Noble Savages, Black Cowboys and Vengeful Bounty Hunters

Exploring Images of the Native American and Black Other in the American Western

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Introduction

For centuries the myth of the Old West has commanded fascination in the hearts and minds of popular imagination. Since the heyday of the Western, Hollywood's romantic reconstructions of a mythic past have persistently appealed to American audiences as the myth encapsulates elements that are central to American identity.[1] The filmic Western brings the stories of adventurous pioneers back to life, stories of the courageous few that moved westward through the untouched lands of the Wild West to build a future abound great opportunities. The Western's focus on the pioneering American spirit finds currency in the frontier myth, which still holds great significance to American consciousness. Even though the 'Old West' – where the Western is essentially set – no longer necessarily exists geographically, the ideological charge of the frontier still finds currency as a symbol of infinite possibility.[2] Hollywood Westerns promote a sense of American exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny through the representation of the white male Western hero riding free under the Big Sky, conquering wilderness, not ready to take commands from bureaucrats in Washington.[3] Our hero is usually a lone figure that has been alienated from society and is on a self-styled moral quest. All of this is embedded in an ethos of individualism, focused on the fantasy of freedom of movement, as well as limitless horizons, and the lack of social constraints, especially those governing the use of violence. The Western hero is self-sufficient and masters the ability to adapt to circumstances to achieve specific ends. Underlying is also implied racial supremacy of the white male, which in turn romanticizes aggressive masculinity.[4]

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[1] Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* (New York 1992) 34.

[2] Michael Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western* (London 1997) 3.

[3] Peter Verstraten, *Screening Cowboys, Reading Masculinities in Westerns* (Amsterdam 1999) 22.

[4] Edward Buscombe, Roberta E. Pearson, 'Introduction' in: Edward Buscombe, Roberta E. Pearson, *Back in the Saddle Again*, *New Essays on the Western* (London 1998) 4.

The American Western has not only been an identity project but also a mirror for contemporary socio-political attitudes as well as national and societal concerns.[5] Romantic images of the Self have been projected on screen from the perspective of the white cowboy hero. The Western employs a format of repetition and variation that falls back on characteristic images.[6] Opposing binary categories of good versus bad, male versus female and Self versus Other are pivotal elements of the genre. Whereas the protagonist of the Western is generally the white male cowboy hero, he is incomplete without his opponent: the Indian. In the classic Western the Indian is often an obstacle which the white cowboy hero needs to overcome in order to complete his quest of westward expansion and civilizational progress. The presence of the Native American in the Western is absolutely essential, but so is his eventual disappearance as such characters are profusely rendered invisible. Depending on the producer's perspective, Indians are systematically exterminated, assimilated, or simply placed outside of the camera's frame to ensure their eventual disappearance.

Native Americans have famously been ill-served in the Western, often assigned the role of the Indian Other. The Hollywood Indian is obviously a mythological being, but the preponderance of these images has reduced indigenous peoples to well-known tropes and stereotypes.[7] The representation of Native American characters and the evolution thereof has developed over time. Whereas the Indian was often portrayed as the vicious but exotic savage in early Westerns like *Stagecoach* (1939), in more recent productions we can see the Indian character develop into a generous host or mystical New-Age environmentalist. However, the evolution of the Native American character in the Hollywood Western has not developed in a progressive, linear fashion towards more positive portrayals. Whereas one would maybe commonsensically assume that the development of minority characters would slowly become more complex and 3-D along the way, as history ruthlessly exposed the cruelties of imperialism, this is definitely not the case with the Indian character.

[5] Steve Neale, 'Vanishing Americans: Racial and Ethnic Issues in the Interpretation and Context of Post-war 'Pro-Indian' Westerns', in: E. Buscombe, R. E. Pearson, *Back in the Saddle Again*, *New Essays on the Western* (London 1998) 9.

[6] Verstraten, *Screening Cowboys,* 11.

[7] Jed Jojola, 'Absurd Reality II. Hollywood goes to the Indians', in: Peter C. Rollins, John E. O'Connor, *Hollywood's Indian. The Portrayal of the Native American in Film* (Lexington 2003) 12.

Instead, the representation of the Hollywood Indian is ambiguous and prone to shifting of American cultural attitudes. Native American characters were often re-invented, and at different points in history assigned roles that were intended to do their narratives more justice. Nevertheless, the Western remained a predominantly white cultural product, produced by and for a white audience. The fact of the matter was that the image which white directors considered to be 'revisionist' and rehabilitationist was often still problematic. Even today Western film producers struggle to develop appropriate roles for Native American characters, or construct objective ethnological depictions of indigenous peoples without (intentionally) linking these to moralist ideologies. The characters that we encounter in modern Westerns are often still vehicles and illustrations in a white story of progress. Producers battle to understand that a fully human relationship between the Self and the (exterior) Other depends upon the willingness of the Self to accept both the equality and the difference of the Other.[8] It involves accepting difference without it automatically degenerating into harmful notions of superiority and inferiority, implying that the Other is merely an imperfect state of the Self and should ultimately merge with this egotistical ideal.[9] Additionally, mere acceptance by the Self of the equality of the Other is not sufficient to establish a just relationship.[10]

Hollywood has famously employed, appropriated and re-appropriated the image of the Indian Other in all sorts of shapes and colors according to societal attitudes and anxieties. This interplay and the development thereof is undoubtedly complex in itself, however, its reciprocity is at times also complicated by the presence of multiple Others. Because of the presence of multiple players on screen the hierarchy that determines subsequent interactions shifts. Even though the character of the Indian Other has received the most scholarly attention, there are also regularly other minority characters represented in the Western as it is a genre set in a time when also many ethnicities migrated westward, hoping to strike lucky. The West was not only a mythical landscape with endless opportunity for white Americans, but also for immigrant Asians and liberated

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[8] Michael Valdez Moses, 'Savage Nations, Native Americans and the Western' in: Jennifer L. McMahon, B. Steve Csaki, *The Philosophy of the Western* (Kentucky 2010) 262.
[9] Moses, 'Savage Nations', 262.
[10] Ibidem, 263.

African Americans. The presence of these minority characters in the Western complicates the seemingly straightforward interplay between the Self and Other, and the power dynamics that exist therein. Especially the position of African American characters offers interesting new questions to an academic field that has fascinated many for decades already. Even though the Western is a cinematic genre that is based on a Myth of Conquest, and has been familiar with racial bigotry from the very start, there have interestingly also been black produced Westerns. Black Westerns set out to put color back in the Western, and employ various strategies to fulfill the challenging task of appropriating a white conquest genre for black audiences. Questions of race are inherent to the genre, and therefore unavoidable to those in charge of the black production. In order to successfully transform such narratives into a comprehensible dimension for their viewers the directors employ various strategies. In these productions African American characters often appear on screen alongside white and Native American characters, resulting in a dynamic and ideologically charged interplay between notions of Self and Other. It is the position of the African American character, coming from a minority position and taking on the role of Self or Other, both in white- and black produced Westerns, that I will be exploring in this research.

In this research it is my objective to trace and reconstruct the modes of representation and visual status of African American characters in the American Western. Before I will be able to direct my attention towards the African American Other, it is essential to take into consideration the more traditional images and relationship of the Self and Other on which the Hollywood Western largely rests. The invention of the Western was based on a white progress narrative that romanticized violence and created the Indian as an obstacle which white cowboy heroes needed to overcome in the name of civilization. The status of the Native American character in the Hollywood Western has developed non-linearly along with society's shifting cultural attitudes. In the first chapter of this research I will be tracing the development of Native American representation in the Hollywood Western from the birth of the genre until more recent productions towards the end of the twentieth century. In the second chapter I will move on to explore the fluidity of the concept of the Other in the Western by focusing on the representation of the African

American character in white produced Westerns. Because all the materials that will be analyzed in the aforementioned queries are focused on a white audience I also want to take this research a step further into largely unexplored territory, and I will be doing so in my third and last chapter. This is where I will take a look at several Black Cinema productions that have appropriated the Western genre by creating narratives that were intended to also appeal to black audiences, and I will particularly examine the strategies that the producers of these pictures used to deal with the racial undertones that are central to the genre.

The sources that I will be using in this research will be primary as well as secondary. I will be combining cultural criticism based on a close reading of relevant visual materials as primary sources, with relevant secondary literature that focusses on the Western, and Native American as well as Black representations therein. In order to incorporate film into my research and use these materials as a mirror of society, reflecting contemporary cultural mentalities, I use a working method that has been put forward by the film historian Chris Vos. Vos argues that in order for a cinematographic product to be truly representative of historical forces, and thus be incorporated into historical analyses, one needs place an extensive analysis of the content next to the relevant social-historical context. One needs to trace the production for the represented problems, values, dreams, while also taking into consideration the socio-historic context of the production, as well as the identity and social standing of the producers themselves. According to Vos, only if a comprehensive analysis as suggested is undertaken, can one convincingly claim that a film functions as a mirror of society. Vos provides historians with a working model in *Bewegend Verleden, Inleiding in de analyse van films en televisieprogramma's.* Whenever working with visual materials as a source of historical analysis it is paramount to be aware of several production factors such as dramatic, commercial and political considerations, and this is also what I seek to do.

The concepts of Self and Other that I will be working with in this research originate in Post-Colonial theory and the studies of Edward W. Said in his groundbreaking work *Orientalism*. Said argues that there is power in Western discourse and forms of knowledge. Cultural prejudice and misconception of unfamiliar cultures is often the consequence of false Western centric cultural assumptions that have long been perpetuated. These

judgements are however not neutral. According to Said the West has consistently defined 'the East' as fundamentally opposite or 'other' and culturally subordinate to the West. Said explains that the West holds a 'flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing the upper hand'.[11] He encourages one to engage critically with these concepts of cultural imperialism, and that is exactly what I seek to do in this research.

Historiography

Until the late twentieth century the Western film received scant scholarly attention, academics generally dismissed these frontier-themed movies as crassly commercial, sensationalist, gimmicky, static and therefore unworthy of analysis.[12] Towards the end of the twentieth century this attitude towards the Western started to shift. The sociologist Will Wright was among the first academics to link the patterns in the genre's plot structure to larger historical shifts in American society. In his study *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* Wright argued that the evolution of the cowboy-picture reflected socio-economic developments in American society. According to Wright, the transition from an open market to a managed market economy after the Second World War caused for shifts in the plot-structures of the filmic Western. Entrepreneurial individualism embodied in the lone gunfighter with an innate sense of justice had to make place for new storylines in which heroes travelled in groups, while being paid to battle evildoers: a reflection of the values of a corporal economic system.[13] Even though Wright has been criticized for his selective attention to commercially successful films and limited perspective, his studies offered important findings on the links between the Western film and American society.

In the 1980's John H. Lenihan built upon Wright's findings by broadening the scope. Lenihan argued that not only economic shifts, but also broader contemporary societal and political concerns determined the shape of especially the post-World War II Westerns.

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[11] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London 1995) 7.

[12] Andrew Brodie Smith, *Shooting Cowboys and Indians, Silent Western Films, American Culture, and the Birth of Hollywood* (Boulder 2003) 2.

[13] Smith, *Shooting Cowboys and Indians*, 2.

According to Lenihan the Western was one of the mechanisms by which the American society gave 'form and meaning to its worries' about its destiny in uncertain times. Socio-political concerns about the Cold War and the struggle for civil rights found fruition in the American Western of the 60s and 70s.

The critical assessment of Westerns grew in the 1990's as scholars posed even more complex questions about the ideological messages and modes of representation of the genre. Jane Tompkins focused on the representation of gender norms and modes of masculinity perpetuated by the Western in *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*. Tompkins argued that the male protagonist of the Western, generally a lone, stoic, isolated cowboy hero, developed at the end of the nineteenth century as a reaction to the threat felt by men from women increasingly entering the public sphere.

Richard Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation* has proved to be one of the most comprehensive works in the field of cultural history concerning American Westerns. This is his third and final book in a trilogy which Slotkin has committed to tracing the historical development of the Myth of the Frontier in American literary, popular, and political culture from the colonial period (he starts in 1890) to the present. Working within the field of cultural history he focuses on the concepts ideology, myth and genre. He explains myths as '(…) mnemonic device[s] capable of evoking a complex system of historical associations by a single image or phrase. (…) [They] evoke implicit understanding of the entire historical scenario that belongs to the event and of the complete interpretive tradition that has developed around it.'[14] According to Slotkin, the power of the myth resides in its ability to express ideology in narrative. He then moves on to emphasize the mythic significance of symbolic violence and the uses thereof in American history. Slotkin discusses the emergence of the gunfighter as a symbol of American identity and leads us through American history through representation in Westerns.

In his study *Shooting Cowboys and Indians: Silent Western Films, American Culture and the Birth of Hollywood* Andrew Brodie Smith expresses frustration with the fact that the academic world has paid so little attention to the early years of Western filmmaking,

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[14] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 5, 6.

more specifically to the silent-era Western. Smith considers it a major shortcoming that studies have failed to examine the Western in the context of the growth and development of the US film industry, as he argues that the history of silent-era Westerns is inextricably linked to the genre's evolution as an effect of the industry's development.[15] Smith explains that studies may show that films reflect greater societal changes, but they subsequently tell us little about the process by which this happens. He goes back to the origins of narrative film-making and explains how the Western was essential to the birth and development of Hollywood. He draws attention to the production side of the Western and incorporates commercial influences into his research, determining how business gave shape to Hollywood Western-productions. Smith's focus on commercial influence reminds cultural historians to take often forgotten practical factors into consideration – such as the height of the budget, whoever provided the funds, the intended audience, and socio-political pressure – when writing about Hollywood productions, in order to tell a fuller story.

Besides these examples of academic efforts that have been directed towards the Hollywood Western – exploring its place in American consciousness and how its images are reflections and perpetuations of a sense of American identity – the field also involves many studies that offer critical assessments of Native American representation in these cultural products. The creation of the White Man's Indian and the role which indigenous characters are assigned on the mythic frontier landscape – as well as the development thereof alongside the evolution of the Western – is especially compelling because of the supposed historical setting of the genre, and the colonial legacy of the United States. Whereas questions of historical accuracy have proved important to some, others are generally more concerned with representation itself, and explore the strategies that are utilized to create the Indian Other.

