

“Is This Play?” Reframing Metaphoric Action on Indianist Playgrounds

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We believe that the paradoxes of abstraction must make their appearance in all communication more complex than that of mood-signals and that without these paradoxes the evolution of communication would be at an end. Life would then be an endless interchange of stylized messages, a game with rigid rules, unrelieved by change or humor.

—Gregory Bateson

Introduction

On a summer evening in 2003, I was part of a big circle of people sitting in a meadow in the Belgian Ardennes. I had spent a few days with a group of European Indianists, and as this tribal council marked the end of a two-week camping event, I thought it was the appropriate moment for me to rise and thank them for their hospitality. Rather than the obligatory display of courteous nods that I expected, my gesture provoked a debate about the legitimacy of my very presence at the camp. I felt particularly ill-at-ease and did not know if I should react. I kept silent. The next day, I left as planned. Something very unpleasant had happened, and I felt relieved that I could go elsewhere with the material I had gathered and interview other Indianists in other places.

In hindsight, I am no longer sure whether anything hostile or even unpleasant had occurred. Perhaps I had taken what had been said too much at face value. Perhaps I had mistaken play for the real thing. Perhaps the entire episode had given rise to a misunderstanding on my part that was emblematic for the type of activity under observation: a form of play with ambiguous frames.

My anthropological research concerns what I would like to call “play communities”: groups of enthusiastic amateurs who study and reenact, on European soil, their specific versions of nineteenth-century Native American life by producing replicas of artifacts and clothing and wearing these in homemade settings reminiscent of living history museums. This knowledge-intensive leisure activity is known as the Indian hobby, Indian hobbyism, or Indianism. I spent the better part of 2003 and the first half of 2004 in Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, and the Czech Republic interviewing Indian hobbyists and participating in Indianist camps.

Play

In *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Gregory Bateson has written an influential theory of play as metacommunication. Describing his observations of monkeys engaging in seemingly aggressive behavior that turns out to be play, he writes, "[T]he statement 'This is play' looks something like this: 'These actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions *for which they stand* would denote' " (1972:180). When humans engage in play, they enter a framework in which signals stand for something other than what they would normally stand for: a framework bearing the cautionary message "This is play." In other words, play is about metaphoric action. A more complex form of play, Bateson writes, is the game constructed not upon the premise "This is play" but on the question "Is this play?" In this case, the interest of the game is in toying with the premise itself.

Bateson's theory is embedded in a discussion of schizophrenia. Schizophrenic patients, he argues, are carried away by their fantasies because they fail to grasp the metaphoric nature of these fantasies. Being unable to set "metacommunicative frames," schizophrenics take everything literally (1972:190-91). Understanding metacommunicative action is thus a matter of understanding which frame is invoked. Bateson describes a frame as a psychological concept that delimits a set of messages or meaningful actions and helps the subject understand such messages (1972:186-88).

The notion of "frame" has been taken up by Erving Goffman (1974) in *Frame Analysis* to develop an understanding of the organization of human experience. Goffman praises Bateson's paper for "allowing us to see what a startling thing experience is, such that a bit of serious activity can be used as a model for putting together unserious versions of the same activity, and that, on occasion, we may not know whether it is play or the real thing that is occurring" (1974:7). In Goffman's approach, the process of transcription that transforms a primary framework (which is meaningful in itself without harking back to an "original" activity) into "something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else" is called keying (1974:44). This process can be applied several times, resulting in multiple re-keyings. A frame can thus incorporate a number of re-keyings, and each transformation may be thought of as adding a layer or lamination to the activity (1974:80-82). Indian hobbyism, seen in this light, may be considered an activity involving multiple transformations. As a form of representation drawing on historical sources (in themselves representations or keyings of a supposed historical reality), Indian hobbyism, as such, is already two laminations removed from the supposed original. Within the context of the hobby, as I hope to show, numerous activities are organized and staged that involve yet additional transformations.

Goffman distinguishes between make-believe, contests, ceremonials, technical re-doings (including rehearsal and experimentation), and re-groundings as

basic keys (1974:48). He notes that the framing of an activity is often marked by a special set of "brackets," as with the keying signals in Bateson's discussion of the message "this is play" (251-54).¹ Goffman's numerous examples are drawn from the realms of sports, games, ritual, experimentation, practicing, and performance. However, he stresses that serious, everyday life is also often already patterned upon cultural standards, thus constituting "a laminated adumbration of a pattern or model that is itself a typification of quite uncertain realm status" (1974:562). Individuals' framing may lead to ambiguity, misframings, and frame disputes, which are resolved upon reaching a clear frame, "which occurs when *all* participants in the activity have a clear relation to the frame" (1974:338).

Often, the term "play" is featured in Goffman's examples, independent of the particular realm of activity he is drawing on, but he does not accord it a special status in the process of keying. In my approach of Indian hobbyism, however, this is what I propose to do. While drawing on Bateson's and Goffman's work on metacommunicative framing, I will use play as my guiding principle in considerations of keying in hobbyism. This choice of perspective is partly motivated, as will become clear from my discussion of hobbyism, by the contentious use of the term "play" by hobbyists themselves.

Within the discipline of anthropology, the idea of play has rarely taken center-stage as theoretical concept, perhaps with the exception of Clifford Geertz's (1972) use of deep play as a characterization of the Balinese cockfight and Victor Turner's (1982, 1984) later work on the liminal and the liminoid. A much more central theoretical concept, ritual, has lately been extended to include non-religious phenomena and is seen to provide room for new anthropological interest in forms of play (see Limón 1989; Coleman and Elsner 1998). Theorists of play differ in their classification of play in relationship to other types of special activity, such as ritual. In *Homo ludens*, Johan Huizinga (1967) includes ritual in the realm of play. According to Huizinga, sacred earnest and make-believe or fun are indissolubly connected in play (1967:24). Play is about pretending, even about "just pretending," but that does not mean that it is not serious. Emphasizing the important role of play in human society, Huizinga considers societal institutions as functioning in the realm of play whenever they can be classified under the headings of performance or contest. Consequently, play in Huizinga's approach includes poetry and the performative arts, philosophy, and, as prime examples of contest, law and war.

