

Hungarian Perceptions of the American Indian

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Abstract: Stories of American Indians representing the forces of good against evil were a typical element of Hungarian childhood throughout the 20th century. The lifestyle and values presented in Indian tales often captured the interest of adults as well, and in some cases, they also participated in Indian camps, wearing Indian clothes and adopting Indian names. Although the popularity and importance of Indian tales and plays have been declining in the 21st century, Indians and their culture still mean a significant point of reference in Hungary. Nevertheless, Hungarian perceptions of the American Indian are not uniform – they reveal a wide range of narratives. The aim of this paper is to analyze and differentiate these perceptions throughout the 20th century and identify the most important overarching narratives to answer two questions: Is there indeed a widespread willingness in Hungarian society to identify with American Indians based on perceived similarities in the different periods of the 20th century? What are the most important factors that explain Hungarians' keen willingness to identify with American Indians?

Keywords: *playing Indian, Hungary, Native American, cultural appropriation, resistance*

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Introduction

An animated feature film titled *Four Souls of Coyote* was released in Hungary in 2023, achieving critical and popular acclaim. The movie, directed by Aron Gauder, is based on the creation stories of Native American Tribes. Through their traditional approach to nature and its forces, the film



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aimed to reconnect the audience with their own natural environment in the twenty-first century (Gauder 2023). The lens through which the director attempts to convey his message is rather unique and may even be surprising for an international audience. Hungarians have their own folk tales, their own creation stories—what makes the director turn to Native American ones instead? Why does he assume that Native tales and legends inspire the Hungarian audience, and why does the film indeed resonate so intimately with them? What makes them feel a connection and be ready to identify with Native people from 10,000 kilometers away?

Indians are well-known and popular elements of Hungarian culture. Generations in the twentieth century grew up “playing Indians” in roleplay activities and reading the Indian novels of James Fenimore Cooper and Karl May. These games and books did not represent (and often misrepresented) the realities of Native Americans: as we know now, they were mostly built on stereotypes held by White Americans. Nevertheless, they created an overarching sympathy and interest towards Indian in Hungary. The fictitious names of the Mohican Chingachgook and the trapper Natty Bumppo (protagonists of Cooper novels originally published between 1823 and 1841), or Winnetou the Apache chief and his German friend Old Shatterhand (protagonists of May novels originally published between 1875 and 1910) were widely known in Hungary throughout the twentieth century. These figures represented and naturalized friendship and loyalty between “red” and “pale-faced” people, while their adventures also taught Hungarian children about the injustices committed against Native Americans at an early age. The lifestyle and the values presented in Indian tales often captured the interest of adults as well, and although their popularity and importance have been declining in the twenty-first century, Indian and their culture still mean a significant point of reference. In 2021, the Petőfi Museum of Literature presented a large-scale exhibition to honor the decades when “playing Indians” was an inherent part of Hungarian life for children and adults equally. The exhibition was very popular and inspired several authors to write about the sentiments that connect Hungarians to Indian (Kocsis 2021).

Nevertheless, Hungarian perceptions of the American Indian are not uniform – they reveal a wide range of narratives and connecting points. The aim of this paper is to analyze and differentiate these perceptions throughout the twentieth century and identify the most important overarching narratives to answer two questions:

1. Is there indeed a widespread willingness in the Hungarian society to identify with American Indian based on perceived similarities in the different periods of the twentieth century?
2. What are the most important factors that explain the keen willingness of Hungarians to identify with the American Indian?

The research is based on inductive reasoning, starting out from specific observations related to the Hungarian perceptions about the American Indian and the willingness to identify with them. The broader conclusions drawn from this analysis are then examined through the lenses of theories explaining comparable phenomena, testing whether they can be relevant in these cases.

The three periods in which the paper examines twentieth-century Hungarian perceptions are the interwar period (1918–1939), the period of state socialism (1947–1991), and the period after the regime change (1992–present). The research intentionally ignores a fourth existing narrative: Indians in the Scout movement, as its origins are not Hungarian. Although it reflects the Hungarian

attitudes towards Indians analyzed in this paper, this narrative stems from American roots. Tóth's (2020) research provides a thorough overview of this issue.