Armando José Prats' *Invisible Natives, Myth and Identity in the American Western* examines the cultural representation of American natives in the Hollywood Western by employing cultural criticism and a close reading of film texts. Prats' research originated with a desire to explore the way in which the Western presented itself as American, with a

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[15] Smith, *Shooting Cowboys and* Indians, 3.

focus on race and culture and how the white hero tells the 'Indian' story.[16] Prats revisits traditional as well as non-traditional materials that play out the well-known American cultural Myth of Conquest. According to Prats the formulaic Hollywood Western involves westward expansion, and the essential marginalization of Native American characters, who are ultimately portrayed as victims of progress and civilization brought by European pioneers. He contends that the Hollywood Western plays out this popular narrative by rendering the Indian invisible in a variety of ways, one of which being the denial of perspective to native characters and marginalization to the savage borders of the mythic landscape. Nevertheless, Prats emphasizes that the Western requires the Indian because, as a cultural product, the genre functions as a project of self-identification.[17] He argues that the Western makes the Indian *present* so that he can eventually render him *absent*, as the conqueror must produce an Other whose destruction is not only assured but justified.[18]

Angela Aleiss' *Making the White Man's Indian* also looks closely at the Indian's image in the Hollywood Western. She seeks to understand how the motion-picture industry created the Native American's screen image and why it transformed over time. Aleiss set out to explore the ambiguous portrayal without falling into the pitfall, familiar in similar studies which resolve to Hollywood-bashing.[19] She hopes to sidestep generalization where it is not in place by looking at key productions that are major exceptions to the 'traditional negative images' of Indians.[20] In line with Smith, Aleiss argues that few scholars have looked at Hollywood's input into the formation of its Indian images and in her study seeks to fill this gap with a large array of unexplored materials.[21] Aleiss considers the Western film as a powerful indication of the industry's struggle to define the American Indian's identity, and traces how the movie-industry reacts to the changing political climate by subsequently shaping the screen Indian's image.

My contribution to the existing discourse will be to draw attention to the often overlooked African American character in the American Western. Even though there is an

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[16] Armando José Prats, *Invisible Natives, Myth and Identity in the American Western* (New York 2002) xiii.
[17] Prats, *Invisible Natives*, xv.
[18] Ibidem, 2.
[19] Angela Aleiss, *Making the White Man's Indian, Native American and Hollywood Movies* (Westport 2005) xvi.
[20] Aleiss, *Making the White Man's Indian*, xvi.
[21] Ibidem, xvii.

extensive amount of scholarly material that has critically explored Hollywood's representation of African Americans on screen in many other genres, such as the horror movie, or the comedy, the Western has been left largely untouched. The fact that questions of race hold a central position in one of the oldest cinematic genres is well-known, but because the presence of black characters in Westerns is less apparent than that of the Indian it has been often considered to be not of much significance. I will be arguing the opposite in this thesis. The Western has functioned as a vehicle for socio-political attitudes towards the position of people of color in American society, and it is therefore *the* genre that is of significance when considering Hollywood's treatment – reflecting society's attitudes – of concepts such as race and racism. I set out to identify which position African American characters take on in the Western in relation to the Native American and white characters, in doing so exploring how producers include, or exclude these characters when remembering the mythic West.

Theory

In this research I will be working within the framework of post-colonial theory. Post-colonialism is a cultural theory that relates to the terms colonialism and imperialism and it focuses on the dissolved as well as enduring legacies of the cultures of Empire. Post-colonial theory is critical in the sense that it questions conventional understandings of knowledge originating in the West, often presented as normative. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, post-colonial scholars need to set out to 'provincialize Europe' so that it can become apparent how the concepts of knowledge which are now perpetuated as global are in fact local. Otherwise, all history turns out to be Western or European history, since Europe is considered to provide both the originating point for global historical development, and simultaneously develops the categories to define it.[22] Ultimately, post-colonial theory seeks to unmask the supposed neutrality of history as a discipline. Because the subject of this research is essentially the legacy of the colonial encounter between Europe and the Other I am concerned with concepts of race, cultural racism, white superiority and progress, relations of power in history as well as representation and the

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[22] Simon Gunn, *History and Cultural Theory* (Harlow 2006) 172.

prevailing stereotypes which are used to perpetuate power. This is where post-colonialism offers the necessary theoretical background to my endeavor.

As Gayatri Spivak once introduced the question, I ask myself how we as historians are to write history after colonialism.[23] In order to do this it is essential to analyze the interrelationship between dominant and Sub-Altern domains in colonial history and its aftermath. The way in which I seek to give shape to the Sub-Altern discourse, is by recuperating the voices of those that have become marginalized in dominant historiography by exploring representations of the Other, and in a sense the way America deals with its colonial legacy. Generally, native understandings of their experiences of colonialism have been subjugated by a supposed normative version of history, written and dominated by the colonizer.[24]

My critical reading of the primary sources is greatly indebted to the work of Laura Mulvey in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* and her pioneering work in feminist film theory. Mulvey's essay establishes the notion of the 'male gaze' and introduces the gender-located subjectivity in film studies.[25] Mulvey, who at the time was writing a powerful manifesto and who's work should nowadays be supplemented with a commonsensical dose of nuance, mobilizes the viewer to move on from a spectator position of pleasure, to a more self-conscious mode of viewing. In other words, Mulvey challenged audiences to watch Hollywood film's 'against the grain', offering a new mode of viewing. Mulvey's theory is relevant to this research in the sense that Black bodies – just like female bodies – exist for the voyeuristic spectatorial pleasure of the viewer. Representations of African Americans as objects of desire/derision are framed by the camera in a way in which the viewer is positioned to enjoy the stereotypical spectacle. As Jacqueline Nujama Stewart has argued, in early cinema '(…) unique pleasures are implied when Black characters are tricked into exposing their own mischief because the film viewer is positioned to enjoy both the

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[23] Simon Gunn, *History and Cultural Theory*, 169.
[24] Ibidem.
[25] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in: Robert Stam and Toby Miller, *Film and Theory: An Anthology* (Blackwell 2000) 483.

Black(face) crime and the white-inflicted punishment.'[26] However, the 'gaze' goes beyond only to-be-looked-as-ness, as the cinema's voyeuristic potential derives from its ability to vary in exposing 'the place of look' through techniques such as narrative, and editing. The 'gaze' determines how the audience views the production, and with which characters the viewer is more likely to sympathize with. Mulvey's theory contributes greatly when viewing films with the intention of locating images of the Self and Other.

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[26] Jacqueline Nujama Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies, Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Los Angeles 2005) 40.

Chapter 1: Cowboys versus Indians in the Hollywood Western

From Reactionary Savage to New Age Environmentalist

Creating a Homegrown Cinematic Genre: Mythic Landscapes and Romantic Tales

In the earliest days of filmmaking in the late 1800's filmmakers were producing so-called 'actuality films' on popular demand. These silent shorts were non-narrative motion pictures which captured US Western lifestyle and romantic landscapes, which was part of a commercial effort to market the 'West' – an up-and-coming economically prosperous region – to potential migrants and visitors.[27] Initially, motion-pictures manufacturers mainly produced records of newsworthy events, as well as scenic landscapes and industrial wonders. Soon however, film would break through this demarcated area of interest. One of the first clients to recognize the promotional potential of moving pictures were railroad companies: while promoting their services the commissioned films helped advertise the region to tourists through a new medium.[28] Producers of promotional pictures increasingly explored ways to convey the uniqueness of their culture, and what elements set the West apart from Europe. Colorado was romantically referred to as a 'strange land of sunshine and beauty, of gold and precious stones'.[29]

Moving pictures immediately appealed to American audiences. These highly popular early films fed on a popular demand for images of all things western, which consumers had already encountered in dime-novels – cheap paperback fiction novels that became hugely popular after 1860 – weekly western story papers, western melodrama's, comedies and

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[27] Smith, *Shooting Cowboys and Indians*, 9.
[28] Ibidem, 12-14.
[29] Ibidem, 17.

Wild-West shows.[30] American filmmakers became inspired by the immense popularity of the British crime film genre and set out to create a distinctly American cinematic genre, based on similar plot-structures but complemented with authentic western backgrounds.[31] Directors now experimented with combining common cinematic practices with gripping narratives, and created the first story-films which immediately drew enthusiastic audiences.[32] By tapping into popular demand, motion pictures now revolved less around the commercialization of a region and scenic nostalgia, and more towards action and sensationalism conveyed through narrative content.

By 1904, the producers William Selig and Harry Buckwalter had gone a long way towards inventing the Western, even though audiences and manufacturers would not recognize these pictures as part of a genre quite yet. American studios created crime films set in the West, with themes and characters that originated in the well-known frontier-experience, complemented by the scenic settings in which these stories took place. The authenticity of Rocky Mountain landscapes enabled the Western to develop into a popular export product and these productions soon became the international face of American motion pictures.[33] Creating Westerns outside of the 'West' proved to be difficult, and so the US now boasted a homegrown cinematic genre that Europeans could not easily emulate due to its unique American character and the geographic specificity of the productions.[34] The following nickelodeon boom allowed existing venues to open small store-front theatres and charge only five cents for admission to motion picture compilations of one-reel shorts. Subsequently, the increased demand for films motivated manufacturing companies to produce a vast amount of Westerns on a regular basis.[35] By 1910 the Western became the nation's leading film type and accounted for one-fifth of all American releases. By this time,

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[30] Ibidem, 10, 52.
[31] Ibidem, 10.
[32] Ibidem, 20.
[33] Ibidem, 53.
[34] Ibidem.
[35] Ibidem, 38.

one of the leading production companies, Essanay, was producing one or two Westerns a week due to popular demand.[36]

Scholarship on Westerns has generally focused on its Golden Age, which spanned a period of thirty years between 1939 and 1969, after which many claim the genre was pronounced 'dead'.[37] In early Westerns such as *Stagecoach* (1939) the enduring stock-formula of Indians-as-obstacles crystallized. With few exceptions aside, Indians were depicted as vicious savages that attacked travelling pioneers in covered wagons and made sure to capture and rape white women. However, by starting one's scholarly journey in the late thirties instead of at the birth of the Western one risks overlooking significant early transformations of the genre, especially concerning the representation of the Native American characters. Silent-era Westerns are often written off as pre-mature B-productions that contain poor acting and have little depth in their narratives, therefore presumably unworthy of analysis. However, the significant choices that were made in this experimental phase – when the Western genre was still being 'invented' – sheds light on production factors and commercial concerns that transformed the genre into how we know it today.[38]

The American Silent-Western: Romantic Exoticism and Noble Indians

When one goes back to the silent-era of the Hollywood Western, one will interestingly be able to observe that the image of the sympathetic Indian preceded that of the bloodthirsty savage. One reason for the relatively positive portrayal of the Indian character at this time had to do with practical factors on the production side. It was fairly easy for directors to create an image of the Indian as a noble hero in an era of *laissez-faire* in the movie industry, a time before studio monopolies and censorship organizations had the power to exercise control on the content of films.[39] Indian-themed pictures proved to be very popular from 1910 to 1912 and the screen's first real Western star was even 'Broncho Billy' Anderson: a

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[36] Scott Simmon, *The Invention of the Western Film* (New York 2003) 3; Smith, *Shooting Cowboys and Indians*, 54.
[37] Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie,* 5.
[38] Simmon, *The Invention of the Western Film*, xi.
[39] Aleiss, *Making the White Man's Indian*, 2.

noble Indian hero.[40] What often fascinated directors and white audiences alike was the very 'exoticism' and inherent Otherness of American Indians, as they were believed to belong to a race and culture that was distinctly different from white America.[41] As a consequence, in the early years of the Western, filmmakers tapped into the popular appeal of the romantic fables of a strange culture.

In retrospect, the popularity of the endeavors of the filmmaker James Gordon Young Deer, who was believed to be a native himself – these claims were later called into question – seems most striking. Before Young Deer became a producer he worked as an actor in some of Selig's early productions. He had been recruited as a native actor after working for years in Wild West shows. Young Deer went on to produce a large number of often controversial Indian-themed films which featured interracial romances. In his *For the Squaw* (1911) a white man marries an Indian woman, and even procreates with her. Nevertheless, he eventually abandons her so that he can return to his eastern sweetheart. Upon his arrival his white fiancé scolds her unfaithful lover and demands him to return back to his Indian lover.[42] Even though Young Deer was certainly an exception, it was not only this specific native filmmaker that favored narratives that were relatively sympathetic towards Indian characters. The American movie pioneer David W. Griffith – who among other things became famous due to his highly controversial and racist depiction of black Americans in the production *Birth of a Nation* (1915) – included native characters in his productions that were rather sympathetic than inherently evil, savage or villainous.[43] Out of the thirty Westerns that Griffith produced, only eight included bad Indians.[44] In Griffith's productions, Native Americans were certainly afforded a higher social status than African Americans. Whereas black Americans threatened to disrupt the social order, Indians seemed possibly worthy of assimilation into white society had it not been for white bigotry that prevented this very thing from happening.[45] Griffith's Westerns also often portrayed whites as evil, and sometimes even responsible for provoking the viciousness of the Indian

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[40] Ibidem.
[41] Ibidem, 4.
[42] Ibidem, 2.
[43] Ibidem, 5.
[44] Ibidem, 6.
[45] Ibidem.

characters, his work therefore contained significant social criticism on the civilization ideals which white settlers claimed to offer.[46]

Even though Griffith's Indians were not inherently savage, his pictures did not necessarily promote miscegenation. Interracial romances mostly ended tragically due to the implied impossibility of cultural assimilation. The persistent tension between red and white was most explicit in the Western movies' 'half-breeds', characters that had to deal with rejection on both sides of the spectrum and almost always struggled to find a place in a racially intolerant society.[47] Despite the fact that many of the representations of Native Americans that we see in the early Westerns are considerably more sympathetic than their thirties' counterparts, these characters are still very one-dimensional. Soon enough, audiences became tired of the stereotypical noble versus savage portrayals which often portrayed the Indian characters relatively sympathetically.[48] By 1912 the public was demanding longer and more complex narratives, and so it became clear that the simplistic formats on which the Western had based its success would no longer suffice to meet customers' expectations. Gradually, one- or two-reelers were replaced by feature films with at least five reels.[49] The demand for longer feature films made the production of movie pictures a larger financial burden. Directors therefore increasingly needed solid evidence that their pictures would appeal to audiences and also sell. One way of solving this was by turning successful plays or novels into movie productions and by signing with established Broadway stars.[50] A consequence of this was of course that it would be more difficult for unknown Native American actors to acquire a role on the big screen. After these changes, interracial romances were often still part of the Westerns' plot but the differences in lifestyle between white and red still reinforced the cultural marginality and native inferiority of the Noble Savage.

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[46] Ibidem, 5.
[47] Ibidem, 8, 9.
[48] Ibidem, 11.
[49] Ibidem, 17.
[50] Ibidem, 20.