For Bateson, unlike Huizinga, play is not an umbrella concept but part of a complex of phenomena (together with threat, histrionics, games, and ritual) which have been important in the evolution of human communication due to their metaphoric nature. He notes that in ritual, as in play, the metaphoric may be misunderstood for the "real." An example of this would be a peace-making ceremony involving ritual blows turning into a battle (1972:182). In Goffman's terminology,

such instances of “breaking frame,” viz. mistaking mock acts for real acts, are called “down-keying” (1974:359).

Bateson’s single complex of phenomena, transposed in more recent anthropological terminology, could be said to include the performative and mimetic (threat and histrionics), the competitive (games), the ritualistic (ritual), and the ludic (play and fantasy), elements which will all be important in an analysis of Indian hobbyism. In *Performance Theory* (2003), theater scholar Richard Schechner discusses play, games, sports, theater, and ritual as performative genres that may be grouped in games, sports, and theater on the one hand, and play and ritual on the other. The basis of his classification is “the different quality and use of the rules that govern the activities. . . . Play is ‘free activity’ where one makes one’s own rules. . . . Ritual is strictly programmed. . . . Games, sports, and theater . . . mediate between these extremes” (2003:15). Schechner also suggests that “play is obviously the ontogenic source of the other activities: what children do, adults organize,” thus according a somewhat more overarching status to the concept of play (2003:15).

What is attractive to me about using play (as an activity practiced by adults) as an umbrella concept for the study of Indianism is the juxtaposition of its seriousness as suggested by Huizinga (the importance of playing by the rules—following the appropriate ritual, wearing the appropriate, “authentic” clothes, excelling in a game) and the self-reflexive irony that seems to be part of it (it is only a game, after all, an “as if” situation as opposed to real life). Using play as my central concept, I look upon the performative, ritualistic, competitive, mimetic, ludic, and ironic as my analytic tools, powered by Goffman’s notion of keying. Although play is considered especially difficult to define, I find Helen Schwartzman’s (1978) approach inspiring because it allows for a broad interpretation, as does Huizinga’s conception of play. Drawing on Bateson, Schwartzman stresses the creative force of play as a mode of activity that constitutes its own reality and concludes that “play is an orientation or framing and defining *context* that players adopt toward something (an object, a person, a role, an activity, an event, etc.), which produces a *text* characterized by allusion (not distortion or illusion), transformation (not preservation), and ‘*purported imitation*’ of the object, person, role, etc” (Schwartzman 1978:330). Bringing in frame analysis, I conceive of such allusion, transformation, and imitation as instances of “playful” keying.

Only a minority of Indian hobbyists would immediately agree with the term “play” as a categorization of their hobby.² As became apparent in field interviews, in most hobbyists’ perception, play implies a lack of seriousness, whereas many take their hobby quite seriously as an activity in which they invest a lot of time, effort, and money. Some have become very knowledgeable on aspects of Native American nineteenth-century material culture and would rather consider their involvement as a dedicated form of amateur ethnology.³ Since the term “play” is immediately associated with playing cowboys and Indians and thus with children’s activities, it

provokes resistance on the part of Indianists who feel they are seldom taken seriously by professional students of Native American history and material culture.

In the episode during my fieldwork among Indianists in August 2003 that I will discuss in this paper, when I was under the impression that communication was at least partly breaking down, I was a guest of a group that explicitly, and even defiantly, used the term “play” to refer to their hobby. Their playground was the Buffalo Days Camp (BDC), an event with a reputation of “historically correct” strictness among European Indianists. Before turning to this episode, I will describe the contacts and events leading up to it, which will serve to paint a picture of part of the Indianist scene, the social networks underlying it, and the various ways of “living” the hobby.⁴

Performance and *Öffentlichkeitsarbeit*: A Hobbyist Family in Eastern Germany

One of my first contacts in the hobby led me to a hamlet near Cottbus in eastern Germany. My visit in March 2003 with an Indianist family in an old farmhouse near the Polish border proved a very interesting introduction to Indian hobbyism “eastern style” that would lead to an invitation to stay in their teepee during the Indian Week (the biggest Indian hobbyist event in the former East Germany) later that year. The hobby turned out to be quite a presence in this family’s daily surroundings. On their property, teepee poles were stacked up along the driveway and deer hides were drying on frames. Gifts from fellow-Indianists and homemade replicas were scattered all over the house. On the living room table, a piece of Cheyenne beadwork was taking shape. The impression of a curiosity-cabinet-turned-living-space was enhanced by a collection of stuffed birds and animals, a buffalo head, Cheyenne, Crow, and Blackfoot baby carriers made by the hostess (a different one for each of their sons), a dried trunkfish from a Polish flea market, and English redcoat jackets from a theater company. An old-fashioned Canadian map of North American tribes adorned the kitchen wall.

My host, Ralph,⁵ was the chief of one of the local clubs and a member of a war society within the hobby, the eastern variant of the Crow Owners or Kangi Yuhas. My hostess, Karin, told me that she was the third generation of Indian enthusiasts along the female line. Her grandmother had been a pioneer of Indian-style camping in a make-shift teepee and her mother still actively participated in Indianist events.

Karin and Ralph earned some money on the side (as they explained, to help pay for vacations abroad) by organizing events and shows (*Veranstaltungen* and *Auftritte*). The couple had a leaflet in which they offered their services, ranging from dance performances and talks on Plains Indian life to teepee tours and flint-knapping. Such public performances (*Öffentlichkeitsarbeit*, community work) used to be part of regular club activities. These days, however, Ralph and Karin put up shows in collaboration with a few Indianist friends.⁶ They guided me through photo albums

filled with pictures taken during such shows—in schools, at fairs, or at country-style trucker festivals. Their goal, they told me, was to show people that Native Americans lived differently from what is usually shown in westerns.⁷

