

# The Brazilian Adventures of a Blue-Eyed Ojibway:

## An Interview with Drew Hayden Taylor

Entrevistador: Rubelise da Cunha<sup>1</sup>

*Submetido em 25 e aprovado em 29 de abril de 2020.*

March 24, 2020

**Abstract:** The Anishinaabe writer and film director Drew Hayden Taylor had his first visit to Brazil and South America in 2019 for the screening of his documentary *Searching for Winnetou* (2018). In this interview we talk about his experience in Brazil, the reception of his movie abroad and how Indigenous knowledges, cultural traditions and politics can be enriched in a transcultural dialogue between Canada and Brazil.

**Keywords:** Indigenous knowledges. Transcultural dialogue. Drew Hayden Taylor.

**Resumo:** O escritor e diretor de cinema Anishinaabe Drew Hayden Taylor fez sua primeira visita ao Brasil e à América do Sul em 2019 para a exibição de seu documentário *Searching for Winnetou* (2018). Nesta entrevista, conversamos sobre sua experiência no Brasil, a recepção de seu filme no exterior e como os conhecimentos, as tradições culturais e as políticas indígenas podem ser enriquecidas através de um diálogo transcultural entre o Canadá e o Brasil.

**Palavras-chaves:** Conhecimentos indígenas. Diálogo transcultural. Drew Hayden Taylor.

The spread of the Indigenous storytelling gospel has no borders, as Drew Hayden Taylor has shown. The Anishinaabe writer is one of the major names in the history of Indigenous Theatre and Indigenous Literature in Canada who has contributed to the spread of Indigenous cultures and traditions through many different genres, such as theatre, novel, short stories and films. One might wonder if it is the Anishinaabe nomadic tradition or the artistic career, but the fact is that travelling is part of the nature of the “Blue-Eyed Ojibway” that lives both in the Curve Lake Nation and in Toronto, in Ontario, but is also a citizen of the world. However, the great adventurer had never travelled to South America until last year. It was our fortunate meeting in Canada in 2018 that changed the course of this story, which also resulted in an interview published in *Interfaces Brasil/Canadá* that year, entitled “Indigenous Storytelling in the

Contemporary World: An Interview with Drew Hayden Taylor”. One more country was added to the passport of the great traveller, and one more significant bridge between Indigenous knowledges in *Brazil and in Canada* was promoted.

It was in October 2019 that Drew Hayden Taylor came for the first time to Brazil and South America, with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts in a partnership with the Graduate Programs of Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB) and Federal University of Rio Grande (FURG), and the Center for Canadian Studies (NEC FURG). The Anishinaabe writer was a keynote speaker at the III Conference on Gender and Literature, which was dedicated to the theme Indigenous Voices: Culture and Resistance. He was also a keynote speaker at the XI Canadian Cinema Week, which celebrated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Center for Canadian Studies at FURG.

In his work as a writer and a film director, Drew Hayden Taylor has managed to approximate different cultures with his sense of humor. It is strongly present in his first documentary from 2010, *Redskin, Tricksters and Puppy Stew*, in which he deals with complex issues such as Indigenous identity, politics and racism by interviewing Indigenous writers, storytellers and actors that incorporate humor in their work in a defense of the resistant and healing power of humor. His most recent documentary *Searching for Winnetou* (2018), which was screened in Brazil, was top listed as the most watched documentary on CBC Canada and approaches the theme of cultural appropriation. The movie was shot in Germany and in the Yukon, in Canada, and explores the limits between appreciation and appropriation by analyzing the phenomenon of Karl May’s books and the hero Winnetou in the German imaginary. We would be together in June for another tour of his movie in Brazil, but plans have been changed, so we continue this Brazilian adventure through this e-mail interview that happened in March.