The Myth of the Vanishing American: a Romantic Fading Culture

The focus of the Western on the tragic fate of Native Americans set within a bigoted society made place for the Vanishing American stereotype. Within this set of ideas, the West was conceived as a zone of wilderness with great economic potential upon European conquest. As Anglo-American presence expanded westward, in doing so also bringing the gift of civilization with them, the wilderness in this largely 'unexplored' territory needed to be conquered in order to make space for progress. The native inhabitants of the region were considered extensions of the established natural order, and like the wilderness, also needed to be overcome in the name of progress.[51] Depicting Native Americans as helpless victims of Western civilization and European advancement, being pushed to the border of their inevitable distinction, became a popular stock-image in the Hollywood Western that fit well within the white-progress narrative of the nineteenth century.[52] As the Western reconstructed an image of the past, of which the outcome was already known, it perpetuated a sense of nostalgia for the culture of a people that were supposedly fading fast. As Edward Buscombe explores the trope of the Vanishing American he explains that: '(…) cinema audiences could indulge [the Westerns'] nostalgia for the wilderness of a people whose threat had been conclusively neutralized (…) they were able to partake of the romantic appeal of the Sioux and Cheyenne in their prime while (…) secure in the knowledge that the threat of the Indian was gone.'[53]

With a mixture of stereotype and social commentary the silent Western *The Vanishing American* (1925) encapsulates this tragic plight of Native American peoples in the West. *The Vanishing American* was produced in a time that the Western world was experiencing rapid population growth, escalating industrialization and modernization. A need to consolidate a distinctly American identity followed these developments.[54] Based on Social Darwinian understandings it was considered that in order to ensure survival, Native

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[51] Michael J. Riley, 'Trapped in the History of Film, Racial Conflict and Allure in *The Vanishing American*', in: Peter C. Rollins, John E. Connor, *Hollywood's Indian, The Portrayal of the Native American in Film* (Kentucky 2003) 62.
[52] Edward Buscombe, 'Photographing the Indian', in: Edward Buscombe, Roberta E. Pearson, *Back in the Saddle Again, New Essays on the Western* (London 1998) 34; Riley, 'Trapped in the History of Film', 62.
[53] Buscombe, 'Photographing the Indian', 37.
[54] Riley, 'Trapped in the History of Film', 64.

Americans needed to assimilate into the dominant culture of the 'superior' race, or to die off as a result of their loss in the Darwinian struggle for life.[55] The tone of *The Vanishing American* is set in the opening shots, that include a quotation from Hebert Spencer, an English philosopher and proponent of Social Darwinism: 'We have unmistakable proof that throughout all past time there has been a ceaseless devouring of the weak by the strong (…) a survival of the fittest'.[56] This narrative prolog historicizes the story in terms of racial conquest and implies a struggle of races therein. *The Vanishing American* focusses on the clash between two 'races' on the frontier: Anglo-Americans and the Navajo. According to the storyline, the survival of the Navajo is dependent on the mercy of white bureaucrats that have now come to rule the country and therefore also determine the dominant cultural order.[57] *The Vanishing American* is in more ways than one a mirror for the society in which it was produced. As the Great War breaks out in the film, the American government turns to its citizens for support. Initially, the Navajo are only requested to supply the soldiers with several horses, but as the war escalates so do the requirements. As the most corrupt government official is fired, the natives see hope in the emergence of justice and order. In an attempt to bridge the cultural chasm and prove their alliance to the new order the Navajo enlist.[58] However, their hopes shatter when upon their return from service they are not welcomed as war heroes by their own people or by white Americans. Instead, they remain oppressed and mistreated, now maybe even worse than before. Completely disillusioned, the Navajo veterans decide to return to their own ways, and are reborn as stereotypical warriors.[59]

The Vanishing American is sympathetic towards the 'Indian question' in the sense that the Navajo are portrayed as powerless, oppressed peoples in contrast to the whites that are the stories' wrongdoers. However, the production lacks authenticity as the lead actors playing Indian parts are not natives but merely heavily made-up whites. This must have been a very conscious decision at the time, for it was certainly not the case that there was a lack of native actors to play the parts. Apparently, the moment an Indian character

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[55] Ibidem, 63.
[56] Ibidem, 59.
[57] Ibidem, 61.
[58] Ibidem, 65.
[59] Ibidem, 66.

attains a more prominent role in the picture, the execution of this responsibility can only be realized if the actor is white and 'plays' Indian. Moreover, the Native American characters in *The Vanishing American* are mostly generic Indians with hardly complex identities.[60] The Hollywood Indian that is created in this feature film is a mythologized icon of the romantic and the exotic, but it is also simultaneously the emblem for the impoverished and vanquished Other.[61] Because no attention is directed towards the potential survival and future for the Navajo and the aboriginal ways of life, the audience remains completely unaware of the fact that the numbers of Native Americans have not been decimated into oblivion and that their cultures still exists, admittedly with more influences from modernization than before European presence. Nevertheless, the representation of Native Americans in *The Vanishing American* stands apart as a Western production in an era when Indians were increasingly portrayed as vicious and savage obstacles to Western civilization. In the end the approach of the film apparently did not appeal to audiences, and the lack of action in this motion picture led to disappointing box-office sales.[62]

Bloodthirsty Savages in B-Western 'stick-em-ups'

Whereas *The Vanishing American* may have sparked hope in the hearts of those rallying for equal and just representations of Native American characters in the Western, this sympathetic Indian-themed film proved to be an exception rather than the rule. In the 1920s plot-formulas like the Indian-as-obstacle theme dominated Western productions. While the cowboy lifestyle was glamorized, Indians were portrayed as a menace to white civilization and progress. As hungry settlers killed the wild buffalo on the frontier, recalcitrant Indians retaliated against the pioneers. The stock-Indians stole horses, burned wagons, captured women and children while firing arrows at their opponents. As long as vicious Indians impeded westward expansion in the Western, the clash between red and white seemed inevitable.[63] Despite the early success of the Western film, its popularity now began to wane. Promising productions encountered highly disappointing box-office returns as the genre experienced an increasing amount of competition from action-packed gangster

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[60] Ibidem, 68.
[61] Ibidem, 70.
[62] Aleiss, *Making the White Man's Indian*, 37.
[63] Ibidem, 34.

films.[64] After this, the genre retreated from the movie screen for a period of time, and independent, low-budget B-Westerns came to dominate the scene. Limited finances restricted available production resources and caused the producers to fall back on simplistic plots, in which 'Indians' – whites in Indian-make-up and attire – were casted as evil menaces in a good-versus-bad storyline.[65] In this phase several filmmakers experimented by creating movies about Indian adventures and interracial romances, but these were rarely successful. The Indian as primary subject was simply no longer exciting enough for American audiences.

The popularity of the Western genre, which had been dominated by B-productions in the 1920s, would only recover with the success of Cecil deMille's *The Plainsman* (1937). DeMille's film glorified American conquest and celebrated the American myth of Manifest Destiny: he resurrected the epic Western by playing out a story in the screen in which heroic pioneers set out to turn a savage frontier into a civilized nation.[66] In *The Plainsman* the Indians are a menace and obstruction to expanding white civilization. This same plot-device would also be employed by John Ford in *Stagecoach*. These films underline that America could only be safe again if the bloodthirsty Indians would vanish forever. American audiences seemed to prefer these epic action-scenes in which heroic cowboys engaged in attack against hostile Indians. Images of savages ambushing innocent settlers would prove to be exceptionally enduring. Nevertheless, Hollywood was soon forced to rethink these modes of representation and to what extent these images contributed to the political standing of the United States as tensions in Europe heightened and the Second World War broke loose.

The Influence of World War II: Wartime Brotherhood and New Frontier Villains

When another war broke loose on the European mainland, the world quickly became aware of the appalling consequences of fascist ideology. As the United States considered letting go of their non-interventionist political stance in the international arena, the offensive images of natives on the American screen suddenly seemed less appealing.

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[64] Ibidem, 40.
[65] Ibidem.
[66] Ibidem, 60.

American directors were fast to pick up on the significance of a rapidly changing political climate and revised images that celebrated conquest and the decimation of Native Americans. Images of Hollywood's Indians were re-evaluated as Native American draftees contributed to the national defense-force.[67] Negative images of Reactionary Savages did not necessarily immediately disappear from the epic Westerns, but they were placed within a framework that was more in touch with the spirit of the times.

In 1939 the director Paul Sloan released *Geronimo*, the story of a great Indian leader that remained unconquered for a long period of time. Geromino was famed as the 'most feared Apache that ever ravaged the West'.[68] Even though the enemy in this film was unmistakably the Indian warrior, *Geronimo* still presented white audiences with a positive message as it boasted America's military strength in national defense. It also promoted the diplomacy in the governments' dealing with the enemy, exemplifying the virtue of democracy.[69] With the fascist threat looming in Europe, directors started experimenting with new plot structures by creating new frontier villains that could replace the cowboys-versus-Indian formula. Scheming businessmen, crooked bankers and railroad owners were now the foes of both white and red, the new threat to law and order became civilization's greed and corruption.[70] Indian characters were given more complex human dimensions and were often even allies of the whites that appeared on screen. During the Second World War the concept of racial brotherhood influenced the portrayal of both white and red in the Western as national unity – also in popular culture – became a powerful weapon against fascism.[71] It was now also Hollywood's duty to actively assist in the war effort by promoting unity and (racial) tolerance. Not only in popular culture, but also in reality, Native Americans stood beside white Americans as they fought together on the battlefield. By 1943, 18.000 Native Americans had joined the US armed services.[72]

World War II challenged the tenability of the negative portrayal of Native Americans which up until then had been so popular, especially in films like *The Plainsman* and

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[67] Ibidem, 61.
[68] Ibidem, 62.
[69] Ibidem.
[70] Ibidem, 70.
[71] Ibidem.
[72] Ibidem, 73.

Stagecoach. The workings of the myth of Manifest Destiny held too many resemblances to the destructible forces of fascist racism that were raging in Europe. Images of hostile interrelationships between white settlers and Plains Indians were replaced by more sympathetic portrayals of friendship and alliances between the frontier heroes and native peoples. White paternalism substituted the Manifest Destiny myth and promoted assimilation instead of racial segregation. Civilized white Americans still determined the norm, and if Native Americans were to take part in this hopeful vision for the future, they were to compromise their heritage and merge with white society. According to these popular narratives, often the only reason for Indian survival was the deliberate act of friendship by the white protagonist, ultimately protecting his Indian ally.

Post-war Liberalism and Racial Assimilation

At the close of World War II, American society became increasingly aware of the insidious and general undesirability of racial bigotry. Hollywood realized the necessity to incorporate these values into their productions, especially now that it was experiencing a lot of competition from the massive influx of foreign movies.[73] Directors realized that the image of the Indian as a bloodthirsty Savage Reactionary was *passé* in a more tolerant post-war society. Post-war Westerns followed suit and incorporated new liberalism into their productions by focusing on themes surrounding interracial brotherhood and national unity. However, as one destructive ideology disappeared – and left Europe's economy and political power in ruins – it did not take long for new fears to arise. As Cold War tensions intensified, home-land security and fear of 'enemies from within' became one of Washington's main concerns. Anything 'un-American' on US homeland raised suspicion as Joseph McCarthy's Red Scare gained strength and following. Hollywood studios were also under scrutiny and were pressured to abide by the norm. Cultural conformity became crucial in order to create a feeling of national unity. Emphasizing the difference between Indian and white became largely undesirable and even potentially suspicious. Therefore, Hollywood Westerns revised the traditional stereotypes that implied racial difference in favor of Anglo-American values. Hollywood eliminated the frontier's 'Indian threat' by

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[73] Ibidem, 92.

assimilating Native Americans into white society, on white terms.[74] In short, peaceful co-existence between red and white was solely feasible on the condition of sacrifice of Indian identity.[75] In this sense, a just and equal relationship of the Self and Other had still not been established despite egalitarian intentions.

By 1950 Delmer Daves' *Broken Arrow* (1950) hoped to show audiences that racial tolerance could exist if Native Americans were willing to compromise.[76] The basic structure of the story was based on the interracial friendship between Thomas Jeffords, and the Apache Indian leader Cochise. The narrative attributes the main reason for conflict between the whites and the Indians to parallel misconceptions, but eventually Jeffords is able to negotiate a peace between the Apaches and the white settlers.[77] In *Broken Arrow* a mixed-race couple attempt to heal social rifts through their own romantic union, but peace only this becomes feasible when the bond is broken between Jeffords and his wife Sonseeahry – who has an Apache ethnic background – when she is sacrificed to end the battles.[78] And so even though the peace is successful in the end, which implies the possibility of assimilation and cultural tolerance, the tragic fate of the protagonist's interracial marriage problematizes *Broken Arrow*'s pro-assimilation message.[79]

In the opening shots of *Broken Arrow* Jeffords rides alone in the Arizona desert as a voiceover introduces the audience to the protagonist of the story: 'This is the story of a land, of the people who lived on it in the year 1870, and of a man whose name was Cochise. He was an Indian, leader of the Chiricahua Apache tribe. I was involved in the story, and what I have to tell happened exactly as you'll see it. The only change will be that, when the Apache speak, they will speak in our language.' In this fragment, the tone of the film is set. Jeffords narrates in the past tense, and he seems to be reflecting on the experiences of a romantic culture that has been pushed to extinction. The outset of the film is a prime

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[74] Ibidem, 90.
[75] Ibidem.
[76] Frank Manchel, 'Cultural Confusion', in: Peter C. Rollins, John E. Connor, *Hollywood's Indian, The Portrayal of the Native American in Film* (Kentucky 2003) 92.
[77] Manchel, 'Cultural Confusion', 96.
[78] Joanna Hearne, 'The "Ache for Home", Assimilation and Separatism in Anthony Mann's Devil's Doorway', in: Peter C. Rollins, John E. O'Connor, *Hollywood's West The American Frontier in Film, Television, and History* (Kentucky 2005) 132.
[79] Hearne, 'The "Ache for Home"', 132.

example of a director working within the pervasive tradition of the Vanishing American. *Broken Arrow* promises the viewers 'the other side of the story', presented to us through the words of a sympathetic white character that supposedly has unbiased knowledge on what exactly took place in the lives of the Apaches. By using a voice-over to mediate the experience of the Apaches to a white audience, the Native American side of the story becomes fully dependent on the white narrative and perspective. Jeffords is able to speak for the Apaches by narrating the voice-overs, and he is also able to assimilate the natives by rendering all speech in English.[80] The most important message of *Broken Arrow* is that peaceful co-existence is possible, under the condition that the Indians agree to accept the army's terms and discontinue warfare. It was the first film in a series of revisionist Westerns that set out to tell the story of the West from the Native American perspective, in this case through the eyes of a white protagonist. The same would be done forty years later in *Dances with Wolves* (1990). *Broken Arrow* was such a popular production that it was even turned into a TV-series that ran for two seasons.