Play Acting or Plain Acting

The hobby, both as something private and as a source of additional income, seemed to be entirely integrated into the family's daily lives and gestures. During later visits, as a guest in their teepee and in their house, I was always struck by the naturalness and matter-of-factness with which they switched between Indian outfits (daily, ceremonial, and society dress) and “normal” clothing, and between house and teepee. With the exception of special occasions, their behavior did not seem to change significantly between “normal” and “Indian play” contexts. I expected instances of keying to be accompanied by a marked behavioral change on the part of the Indianists in the form of role-play. During hobbyist outings in Karin's and Ralph's company, however, I was puzzled by the lack of such make-believe. Certainly, Bateson's message “this is play” could be said to be conveyed by the very costumes and setting, and by the change in gestures and activities. Moreover, life in camp at the Indian Week as I observed it was punctuated by many marked moments of special play, re-keyings within the re-keying that is hobbyism: performative play (as when the Crow Owners went through the camp asking for gifts and the people came out to contribute and take pictures), ritualistic play (as when the Crow Owners' wives treated their men and former Crow Owners to a meal during which the men took turns making speeches about shared history), competitive play (games of chance in the society teepee or games of skill on the meadow), mimetic play (“Plains Indians” trying out Woodland steps, mimicking other hobbyists; dance leaders and singers mimicking historical models, instructing others), and ironic, verbal play (“Woodland Indians” mocking “Plains Indians”). But most of such moments of play had occurred in similar ways before, I was told, and appeared to have become part of day-to-day life in camp, part of the normal array of gestures, which, as a whole, did not seem to involve any explicit role shifts marked by the warning label “this is play.”

This does not mean that Karin and Ralph did not reflect on their hobby lives as opposed to their everyday lives. In a taped television interview with a local journalist that Ralph showed me during my visit in March 2003, he mentioned that he appreciated a tendency in the hobby towards a more *ernsthaf* (serious) approach. Concrete changes as a result of this tendency, he explained to me, included a more structured organizational framework for events, with societies playing a policing role, and a general improvement in people's outfits. In the old days, hobbyists could walk around at the Indian Week in a sports outfit, but such lack of historical rigor was no longer tolerated. When I asked him why he approved of this more *ernsthaf* approach, Ralph answered that it enhanced *nachempfinden* and that it felt better to be properly dressed in proper surroundings.

Nachempfinden, and also *nacherleben*, were terms that I would often hear mentioned in my fieldwork in the former East Germany. *Empfinden* translates as “to experience,” *erleben* as “to relive, to experience,” and the prefix “nach” may be rendered as “through copying/mimicking.” Both terms are used by Indianists to express their principal goal in the hobby: to acquire an understanding of how life used to be in the period and among the people under study, not only by reading about them, but also by going, at least partly, through the same motions. This conception of the hobby resonates with Goffman’s notion of keying in the sense of technical re-doing. Most of my discussion partners in the former East Germany would contrast *nachempfinden* or *nacherleben* with *spielen* or *schauspielen*, to play or to act a part, of which they would usually disapprove.⁸ This discourse would often include the claim that too much emphasis on authentic representation of the historical model might be detrimental to genuine, meaningful experience. As one of the main initiators of powwowing in East Germany told me during an interview, a step considered wrong by the book would be just fine if the dancer felt it to be appropriate during his or her performance. Among Goffman’s examples of technical re-doings, experimentation would perhaps be the best label for this approach.

As we leafed through Ralph’s and Karin’s photo albums, an invitation to the Buffalo Days Camp turned up for each documented year. The couple had not yet participated in this “1830-1870 Plains Indians only” event. They knew a Belgian BDC participant, however, who had attended the Week in the GDR even before the fall of the Wall and was quite appreciated because of this.⁹ Karin and Ralph gave me his telephone number. When I called him in Belgium, he referred me to his son.

In Quest of Authenticity: A Hobbyist Couple in Belgium

In April 2003, I met Paul and Helen, a couple with, as it turned out, quite a different stance towards the hobby. They lived on the outskirts of Antwerp in a townhouse in which Indianist objects were only sparsely and tastefully displayed. In the corridor, smart drawers had been installed to contain the large collection of pictures of Native American artifacts from ethnology museums that the couple had acquired over the years. They told me they had lent out replicas to ethnography museums in Belgium on several occasions and had been involved in restoration projects of *ethnographica*.

Paul joked that his early efforts in the hobby were characterized by “a high Winnetou content.”¹⁰ Through study and experimentation, this had since changed. The driving force behind the couple’s Indianist activities had become to attain the highest possible degree of authenticity. At the same time, they emphasized the importance of sheer enjoyment and of poking fun at their own (and at other hobbyists’) seriousness, for example by dressing up in shockingly inauthentic children’s play outfits, thus satirizing their own efforts—in frame analysis terms, a re-keying of a re-keying.

As I found in subsequent interviews and conversations in the field, the term “authenticity” is used among European hobbyists to characterize their own productions and performances as more or less accurate (“historically correct”) renderings (keyings) of the emulated model. Authenticity in European hobbyist usage is thus located in the relationship between hobbyists’ output and the historical model. According to Paul and Helen, the best venue to experiment with historically correct reenactment would be the annual Buffalo Days Camp (BDC), an initiative by a German Indianist that had taken place at different locations in Europe over the preceding eight years.

Play as a Learning Tool

Paul explained during the interview in Antwerp that his main responsibility at the BDC consisted in designing choreographies by compiling ethnographic sources. He had also volunteered to document the history of the BDC by drawing ledger books as an alternative to historically incorrect photography. Paul and Helen stressed that they *played* Indian (more specifically, Lakota): in their view, play was something very positive, implying learning, acquiring skills, and experimenting. The challenge at the BDC, they told me, was to learn both intellectually and physically.

At the BDC, as Paul and Helen explained, participants did not try to portray a specific historical figure as interpreters do in living history museums. They did have nicknames, however, reflecting a trait of their personality in the Native American language of the people they sought to emulate. Paul suggested that playing at the BDC involved the technique of method acting, in which improvisation is important. Slipping into another world, if only for ten minutes, was an experience he particularly enjoyed. This was highly personal, he stressed, and possibly disconcerting for people who were less prepared to let themselves go. He appreciated the BDC for providing a sheltered environment suited to this kind of experimentation, which would not be possible at just any camp. In fact, at one particular Indianist event, the annual gathering in western Germany called the Indian Council, Paul had found himself in real trouble when he used a reenactment of a running competition to engage in mockery of older Indianists, a practice that he claimed attested to historical examples. The older men had taken these insults personally and excluded him for several years from the Council.¹¹ From the perspective of frame analysis, the older Indianists interpreted the mockery in a primary framework of ordinary communication instead of recognizing it as keyed activity. They were down-keying, removing a lamination from the frame, with a frame dispute as a result (Goffman 1974:359,343). In Bateson’s terms, the metacommunicative message “this is play” was not adequately conveyed or understood. Problems were likely to arise among participants in the hobby, Paul felt, from not being clear about the rules of the game. Sometimes, he admitted, he tended to play according to his own rules without having explained these properly beforehand.