The paper consistently uses the term Indian, but this is by no means used as a reference to Native Americans, their tribes, their societies, or their cultures. It refers to the products of Hungarian imagination about Native Americans, which have been in constant interaction with Hungarian reality and only rarely with authentic Native American reality.

Indian as Metaphors in Mainstream Politics

The former Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, often turned to the image of the Indian to activate the generally positive sentiments of Hungarian society relative to Native Americans. During his first mandate (1998–2002), he referred to Indian as the caricatural representations of traditional wisdom, reciting allegedly ancient “Dakota proverbs” to mobilize his supporters. The best-known example is “When you discover that you are riding a dead horse, the best strategy is to dismount [*Ha észreveszed, hogy döglött lovon ülsz, szállj le róla*]” (Kiss 2022), which is indeed widely attributed to Dakota Tribes. Nevertheless, Orbán has not paid much attention to the authenticity of his “ancient proverbs,” as in the case of quoting “Trust arrives on foot and leaves on horseback [*A bizalom gyalogosan érkezik, és lóháton vágtat el*]” (“A bizalom” 2008), which is not related to any Tribes or ancient times—instead, it is a Dutch proverb, usually associated with Dutch politician Johan Thorbecke from the nineteenth century. In these cases, political leadership attempted to gain an easy profit from the existing popularity of Indian and their alleged wisdom. The reason why the Hungarian public could resonate with the “Dakota proverbs” was the thorough familiarity with the positive image of the Indian, going back to eight decades of Hungarian perceptions.

After the beginning of his second mandate in 2010, Orbán developed a more sophisticated narrative about “Indians,” adding new elements to the existing ones in Hungary, while continuously capitalizing on the widespread perception of the positive image of the Indian. In his narrative, Orbán claimed that “there is a similarity between Indian destiny and Hungarian destiny” (quoted in Ginelli 2024). In this relationship, Indian appear as a metonymy of unjustly oppressed peoples, who lost their homeland because of political manipulations by an unequally strong enemy, and who are confined to live on reservations, heroically and nobly struggling to maintain their culture, language, and traditions. Orbán uses this metonymy to emphasize the perceived injustices towards Hungarians over the course of the twentieth century and even today. For example, the peace treaty of Trianon after the First World War took away two-thirds of the area of the Hungarian Kingdom and created a small state with a demographically pressured population. Another example is the issue of political and economic disparities among members of the European Union, which are often claimed to encroach upon state sovereignty and exaggeratingly interpreted as the foundations of a colonial relationship in Hungarian right-wing politics (Ginelli 2024). A third prominent example is the allegedly crucial threat of migration on Hungarian culture. In terms of this, Orbán used the Indian analogy to endorse Donald Trump in a speech in 2016, when he said “I can even understand Americans’ positive point of view on migration because that is how the United States came to be, but they have to be able to see that in this situation we are the Indian (quoted in “Viktor Orbán endorses” 2016).

Orbán’s narrative is not the first in Hungary which intended to make political use of the image of the Indian as a metaphor of heroic warriors fighting relentlessly against a strong enemy and

surviving a long-time historic oppression. A radically different political ideology, state socialism, had also realized the political potential of this narrative and applied it systematically since the 1960s. (In the 1950s, Indian novels were initially prohibited as reactionary readings [Ginelli 2024] and the state ordered systematic investigations against those who “played Indian.”) Cultural products in the Soviet bloc, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, keenly utilized the “Western” topic in movies. Red Westerns are films produced in socialist countries that adapted Western-genre themes but reinterpreted them through a socialist ideological lens. They inverted the classic Hollywood perspective; Indigenous peoples were depicted positively, while white settlers or capitalists often negatively (Takács 2022: 121–122). Reversing roles in classical American “cowboys versus Indians” movies encouraged the criticism of Americans through the lens of Indian eyes and their white companions. Red Westerns provided the socialist audience with easily digestible and popular entertainment imbued with anti-American, anti-colonial, and anti-capitalist propaganda. The most emblematic case of Red Westerns was the series of GDR DEFA Indian Films. The series starred Serbian actor Gojko Mitić in the roles of Native chiefs, and the majority of the scenes were shot in Eastern Europe, mostly in Yugoslavia (Gemünden 2001). Indian novels of earlier times were also republished, with modifications to erase parts inconvenient for state socialism and with new emphases that contributed to a markedly anti-American spirit. In the Soviet and socialist representations of the Indian, resistance against American, colonial, and capitalist politics and values dominated the creation of the figure of the “noble” tribespeople and their loyal white allies.