Sixties Anti-war Sentiments and Revisionism in the Hollywood Western

In the sixties several major Western releases offered white audiences more sympathetic images of Native Americans. Even the famous John Ford, responsible for popularizing the negative stereotype of the Reactionary Savage in *Stagecoach,* and who had produced the extremely violent *The Searchers* (1956) a decade earlier, now consciously chose to depict the heroism and dignity of the Cheyenne people in *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964). In the late 1960s a growing anti-establishment mood reflected the feelings of disappointment that many young Americans felt towards their national government as the war in Vietnam continued to escalate. At the same time, civil rights movements grew stronger and the American Indian Movement demanded political sovereignty for Native Americans as well as a more just portrayal of indigenous peoples in popular culture.[81]

Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* (1970) is Hollywood's quintessential anti-Western. It appealed to young audiences as it addressed their alienation while critically commenting

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[80] Ibidem, 135.
[81] Aleiss, *Making the White Man's Indian*, 120.

on American violence, and hypocrisy in white civilization.[82] With *Little Big Man* it was Penn's intention to set the record straight and tell the story from the Native American point of view. In the classic Western, whites were representative of civilization and the Indians were barbarians. *Little Big Man* turned this popular dynamic around by presenting audiences with Indians that had become victims of the malevolent treatment of white Americans.[83] The story unfolds through the eyes of a white man, Jack Crabb, who gradually becomes disillusioned with his own culture after having lived humbly among indigenous peoples for long periods of time. After learning the ways of the tribe, Crabb casts off his Euro-American identity and is initiated by the tribal community. After these experiences, in which Crabb becomes acquainted with both sides of the spectrum, he is eventually able to recognize the moral- and spiritual emptiness in white society. Crabb grows especially disillusioned by the ferociousness of Lieutenant General Custer, who heartlessly sends large groups of Indian women and children to be massacred. *Little Big Man* depicts the virtues of the Cheyenne and bemoans the destruction of their culture in the name of white progress.[84] The film's emphasis on the moral emptiness of white American society invalidates the Myth of the frontier, which contends that westward expansion was entirely heroic.[85]

Furthermore it is important to place *Little Big Man* in its appropriate historical context. It seems that the film was also a critique on the American military intervention in Vietnam and the atrocities that took place in My Lai.[86] Penn links the plight of the Vietnamese during the American involvement in South-East Asia in the 60s en 70s to that of the Cheyenne in *Little Big Man*. The most shocking scene in the film is one in which the Massacre of the Washita River is re-enacted. During this scene, US cavalry troops are commanded by General Custer to slaughter the Cheyenne in a surprise attack. The amount of violence in this scene is striking. Women and children are not spared by Custer's soldiers while the Cheyenne's camp becomes engulfed by flames after their teepees are

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[82] Ibidem, 123.
[83] Margot Kasdan and Susan Tavernetti, 'Native Americans in a Revisionist Western *Little Big Man* (1970)', in: Peter C. Rollins, John E. Connor, *Hollywood's Indian, The Portrayal of the Native American in Film* (Kentucky 2003) 121.
[84] Kasdan, Tavernetti, 'Native Americans in a Revisionist Western', 127.
[85] Ibidem, 129.
[86] Tavernetti, 'Native Americans in a Revisionist Western', 130; Aleiss, *Making the White Man's Indian*, 124.

intentionally set on fire by the soldiers to ensure they will have utmost difficulty surviving the winter. This scene is meant to evoke the atrocity of the My Lai Massacre of 1968.[87] With Cheyenne functioning as stand-ins for the Vietnamese during the Vietnam War, *Little Big Man* is mainly an anti-war statement that commented critically on contemporary atrocities that were taking place at the hands of the American government in South-Vietnam while also a plight for a more just treatment of Native American characters in the Western. Despite good intentions, it is difficult to overlook the irony in the enfolding situation. *Little Big Man* was one of the first films in a series of so-called 'revisionist' Westerns that set out to right past wrongs concerning the representation of Native Americans, and their histories, in the Hollywood Western. However, before this sub-genre had even found a chance to mature, giving audiences proper tools in dealing with America's colonial legacy, Indians were already functioning as stand-ins for other oppressed peoples in the world. Of course, the fact that native peoples could function as stand-ins in the first place was social commentary in itself, but in the end the revisionism towards Native Americans is overruled by an anti-war statement. In *Little Big Man*, the Western and especially the Native American characters are appropriated in order to comment on contemporary socio-political issues. In this sense, the revisionist Western was flawed from the outset despite its good intentions.

Despite its ethnographic shortcomings and political agenda *Little Big Man* did contribute to a more sensitive representation of Native Americans in the Hollywood Western. Nevertheless, one major point of criticism is that the film still relies on a white protagonist to tell an 'Indian story' instead of going as far to situate the narrative point of view in a Cheyenne hero. Moreover, the Cheyenne in *Little Big Man* appear to be more of a reflection of the sixties counterculture – while being portrayed as sexually frivolous New Age environmentalists – than an attempt at authentic ethnological representation. What was revolutionary about *Little Big Man* in the end was the narrative structure: it was for the first time in a Hollywood Western that a white protagonist's consciousness was raised

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[87] Moses, 'Savage Nations', 277.

by his exposure to an indigenous culture to the point where he chooses to re-evaluate his own culture.[88]

Redux Revisionism and the Double Other in Dances with Wolves

Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990) was the winner of seven Academy Awards including one for 'Best Picture'. The film was praised for its sympathetic portrayal of Native Americans in an era when the American Western had already been considered to have 'died out'. The popularity of the Western genre had seen a sharp decline in the 1970s.[89] *Dances with Wolves* resurrected the romantic image of the Noble Savage and was a continuation of 1970s revisionist Westerns like *Little Big Man*. Whereas the perspective of the production was far from new, the producers' claims to authenticity based on the commitment to getting the facts about the Sioux straight, definitely was.[90] The costumes were historically accurate, much of the dialogue was spoken in the Lakota language, substituted with English subtitles, and Native Americans were cast in Indian roles.[91]

In *Dances with Wolves* Lieutenant Dunbar flees the horrors of the white world to find a more spiritually rich and meaningful existence among the Plains Indians, who are in this case, the Sioux.[92] Dunbar longs for a life uncontaminated by the corruption of contemporary society, and claims that he has 'always wanted to see the frontier before it's gone.' This fits comfortably within the white Myth of Conquest on the mythical frontier. After meeting the Sioux, Dunbar 'goes Indian' – back to tribalism – in order to 'find himself' to go forward.[93] Dunbar almost completely assimilates into the tribe and proves himself an 'able Indian' after participating in initiation rituals. At one point he saves the Sioux from hunger by locating a herd of buffalo, in this scene Durbar proves his abilities as well as his affection for the tribe that has adopted him. Dunbar eventually sheds his European identity when he is renamed by the Lakota tribe, an event that implies that he has now fully

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[88] Kasdan, Tavernetti, 'Native Americans in a Revisionist Western', 134.
[89] Aleiss, *Making The White Man's Indian*, 137.
[90] Alexandra Keller, 'Historical Discourse And American Identity In Westerns Since the Reagan Era', in: Peter C. Rollins, John E. O'Connor, *Hollywood's West, The American Frontier in Film, Television, and History* (Kentucky 2005) 243.
[91] Keller, 'Historical Discourse And American Identity In Westerns Since the Reagan Era', 243.
[92] Moses, 'Savage Nations', 278.
[93] Robert Baird, '"Going Indian", *Dances with Wolves* (1990)', in: Peter C. Rollins, John E. O'Connor, *Hollywood's Indian. The Portrayal of the Native American in Film* (Lexington 2003) 157.

adopted the Sioux ways.[94] Dunbar's renaming is synonymous for the film's Sioux acceptance of the white character, which in turn permits him to colonize their historical pejorative and speak for and sometimes even with them.[95]

In *Dances with Wolves* the protagonist is able to transform the character of an Indian as a Savage Reactionary into a Noble Savage through his own insights. He claims: 'Nothing I had been told about these people is correct. They're not beggars and thieves; they're not the bogeyman they have been made out to be. On the contrary, they are polite guests and have a familiar humor I enjoy'. *Dances with Wolves* is narrated by a voice-over, from the perspective of Dunbar, by which he shares his accurate personal experiences, recorded in his diary. This voice-over has the power to elevate the Indian to equality, an authority that the Lakota somehow lack. In *Dances with Wolves* Dunbar is assigned a superior position in which he is able to make 'equality' possible, but from this position he also has the power to denounce it.[96] According to Edward Said, this flexible discursive position concerning the representation of the 'Oriental' Other is derived from and vested in the discourse on the Other. It puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Other, without losing the upper hand. It is exactly this authoritative position that Dunbar holds in *Dances with Wolves* by controlling the voice-over. Dunbar and his Caucasian wife will share in all that is Lakota, except their tragic destiny as a vanishing race.[97] According to Armando Prats, in *Dances with Wolves*, Dunbar is a 'double Other'. '[H]is Indianness is complete, yet he is also *more* than Indian, for he so perfectly embodies all the high virtues in which we confirm civilization's best.'[98]

In contrast to *Little Big Man*, *Dances with Wolves* carefully avoids any issue of miscegenation as there is no interracial romance involved. Instead, Dunbar courts the only white female in the Lakota tribe. Stands With A Fist is a Caucasian woman with an appropriate age that was taken captive by the Sioux as a child, she has fully adopted the Lakota lifestyle and considers the tribe to be her family. In the end, Dunbar and Stands

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[94] Baird, '"Going Indian"', 161.
[95] Keller, 'Historical Discourse and American Identity In Westerns Since the Reagan Era', 242.
[96] Armando Jose Prats, 'His Master's Voice(over): Revisionist Ethos and Narrative Dependence from *Broken Arrow* (1950) to *Geronimo: An American Legend* (1993)', *ANQ* 9 (1996) 15.
[97] Prats, 'His Masters Voiceover', 27.
[98] Ibidem, 25.

With A Fist form a nice white couple, that teach each other how to love again after having undergone a therapeutic experience that only extensive travel and the immersion into a foreign exotic culture can provide.[99] *Dances with Wolves* sets out to offer a white audience a different perspective on Native American experiences by depicting white atrocities, but the films still largely holds on to a 'white' perspective as a means of inviting audience identification. The white American protagonist is not one of the 'bad' whites, but is more of an exception to the rule. In the end, *Dances with Wolves* leaves the American national self-image largely intact by offering the audience a white protagonist that does good to identify with.[100] Therefore, after watching the film, white audiences can still feel good about themselves by identifying with Dunbar. In this case it is the white Other that commits atrocities against Native Americans, and the oppression of native peoples in America's past is redeemed by individual good. In *Dances with Wolves*, the Indian of America's frontier mythology exists for the self-identification of the white hero.

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[99] Moses, 'Savage Nations', 280.
[100] Sandra Wynands, 'Sam Shepherd's Anti-Western *Silent Tongue* as Cultural Critique', *Canadian Review of American Studies* 35:3 (2005) 299.

Chapter 2: Incorporating Black Into the Western

Loyal Buffalo Soldiers and Vengeful Bounty Hunters in the Old South

Keeping in Touch With the Times: Hollywood and the Question of Black Representation

Hollywood's representations of African Americans on the big screen have been mediated by contemporary white attitudes towards questions of race since the very start of the motion picture industry. These images – which tend to 'frame blackness' according to a vast set of stereotypes – have tangible consequences for black minorities and the way they function in American society, as representations continue to give shape to white conceptions of what it means to be black. The year 1915 would prove to be a defining moment for Hollywood in creating images of black Americans. It was when D. W. Griffith, one of Hollywood's pioneering filmmakers in the early years of the motion picture industry, released *Birth of a Nation*, an almost three-hour long feature that contained blunt anti-black depictions and systematic overt racism.[101] Griffith's film was based on Thomas Dixon's racially charged novel, *The Clansman* (1905), and was intended as a tribute to the racist organization and actions of the Klu Klux Klan. *Birth of a Nation* created fixed images of Blackness that were necessary for racist America's fight against black people during Reconstruction (1865-1877).[102] Before the release of Griffith's epic, images of African Americans derived mainly from the work of 'plantation school' novelists. Abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) depicted blacks as docile victims, totally subservient to whites: the foundation for the long enduring 'Uncle Tom' stereotype that even today still finds currency.[103] After Griffith introduced *Birth of a Nation*, existing stereotypes were supplemented with more violent images of blacks as vicious beasts and

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[101] Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness, the African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia 1993) 11.
[102] Manthia Diawara, 'Black American Cinema: The New Realism', in: Manthia Diawara, *Black American Cinema* (New York 1993) 3.
[103] Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 12.

rapists. Griffith was propagating ideals that implied the need to suppress the expansion of black civil rights during Reconstruction.[104] This took place at a time when the postbellum South was suffering from economic difficulties that were undermining the Southern male's role as provider for his family. Seeing his masculinity challenged he sought to inflate his depreciated sense of manhood by protecting white womanhood against the newly constructed Other: the 'brute Negro'.[105] Because *Birth of a Nation* was released at a time when Jim Crow was on the rise and lynching was at its height, the film proved immensely popular and influential.[106] Nevertheless, Griffith's work was also met with organized resistance; African Americans protested Hollywood's racism by offering a counter-narrative that provided positive images of 'race' in the black-produced *Birth of a Race* (1918).[107] Even though this obviously technically inferior production did not receive much attention, it does testify of early African American resistance to Hollywood's oppressive hegemonic narratives.

Birth of a Nation is a film which perpetuates a set of stereotypes, ranging from the loyal slave and the mammy to the 'brute Negro', embodied by Griffith's character Gus: the black rapist who causes a woman to jump off a cliff, choosing death above rape.[108] Griffith's images mask the ugliness of plantation slavery by sentimentalizing it according to the 'antebellum mythology', which would still find currency two decades later in *Gone with the Wind* (1939). With the release of *Gone with the Wind* the popularity of the plantation genre peaked, and even today it is considered to be one of the top moneymaking films of all time.[109] It adapted a mood of antebellum idyll while depicting devoted house servants who preferred slavery to freedom and mammies that loyally protected their white masters from blue coated Union soldiers. The introduction of sound to the feature-length film raised popular demand for more believable stereotypical, black characters, subsequently bringing an end to the practice of black-facing, but not to Hollywood's racist stock formulas. The minstrel tradition of black-facing – which involved white characters substituting African

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[104] Ibidem.
[105] Ibidem.
[106] Ibidem, 13.
[107] Ibidem, 15.
[108] Ibidem.
[109] Ibidem, 26.

Americans after painting their face with black cork – offered white audiences the opportunity to act out their racial anxieties while maintaining the necessary distance from the potential realities thereof.[110] Even though *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind* clearly contained insidious anti-black sentiments and promoted dangerous attitudes, Hollywood understood that their products needed to reflect middle-class values in order to be profitable. This included perpetuating strict racial codes – that were popular with conservative white audiences – to guarantee profit.[111] As an extension of this marketing strategy Hollywood adopted the Hays Office Code throughout the thirties, which entailed prohibiting scenes and subjects which suggested miscegenation in all productions by way of self-censorship.[112]

With fascism on the rise in Europe, Washington's potential intervention in the Second World War seemed increasingly inevitable. Consequentially, Hollywood was forced to rethink its contribution in perpetuating Uncle Sam's contradictory stance towards the race question. Since the turn of the century Americans had employed the 'melting pot' myth as a meant to deal with the ethnic differences that came along with European newcomers, while still maintaining difference and distance towards African Americans.[113] With the war in mind Washington started looking for ways to appeal to national unity, as many African Americans were potential military draftees that could fight alongside white Americans under the same flag. Hollywood became increasingly aware of their extensive black audience, which had grown dissatisfied and impatient with the industry's demeaning attitude towards black representation.[114] The cinema moguls experienced even more pressure to employ revisionism as the dissenting voices of African Americans grew stronger in the late forties through to the sixties. Voices that defended the civil rights of African Americans became louder, following a developing sense of black political consciousness, leading to powerful acts of resistance with the Freedom Rides in 1947, the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1956 and the March on Washington in 1963.[115] Largely due to

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[110] Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black, The Negro in American Film 1900-1942* (New York 1977) 14.
[111] Ibidem, 17.
[112] Ibidem, 18.
[113] Ibidem, 4
[114] Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 27.
[115] Ibidem, 29.

white intransigence towards appeals for equality many African Americans grew disillusioned with the apparent futility of non-violent resistance. Following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 – which delivered a significant blow to hopeful civil rights spirits – the protests became more violent, the Black Panthers pronounced allegiance to 'Black Power' and entire cities broke out in rebellion. In this heated climate issues of race and freedom could no longer be ignored, Hollywood included.

