilitated the repression and refashioning of Nazi racial precepts. During a time when American occupation authorities insisted on the remembrance and redress for the Holocaust, the Wild West emerged as a displaced theater of the German racial imagination, where the roles of victims, avenger, and perpetrator of genocide were reassigned. Thus in chapter 2, entitled “Race and Reconstruction: Winnetou in Bad Segeberg,” Sieg focuses on the open-air festival in a German town, an annual event based on the work of Karl May, a popular writer of travel and adventure published in the late-1900s, whose series of books are an assortment of “colonial fantasies and fictions” (p. 84). The postwar West German stage adaptations of May’s westerns, which began in 1952, feature Winnetou, the Apache hero, and Old Shatterhand, the blond, blue eyed, white protagonist. As Sieg points out, “May’s dehistoricized Wild West offered the material for a very historically specific surrogation in a situation in which direct confrontation between Germans, and even more so between Germans and Jews, over racial aggression was both painful and increasingly discouraged in public, political discourse” (pp. 79-80). And May’s Winnetou novels have as their central trope *Wiedergutmachung* or restitution, according to Katrin Sieg: “Germans are ‘made good’ again, their honor is restored after being suspected of white racism” (p. 78). The Wild West “stage adaptations visually translated the dream of German exceptionality and exemption from the crimes of white racism into a bodily style that juxtaposed the German hero with his Nazi predecessors and other villainous whites” (p. 107). This is an important observation. Moreover, the increasing prominence of the “red hero” in the drama “illustrate[s] West Germans’ views of racial others as either noble and forgiving victims of genocide or the fetishized objects of profitable multicultural industries” (p. 107), “cathartically purging profoundly ambivalent emotions about race, nation, and gender in the early 1950s” (p. 112). These themes, centered on the coupling of mimesis and masquerade, also run through chapter 3, entitled “Winnetou’s Grandchildren,” a chapter that traces ethnic drag as a “technology of forgetting”

through the activities and practices of German hobbyist clubs. This portion of the book is largely based on interviews with the practitioners of Indian impersonation. With such a reliance on ethnographic materials, the work departs from the usual archival storehouse of the cultural historian to explore different forms of historical denial and ethnicization in the present. Moreover, Sieg effectively examines whether and how such ethnic emulations and solidarities are transported into wider political belief systems and everyday behavior.

Turning more specifically to an analysis of the violence of the white gaze in chapter 4, Sieg examines antifascist dramaturgies developed by leftists and feminists since the 1960s. In these confrontational plots, antifascist drag exposes the racializing gaze, but in the process negates the subjectivity of ethnic others, rendering them speechless, and, as Sieg points out, systematically precludes intercultural communication in favor of a monolithic notion of oppression. By a focus on a select number of films and novels, Sieg engages in an in depth analysis of the tropes of interracial fantasy.

The rigorous examination of such dialogues continues in chapter 5, entitled “Queer Colonialism,” where critical ethnographic documentaries deploy drag to work through the themes of “racial domination, submission, and objectification that structure colonial and East-West relations” (p. 25). Although the performances seek to render visible and deconstruct European colonial fantasies, Katrin Sieg’s analysis suggests limited possibilities for transformation. Somewhat more promising seem to be the counter anthropological plays (by Spiderwoman and Āzdamar), which are highlighted in chapter 6, a book segment appropriately entitled “Ethnic Travesties.” Here the techniques of caricature, parody, defamiliarization, estrangement, and critical spectatorship, in addition to the casting by “Native Americans and Turks”, allow the ethnic drag performances to “take the risk of essentialism in order to foreground the material effects of representation on ethnic subjects, their bodies, subjectivities, and social possibilities, while refuting the truth claims of mimesis” (p. 27). These performances are, according to Katrin Sieg, most successful in contesting and transforming established notions of racial belonging.

In her conclusion to this original study, Katrin Sieg notes the difficulty in interpreting the performativities of ethnic drag. She suggests that race relations are not represented but signified by mimetic masquerade, which “dramatizes social conflicts in the manner of a dream, through condensations, displacements, and distortions.

Its relation to reality is indirect, its outcome in many ways counterintuitive” (p. 255). In linking ethnic drag to identity politics, Sieg shows that “in these critical and comical interventions, ‘race’ emerges not as a property of particular bodies, but as a spectatorial activity of decoding (and thereby producing) difference” (p. 257). It is through these performative dramaturgies of ethnic drag that older paradigms of race can be subverted, estranged, and, perhaps sometimes, altered. As Katrin Sieg puts it: “Some masquerades translate high cultural icons into local forms of engagement and activism. Others evoke the shared memories of displacement and ostracism, as well

as proximate histories of pride and resilience, for a politics of dialogue, trialogue, and coalition” (p. 260).

This book is a fascinating read. The detailed documentation throughout makes Katrin Sieg’s arguments utterly convincing. The interpretive insights often take an unexpected turn, thereby enhancing the reader’s curiosity with each chapter. It ought to be read by all scholars interested in German Studies, whether in the humanities or social sciences. Graduate students as well as upper division undergraduates should be encouraged to discuss this work in class. Katrin Sieg has published a novel, original, and important work.

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