Indian Fantasy Worlds as Means to Escape Modern Realities

The second identified narrative brings us back to the animated feature film *Four Souls of Coyote*. The director, Aron Gauder, writes that “In several cases the perspective of the so-called primitive folks is much more modern than ‘more advanced’ Western thinking. (...) *Four Souls of Coyote* is an alternative and more modest creation myth, in which the human being is neither the top creature of nature nor the king of the world, but only one of all the creatures. Surprisingly, these archaic myths depict the interrelations of the world quite similarly to modern scientific results. The former represents the only alternative to a capitalist society” (Gauder 2023). When Gauder emphasizes that Native wisdom offers a viable alternative for the society we are currently living in, he goes back to the traditions of the circle of Ervin Baktay (1890–1963), which flourished in the 1930s.

Baktay, a widely known expert on the Orient, saw the North American Indian as “the most authentic of athletes among all the peoples of the world, and that in the most noble sense of athleticism,” like “the perfect gentleman and sportsman,” “a truly cultured man in the spiritual sense, without the defects and sins of culture and civilization in the material sense” (Kelényi 2014: 274–275). The values he saw in Indians had their roots in their closeness to and strong bonding with nature, which included interactions with nature’s spiritual forces. The perceived lifestyle of Indians became a source of societal escapism for Baktay and his friends. They played Indians in a roleplay manner, like children did, taking names like Sitting Rabbit, Lazy Buffalo, or Star Dancer, but immersing themselves into their roles on a much more sophisticated level. They created a “reservation” and called themselves Danubian Indians (dunai indiánok). “Their Western-styled ‘Loaferstown’ [was] equipped with a saloon, a nearby ‘Indian camp’ with tepee tents, a chieftain and a sheriff (Baktay played both), while the costumed group practiced canoeing, archery, horse-riding, ‘Indian’ rituals, and drinking ‘grog’ (alcohol). Dressed in meticulously detailed costumes, they posed with Colts and Winchesters, quoted from their ‘bible’, Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, and sang old ‘Indian’ and new American songs” (Ginelli 2024).

The merry Utopian “reservation” of Baktay’s circle survived the Second World War but gradually lost its appeal and ceased in 1963 (Ginelli 2024). In the meantime, Indian roleplay transformed into the refuge of those who did not accept the main values propagated by the new socialist state. In 1961, a group of artists, led by the popular singer Tamás Cseh (1943–2009), established an Indian camp in the Bakony hills. They were amazed by Native American culture, learned folk songs and dances, and attempted to live a minimalist, close-to-nature life. In this case, Native American elements were not the single values orienting this Indian community. Bakony Indians (bakonyi indiánok) combined them with ideas of the hippie movement, with Hungarian nomadic traditions, and Hungarian folklore, creating a unique worldview and lifestyle, which was also present in the arts and crafts produced by the circle. In the recollections of a participant, the “freedom, the simplicity of life stood in contrast to the communist Hungarian oppressive, centralized, state-stupefied world” (Case 2018). Paradoxically, while the socialist state and Soviet politics attempted to utilize Indian movies and novels as means to transmit political messages, the “Bakony Indians” created a circle of passive resistance based on Indian culture, which has been active even after the collapse of State Socialism in Hungary.