Walter White, the president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, put pressure on the studios to create more positive visual representation of African Americans.[116] Hollywood's solution was to steer clear from the race film – which tended to romantically invigorate the myth of Old South – and casting African American characters in so-called 'message movies'.[117] Aligning with integrationist politics these films carefully explored the social inequities of American race relations.[118] While Hollywood attempted to confront racism, by offering an alternative to antebellum idyll, they still struggled to find a suitable setting for black narratives revolving around black characters. Additionally, hoping to appeal to the broadest audience possible, Hollywood's message movies were still primarily about White Times. African American characters in message movies often merely existed in relation to their white counterparts, and were isolated individuals contained by a white environment.[119] They were almost always male, middle-class professionals that were denied sexuality – to the great annoyance of black inner-city youth – removing the black male's capacity to be intimate, in doing so denied the opportunity to become fully human.[120]

As Hollywood encountered financial difficulties as the seventies approached, it recognized the potential to generate income by exploiting an audience hungry for specific kinds of images, an audience that also had significant purchasing power: young black inner-city males. The era of Blaxploitation in Hollywood had dawned. Now that African

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[116] Ibidem, 27.
[117] Paula Massood, *Black City Cinema* (Philadelphia 2003) 80.
[118] Ibidem.
[119] Ed Guerrero, 'The Black Image in Protective Comedy' in: Manthia Diawara, *Black American Cinema* (New York 1993) 244.
[120] Jacquie Jones, 'The Construction of Black Sexuality: Towards Normalizing the Black Cinematic Experience' in: Manthia Diawara, *Black American Cinema* (New York 1993) 250.

Americans dominated the ticket sales, Hollywood strategically responded to their demands. Blaxploitation films like Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) revolutionarily offered an African American screen hero that was male, urban, sexually and socially virile.[121] Hollywood's interest in Blaxploitation lasted as long as their financial difficulties, after which their priorities, once again, changed. In his study *Framing Blackness* Ed Guerrero has explained the movie picture industry's interaction with society – from which it is impossibly isolated – and the latter's subsequent behavior towards the question of race: 'Hollywood's strategy of revising history to favor the hegemonic point of view, or inverting historical relationships between the dominant society and people of color, constitutes an ongoing practice'.[122]

Now that I have given several illustrations of how Hollywood – sometimes more consciously than other times – has engaged in an ongoing conversation with society during the construction and distribution of its images, it is safe to assume that its products can therefore be examined as mirrors for contemporary cultural attitudes towards a variety of issues. After having provided a general sketch of Hollywood's treatment of African Americans characters from *Birth of a Nation* to *Sweetback* I will now move on to explore images of black Americans in a specific cinematic genre where, as has been observed in Chapter 1. The question of race lays at the heart of the matter: the Western. In the remainder of this chapter I will be critically analyzing two white-produced Westerns, both from different time periods, in which African American characters claim a central position in the narrative or on screen. My focus will be on how these productions construct images of the Black Other in relation to the Self and possibly other ethnicities.

A Fair Trial for Sergeant Rutledge

In 1960 John Ford – one of America's most well-esteemed directors and a pioneer within the genre – released the revisionist Western *Sergeant Rutledge* (1960). The production was unique for its time as the narrative revolved around the predicament of an African American character. In a post-Civil War Arizona, Sergeant Braxton Rutledge – a troop

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[121] Massood, *Black City Cinema*, 81.
[122] Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 53.

serving in the all-black US Ninth Cavalry unit – has been brought before the military court to face charges that have been filed against him for the rape and murder of a young, white, teenage girl. Rutledge's defense attorney, Lieutenant Cantrell – who turns out, is also his commanding officer, sporting James Bond looks – desperately defends what appears to be a lost cause in front of an all-white and hardly trustworthy five-man military jury. Rutledge's presence in the court initially appears to be more of a spectacle than a fair trial, as it has drawn a large audience that has showed up to enjoy the enfolding drama. To the surprise of the court, in what appears to be a closed case to all that are present, Rutledge pleads non-guilty. Nevertheless, he is generally silent throughout the film as he refuses to defend himself – which Rutledge argues will undermine the nobility of his African American brothers in arms – while he believes his defense is futile in a trial in which he will probably be charged guilty solely based on the color of his skin. Through flashbacks – narrated by several eye-witnesses that are routinely called to testify – the jury as well as the audience is introduced to what actually happened on the day in question. Cantrall fights an uphill battle as there are only two other individuals present in the courtroom that, like him, believe in Rutledge's innocence. Moreover, even though Cantrall is convinced of Rutledge's innocence and does whatever he can to achieve a verdict in his advantage, the colonel is unsure of who *is* guilty to the crime, and therefore struggles to present an alternative case to the jury. Consequentially, until the very last moments of the movie, the viewer is kept pondering in anticipation of the verdict, rooting for the case of Cantrall and Rutledge. Along the way the audience learns of Rutledge's heroism and bravery in saving a white woman from bloodthirsty Apaches, his refusal to escape from custody when he had the chance and his loyalty to his unit when saving them from an Apache ambush. *Sergeant Rutledge* ends on a happy note as Cantrell proves the Buffalo Soldier's innocence while simultaneously solving the case and exposing the real perpetrator to the court. The culprit turns out to be a white storekeeper – also present at the hearing – who was willing to let his dead son appear as the murderer. In the end Rutledge's acquittal is not predetermined and seems closer like a strike of luck if anything else.

Ford's inspiration to create a narrative that was sensitive towards an African American point of view, and drastically challenged the myth of white racial supremacy, was

strongly influenced by the post-World War II socio-political conditions in the United States.[123] In the late 1950s and '60s Washington was forced to renegotiate the exclusionary nature of its political order and following racist realities. Non-white minorities in the United States struggled for the protection of their civil rights in Jim Crow America, but at the same time countless African American military forces were being sent to Vietnam to fight a racially charged, white-man's war.[124] Additionally, by the late 1950s many white Americans abandoned the city for the suburbs, which drastically altered the demographics of the inner-city. African American presence in the cities became prominent, as well as in downtown theatres, and consequentially their power in the box-office grew. As they became a formidable audience the demand for more positive screen images of blacks crystallized.[125]

In *Sergeant Rutledge* Ford addresses the American military's hypocritical strategy of dealing with their African American forces. According to Ford, the army's policy was one of outright opportunism. On the one hand the US military presented itself as an egalitarian institution, in which all were equal when serving under the American flag, and thus functioned as a safe-haven for African Americans that were unwelcome in American society. But on the other hand it contended that if Buffalo Soldiers distinguished themselves in combat, the military could potentially provide disenfranchised blacks a passport to a better future.[126] Therefore, the status of African Americans in the military was at the least ambiguous, and in *Sergeant Rutledge* Ford sets out to address the arrogance and opportunism of military authority, as well as Hollywood's shameful amnesia concerning Buffalo Soldiers. *Sergeant Rutledge* provided John Ford with the opportunity to rewrite the conventions of the Western – which he himself had help establish – to reclaim the place of black troopers in the historical setting of the frontier.[127]

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[123] Frank, Manchel, 'Losing and finding John Ford's "Sergeant Rutledge" (1960)', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 17:2 (1997) 247.
[124] Ibidem, 248.
[125] Ibidem.
[126] Ibidem.
[127] Ibidem, 252.

A White Romance Story

Braxton Rutledge, who is played by the renowned African American football player Woody Strode, excellently personifies white America's racial nightmare. He is a muscular black man whose repressed sexual fears have presumably led to the abuse and murder of an innocent young white woman who naively trusted Rutledge despite warning signs.[128] This makes the journey towards Rutledge's final acquittal revolutionary in itself, as the biased white attitude of the court is eventually proved wrong. At several points in the movie the camera focuses on Rutledge's stripped body. He is shown breathing heavily while suffering from a gunshot wound, while his impressive build shimmers in the moonlight. From the point of view of the audience these images of Rutledge's body are both magnificent and terrifying, as Rutledge is clearly still strong enough to afflict harm to White Womanhood despite his wounds. The camera's voyeuristic 'gaze' turns Strode into an object of both desire and derision. Rutledge is the spectacle who is to be looked at – he exists for the pleasure of the audience – and it is the lens that frames him as such, determining the mode of viewing.[129] In these scenes Ford evokes and inverts the popular white captivity narrative, in which a white damsel is traditionally kidnapped and held hostage against her will by an ill-minded black man. At one point Rutledge grabs Mary Beecher – who is stranded at an abandoned railway station in the middle of the night – and holds his hand over her mouth. It is clear at this point that this is the ultimate opportunity for Rutledge to inflict harm on this innocent white woman, but it soon becomes clear that his only intention in grabbing her was to muffle her scream, doing so to protect her from nearby Apaches. The main function of Strode's body in *Sergeant Rutledge* is to excite fascination and exists for the visual pleasure of what Laura Mulvey has called the white 'gaze'.[130] Employing the black body for the gaze is an act of oppression because of the social consequences of this strategy. It marks the existence of non-white bodies and causes the preponderance of harmful stereotypes, like the white sexual fear for primal blacks, personified by Gus the rapist in *Birth of a Nation.*

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[128] Ibidem, 250.
[129] Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', 283.
[130] Ibidem.

Ford exposes his audience to the exclusionary nature of the 'melting pot' myth by his representation of Rutledge's court-marital. Rutledge explains how America's ideology of freedom and democracy excludes African Americans when he says: 'It was all right for Mr. Lincoln to say we're free. But that ain't so. Not yet. Maybe one day, but not yet'. Lieutenant Cantrall – who unfailingly supports Rutledge through the whole ordeal – expresses his frustration with the court's continuous racism and finger-pointing when he powerfully exclaims: 'if the color of a man's skin is to be entered as evidence against him, or even as argument, then I say that it is *this court* that is on trial and not Sergeant Rutledge!'. In this scene, and many others, Cantrall functions as a white savior figure. It seems obvious that Rutledge would not have stood a chance in front of the corrupt jury – that occasionally drinks whiskey and plays poker on the job – without him. In the end Cantrall not only wins the case, by proving Rutledge's innocence, but he also wins the heart of the girl – a white educated maiden – that he has been courting since the very beginning. Rutledge on the other hand, stays sexless and is denied the capacity for intimacy. Despite Ford's revisionist intentions towards African American characters Rutledge is still not able to become completely human, in the same way that the white Self, embodied by Cantrell, is. By being denied sexuality Rutledge remains at best an imperfect state of the white Self.[131]

Rutledge's amended award after being wrongly accused is to continue serving in the US Ninth Cavalry, leading his unit of uneducated black soldiers. In the last scene of the movie the audience sees Rutledge smile for the very first time, this last-minute attempt to explore Rutledge's emotional depth comes as somewhat of a surprise as he has mainly appeared as a stoic, emotionless victim up until this point. Rutledge marches past Cantrell and approvingly salutes him, cheering on his savior's white romance. Even though an interracial romance between Beecher and Rutledge definitely would have proved believable, as the sexual tension between these two characters is undoubtedly present, Ford avoids any instance of miscegenation, which would probably have been considered as pushing the revisionism a bridge too far for conservative American audiences.

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[131] Jones, 'The Construction of Black Sexuality', 250.

The Buffalo Soldier and the Reactionary Savage

Even though Ford's revisionist Western revolutionarily affords a black character a central role and a relatively happy ending, the Native Americans receive less sensitive treatment. *Sergeant Rutledge*'s Indians are the same vicious savages that audiences saw twenty years earlier in Ford's *Stagecoach*. The Indians transform Ford's courtroom drama into an actual Western offering action, as they storm off mountains, attacking innocent working-class whites on multiple occasions while chanting and waving spears. The Apaches are also the reason why Rutledge finds himself in such a sticky situation in the very first place. In the very beginning of the movie Cantrell explains to Beecher, who is visiting her parents in Arizona for the first time in twelve years, that 'Arizona has changed since Geronimo was taken, we haven't had any Apache trouble since'. Nevertheless, upon Beecher's arrival she soon finds out that Cantrall's statement is incorrect, as a group of Apaches is on a raid in her hometown. Rutledge, who was initially on his way to inform his commanding officer of the Apache raid, unluckily walks in on the dead body of a girl in the office of an army official. Misfortune strikes again as the officer – and father of the girl – enters his office. Immediately assuming Rutledge is the murderer the officer attacks Rutledge, forcing him to act in self-defense. After this struggle Rutledge flees the scene with a gunshot wound towards the abandoned railway station, where he comes across Mary Beecher. At the railway station the sergeant protects Beecher from the savage threat of the Indians by gunning them down. Ford's Apaches are silent, ruthless, disorganized and easily defeated despite their overwhelming numbers. The Indians are featured in a total of two scenes, and are therefore largely invisible, but they are nevertheless omnipresent throughout. As Armando Prats has argued in *Invisible Natives* the invisibility of the Indian enemy is a popular way of depicting Native characters in Hollywood as it causes more tension and is possibly more terrifying than their embodied visual presence on screen.[132] In *Sergeant Rutledge* the Indian is represented through synecdoche – which includes marked arrows, footprints, feathers and smoke – and unfailingly arouses fear in the hearts of innocent white Americans. Ford's Native American characters are one-dimensional obstacles to both black and white in the American quest for progress. It seems incredibly ironic in retrospect

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[132] Prats, *Invisible Natives*, 25.

that, in a film inspired by civil rights struggles, Rutledge and his troops are only able to prove their virtue to white society by selflessly serving in a white man's racially charged war.

Whereas Rutledge initially appears to be the primary Other, thankfully enabled by the charismatic Cantrell to climb up the social ladder through loyal military service, in reality there is a much more disenfranchised and inhumane Other in the Indian. The threat of the Indian enemy requires the white Self and black incomplete-Self to stand hand in hand in battle in order to live the American Dream. In *Sergeant Rutledge* Ford promotes the socio-economic ideology of assimilation for the African American community. Black merges into the white progress narrative as a solution to the racist reality of American society. Towards the end of the movie, when Beecher gets news of her deceased father – who has died at the hands of savage Apaches – she tells Cantrell: 'I hate this land, it killed my mother and now killed my father, I wish I had never come back!' to which Cantrell answers: 'but it's a good land Mary, it really is. Maybe not now, but like Rutledge says,… some day.' Cantrell's promise to Beecher is two-fold: on the one hand it seems to hopefully imply that one day African Americans may hold the same rights as their white counterparts, but on the other hand it entails that the Indian 'trouble' will have to be fully neutralized.