**RC: Hello Drew. I wish we could be doing this interview in person this year, but unfortunately the circumstances do not allow regular contact among people. Thank you very much for accepting doing this chat through e-mail. Last October you were in Brazil for the first time for the screening of your documentary *Searching for Winnetou*. I know it was a short visit only to two cities in very diverse parts of the country – João Pessoa in the Northeast, and Rio Grande in the South, but could you talk a bit about your experience here?**

DHT: This was my first visit to Brazil, and I was very excited to be invited. I had been looking forward to this for some time.

First of all, João Pessoa greatly represented my original perception of the country. Tropical and beautiful. Lots of ocean front. Coconuts. My time there was special. Loved the food. Loved the people and the university, loved the local landscape. I was tired from the trip down from Canada, so, unfortunately, I wasn't as fresh and invigorated as I usually would be. And by the time I recovered, it was time to go. I hope to return someday and spend little more time. One of the things I remember specifically though was at the local university, there were some semi-feral cats located on campus. A charming addition to any educational institute. It's always delightful to screen my

documentary where I can, and I found the audience in João Pessoa attentive. As I recall, there was an interesting Q & A afterwards.

I spent more time in Rio Grande and feel I got more of an understanding of that part of the country. If possible, the people were nicer and were more interested in what I had to say and present. The weather was a little damper but the reception very warm. I got the chance to meet with some local Indigenous people, strong political activists who -through a translator - I managed to have short conversations with. It was with deep regret I had to leave. The connection between Canada's Indigenous people and Brazil's was an interesting topic to discuss, above and beyond my documentary about Germans. I hope to revisit the topics, the city and the university again.

**RC: I'm glad to hear your feedback about the visits to João Pessoa and Rio Grande. The Q&A in Rio Grande was fascinating, since you could meet the Indigenous leaderships at the university. For Jane Moraes, the Guarani leadership, your presence was a remarkable moment in her life, as her son is also a blue-eyed Indigenous boy who has faced the same kind of situations you have been facing and discussing in works such as *Funny, You Don't Look Like One: Observations of a Blue-Eyed Ojibway*.**

**I had the chance to be with you in both screenings of the movie, and the experience at the Federal University of Paraíba, in João Pessoa, had a special significance, as we could attend the ceremony of reintegration of Indigenous writer Eliane Potiguara into her community. How was your experience of having contact with Indigenous people and cultures from Brazil for the first time? Did you feel any kind of relation with your heritage? I noticed you really appreciated the drums during the ceremony there.**

DHT: Definitely. There's definitely a certain universality in drumming. Practically all cultures around the world have some sort of drum, including the Inuit in the North. You are correct, I did feel a sense of familiarity as I witness the reintegration ceremony. The regalia, the dancing, the drumming, it all had a sense of familiarity. Additionally, I have seen many of our traditions practiced in academic surroundings, when once they

used to be banned. Hopefully, on return trips, I will have a chance to possibly sit down and have a more in-depth conversation about issues I am sure the Indigenous people of both countries share. Having read that book you gave me, there was so much in there that seemed familiar, though not as recent.

**RC: You mean *The Falling Sky: Words by a Yanomami Shaman*, by Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, isn't it? Would you like to talk about the sense of familiarity you felt during the reading?**

DHT: Yes, that is what I meant. I don't have the book handy. And I thought the title was longer... so I was afraid I'd get it wrong. And I knew you'd be there to save me!!

Basically, what I came across in the stories he told were very reminiscent of stories I heard up here, basically the Christian inability to appreciate other concepts of worship, and the active attempts to drive a wedge between those who truly believe in what their grandparents taught them, and what the White people insist is the correct way. And of course, this bizarre sense of privilege the white gold hunters and cattle people have, coming into and thinking the land was not being properly utilized and they could do a better job of making it profitable. It reminded me of Sir John A Macdonald starving the Indigenous people of the Prairies in order to make way for immigrant farmers. Or right now in British Columbia where there is great conflict of pipelines across Indigenous land. And of course, that sense of unity with the land... the fact we are parts of the big picture. In the bible it says God gave man dominion over nature, which is the opposite of most traditional beliefs. WE are nature...