Although their hobby spilled over into their normal lives in various ways (for example, through close friendships with fellow Indianists), reality to Paul and Helen remained explicitly the daily (work) environment as “Westerners.” In contrast to many East German hobbyists that I interviewed, they did not seem to regard Native American lifeworlds as a source of inspiration or a guiding rod for (ethical) behavior in their “normal” lives.¹² What it did seem to offer them, however, was a space in which to engage in rituals (interpreted not in a religious sense, but rather as meaningful shared gestures) that they felt were lacking in modern Western European life. They were well aware that other Indianists criticized the BDC approach for being too rigorous or too individualistic. In their view, other hobbyist networks, especially in western Germany, focused much more on *Gemütlichkeit* (conviviality) or, especially in eastern Germany, on solidarity, with everybody (including the less skilled or rigorous) welcome to join in.

Hobbyist Playgrounds

In the summer of 2003, I was preparing for my first big event: Ralph and Karin had invited me to the Indian Week in early August, where I could stay in their teepee as a guest of the Crow Owners Society and wear appropriate dresses, moccasins, and leggings from Karin’s elaborate hobby wardrobe. A few days before leaving for the camp site in Thuringia in eastern Germany, I spoke to Paul on the phone. To my surprise, he invited me to spend three or four days at the Buffalo Days Camp in the Belgian Ardennes, in mid-August, immediately after the Week. There was one condition, however: I was welcome only in the guise of a female anthropologist not later than 1880. In great haste, I called theater companies that rented costumes and I managed to secure a more or less suitable outfit, with a hat and parasol. I decided my role model would be Alice Cunningham Fletcher who visited the Omaha reservation in Nebraska for the first time in 1879 to do anthropological research. In terms of frame analysis, this spell of participant-observation, in itself already a keying (more specifically a re-grounding) according to Goffman,¹³ was thus bound to undergo a re-keying, a further lamination, as a staging of “normal” participant-observation.

My ten days at the Indian Week, a gathering involving hundreds of teepees, left me with a wealth of impressions and data that made me wonder whether the idea of “play” still held in a context where people seemed to go about their daily business (albeit hobby business in hobby clothes) as if everything went without saying. Except for the overtly staged and planned actions, ranging from a society dance to Lakota lessons, people seemed simply at home. They had been doing this for years. Still, the setting was extraordinary, and participants marveled at its extraordinariness, while playing by specific rules aimed at creating a specific atmosphere, in a clearly demarcated playground that was not accessible to outsiders.¹⁴ But apart from explicitly framed occasions, when someone became a story-teller or defied the chief of a rival society, role-play was rare.

I was expecting something different at the Buffalo Days Camp. When the BDC was mentioned by participants at the Week, it was mostly with some disapproval in which the word “play” was often featured: it was considered “too extreme,” participants were said to be playing as opposed to experiencing (*nachempfinden*), and the camp was said to be more about individualistic showing-off than about social sharing. Playing, in Week participants’ discourse, seemed to imply being theatrical, putting on a show, instead of being sincerely, personally involved in worthwhile emulation of Native American values. Thus, Week participants seemed to draw moral distinctions between different types of mimetic keying (detached and heartfelt).¹⁵ Few people had experienced the BDC themselves, however. One couple (members of the Crow Owners Society) who had participated in the BDC invited me to make a stop-over at their home on my way to the BDC in Belgium. They playfully prepared me for all that could happen upon my arrival there, warning me that I was likely to be abducted by warriors on horseback.

Alice Fletcher among the “Indians”

Armed with a detailed map indicating the farm where the BDC meadow could be found, which my hosts had sent through e-mail, I arrived at the spot in the Belgian Ardennes nicely on time, by car. On an improvised parking lot near the farm, I changed into the theater outfit (a synthetic horror in the blistering sun) and waited for someone to escort me to the camp, well out of sight. I left my laptop and camera in the car trunk, knowing that such modern equipment would not be appreciated here. Transcribing fieldnotes into the laptop would have to wait until after my stay. Only an old-fashioned notebook and a pencil were to accompany me on this hobbyist site. This would not be a major departure from my accustomed way of recording. All events and interviews discussed in this paper were recorded by taking elaborate notes on paper and, if necessary, pausing to write out a quote, without using audiovisual devices, with the exception of a camera. During my fieldwork, I took pictures of Indianists at home after interviews and at many hobbyist events, both open and closed to the public, but not at the BDC. Whenever possible, I transcribed my notes into my laptop on the evening or day following an event or interview, using a simple code to protect informant privacy and adding observations and annotations.

After a while, Helen came to meet me, in a buckskin dress stripped to the waist. She was pleasant as ever. We walked through a meadow down to the camp (a circle of about twenty teepees) close to a narrow, shallow river. Under a shelter made out of branches, women and children were resting. Helen introduced me and I murmured a few sentences of the speech I had prepared as part of the role-play of Fletcher, expressing that I had come hoping I would learn a great deal from them. It turned out that the men were holding a meeting in the society teepee. Some of them were members or ex-members of the “west” Crow Owners Society, the counterpart of the “east” Kangi Yuhas whose guest I had been at the Indian Week. Paul was not available for consultation, and Helen was not sure how to proceed. She showed me

the teepee where I would stay with Paul, herself, and Michael, the lead musician and guardian at the camp. The heat was oppressive, and Helen felt like a swim. Abandoning the role I was expecting to play, I got rid of the heavy costume and waded into the river as naked as she was, a practice with which I was already quite familiar since the Week.¹⁶ Shedding one lamination from transformed participant-observation to normal participant-observation within the frame of “playing Indian,” I was soon reminded by a third bathing woman that another layer of play was still expected to be added: she asked us whether we would all be moving into role-play so that “the game may begin.” Helen inquired whether I had a specific historical figure in mind. The choice of Alice Fletcher did not surprise her. As a man approached the bank of the river, Helen held her breath. He could snatch my clothes! I felt excited and terrified at the same time at the prospect of such a spectacular start of the game, but the warrior went away without paying any attention to us.