There was a third, short-lived Indian movement in the twentieth century, led by Sándor Borvendég Deszkáss, which was eliminated by state authorities due to the accusation of active resistance against state socialism. Borvendég Deszkáss, also known as White Deer, had been a member of Baktay’s circle in the interwar period, but because of his different views, he had to leave the Danube Indians (Gergely 2011: 290–291). He was a well-known writer of his time, dedicating his novels to Indians, whom he adored since childhood. He was also one of the few Hungarians who allegedly had first-hand experience with Native Americans, visiting the United States in 1934 (Gergely 2011: 291). In 1949, he was banned from the Hungarian Writers’ Association and was warned by state authorities to stop engaging in Indian activities (Kovai 2009: 41). In 1961, an investigation against Indian groups related to religion again identified Borvendég Deszkáss as a challenge for the socialist state. The secret police caught the letter of a “chieftain” member of his Indian movement which described their aims as a “fight for the oppressed Indian peoples and first of all our Hungarian people ... If need be, we should fight for the interest of our Hungarian people and for the just cause with weapons ... and we should live an Indian life” (quoted in Kürtösi 2021: 32). Borvendég Deszkáss was arrested, along with a handful of his followers, and a show trial followed. Fifty-six people were interrogated, eight arrested, and five declared to be guilty in “leading an organized conspiracy to overthrow the state” (Kovai 2009). Although the final sentence was not carried out due to a general amnesty in 1963 (related to the revolution in 1956), this meant the end of the political resistance of the circle of Borvendég Deszkáss in the spirit of Indian values. (In the 1950s, there was a secret investigation against Baktay’s circle, which was found to be politically innocent. After its start, a secret police agent was planted in Cseh’s circle as a member of the group, but again, no claims of active political resistance were raised [Kovai 2009]).

Pseudo-Science: Genetic, Linguistic, and Cultural Relationship with Indians

Similarities between Native American lifestyles and the traditional society of ancient nomadic Hungarian tribes have had a certain appeal on every level of the Hungarian society during the twentieth century and after. This appeal, which often culminated in fascination, created a further basis for sentiments of identification with “Indians,” and these sentiments in several cases motivated scientists to attempt to prove a tangible kinship between Native Americans and Hungarians.

Borvendég Deszkáss was the first well-known figure who tiptoed on this narrow line between science and pseudoscience due to his admiration of Indian. Several sources claim that he received a certificate from a North American Association of Tribes declaring him to be an “honorary chieftain” in recognition of his active efforts to protect and maintain their culture. According to the document, the association “confirms his name as White Deer, as they read in one of the works of Borvendég Deszkáss that this was also a name that is present in the history of ancient Hungarians” (quoted by Wirth 2022: 134). The depth (and even the mere existence) of this relationship with American Tribes is difficult to confirm today, as the secret police confiscated all the Indian documents and objects in the possession of Borvendég Deszkáss, thus most of his heritage, including the certificate, is lost (Gergely 2011). Nevertheless, various sources report that he lived like an Indian in his everyday life, mimicking what he had read and experienced about Native Americans, committed to “fight for their freedom” as one of them, claiming to share their blood as well (Wirth 2022). Although Borvendég Deszkáss remained vague about the nature of the relationship between Indians and Hungarians, former students of his explicitly wrote about the relationship of blood, language, and culture (Wessely 2010).

In the 1960s, a Hungarian explorer, János Móricz, claimed that he discovered Hungarian-speaking Natives in Ecuador. He developed a theory about early Hungarians traveling around the world and argued that a conspiracy silenced this important part of Hungarian history. The ideas of Borvendég Deszkáss and Móricz resonate well with the values of today’s right-fringe, nationalist, and traditionalist groups in Hungary, some of which use these ideas and others about the similarities between Native Americans and Hungarians to argue for a common origin (Case 2018).

This narrative goes beyond conspiracy theories and right-fringe groups making speculative assumptions related to the former glory of Hungary. Experts operating outside the academic mainstream also try to gain attention with self-published papers arguing for kinship between Native Americans and Hungarians. On Academia.edu, for example, articles titled “Reading American Indian folk writings using the Hungarian hieroglyphic script” by Géza Varga, or “Relationship between Dakota Indians and Hungarians” by Anikó Csincsik have been published.¹ The authors are, in the majority of these cases, educated people, who, nevertheless, have no qualification, expertise and no formal degrees in the related disciplines of history, ethnography, linguistics, or archaeology. There is no agreement among these pseudo-scientists about the assumed relationship between Native Americans and Hungarians. Some refer to the “Dakota”, or “Oglala”, seeking connections with subgroups of the Sioux nation, while others prefer the kinship of the Blackfoot Indians, or some other tribes (Csajághy 2015). Some focus on music, others on the spoken language, and still others seek to unite every emerging branch of these non-mainstream approaches. Some of these accounts use apparently scientific methodologies and, in some cases, seem so convincing that qualified historians and other experts dedicate significant time and effort to refute them in journals and academic papers (Fejes 2010, Csajághy 2015).