**RC: So good to hear how much Indigenous knowledges are co-related in the Americas. That has always been what made me try to build up bridges through which Indigenous thinkers in Brazil could interact with the ones in Canada. I'm so glad to say you were the first Indigenous writer from Canada to have a meeting in Brazil with one Indigenous writer from here, Eliane Potiguara. When I see the way you approximate the knowledge of the Yanomami in the Amazon and the ancestral knowledges of Indigenous people in Canada, I really feel there is much to be done together, in a movement to reintegrate humanity to nature and respect Indigenous knowledges and territories.**

**Here in Brazil the dispute with the gold hunters and the farmers is one of the worst tragedies Indigenous people have been facing. Do you think the conflict due to the pipelines in Canada is once more an attempt to take control of Indigenous land?**

DHT: I don't think it has much to do with taking control of Indigenous land. They don't want to buy it or take possession of it, they just want to cross it. I think they just see the Indigenous land as a way to get their oil from A to B. If there's no oil underneath the ground, they don't really want or need it. Oddly enough, currently Indigenous people are attempting to take possession of additional land they felt was wrongly taken, and that they are owed. In many ways, up here its the other way around.

**RC: I would like to hear more about your experience of interacting with the Brazilian audience after the screening of Searching for Winnetou. My feeling is that here in Brazil there is still the necessity to recognize only the “imaginary Indian”, or an image of the romantic Native, the Indigenous person of the past. I feel, right now, we are finally facing the confrontation of this imaginary Indian with the political and historical subjects that are the original owners of this territory. Do you think a movie such as Searching for Winnetou can promote this kind of experience of looking into the mirror to recognize our own colonial gaze?**

DHT: I don't really remember too many details of the screenings, as that was like... six months ago or so, and several other screenings ago. Be that as it may, I am not too knowledgeable of the Brazilian awareness of North American Indigenous culture, though I can only surmise it was heavily influenced by American westerns, and that all Native people, regardless of if it was America or Canada, ride horses and live in teepees and wear headresses. In places like India and England, I found out we were referred to as Red Indians. What I tried to do with the documentary was show a number of things - how a book written in a foreign country in the 1880's heavily influenced a particular unaffiliated culture for five or six generations. Secondly, the resistance cultures like that have to being corrected. In many cases, they prefer the implied rather than the actual culture. Quaint is often more preferable than a sense of equality.

One of the odd things I found about screening the movie, both in Germany, Canada, and in Brazil, was a general sheepishness, even reluctance by some Germans to see the movie, expecting to be embarrassed. And many were. But I actually heard one woman say, after seeing me and several other Indigenous people at the film festival in Stuttgart, “I think our Indians are more accurate.” Some people are frequently uninterested in seeing what their ancestors have done, and owning up.

**RC: We had plans to receive your visit again this year in June for three events in which the movie would be screened, but also for a conference on Science Fiction and Dystopia, in which you would talk about Indigenous Science Fiction. Well, I guess it is almost impossible not to think about dystopian literature when we are facing the COVID-19 pandemic. Take Us to Your Chief is one book in which you explore this genre. Could you tell us how you had the idea to write the book?**

**Can you see any correspondence between your book and the moment we are living now? How do you read this experience of the COVID-19 pandemic as an Anishinaabe in Canada?**

DHT: I have always liked science fiction. Was a huge Star Trek fan, Star Wars and a whole bunch of other movies and television shows. Same with books and comics. I always wondered why there wasn't any Native sci fi out there, and then I realized it was probably because most people think Indigenous people tend to look backwards... at where we came from, what we've left behind, when I think we were looking ahead, to where we were going. But most of our literature dealt with the darker aspect of our culture, the more dysfunctional perspective, you know, stories about the oppressed, depressed and suppressed. So on a lark, I decided to write a collection of short stories myself. It was so much fun, and I got to explore a whole bunch of issues important to our culture, but in a fun and unusual way. I had no idea if it would be successful, but it was!!! It is definitely one of my most favourite projects to work on.