We were properly dressed in our play clothes when the society men, in breechclouts, emerged from the central teepee, Paul among them. He introduced me to the initiator of the BDC, Udo, an engineer with whom I had had contact through e-mail and who had agreed to an interview at a later date, in spite of misgivings about journalists and other outsiders likely to misrepresent Indianism. Paul felt that as long as no complaints were voiced concerning my presence, a formal presentation to all participants would not be necessary.

Over the days that followed, I did not play Alice Fletcher in any sustained way. I pretended to feel a bit Fletcher-like when striding about in my robes shaded by the parasol or when accepting a blanket to sit upon while recording goings-on in my old-fashioned notebook. Outfit does make a difference. People were either busy with private projects (carving a bow, asking others for advice, cooking, cleaning a hide) or involved in planned actions that, other than what I had seen during the Week, were carefully prepared beforehand and executed in a rather cerebral fashion. Sometimes, an action was interrupted because of a perceived flaw in its staging—a detail that did not match historical descriptions or images, of which Paul kept copies in his teepee. After an action, participants would discuss its quality and their personal experience with a view of improvement next time. Frames would be shifting constantly, both in terms of activity and in terms of discourse. Indianists could be involved in a “historical” task within the setting of the hobby, such as quilling, while discussing problems at work (the primary frame outside of the hobby) or ideas for an action (a quilling contest in which their replicas would be judged, modeled after an event described in historical sources). They could also be engrossed in a staged action and experience, if only for a fleeting moment, “how it could have been,” achieving a temporary belief in an illusion (self-deception, a form of fabrication according to Goffman), before stepping out of frame into everyday hobby life.

Because of the international character of the camp (in 2003, about 45 hobbyists participated, from Belgium, Germany, France, the Netherlands, and

Hungary), stage directions before and even during actions would be given in English, German, and sometimes in French, keying the actions as rehearsals rather than performances. Although preparing for actions by consulting historical sources seemed to be an integral part of the experience for participants at the BDC, opinions varied on the amount of preparation needed. The night before I arrived, a spontaneous raid had taken place, to the disapproval of those who had been left in the dark and were subsequently “massacred.”

In general, I noticed that considerable self-reflection went into BDC practices. The word “play” was used as a standard term to refer to hobbyism, sometimes in explicit defiance of other hobby networks in which people were said to be too insecure (towards outsiders who ridiculed play) or too carried-away (due to an idealized understanding of the historical model) to admit to the play nature of their activities. This attitude towards the hobby was quite different from the prevalent approach at the Week, where the accent seemed to be on the inspiration that hobbyists could draw from Native American historical examples rather than on meticulously accurate representation.

I was not the only “white person” present at the BDC: one of the French Indianists had brought her cowboy husband. Our status as white outsiders became part of an unmistakable play situation when Paul announced a performance and we were invited to sit on a blanket as an audience, together with Paul’s elderly father, to watch a series of war dances especially put on for the entertainment and enlightenment of the white visitors. Michael, the musical leader, gave me some historical background information about the dances they were about to perform. I inquired after the headdresses that some of the men were donning. Did a headdress signify prestige in the hobby, as it would have done in the historical model? No, he answered, unfortunately not. Some fifteen years ago, Michael elaborated, he had been involved in playing a game (*ein Spiel spielen*) during which only “tribal leaders,” people who had made an impact on the hobby, were allowed to wear a headdress. As he had a policing function at the time, he asked a newcomer to remove his brand-new bonnet. Unfortunately, this newcomer reacted badly and sat sulking in his teepee throughout the game. Michael seemed to consider this an example of a ludic initiative by one party mistaken for a putdown by another. The basic problem, Michael claimed, was that the hobby was a game without rules (*ein Spiel ohne Regeln*).

When everyone had dressed for the occasion and stood assembled on the open space in the teepee circle, Paul and Michael explained the rules for the upcoming performance, which was set around 1870. At last, I felt we could all act out a role; there was no ambiguity about which frame to invoke. Some of the dancing men came up to the audience as if to challenge the white visitors. Thinking of the adventure novels and westerns that were part of my European cultural baggage, I tried to look them straight into the eye so as not to show any fear. At less intimidating moments, I took notes frantically. It felt like a translation exercise in which the translator is given

a text that has already been translated and now has to be translated back into its source language: inevitably, the resultant text will be quite different from the original.

In the afternoon, a fishing party was organized. Led by Michael, the women and a few men stepped into the river to chase the fish towards the other men, who were waiting with their arrows on the string. Paul had appropriated my dainty hat. It suited him fine. I hesitated, then took off my laced boots, girded up my skirt, and followed the others into the water, lashing it with a twig, as they did. Rather soaked after all the excitement, and no longer feeling very dignified, I returned to the teepee in disarray and gladly accepted Helen's offer of a calico dress, moccasins, leggings, and a belt with a pouch containing fire-making tools. Paul added a knife in a sheath to my outfit. The other women remarked amusedly that I had gone native. Udo's eldest girl asked me whether I was playing Indian now. I wore the Indian dress for the remainder of my stay, quite relieved to be able to dispense with the heavy "anthropologist's costume" in the relentless heat.

When the Anthropologist Becomes Data

That evening, I rose and thanked my hosts at the tribal council that was held to evaluate that year's BDC. Paul took the floor and asked participants whether they wanted me to pay the full contribution that, according to the rules, was due by anyone staying longer than two nights at the BDC, or whether they considered my presence as constructive as such and would waive the contribution. After several endless moments of silence, a French Indianist got up and declared that it was not his intention to hurt the visitor, but that she would never be able to understand what drove him as an Indianist. A woman rose and complained about the participation of the cowboy (who had already left) with his big mustache. The leader of the French group then took the floor to defend the cowboy, claiming that the latter's presence at the camp as the husband of a Native American woman had been historically correct. He went on to vent his discontent with the concept "historically correct," which he felt was used rather opportunistically by the camp's leaders. He asked for an explanation of what it exactly stood for.