Vengeful Bounty Hunters in Django Unchained

"Kill white people and they pay you for it? What's not to like?" – Django in *Django Unchained*

Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012) is the tale of an ex-slave turned bounty hunter embarking on a quest to rescue his wife from the brutal Southern slave-owner on whose plantation she now works. Tarantino's Western is set in the American Deep South – he personally refers to it as a 'Southern' – in the pre-Civil War era and takes on the form of a Spaghetti Western. The Spaghetti Western is a subgenre of the American Western that was born in the 1960s, well-known for the excessive use of violence and made famous by the renowned Italian producer Sergio Leone. In *Django Unchained*

Tarantino seeks to engage critically with America's shameful past – which entails the existence and upholding of an economic system based on slavery – by offering his audience an empowered black hero: Django. In doing so, Tarantino builds on Hollywood's '60s and '70s cinematic tradition of Blaxploitation, which according to the director highly influenced his work. *Django Unchained* is meant to (not exclusively) appeal to young, black audiences by offering them a powerful black hero figure. Tarantino's latest production has caused a lot of controversy in and outside of Hollywood due to his treatment of such a delicate topic in such an explicit manner. African American filmmakers, including Spike Lee, have questioned Tarantino's authenticity and authority to deal with America's legacy of slavery in a way that does justice to the Black experience. Even though *Django Unchained* is white-produced and has received much critical acclaim from white audiences, its protagonist is black and his storyline is one of resistance, which is fairly revolutionary for a white-produced Western.

In the very first moments of the film the viewer encounters traditional elements that identify the production as a Western. Yellow text determines the setting as Texas in 1858. This shot also reminds, or educates, the audience that the film is set in a period right before the Civil War broke out, and slavery had not yet been outlawed. What follows is a shot of two slave-owners in the midst of the woods transporting several slaves, are all in chains. They encounter a one-man travelling carriage. The unnamed man is keen on striking up conversation with the slave-owners and introduces himself as Dr. King Schultz, a German dentist. Schultz expresses interest in buying one of their slaves. The annoyed slave-owners suspiciously decline, but Schultz refuses to take 'no' for an answer. As the men become obstacles in his quest he guns them and their horses down, subsequently freeing Django. Thereafter Schultz gifts the remaining slaves a rifle and words of wisdom which empower them to attain freedom. Schultz and Django ride to a nearby town by horse where everyone looks on in awe, shocked by the sight of a black man on a horse. The German doctor takes Django to the nearest saloon – which is traditionally a segregated and white dominated public space in the Western, allowing *Django Unchained* to break with this convention – where he explains to him that he is a bounty hunter and needs Django's help to track down and identify several villains. Schultz mentions that he is an abolitionist, but willing to utilize

the system of slavery for his own means on the short-term in order to get the job done. In what follows he makes an agreement with Django: Schultz promises to offer him freedom and an amount of the bounty after the task has been completed. When Schultz requests Django to become his partner-in-crime in the bounty-business he quickly answers: "Kill white people and they pay you for it? What's not to like?".

While preparing Django for his first assignment Schultz teaches him the rules of the game and lets him choose his own outfit, something that the recently freed slave is not accustomed to but appreciates greatly. During their collaboration Django proves himself a highly skilled gunslinger: the perfect man for the job. This leads Schultz to enquire about Django's further plans as a free man, after which he finds out about Django's wife, Broomhilda. Django explains how they were separated after illegally getting married and attempted running away from the plantation they worked on. Broomhilda functions as Django's love-passion, inspiring him to embark on an individualistic quest to rescue her. Impressed by Django's drive, Schultz paternalistically proposes a plan in which they work together as bounty-hunters to rescue Broomhilda; Django consents.

In the following months Schultz leads Django through a rite of passage towards his initiation as bounty hunter. Django perfects his gunfighter skills, masters the wilderness and remains unfazed by death. As Spring arrives the partners head South to Mississippi in order to track down Broomhilda. After they learn that she has been sold as a comfort girl to the notorious Calvin Candie, owner of the 'Candyland' plantation, Schultz devises a complex plan to force their way onto the plantation by posing as Mandingo-fighting experts. Once Schultz and Django enter Candyland they try to trick Candie into selling Broomhilda to them by legal means, only to be discovered at the last moment by Candie's black slave-driver Stephen, who appears to be the one that is *actually* running Candyland. At this point the tables turn, Schultz and Django have immediately lost their powerful position and the modus of the operation changes from opportunism to survival.

Black Complicity and White Paternalism: Heroes and Villains of Both Sides of the Color Line

In *Django Unchained* the sources of good and evil are not clear-cut along color lines. Tarantino creates an oppositional narrative that challenges the white blackface minstrel

tradition – humor that ridiculed members of the black community by presenting white audiences with an unthreatening image of the black community – that was common in the early years of commercial cinema, and persisted in many forms until the mid-1960s.[133] In Tarantino's revenge fantasy there are both black and white villains, which causes for complex relationships between good and evil as well as Self and Other. In doing so, *Django Unchained* does not fall into the tradition of what Mark Reid calls 'satiric hybrid minstrelsy', which simply reverses racial hierarchies and thus sustains the racial tendentious structure of blackface as a racially objectified white, or any other non-'black', becomes the target of 'black' laughter.[134] This was a form of African American humor that was popularized during the civil rights movement as it has the ability to simultaneously appeal to both black- and white audiences.[135] *Django Unchained* inverts the many stereotypes and tropes which have determined Hollywood's treatment of slavery in popular epics such as *Gone with the Wind* and *Birth of a Nation*. The trope of the sympathetic slaveholder is challenged by the character Calvin Candie, and the stereotype of the pliant fearful slave is inverted by Django's merciless quest for vengeance. The ultimate bad guy in Tarantino's revenge saga is Calvin Candie, who is a sadistic, sister-loving mega villain and owner of Candyland. Despite Candyland being one of the most lucrative plantations in the American South, Candie, who comes from a long line of successful plantation-owners, admits to being 'bored' with his profession and seeks thrill by participating in the Mandingo-fighting trade. As the story progresses and the viewer follows Schultz and Django deeper into Candie's world, it seems that the person who determines the everyday life on the plantation – which includes brutal practices such as locking reluctant slaves for days on end in the 'hot-box', a small metal isolation cell located directly in the blazing sun – is in fact the Uncle Tom character in *Django Unchained*, Candie's right hand: Stephen. The evil which rests with Stephen is of an even more malevolent nature than that of Candie, for not only is he black himself, but also fully understands the workings of the system of slavery and still freely *choses* to utilize the peculiar institution to his own benefit. In the end it is Stephen that is smart enough to pick up on the bounty hunters' orchestrated plan to rescue Broomhilda

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[133] Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 14.
[134] Mark A. Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Oxford 1993) 35.
[135] Reid, *Redefining Black Film,* 42.

from Candyland, and it is also he who to takes steps to prevent their escape by revealing his suspicions to Candie. Black complicity is a major theme in *Django Unchained* and it almost seems that this is a bigger problem than white racism as it is shameful and even more difficult to erase.

Not only the villains in *Django Unchained* are both black and white, so are the heroes. It is the powerful partnership between Django and Schultz that enables them to achieve the extraordinary, especially considering Django's precarious position in the film's historical backdrop. Schultz, who is Django's liberator, is interestingly the only white person in the movie who explicitly speaks out against slavery and considers himself an abolitionist. His full name, Dr. King Schultz appears to reference the prominent civil rights leaders Martin Luther King Jr. Schultz, who has unfailing charisma, is the only white good guy in *Django Unchained*. Even though he presents his relationship with Django as one of equal standing, his attitude towards his partner is primarily paternalistically defined. From the very first moments of the movie Schultz fulfills the role of the white savior figure as he unchains Django, and renames him Django Freeman. As Schultz teaches Django about staying in character, practices long-range shooting and teaches him to read, he initiates the ex-slave into being a bounty hunter – and a man – while subsequently enabling his revenge rampage. Schultz's character robs the stone-cold Django from a considerable amount of agency as he explains: 'I've never given anyone their freedom before and now that I have, I feel responsible for you'. It is also Schultz who devises the plan that they eventually put to practice when entering Candyland, and even though Schultz does not make it to the end, as Django does, he fires the most symbolic and satisfactory shot when he exterminates Candie in the Big House: the ultimate symbol of all that is evil.[136] This shot causes all hell to break loose and Schultz loses his life. Nevertheless, he dies a dignified death.

At several moments it is also easier for the audience to relate to Schultz than to Django, as the latter seems to somewhat be losing himself in his character, abusing his newfound authority. While Schultz looks away in disgust, Django allows one of Candie's Mandingo-fighters to be brutally torn apart by dogs; this is possibly the most unsettling

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[136] Guerrero, *Framing Blackness,* 34.

scene in the entire film which involves black torture on the watch of another black man. The fact that Django appears completely unfazed by the brutality of slavery in this scene confirms to what extent the black hero is on an individualistic quest. Django does not necessarily seem to be directing his revenge rampage towards the system of slavery – which would imply him standing up for the oppressed African American community – but is primarily self-involved. This arguably makes Django's narrative less empowering for a black audience that is engaging with a film about a painful past. This perspective is in stark contrast with a black-produced Western that I will be discussing in Chapter 3: *Buck and the Preacher* (1972).

Reoccurring Antebellum Idyll and 'Gangsta Guerilla Super Heroes'

Numerous reviewers have argued that Tarantino's depiction of slavery in *Django Unchained* is in many ways problematic. For one, he specifically chooses to focus on the extreme brutality of slavery instead of on the very economics that are at the heart of this historical system of oppression. Moreover, *Django Unchained*'s sole focus is on two unusual and partly a-historic slave-professions: Mandingo fighting and prostitution. Tarantino, being a film enthusiast *pur sang* makes a game out of impressing his audiences with his extensive knowledge of cinema history by making an infinite amount of well thought-out references to cult cinema. He has admitted to have derived his idea for Mandingo fighting – which plays such a central role in *Django Unchained* – from the Blaxploitation classic *Mandingo* (1975). There is however no historical evidence that this practice existed in reality. Because Tarantino choses to focus on two specific professions, the slaves in *Django Unchained* never seem to be doing any 'real work'; for example, none of them are seen working on the fields. Another peculiar decision on Tarantino's side is the idyllic setting of both slave-run plantations; these scenes echo Hollywood's romantic remembrance of the mythical Old Plantation South, popular in familiar films such as *Gone with the Wind*.[137] The slaves are never dirty, and their skin shimmers lusciously in the Southern sun. Even though he draws attention to the brutal punishment practice of whipping slaves by sadistic slave-drivers, the scars that we see are almost always healed and quickly covered up.

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[137] Ibidem, 21.

Considering Tarantino's obsession with gore and violence in many other scenes, this omission appears to have been a conscious decision. All in all, by selectively drawing attention towards the brutality of the institution – embodied by the slave-owner character Candie – it almost seems as if, given these extremes would have not existed, slavery would not been as bad as it turned out to be. In this narrative, slavery is reduced to bad attitudes instead of racist economics and property rights.[138] If Candie's character would be removed from *Django Unchained* it would leave the audience questioning why the system would still be objectionable.[139] In short, Tarantino sidesteps the responsibility to shed light on the racist economics that caused the very brutality on which the film ultimately focuses.

Another dangerous consequence of not addressing racial economics in *Django Unchained* is that an impression is left on the audience that African Americans were able to escape slavery provided they transform into 'gangsta guerilla super heroes'. Underlying this premise is the neo-liberalist ideology of the 'myth of the limitless upward mobility' which applies to enterprising and persistent individuals. This myth carries with it the idea that individuals are able to escape the evil system of slavery if only they are strong-minded enough to persevere in their dreams, like Django.[140] Escape it seems, is only available to the exceptional few like Django and Broomhilda. Candie calls Django an 'exceptional nigger (…) one among ten-thousand others'. By branding Django as one-in-a-million, the agency of the other black characters in *Django Unchained* is denied.

Double Alterity: Broomhilda as the Black Damsel in Distress

Considering the fact that Tarantino is working within Hollywood's Blaxploitation tradition – which sets out to create powerful black figures to which black audiences can relate and more importantly are also willing to pay for – his treatment of the character Broomhilda is curious. Early on in the movie we are introduced to her character through a flashback that Django has to their illegal marriage – a powerful act of resistance as they are at this point still bound by slavery – and following futile attempt to escape plantation-life. At this point it

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[138] Adolph Reed Jr., '*Django Unchained*, or, *The Help*: How "Cultural Politics" Is Worse Than No Politics at All, and Why', *Nonsite* 9 (2013), http://nonsite.org/feature/django-unchained-or-the-help-how-cultural-politics-is-worse-than-no-politics-at-all-and-why.
[139] Reed, '*Django Unchained*, or, *The Help*'.
[140] Ibidem.

seems as though Broomhilda has the ability to develop into an emotionally complex character. However, the audience soon discovers that her sole function is that of a damsel in distress, whose ultimate *raison d'être* is to inspire the quest of and eventually be rescued by her love-interest, Django. Even though Broomhilda holds a prominent position in the narrative, her character is highly one-dimensional and predominantly silent while existing primarily in Django's imagination. Her disempowered character's main role is to appear naked, look pretty, faint and in the end applaud the heroic deeds of her husband.[141] It is also Broomhilda's inability to keep composure that tips off Stephen, Candi's ears and eyes, that something is up when Schultz and Django's plan to rescue her is about to come into fruition.

Django Unchained is unquestionably male-dominated, women are either objects of apathy or sympathy and are not nearly as complex or charismatic as any of the black characters. Broomhilda only exists to be rescued by Django and is therefore little more than a vehicle in Django's individual quest for justice. Moreover, Django's masculinity is defined in opposition to Broomhilda's femininity which makes her Otherness twofold: not only is she black, but she is also female. Both of these characteristics disenfranchise Broomhilda's character considerably. Whereas Django was able to invert pre-existing tropes, Broomhilda is denied this capacity. Adding insult to injury, it is Broomhilda's body that is subject to the spectatorial voyeuristic 'gaze' this time around.[142] As the lens frames her body as an object of desire – and as Tarantino confines her narrative to the realms of pleasure by making her an enslaved comfort girl – the alterity of her visual existence is emphasized, marked by the very Otherness of her visual appearance. Tarantino's movie is about how men, both black and white, navigate America's racial maze.[143]

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[141] Joshunda Sanders, '2013 Oscar Week: Heroic Black Love and Male Privilege in "Django Unchained"', *Bitch Flicks, the radical notion that woman like good movies*, February 18, 2013, Accessed on 28 July, 2013, http://www.btchflcks.com/2013/02/oscar-week-django-unchained-heroic-black-love-and-male-privilege.html.