There were no stories in the book about pandemics but I think that one character in one story says that old adage – “If you don't remember the past, you are condemned to remember it.” So here we are again dealing with yet another pandemic. And I might

add, pandemics are something Indigenous people have become very familiar with in the last five hundred years. Its estimated that at time of contact, there was over 100 million people in the Americas. A hundred years later, it was down to 10 million. Over 90 million killed by various diseases.

**RC: That's so true, Drew. As a colleague of mine, Raquel Souza, has said: "Now white people might remember how terrifying it is what Indigenous people have gone through".**

**I know you are shooting another documentary at this moment, and you have posted many images of places you have visited in which you have had contact with Indigenous cultures not only in Canada, but also in the United States and Mexico. Could you tell us about this new project? Are there any plans to shoot parts in South America? When are we going to be able to see it on screen?**

DHT: Actually, I was working on two projects. The first is a documentary approach to COTTAGERS & INDIANS, exploring Native/non-Native conflicts involving land and water issues. We shot it all across Canada and it will air on the CBC in early June. But the other documentary, made possible by the popularity of WINNETOU, is a 13 part series for APTN called GOING NATIVE. In it, we explore different aspects of contemporary Indigenous existence. We have done episodes on fashion, gourmet food, pop culture, architecture etc. It will air in the fall on APTN. The odd thing is, even though it won't air for another six months, we should find out next month if we go to a second season.

If we get a second season, we are going to push hard to do shows outside of North America. I would love to shoot in Brazil (and visit of course). But we would be looking for something specific to shoot... so is there anything special happening culturally, politically, socially, historically etc involving the Indigenous people you know in Brazil this coming fall (Canadian fall). If we get to do what we want, we would be looking at a shoot between September - December.

**RC: That would be fabulous, Drew. There are important gatherings of Indigenous People here such as the Youth Conference, which usually takes**



place around September or October. Last year there was also a very important Indigenous Women Parade, which happened in the capital city, Brasilia, in August.

Well, thank you so much for this opportunity to interview you again, though this time it is only through e-mail exchange. Hopefully you will be back here in Canadian Fall, our Brazilian Spring, and then we can organize other events and activities to do together.

DHT: The pleasure was mine. So glad to be of help. I so hope we can pull something together for this trip. So disappointed our plans fell through, even though it looks like we would have had to cancel anyway with all this virus stuff. I will keep you abreast of what is happening with the series when we find out.

## References

CUNHA, Rubelise; TAYLOR, Drew Hayden. *Indigenous Storytelling in the Contemporary World: An Interview with Drew Hayden Taylor*. Interfaces Brasil/Canadá. Florianópolis/Pelotas/São Paulo, v. 18, n. 2, 2018, p. 150-163.

KOPENAWA, Davi; ALBERT, Bruce. *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*. Nicholas Elliott and Alison Dundy, trans. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2013.

TAYLOR, Drew Hayden. *Cottagers and Indians*. Vancouver: Taloonbooks, 2019.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Funny, you don't look like one: observations of a blue-eyed Ojibway*. Penticton: Theytus Books, 1996.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Searching for Winnetou*. Documentary. Toronto: CBC, 2018.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Take us to your chief and other stories*. Madeira Park: Douglas & McIntyre, 2016.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Associate Professor and Coordinator of the Center for Canadian Studies (NEC FURG) at the Federal University of Rio Grande, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. rubelise@hotmail.com
- <sup>2</sup> The subtitles for the movie in Brazilian Portuguese were developed in a partnership between the Center for Canadian Studies and the Center for Translation at the Federal University of Rio Grande.
- <sup>3</sup> Drew Hayden Taylor was asked to write a play about Sir John A. MacDonald from the Canadian perspective, and it was a huge success. It was called Sir John A: Acts of a Gentrified Ojibway Rebellion (CUNHA; TAYLOR, 2018, p. 159)