Several people subsequently attempted to define the "historically correct." They emphasized that at the BDC, the historically correct was a product of specific BDC rules rather than a reference to *real* history. Udo mentioned that some Native Americans were known to have had beards during the reenacted time period, but that beards were banned at the BDC to prevent it from resembling a trappers' camp. Udo's wife Ela, a highly respected and skilled hobbyist, pointed out that hunting was impossible and that their teepees were made out of canvas instead of buffalo hides. The "historically correct," she argued, was a compromise, and it was exactly this, she claimed, which enabled her to invoke BDC rules and speak out against people (no matter how kind or well-dressed) who walked around not having been introduced or announced, and were present without the general consent of the people. In fact, she

added, she should have torn the clothes from my body and had me work as a servant in her teepee. Paul then countered with a historical example of a white guest in an Indian camp who, after a row with his host, went to live in the teepee of another Native American. Therefore, Paul claimed, it was historically correct to have a guest who had not been introduced to everyone and who could even be an object of controversy. Native American camps used to swarm with white visitors at the time. Nevertheless, he added, they could either decide to act in accordance with the historically correct and welcome such visitors, or agree upon a revision of BDC rules that would regulate, for example, the number of visitors per event. The matter was not brought to a vote. It was decided to review the issue later.

After the meeting, I sat gloomily and rather shaken in the teepee, pondering my unwelcome presence. Noting my dejection, Michael volunteered that Ela's remarks were not to the point since I was the guest of an important member of the tribe, a chief, as it were—she would never have dared to touch a guest enjoying such protection.

The next day, I was relieved that I could travel on as planned. I left without having discussed the matter in any depth with Paul or Helen, who did not seem to be surprised or in any way affected by the altercations at the tribal council. I paid my contribution to the treasurer and took leave of the people with whom I had interacted. Udo confirmed that I could call him and Ela for an interview at their home.

Discussions in the Aftermath

A few weeks later, I ran into Paul, Helen, and Michael at an event in Hamburg featuring Native American music by a German who, traveling with Michael, had learnt to sing on North American reservations. The event was open to the public, and a number of hobbyists showed up in “old-style” outfit. Helen and Paul wore T-shirts and jeans, and Michael, as a powwow enthusiast, a ribbon shirt. I asked Paul whether there had been any follow-up to the BDC tribal meeting. The proposed solution regarding non-Indianist guests, he told me, was to ask them to embody a historical figure bringing all the necessary props, such as a trader with trade goods. When I raised the subject of the lack of role-play in connection with my visit, he answered that role-play had not been necessary in my case because I was playing myself: an anthropologist.

A month after the BDC, I paid the planned visit to Udo and Ela, feeling rather apprehensive. Ela, an ardent craftsperson, proved eloquent on the intricacies of materials and techniques. She told me that she considered playing her passion—this included sports, party games, and going all the way in role-play. When I mentioned my uneasiness at the BDC as to the role I was supposed to play, she said that things should have been better prepared and playfully added, “If only I had not felt so sick on the day of your arrival, I would have stolen your things or initiated some other kind of

game.” I suddenly wondered whether her confrontational speech at the tribal meeting had to be seen in another light: not so much as an expression of irritation concerning unannounced outsiders, but as an expression of frustration over a lost opportunity for play—perhaps even as a way to make up for a lost opportunity for play by using the presence of the outsider as a source of inspiration for a confrontational speech, an alternative opportunity for keying. I started to wonder even more about the semantics of the tribal council when Udo expressed satisfaction with the intervention by the French hobbyist who had risen and claimed that this woman (meaning me) would never understand him. Usually, Udo said, this particular hobbyist was rather quiet and kept to himself. Do you mean he was playing a role? I asked. Perhaps, he answered. In any case, the manner in which the Frenchman had intervened came across as very “Indian,” Udo felt, and it pleased him because of that. It contributed to the illusion that Udo sought to create in the hobby. As far as the BDC’s initiator was concerned, he explained, a teepee camp where all participants did their utmost to play Indian in an aesthetically pleasing and historically correct manner was key to a satisfying hobby experience.

As I probed him further on the issue of role-play, Udo mentioned that all possible variations existed in the hobby along a continuum with, on the one extreme, the Indianists who played a part 24 hours a day and, on the other, the Indianists who remained themselves no matter what outfit they wore. This is the reason, he claimed, for all the conflicts that occur during camp life: you can never be quite sure whether the other person is playing a role and insulting you as part of the play situation, or whether he or she is really attacking you as a person. You never know when switching [*umschalten*] occurs. In other words, Udo pointed to misframings as a source of misunderstanding in the hobby. Ela offered an example of how differences in knowledge about the historical model might also lead to misunderstandings. When borrowing a cooking pot in camp, she would return it “dirty” with food sticking to it, because, playing by the historically correct rules, she wanted to act as an Indian woman would have done. The woman on the receiving end, however, might take offense, since, according to modern standards of polite behavior, the pot should have been returned properly cleaned. In terms of frame analysis, she either failed to invoke the right frame or was ignorant of required behavior in the right frame. To avoid misunderstandings, Ela said she would make some little joke to explain her gesture. In other words, she would make the frame explicit and clear to both women.

Udo’s and Ela’s remarks on misunderstandings resulting from switching (or a failure to switch) from “normal behavior” to role-play seemed to echo Michael’s on Indianism as a game without rules. In a similar vein, Paul had mentioned several times, both during the interview in Antwerp and at the BDC, that he was perhaps prone to playing by rules that he had failed to discuss with fellow-hobbyists beforehand, thus creating misunderstandings and tensions, as during the incident at the Council which resulted in his exclusion. What seemed to be at play were frame disputes.

Is This Play?

In a study of ritual and performance, with one chapter dedicated to play, Richard Schechner discusses what he calls “dark play,” a special and somewhat dangerous form of play (1993:24-44). Dark play is play that breaks its own rules and in which players derive pleasure from playing with non-players, those who are in the dark about what exactly is going on. In Goffman’s analysis, this would be an example of fabrication. Although my Indianist discussion partners presented the misunderstandings discussed above as interfering with straightforward enjoyment, the initiatives or pranks they described often seemed to start off in a mischievous manner, with the “offenders” being quite conscious of the fact that some others might not approve of their behavior. Besides, during my fieldwork in various hobby networks, participants often told stories (directly to me or around the campfire) of mischief in which they had purposefully broken the rules and irritated other players, or of which they had been the victim. Part of the fun in Indian hobbyism may therefore be said to come from dark play or fabrication.