[142] Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', 483.

[143] Salamishah Tillet, 'Opinion: Quentin Tarantino creates an exceptional slave', *CNN.com*, December 25, 2012, Accessed on 28 July, 2013, http://inamerica.blogs.cnn.com/2012/12/25/opinion-quentin-tarantino-creates-an-exceptional-slave/.

Chapter 3: Putting Color Back in the West(ern), Appropriating a White Conquest Genre For Black Audiences

Black Cowboys, Common Enemies, and Voodoo Traditions

Discovering a New Audience: Blaxploitation in Hollywood

In the late 1960s large groups of African Americans grew increasingly impatient with white intransigence towards a decade of civil rights struggles of black Americans. They began to lose faith in the effectiveness of non-violent tactics, and passive resistance in the form of sit-ins, eat-ins and voter registration drives after their efforts yielded little effect mainly as a consequence of white indifference.[144] Black Americans were fed up with their second-class citizenship status and began to look for solutions elsewhere. Black grassroots organizations became more aggressive and militant in their tactics while they embraced black cultural nationalism. The slogan 'Black Power' was coined in 1966 when the Black Panther Party for Self Defense was founded.[145] A wave of inner-city riots followed the black activists' repudiation of non-violence, and peaked in the years 1967 and 1968 with a record of 384 uprisings in 298 cities.[146] Young blacks directed their frustration towards the 'the system' – the [white] man's institutions, property, and laws'[147] and promoted black cultural nationalism that would not promote white, but black notions of aesthetics.

This surging new sense of black identity caused African Americans to direct their frustration towards Hollywood, criticizing the tradition of portraying black characters in a

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[144] Mark A. Reid, 'The Black Action Film: The End of the Patiently Enduring Black Hero', *Film History* vol. 2 no. 1 (Winter 1988), 23.
[145] Mark Reid, 'The Black Action Film', 23.
[146] Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness, The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia 1993), 71.
[147] Mark Reid, 'The Black Action Film', 24.

demeaning fashion. Sidney Poitier, one of Hollywood's most successful black actors at the time, had once too many been appointed the role of 'ebony saint' in films such as *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner?* (1967). His recurrent performance in these films was criticized by black nationalists and has been described as the 'Sidney Poitier syndrome (…) a good boy in a white world, with no wife, no sweetheart, no woman to love or kiss, helping the white man solve the white man's problem'.[148] A rising political and social consciousness among the black American youth translated into a large black audience that was thirsty to see their full humanity depicted on commercial cinema screens.[149] Their dissatisfaction with Hollywood's traditional treatment of African Americans coincided with the near economic collapse of the film industry in the 1960s.[150] Having established that there was a vast and eager young black audience with purchasing power, longing for assertive and multi-dimensional black heroes on screen, Hollywood responded by tapping into this newly discovered demand. What followed was a black movie boom, the era of so-called Blaxploitation, named as such for the reason that Hollywood decided to exploit the demands of their new-found audience in order to ensure its survival as an institution.[151] The black director Melvin van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) was the first black action film that attracted large black teenage audiences to theatres by offering them a relatable black hero, while avoiding overtly politicized messages.[152] Other popular Blaxploitation films that would follow were *Shaft* (1971) and its sequel *Shaft's Big Score* (1972).

Hollywood's enthusiasm for black exploitation films in the seventies also led to a series of black Westerns, including the trilogy *The Legend of Nigger Charley* (1972), *The Soul of Nigger Charley* (1973) and *Boss Nigger* (1974). In some cases Hollywood even hired black directors and put them in charge of the production. Most of the Blaxploitation Westerns worked with very low budgets, which made them aethetically less impressive than the white-produced Westerns that the public had become accustomed to. Moreover, Hollywood had devised a Blaxploitation stock-formula which played up hyper-masculinity

[148] Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 72, 73.
[149] Ibidem, 69.
[150] Ibidem, 70.
[151] Ibidem.
[152] Reid, 'Black Action Film', 26.

and often cast famous football players like Fred Williamson in main leads. The Western genre may initially seem like a peculiar choice of genre for a debuting black producer, as it has traditionally remembered the Old West as a story of white conquest and white racial supremacy and has marginalized the presence and histories of non-white ethnicities in its myth of progress. However, this given is simultaneously *exactly* the reason why making a Black Western would make so much sense. For even though the classic Western erased the presence of black Americans from the frontier, this was essentially a historical inaccuracy: there were in fact many African Americans that helped settle the frontier in the nineteenth Century. That is why several filmmakers took up the challenge of providing black audiences with a counter-narrative by means of a Western film: they set out to right Hollywood's past wrongs with empowering revisionist narratives, revolving around black characters in the Old West. In the remainder of this chapter I will be discussing two of such Westerns, both black produced, and exploring how the producers approached appropriating a white-dominated genre for black audiences.

Creating a Black Cowboy Hero in Buck and the Preacher

Sidney Poitier made his directional debut in 1972 with his studio-produced high budget Black Western *Buck and the Preacher* in a period that Hollywood was determined to exploit their new-found audience: young, black males. His choice to work within the Western genre – which had been mythologizing white American history since the birth of Hollywood – seems curious at best, but at closer examination it becomes clear that Poitier made this decision quite consciously. With *Buck and the Preacher* he intended to recover the lost history of African-Americans on the frontier by re-reading the American past and putting color back into the Western. Poitier uses the Western as a vehicle to re-imagine history from a black perspective and challenges the myth of white-supremacy by appropriating the genre.[153] These intentions are made explicit in the very first moments of the movie as a shot of text appears, reading: 'dedicated to those people who lay in graves as unmarked as their place in history'. This statement refers to the forgotten African-American involvement

[153] Richard Slotkin, *Buck and the Preacher (1972)*, Western Movies: Myth, Ideology, and Genre-Audio Podcast, Wesleyan University' accessed July 10 2013, https://itunes.apple.com/us/itunes-u/western-movies-myth-ideology/id427787656.

in the settling of the West. Poitier was very committed to the production of this film. He started off by employing a white director, but eventually sent him home and took over the lead himself as he believed that the black characters were not being given enough justice, something Poitier considered to be unacceptable, and a blatant contradiction towards the ideological foundation of the film.[154] As a consequence *Buck and the Preacher* was a black produced Western that not only received a high budget, but also boasted a large, black star-cast.

Buck and the Preacher is the story of an unusual friendship between an ex-cavalry wagon-master, played by Sidney Poitier, and a 'preacher' turned con-man, played by Harry Belafonte. The film is set shortly after the Civil War, when blue coated Union soldiers have left the Southern states and have put the responsibility of materializing the promises of Reconstruction in the hands of those that until recently were slave-owners. African Americans that stayed behind in the Southern states at the close of the Civil War struggled to build up a comfortable existence as many still worked for their former slave-masters, now only on different economic terms. At the end of the war, and despite its outcome, many black Americans living beneath the Mason-Dixie line now found themselves surrounded by embittered Southerners, and vengeful vigilante members of the Klu Klux Klan that disputed Reconstruction values. This caused the so-called Exoduster movement, which was the name given to the Great Migration of African Americans that fled the South and hoped to settle in the West.[155]

In *Buck and the Preacher* wagon-master Buck leads a wagon-train of African American freemen from Louisiana westward across the Plains, helping them find safe a place to settle as a community. However, their redemption is not achieved easily, as the black newcomers are not welcomed by everyone. A band of white vigilantes repeatedly harasses them by mercilessly destructing their camp, destroying their food resources and even goes through great lengths to shoot all their animals (including their chickens) after which they exclaim: 'there's enough good jobs chopping cotton in Louisiana, go back!'. DeShay, who is the leader of the gang, then heads after Buck. While Buck tries to outrun the

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[154] Ibidem.
[155] Ibidem.

vigilantes his path crosses with a 'preacher', who turns out to be no more than a con-man clothed in preacher's attire. Buck, in desperate need of a disguise, attempts to steal the preacher's horse, but ends up making him an honest offer – as the preacher understandably objects – before stealing his horse and riding into the distance. The preacher claims to be roaming the West on an evangelic mission but he is clearly a con-man – in white man's clothes – waiting to take advantage of anyone and everyone. DeShay approaches the preacher after he recognizes the traded horse and offers him $500 for bringing him Buck 'dead or alive'. This award sparks the preacher's interest and leads him to follow Buck and the wagon-train. Although the two initially get off on the wrong foot they eventually end up working together in bringing the Exodusters to safety and taking revenge on the vigilantes – by robbing a white-man's bank – for attacking their camp for a second time and stealing all the community's savings, including the amount they had set aside to pay Buck for his services.

Poitier's black Western has two heroes, Buck – the black hero that knows Indians – and the preacher – the black (anti-)hero that knows whites. Because this film is working within a well-established genre, and sets out to appropriate it in a way that is beneficial to the African American side of the story, many recognizable elements – that determine if the picture fits within the genre's tradition – are employed. The film starts off with a set of sepia-stills that slowly turn into moving images of impressive stretches of mountainous Western landscapes – which immediately make clear to the audience that the narrative is set in the mythic West – backed by a funky tune. Still photography is also used in the characteristic Westerns *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969).[156] Furthermore, the setup of *Buck and the Preacher* is that of a buddy-picture: at the time of production a popular way to make a Western work. Our hero is Buck, a composed but charismatic horseman. Buck is morally superior as he feels a strong sense of responsibility towards the wagon-train and utilizes his skills – and knowledge of the surroundings – in order to help them. Even though Poitier builds on established Western conventions in *Buck and the Preacher* in order for it to believably pass as a Western, it soon becomes clear that its narrative is also in many ways unconventional. For one, the

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[156] Ibidem.

soundtrack is upbeat and has more of a funky feel to it than one typically encounters in Westerns. By choosing this specific musical score Poitier is doing what Julia Leyda has called 're-territorializing' the West into a mythic-historic space influenced by African American (musical) tradition.[157] In other words, the fact that one can hear funky-bluesy music in the cinematic West is proof of the erased African American presence on the historical frontier: 'those people who lay in graves as unmarked as their place in history'.[158] Secondly, although the preacher gone con-man is a familiar stock-character in the traditional Western, Belafonte's preacher is a-typical, not only because he is black, but more so as he employs his trickster-persona to aid black people.

In *Buck and the Preacher* white characters that are 'good guys' which support Buck are scarce. Nevertheless Poitier has not simply inverted the traditional Western by employing a simple black versus white dichotomy, according to 'satiric hybrid minstrelsy'.[159] Instead he explores the complexities of race-relations during Reconstruction. DeShay, Buck's arch-enemy, wears a blue Union uniform. This means that even after the Civil War, the difference between good and bad could not be delineated along the lines of North and South, since there appear to be corrupt Northerners – like DeShay – that consciously aid embittered Southerners' malicious intentions. The preacher also discovers that racism is still prevalent in the West as he enters a brothel in the small town of Copper Springs. The head prostitute gasps at the sight of Belafonte and blurts out her dissatisfaction with his unexpected presence: 'look, I run a selective house, this is not one of your New Orleans cribs!'. Apparently sexual relationships between black and white are still considered to be a tad too progressive for the likes of Copper Springs.

Similar but Different: Maintaining Autonomy for Native Americans

One of the most striking elements in *Buck and the Preacher* is the treatment of Native Americans. Buck communicates with the native peoples of the Plains on multiple occasions and in both cases approaches them with utmost respect. Buck is aware of the fact that the

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[157] Julia Leyda, 'Black-Audience Westerns and the Politics of Cultural Identification in the 1930s' *Cinema Journal* 42:1 (2002) 50.
[158] Massood, *Black City Cinema,* 80.
[159] Reid, *Redefining Black Film*, 34.

group he is leading will need to cross 'Indian territory' in order to reach their 'promised land'. However, instead of taking his chances, or arrogantly claiming the land as his own, he asks the Chief for permission to cross his land while bowing deeply. By trading and negotiating with the Indians, Buck treats them as equals, but also as an autonomous entity. The natives in *Buck and the Preacher* are provided agency because Buck offers them the opportunity to either accept or decline his requests on their own terms.[160] Here Poitier makes a critical statement which emphasizes that not all non-whites are the same. At this point it appears that the Native Americans and African Americans in *Buck and the Preacher* are united in battle by their common enemy: the whites. Nevertheless, some daring nuance is added to the dialogue when the Indian Chief explains to Buck: 'we will not fight for you, (…) you black people fought with our enemy against our people'. Buck is confronted with the fact that many African Americans did not hesitate to fight the white-man's war – himself included – this seems to be veiled anti-war critique from the producer in a time when the American involvement in Vietnam was escalating and many African American troops were being sent to East-Asia to fight in a racially charged conflict.[161] Despite the Chief's initial skepticism, the Indians come to the rescue of Buck and the preacher when hopelessly surrounded by vengeful whites.

Poitier's treatment of Native American characters in *Buck and the Preacher* is believable because he gives them somewhat more emotional depth despite their limited presence. Nevertheless, the portrayal is not perfect. Poitier exploits the Vanishing American trope when exploring Indian characters; they appear to be fighting an uphill battle against a force that will inevitable erase their existence. The Chief expresses his frustration with their diminished territory following white westward expansion: 'now we are here with our backs against Snow Mountain. The yellow hair [has] sent wagons, soldiers and speaking wire, tomorrow we will be like ghosts, like the spirits that come in dreams with no earth to walk on … but, we will *fight*'.

Another interesting element in *Buck in the Preacher* that challenges the myth of white supremacy is the representation of Voodoo. When in despair, the black travelers

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[160] Richard Slotkin, *Buck and the Preacher (1972)*.
[161] Ibidem.

from Louisiana seek wisdom from a traditional healer, who reassures them that Colorado is their promised land. The fact that these African-Americans fall back on African spiritual traditions instead of seeking refuge in the white man's Christian religion – Christianity was often introduced to slaves by slave-owners in order to justify the institution, ensure a better work ethic and to add meaning to slaves' existence – is a powerful act of resistance.[162] Moreover, the preacher mockingly appropriates Christianity to suit his own means. Towards the end of the film we find out that the preacher actually holds a gun in a cutout of the Bible he carries, and before he fires shots he shouts: 'I put my faith in the good book!'