These ideas, nevertheless, culturally resonate well with the Hungarian public. Hungarians often claim that they are a lonely and isolated people in Europe—their closest relatives in terms of language, culture, or genetics are small nations living far away, mostly in the territory of Russia. Finding a value-based community of long-lost relatives has been a dream motivating researchers of ancient Hungarians for centuries. Non-mainstream approaches offer a chance to experience this

¹ No full references are used in order to avoid endorsing these works.

long-desired relationship. They resonate with the widespread identification of Hungarians with Indian, and Indian romanticism, and demonstrate the strength of these narratives in certain layers of the Hungarian society.

Theoretical Explanations: Cultural Appropriation and Resistance

Identification with the American Indian has been widely regarded as a controversial practice in contemporary academic literature. The phenomenon of "playing Indian" and the other mentioned interpretations and representations of the Indigenous way of life are centered around the widespread broad generalizations about Native Americans, originating from racist and colonial imaginaries. What may appear as an innocent form of play or a genuine gesture of respect often reproduces and reinforces deep-rooted biases, reactivates historical traumas linked to centuries of colonization and dehumanization, and may legitimize contemporary racist discourses and policies (McGrath 2001). Among the most pervasive stereotypes that have been long circulating in the United States and beyond are those of the "violent savage," the "noble savage," the "drunken Indian," the "lazy or welfare Indian," and the "vanishing Indian" (Berkhofer 1978, Hanson and Rouse 1987, Erhart and Hall 2019, High Desert Museum 2024). Notably, the "noble savage" and the "vanishing Indian" are central elements in the examined Hungarian narratives about Indian across each of the studied time periods in the twentieth century, which raises critical questions about the implications of the Hungarian image of the Indian.

Beyond the critique concerning the reproduction of such harmful stereotypes, the practice of identification with Native Americans in general is also frequently analyzed through the lens of cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation, defined as the "use of one culture's symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture" (Rogers 2006: 476), clearly manifests in the Hungarian narratives discussed above. Some experts argue that factors like expressing authenticity and respect (Kunst et al. 2024) or the absence of "amplifiers" like unequal power and profit (Lenard and Balint 2019) may justify certain cases and mitigate the charge of appropriation. Most of the definitions, nevertheless, emphasize that cultural appropriation occurs "regardless of intent, ethics, function, or outcome" (Rogers 2006: 476). In the Hungarian examples, one may argue, each of the mentioned justifying elements of cultural appropriation present. At the same time, it is also true that the identification with the American Indian involves a conscious and agentive process through which certain groups of Hungarians actively appropriate and internalize elements of Native American culture. These cases also qualify as subject appropriation, meaning "the depiction of... cultures other than one's own, either in fiction or non-fiction" (Canada Council quoted by Young 2008: 7), "particularly when outsiders represent the lives of insiders in the first person" (Young 2008: 7).

The analysis of the Hungarian image of the Indian thus may productively draw from the conceptual frameworks developed in theories of cultural appropriation. At the same time, in the light of the analyzed cases, the Hungarian phenomenon represents more than it can expose about stereotypes and racist or colonial imagination, which primarily stems from its distinct political and socio-cultural context. For example, "playing Indian" in twentieth-century Hungary differs fundamentally from the phenomenon of white Americans dressing up and acting like Native Americans (for a seminal interpretation of the latter, see Deloria, 1998). As Rogers notes, "acts of appropriation [are] shaped by, and in turn shape, the social, economic, and political contexts in which they occur" (Rogers 2006: 476). He argues for differentiating among forms of cultural appropriation based on the power relations between the involved cultures. Yet, his offered

typology (cultural exchange, dominance, exploitation, transculturation), along with other prevalent works on cultural appropriation, does not adequately capture the primary nature of the Hungarian identification with the American Indian.

As the analysis of the above narratives shows, certain Hungarian political/cultural groups situated in a perceived position of marginality within their surrounding majority societies (whether in relation to the European Union, the Soviet bloc, modern capitalist society, or even mainstream science) in specific periods of time, identified themselves with Indians as another marginalized group, using their symbols, artifacts, and rituals to express dissent with the dominant layer of their own surrounding group's identity. In doing so, the Hungarian phenomena are different from the conventional pattern of cultural appropriation practiced by dominant groups, while they also diverge from the practice in which marginalized groups appropriate elements of dominant culture as a form of resistance (Rogers 2006: 477).