According to Schechner, dark play underlines the rigidity of Bateson’s play frame. The frame breaks down, Schechner argues, because in dark play, the message “this is play” need no longer be conveyed (1993:40-41). As I mentioned earlier, however, Bateson suggests subtle plays within play may cause one to wonder, “Is this play?” He even refers to the “labile nature of the frame ‘This is play’ ” (Bateson 1972:182). Precisely because of such ambiguities, further elaborated on by Goffman, frame analysis lends itself well for coming to grips with some core notions of Indian play. As I walked onto the BDC grounds, I expected to enter a play frame overlapping with the actual, physical playground. And in a sense, I did. On the grounds, people were staging a different world, a hobbyist world in which they dressed differently and were discussing what games to play and how to play them most convincingly. And yet, within this hobbyist world, moments of other play (other keyings and re-keyings) occurred, in which the games were no longer discussed but acted out, as when the “tribe” performed their dances for the “white visitors,” with participants gathered on and around the dance floor, the more restricted playground for this specific moment of play. As became clear from what I was told about misunderstandings in the hobby, however, these shifts in frame might not always be noticed or agreed upon by all participants. In Goffman’s terms, misframings may occur. Some misframings seemed to be linked to generational differences (as the events leading up to Paul’s exclusion from the Council, where a rebellious streak could be discerned in the young men’s initiative). Others may be attributed to different traditions and approaches (Westerners seen as “playing” too much according to Easterners looking for *nacherleben*). Not only did frames appear to change abruptly and alter the mode of communication, but players could act according to different frames while seemingly playing the same game—the game being multi-layered or involving multiple laminations.

During my visit at Udo's and Ela's, I did not notice any discomfort on their part concerning Ela's having turned my presence at the BDC into an issue during the tribal council. Instead of communication having broken down, we seemed to be on good terms and they were quite willing to share information and experiences. It was only later that I started to wonder whether I had misjudged the entire affair. Had I been taking discussions at the tribal council too much at face value (in a primary framework), whereas (some) people were actually *playing* at holding a tribal council? Certainly, the presence of outsiders had raised irritation within the play frame, which was thought to have been disturbed—the play rules were thus up for revision. The discussion was about rules and about the camp's leading concept: the historically correct. The matter under discussion was thus a lamination removed from the real play action, taking place in a more detached (down-keyed) frame. From this perspective, the scene was similar to Bateson's example of two canasta players who stop playing and start discussing the rules: "At the end of this discussion, we can imagine that they return to playing but with modified rules" (1972:192). And yet, this discussion was played out within the setting of a tribal session, and the wording and manner (an introduction in Lakota, terms such as "the people" and "whites" versus "Indians," the intervention by the French hobbyist) fitted this particular frame and would not have fitted the ordinary, everyday frame of a discussion in a conference room. While the players engaged in metacommunication about their play, the "game" seemed to continue.

When I ran into Michael at a powwow in Germany a month after having visited Udo and Ela, I told him about my stay at their house and asked him whether he thought Ela's speech could have been, at least partly, role-play. He reacted surprised at first, then amused; he had not thought of that, and it would certainly put matters in a different light.

The incident at the BDC, where I had come as part of the game in the guise of an anthropologist *avant la lettre* and turned into an object of controversy after having gone native (but not quite), put the spotlight on what I now realize to be perhaps the major driving force behind the politics of Indian hobbyism: the very question, either implicit or explicit, "Is this play?" If answered differently by different players (or non-players) sharing the same stage, misframings may result. These may be resolved ("cleared" in Goffman's terminology) through a revision of the rules. On a more general level, divergent Indianist attitudes towards the question, "Is this play?" can be said to be a major factor in causing schisms within clubs or the hobby as a whole, and may lead to disappointments where different communities meet, as with the Western influx at the Week. In some clubs or networks, an (either implicit or explicit) answer in the affirmative is not considered socially acceptable, since it is perceived as demeaning towards the hobby or its historical model, or towards contemporary Native Americans. In other Indianist circles, it is considered naïve *not* to view the hobby as play, and a sign of insecurity or hubris to present it as something "more serious." Some hobbyists mentioned that towards outsiders, such as journalists, terms such as

“experimental ethnology” rather than “play” are used in order to avoid ridicule. The matter is complicated by the wide range of (usually implicit) interpretations and appreciations of “play” among Indianists: for example, play as a learning tool or as something that requires skill and expertise, or play as something disrespectful or unworthy of respect. One Indianist’s play may not be another Indianist’s play. To complicate matters even further, the question “Is this play?” arises for quite a different reason as well: would “play” still be an illuminating tool for thinking about Indianism in situations where it becomes questionable whether any significant boundaries exist at all between normal life and the Indian hobby, especially when the hobby may provide (additional) income, as in Ralph’s and Karin’s case?

As a result of my half-baked performance at the BDC culminating in those confrontational moments at the tribal council, my expectations that “play” would be key in my investigation into the Indian hobbyist phenomenon were confirmed, but in much more subtle and intricate ways than I had imagined: as a question driving the hobby’s dynamics rather than as a straightforward characterization of it.

A few months after my stay at the BDC, I wrote a journal on the basis of my fieldnotes adopting two alternating frames: a “modern” account printed out on a computer, and a “nineteenth-century” account that I produced by hand on paper made from rags in a local paper mill according to an 1870s procedure, interspersed with quotes from Fletcher’s *Camping with the Sioux: Fieldwork Diary of Alice Cunningham Fletcher* copied in the old-fashioned handwriting of my father, a much appreciated collaborator in this project. I sent it to my principal contacts in order to thank them for their hospitality, and also to show them that I had made an effort to contribute something tangible in the spirit of their camp—to play along in this ambiguous game, as a modern observer hovering into and out of the play frame, as a contemporary observer within the play frame, and as a historical character safely in another time and place. Udo sent me a short e-mail after having received the package. I was pleased to read that he and his wife felt that the journal was quite good and that I had mastered the theme quite well. But perhaps I was misframing and they were just kidding me.

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Notes

¹As a second form of transformation complementing keying, Goffman distinguishes fabrication, “the intentional effort of one or more individuals to manage activity so that a party of one or more others will be induced to have a false belief about what it is that is going on” (1974:83). Examples of fabrication include deceit, hoaxing, illusion, and self-deception.

²The actual terms used by my discussion partners in German, Dutch, and French were *Spiel*, *spel*, and *jeu*, respectively, and more often the verb: *spielen*, *spelen*, *jouer*. The semantic fields of “play” and these terms do not perfectly overlap, however; the nouns in German, Dutch, and French may be used very concretely to mean “game” or “match.” The need to distinguish sharply between play and games (as some theoreticians of play do) is thus less pressing in my fieldwork context, but the terms used are even more subject to divergent interpretations. Cf. Schechner (2003:24, n. 22): “I separate play from games in the following way: play is an activity in which the participant(s) set her/his own rules, while a game has generally acknowledged rules”; Schwartzman (1978:219): “In games, the paradoxical reference system of play is embodied in a codified system of rules that organize the use of objects, space, and time, as well as player activities. Here it is not necessary for metacommunication to occur continually to define or ‘frame’ the players’ actions, as this is achieved by the game’s explicit rule structure. In games, the ambiguity and paradox inherent in play, which necessitates constant metacommunication for maintenance of the event, has been ‘ruled’ out.” Contrast Huizinga (1967), who conceives of games as a form of play.

³See Kalshoven (2004) on Indianism as a quest for knowledge.

⁴Scholarly literature on Indian hobbyism is scarce and often based on little dedicated fieldwork. See Broyles González (1989) on her experiences with a club in the Black Forest; Turski (1994) for an insider’s account of hobbyism in the GDR; Hämäläinen (1998) on Finland; Bolz (1999) on a visit to a club near Frankfurt; Schultze (1999) on shamanism at the Indian Week in eastern Germany; Hans (2001) and Sieg (2002) with accounts based on interviews with hobbyists in Germany; Feest (2002) on hobbyism as a European (rather than specifically German) phenomenon. Estimates of numbers of Indianists vary widely; in Germany, where hobbyists are organized in clubs and umbrella organizations and thus easier to trace than elsewhere, several thousands (perhaps between ten and twenty thousand, Feest 2002:31) of Indian hobbyists are active. Wildwest shows (Buffalo Bill, Circus Sarrasani) and *Völkerschauen* (shows featuring “exotic” peoples) are considered to have been major impulses for the emergence of Indian hobbyism in Germany (Bolz 1999; Kreis 2002). Cf. Conrad 1999 for early contacts between hobbyists and Native Americans in Dresden and Leipzig. On Indian hobbyism in the United States, see Deloria (1996, Ch. 5).

⁵The names of my discussion partners have been changed in this paper.

⁶In GDR times, clubs were often sponsored by companies or cultural institutions and were expected to reciprocate (or to generate additional income for the club) by participating in community events (see Turski 1994:32-33). In my interviews with hobbyists in eastern

Germany, they often expressed a moral obligation to do something for the public good and enlightenment, even though the practical obligation no longer existed.

⁷The obligation to counter clichés is often mentioned by hobbyists involved in *Öffentlichkeitsarbeit*. Ironically, because of their primary interest in a historical image of Native Americans, Indianists are reproached by outsiders for perpetuating clichés; cf. Sieg (2002).

⁸Cf. Turski (1994:12): “Wir wollten nicht ‘Indianer spielen,’ sondern aufklärerisch wirken” [We did not want to ‘play Indian,’ but enlighten people], i.e., correct the “falsches Indianerbild” [incorrect, stereotypical image of Native Americans] portrayed by other groups.

⁹Since the fall of the Wall, an increasing number of Western hobbyists have flocked to the Week, which is considered less commercial and more intimate than comparable events in the West. Not all Easterners are happy with this influx, as they feel the Week is changing because of Western influences. During my fieldwork, Eastern hobbyists often vented frustrations on the subject of perceived Western cultural and financial domination and the high unemployment rate in the East. This was the year (2003) in which Wolfgang Becker’s hit nostalgic comedy *Goodbye, Berlin* was released.

¹⁰Winnetou is the Apache hero in Karl May’s late nineteenth-century adventure novels. Karl May is now universally rejected by Indianists as a useful source of information because of the lack of historical accuracy of his novels’ characters and settings. As a cultural icon in hobbyist history, however, he remains of interest, and hobbyists in the Dresden area often mention the Karl May Museum in Radebeul, with its impressive collection of Native American artifacts, as a major inspiration for joining the hobby.

¹¹I later interviewed veteran hobbyists with prestigious positions at the Council who had been involved in this particular incident. According to these veterans, tolerating disrespectful behavior towards older hobbyists would set a bad example for younger participants and besides, in the historical situation, the older men could have reacted to the insults by declaring a war, which was obviously impossible in the hobby context. Declaring the practice of insulting “historically correct” would, according to these veterans, amount to a conveniently selective attitude towards history on the part of the rebellious youngsters.

¹²Contrast Turski (1994) on developments in East German hobbyism during the 1980s: “Als neue Komponente im Hobby trat die stärkere Orientierung auf die indianische Lebensweise auf, und zwar nicht nur als ‘Studienobjekt’, sondern als praktische Orientierung für die eigene Lebensgestaltung” [As a new component of the hobby, participants became more strongly focused on the Indian way of life, not only as an ‘object of study,’ but as a practical guiding rod in giving meaning to their own lives] (30).

¹³See Goffman (1974). He describes a re-grounding as “the performance of an activity more or less openly for reasons or motives felt to be radically different from those that govern ordinary actors” (74-75).

¹⁴Huizinga includes the need for a playground in his characteristics of play, which he defines as limited in both time and space (1967:10).

¹⁵But cf. Goffman (1974:269-270): "In formulating a separation of some kind between person and role, one should in no way precommit oneself to notions about the 'essential' nature of each. There is a tendency to assume that although role is a 'purely' social matter, the engine that projects it—the person or individual—is somehow more than social, more real, more biological, deeper, more genuine. . . . The player and the capacity in which he plays should be seen initially as equally problematic and equally open to a possible social accounting."

¹⁶According to some hobbyists in the former East Germany, the general German practice of FKK (*Freikörperkultur* or nudism) is on the wane because of more prudish Western influences. I have heard remarks to the contrary, however, from sources in the West. Although Indianists consider FKK appropriate within the frame of Indian play, it could be argued as belonging to the primary framework of German experience.

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