As the analyzed cases demonstrate, resistance is nevertheless clearly present in each of the Hungarian narratives, although in a less conventional form. It manifests through a set of projections which use the image of the Indian to construct the inverse 'Other'. This mechanism emerges when a marginalized group is unable to directly challenge existing power structures and social or cultural norms and is equally incapable of disengaging from the dominant group physically, socially, or ideologically. In these circumstances, the marginalized group reframes the dominant majority as the one with negative qualities. In the three narratives discussed above, this inversion happens through the identification with the image of the "Indian," whose certain attributed values are reinterpreted and represented by these marginalized groups in Hungary as oppositional to the dominant layer of their surrounding group's identity. In this interpretation, those Hungarians who seek identification with Indian represent marginalized political/cultural groups which symbolically align themselves with another marginalized group with perceivably the same or similar characteristics and values to express their resistance.

Thus, although the analyzed narratives of Hungarian identification with Indian can still be connected to pejorative discourses and elements of racist or colonial imagination, the image of the Indian is primarily appropriated as a locally meaningful symbol, detached from its original historical and cultural setting, which is emphasized because of the perceived parallels with Hungarian experience. In this way, the image of the Indian in the analyzed Hungarian narratives primarily functions as a symbolic resource for the reflections on contemporary power relations and competing normative frameworks within Hungarian society.

Conclusion: Values as a Common Basis for the Identification with Indians

The aim of this research was two-fold. Firstly, to confirm if there was indeed a widespread willingness in Hungarian society to identify with American Indians based on perceived similarities in the three examined periods of the twentieth century, and secondly, to explore the most important factors that explain this phenomenon. Regarding the first aim, the article found several positive indications. In the three periods examined, children played Indian and read Indian novels and later watched Indian movies with their parents. State leaders and their propaganda machinery developed Indian narratives to convey their political messages. Members of the intelligentsia and art circles found refuge and expressed their passive resistance in Indian camps, while experts operating outside the academic mainstream made attempts to prove the relationship between Native Americans and Hungarians.

As for the second aim, the above analysis shows that Hungarians who choose to identify with Indians do so based on certain values and value sets that they consider desirable and preferable in their own lives. In the first analyzed narrative, which perceives Indian as a political metonymy, Hungarians find similarities in historical injustice committed against a small community, which is thus forced to fight against a strong enemy to maintain its culture. Beyond justice, survival, traditions, and community, this also appeals to the values of political and cultural sovereignty, the equality of peoples, anti-colonialism, and resistance to oppression.

In the second narrative, the fantasy world of Indian lifestyle offers an escape from the realities and burdens of modern existence and its political environment, tending toward extremes. Values based on a strong connection with nature and the environment, with a minimalist lifestyle and nature-based spirituality, constitute a resort against rapidly developing technology and consumer society, later against the nonsenses of everyday life under state socialism. Passive resistance is intertwined with these values, representing an anti-fascist and anti-communist attitude imbued in the lived practices of Indian—which was often noticed (and even sanctioned) by state authorities.

The third narrative, even if it leaves the realm of mainstream academia, offers community with Indians who fascinate Hungarians throughout the twentieth century. These Indians are perceived to share several Hungarian values, and the alleged relationship would offer means to nurture traditions together. Conspiracy theories and the search for 'secrets' about genetic relatives are presumed to strengthen Hungarian identity and community. This may explain why mainstream academic values and methods are often relegated to the background in favor of proving genetic, cultural, or linguistic relations between Indians and Hungarians.

All three narratives intertwine at one point: resistance. The Indian in these perceptions appears as a symbol of resisting injustice, political oppression, inequalities, the loss of territories and sovereignty, the loss of traditions and culture, political radicalism, modern life and technology, environmental destruction, loneliness and isolation, and, in extreme cases, even mainstream science. Based on this analysis, it can be confirmed that resistance is a core value that explains Hungarians' keen willingness to identify with Indians. Within this framework, Native American history and culture serve as imagined reference points and provide a symbolic template for challenging existing power structures and social or cultural norms in Hungary. The meanings associated with widespread stereotypes of Indians and appropriated elements of their way of life are thus transformed and become symbols to express critique and dissent with experienced realities in Hungary during the examined time periods.

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