Images of the Self and Other from a Revisionist Black Perspective

Despite inevitable shortcomings, *Buck and the Preacher* offers young black audiences – that were the motor behind Blaxploitation surge in Hollywood – the kind of hero they so long had longed for. Our hero Buck is not so much on an individual mission – which Django in Tarantino's *Django Unchained* clearly was – as his loyalty and dedication is directed towards aiding the oppressed African American community. Besides this commitment Buck still has dreams for his own future with his wife Ruth. In *Buck and the Preacher* Poitier finally breaks with the white tradition of casting African Americans in sexless 'ebony saint' roles – as seen in John Ford's *Sergeant Rutledge* – while simultaneously not sacrificing agency by become a black martyr, having to suffer or perish in order for the greater good of his community to be served.[163] Neither is Buck denied sexuality, therefore the audience is able to conceive the black character as fully human.[164]

In *Buck and the Preacher* the audience is likely to identify with the black characters rather than with their white counterparts. Subsequently, African Americans define their sense of Selfhood in opposition to the white, and in relation to the Native American Other. *Buck and the Preacher* is successful in its revisionism in the sense that African Americans now function from the top hierarchical position. Black determines the norm, and negotiates

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[162] Manthia Diawara, 'Black American Cinema: The New Realism', in: Manthia Diawara, *Black American Cinema*, (New York 1993) 18.
[163] Reid, 'The Black Action Film', 27.
[164] Jones, 'The Construction of Black Sexuality', 250.

space for Native Americans in doing so. In *Buck and the Preacher* African Americans and Indians work together, they are interdependent in their collaborated resistance against the white Other. Revolutionarily, the Native Americans claim a higher moral standing than whites, without necessitating the negotiation of a white savior to uplift them like in *Dances with Wolves* or *Little Big Man.* However, while Buck, Ruth and the preacher ride into the sunset, ready to lay down the foundations for their future in the 'promised land', the future of the Native Americans is less certain. This time around the Native Americans are a 'helpless race' on the verge of extinction.

History Is a Funny Thing: Recuperating an Omitted Black Presence on the Frontier in Posse

In 1993 Mario van Peebles tread in his father's footsteps when he directed the African American revisionist Western, *Posse*. Melvin van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* – which is arguably the most notorious and acclaimed motion picture of the seventies' Blaxploitation genre – not only offered black audiences a powerful black hero, but it also inspired many African-American filmmakers, including Spike Lee, to produce films that were based on similar principles and drew attention to black American experiences. Mario van Peebles was lucky enough to have had learned the art of directing from the legend himself and when filming *Posse* he was understandably heavily influenced by the important Blaxploitation legacy that his father passed on to him.

Mario van Peebles's *Posse* is the story of a predominantly black gang, or posse, of outlaws that are on the run after having deserted military duties during the Spanish-American War. The posse travels West following their strong-minded leader, Jesse Lee, who has now turned their escape into a retribution mission directed at white vigilantes – members of the Klu Klux Klan – that killed his father years earlier. In a similar fashion to *Buck and the Preacher*, *Posse* sets out to re-position the black cowboy in the Western myth. Van Peebles's intentions are made clear in the very beginning as the audience is introduced to the movie by a familiar face in the African American community: Woody Strode. He addresses the viewer directly and gives a short, but powerful history lesson that comments critically on the biased perspectives of Western history: 'History is a funny thing; they got

us believing that Columbus discovered America [while] the Indians [were] already here. That's like me telling you, and you sitting in your car, that I discovered your car, then they want to call them the "evil red savages" because they didn't give up the car soon enough. There's one thing about time, no matter how much or how little passes, it changes things. People forget their past, and they forget the truth. But pictures don't lie - forgotten gunslingers like Nat Love, Ice and Dart, Cherokee Bill, and troops like the Ninth and the Tenth - see people forget that almost one out of every three cowboys was black. 'Cause when the slaves were free, a lot of them headed out West, built their own towns; shit, they didn't have much choice. In fact, over half of the original settlers of Los Angeles were black. But for some reason we never hear their stories, stories like Jesse Lee and his posse.' This is where the tale of Jesse Lee starts.

Strode's narration sets the tone for the movie and is tailored to suit an African American audience that is fully engaged. While Van Peebles explicitly pays homage to black cinema history – to Blaxploitation in particular – it also becomes clear in the very first scenes that *Posse* is a significant departure from his father's legacy, as he explicitly chooses to educate his audience. Melvin van Peebles' *Sweetback* was criticized by black nationalists in the sixties for its lack of a 'didactic discourse', considering this, Mario's decision was possibly also a very conscious one, a response to dissenting voices.[165] In the seventies the glory-days of the Western were coming to an end as the popularity of the genre was dwindling. Nevertheless, a series of postmodern Westerns appeared in the 1990's.[166] Films like Maggie Greenwald's *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993), Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995), and Mario van Peebles' *Posse* (1993) break the codes of the traditional Western mythology, offering a plurality of racial, cultural, and gender-specific tropes by appropriating one of cinema's oldest genres.[167] *Posse* established a unique cultural voice intended specifically for African Americans. As Adam Wadenius has argued, based on Michel Foucault's postmodern politics, postmodern Westerns are a powerful form of resistance that empower peripheral groups by contesting a hegemonic, totalizing discourse. 'Traditional Western conventions,

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[165] Reid, 'The Black Action Film', 26.
[166] Adam Wadenius, 'Oral History as Political Resistance, *Posse* & *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*', *FORUM* 9, (2009) Accessed on July 21, 2013, http://www.forumjournal.org/site/issue/09/adam-wadenius, 1.
[167] Wadenius, 'Oral History as Political Resistance', 3.

translated into a culturally specific counter-discourse that is aimed directly toward marginalized audiences, operates as an effective method of resistance for such groups against the dominant Western narrative.'[168] *Posse* is a sincere attempt by Van Peebles' to memorialize neglected lives and slighted histories.[169]

Posse inscribes its historicity by situating the narrative in a specific time and place: Cuba, 1898. The film is set during the Spanish-American War – a key moment for US imperialism and ideological expansionism – which in itself reminds the audience of the often forgotten fact that that many Buffalo Soldiers fought heroically during this conflict, only to have their efforts erased from historical records – except, of course, those that behaved badly – in order to whiten the image of the Rough Rider: representative of white supremacy.[170] In *Posse* our hero is the commander of the all-black Tenth Cavalry Regiment stationed in Cuba, Jesse Lee, played by Mario van Peebles himself. Jesse Lee and his men are sent on a suicide mission by their corrupt colonel, who adds Little J, a white gambling con-man, to the all-black unit, supposedly appointing this convict a death-sentence. Against all odds the mission succeeds, and Jesse Lee's unit additionally confiscates a large chest of gold found behind enemy lines. Aware of the fact that the colonel is unlikely to spare their lives or grant them any of the riches they just acquired, they devise a plan to flee Cuba. They reach American ground after hiding in wooden coffins that are about to transport the military dead to New Orleans, Louisiana. Now that the gang, still following the lead of Jesse Lee, has deserted the US military forces they become outlaws that are on the run. After a short and lavish stay in New Orleans the 'posse' is forced to leave once again as the colonel appears to have located them and is predictably after the stolen gold. Then, the posse heads West, following Jesse Lee, who now confirms he is on a mission to avenge his father's lynching by claiming the life of his murderer. Along the way he stops at a blacksmith to melt down a portion of the gold into bullets. As one of the outlaws comments, according to Voodoo tradition, gold is the only substance that can kill a demon from the past. Jesse Lee symbolically uses gold ammunition to avenge his father's brutal death and the injustice that

[168] Ibidem.
[169] Donald Hoffman, 'Whose Home on the Range? Finding Room for Native Americans, African Americans and Latino Americans in the Revisionist Western' *MELUS* 22:2 (1997) 51.
[170] Christine Bold, 'Where Did the Black Rough Rider Go?', *Canadian Review of American Studies* 39:3 (2009) 274, 278, 279.

has been inflicted upon the citizens of 'Freemanville', a multi-racial town and safe haven for non-whites in the West that has been built in remembrance of Jesse's father. The fact that *Posse* mobilizes Voodoo tradition – which references African ancestry – is an act of resistance to imperialism, the foundation of the hegemonic Western narrative.[171] Jesse's golden bullets in *Posse* are analogous to the authority of the traditional healer in *Buck and the Preacher*, they are exemplary autonomous strikes against totalizing discourses as well as a proliferation of cultural difference.[172]

Keeping the Legend Alive: Oral History as Resistance

Oral tradition plays a central role in *Posse*, it is employed as a tool of resistance by an oppressed community in order to emphasize cultural difference and annihilate socially generated inequalities.[173] By means of flashbacks the audience observes Jesse's father reading his son the tale of the slave Nicodemus from a small silver booklet. Jesse still carries the booklet with him and occasionally reads from it for inspiration. It is the same book that Jesse paternalistically reads aloud to Obobo, one of the members of the posse, when needing reassurance. Jesse eventually also passes on the book, as received from his father, to Obobo. It is this small silver booklet that literally saves Obobo's life when it stops a bullet from protruding his heart during a climatic shoot-out. Obobo continues the (oral) tradition by eventually gifting the storybook to a frightened young African American orphan that Jesse and the outlaws rescue and bring to safety in Freemanville. Consequentially, this young African American child becomes the narrator of the story as he follows the posse and looks on, he is their witness.[174] At the close of the movie, when Jesse has completed his quest, Woody Strode re-appears. Strode is however no longer facing the camera as he was previously. This time he appears to be talking to a young reporter who is documenting Strode's story, and is just wrapping it up. At this point, Strode takes the familiar booklet out of his jacket pocket and presents it to the reporter who reacts by saying: 'you're the kid aren't you?', to which Strode solemnly replies with a nod. He successfully passes the book on to yet another younger generation, just like Jesse's father

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[171] Diawara, 'Black American Cinema', 18.
[172] Wadenius, 'Oral History as Political Resistance', 3.
[173] Ibidem, 14.
[174] Ibidem, 13.

passed it on to his son, and Obobo and Jesse passed it on to Strode. The centrality and effectiveness of oral history in *Posse* powerfully challenges the Eurocentric tendency of valuing literacy above oral tradition.[175]

Urban Spaces, Hood-slang and Rap Music: Re-territorializing the West

Hoping to maximize the appeal to young African-American audiences, *Posse* employs a 'contemporary framing device' to link the time and space of the nineteenth-Century frontier to present-day Los Angeles, and early African-American filmmaking to the present.[176] By casting familiar African American cultural icons in supporting roles – like Woody Strode, Big Daddy Kane and Tone Loc – Van Peebles not only increased the marketing potential of the film, as the rappers' talents also appeared on the soundtrack, but their visual presence on screen created cultural cachet among young black audiences, maximizing box-office profits.[177] Rap makes several appearances in *Posse*, replacing the mellow guitar-sound traditionally home to the Western. Its presence destabilizes generic conventions and provides a specific contemporary mood.[178] Inserting traditional African American musical styles into the Western helps black Americans to reclaim their rightful (imagined) presence in the West. In other words rap and gospel music in *Posse* 're-territorializes' the mythic West for African American characters by placing them in a familiar and predominantly black milieu. Consequentially, *Posse* successfully breaks with the Hollywood tradition of 'de-territorializing' African Americans characters – by isolating them in a white-dominated milieu – turning their main function into a race-specific desire.[179] Additionally, Van Peebles pays homage to black cinematic history by referencing the influence of Blaxploitation on his work by casting actors from the seventies in his film, including his father, Melvin van Peebles in the role of Papa Jo, a citizen of Freemanville.[180] Lastly, *Posse* links the represented historical period with contemporary city-life by combining speech patterns from different historic times. Members of the outlaw posse use contemporary urban- and hood-slang: while venturing the frontier they use the word

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[175] Wadenius, 'Oral History as Political Resistance', 13.
[176] Massood, *Black American Cinema*, 183.
[177] Ibidem.
[178] Ibidem.
[179] Leyda, 'Black-Audience Westerns and the Politics of Cultural Identification in the 1930s', 50.
[180] Massood, *Black American Cinema*, 184.

'muthafucka' and the expression 'I'm looking out for my black ass!'. By these means *Posse* links a familiar space with the past enabling empathy of the viewer.

Assimilating Native Americans into the Black American Dream

Posse's Native American characters are also worth attention, especially considering the fact that Van Peebles treatment of indigenous peoples appears to be significantly more one-dimensional than one will encounter in *Buck and the Preacher*. This begs the question if the sympathetic treatment of African Americans and Native Americans is mutually exclusive. Even though native characters are fairly scarce in *Posse*, which leaves their frontier experiences largely unexplored, they do participate in the narrative in significant ways. From the posse's point of view black and red are 'brothers', as Mr. Time explains to Little J – the only white member of the posse – when they are forced to travel through Sioux territory: 'the red man got no problem with the black man, but as for the white man, he he, first you enslave the black man, exploit the yellow man, then you kill of the red man and steal his land.' Once Jesse and his outlaw posse reach Freemanville, which is a quasi-utopian Western paradise for non-whites, all the troubles that they encountered in the few past days evaporate into thin air. Freemanville has a black sheriff and the town boasts recognizable elements that are central to (imagined) black urban life: a barbershop, a saloon with black jazz singers, and female gospel singers on the streets. Public space in Freemanville is accessible for all non-whites. Upon his arrival, Jesse Lee is hailed as a hero – the son of the preacher who was the source of inspiration for constructing the town – while encountering many old friends. Soon Jesse is reunited with his past love interest, Lana, which is a girl of mixed African- and Native American ancestry. They make love passionately – despite the fact that she is engaged to the sheriff – but only after Jesse requests Lana's father for permission to court his daughter. Lana is the only Native American character than has any depth in *Posse* even though a considerable portion of the inhabitants of Freemanville are natives. African Americans and Native Americans live in harmony in Freemanville united by their common enemy, and desire to live in peace.

However, the idyllic peace is soon disturbed as the residents of Freemanville are faced with an impeding attack on their livelihood. Jesse discovers that the sheriff of a

nearby municipality, Cutterstown – who is the white vigilante that murdered his father – is interested in the land where their town is located as the expanding Railroad is expected to pass through Freemanville, giving the land great economic potential. The citizens of Freemanville are furious and desperately turn to Jesse Lee appealing for help, while expressing their will to unite in arms in order to defend their home. *Posse* creates an effective sense of African American Selfhood by Othering the evil whites, represented by the corrupt US military and the Klu Klux Klan. However, the only way that black Americans seem to be able to claim their presence in the American mythic West is not by assimilation but by segregation, in an isolated settlement. In turn, Van Peebles' Native Americans seem only able to be partake in the Western experience by merging with the black American Dream, as residents of Freemanville united by contempt for the same enemy. This notion finds expression in several instances. Strikingly, despite the fact that the Indian characters in *Posse* sport traditional attire, none of them speak their native tongue; instead they solely communicate with white and black in impeccable English. In an interesting scene early on in the film a multiracial group of men – white, Native American, and African American – gamble in an upstairs room on Bourbon Street, the notorious party street of New Orleans. When an Indian character in this scene catches a black player cheating he exclaims: 'you try that and I'll scalp your black ass'. Van Peebles seems to hold on to age-old stereotypes that long dominated Native American representation in the Western – the savage that is capable of primitive violence – while also giving these characters the ability to appropriate contemporary hood-slang, referencing black urban life. Van Peebles possibly intended to invert the Savage Reactionary stereotype here, but as he neglects to unpack this issue it only does the representation harm. Even though the treatment of Native American characters in *Posse* is certainly more revisionist than in Ford's *Sergeant Rutledge* – which indicated the limits of revisionism in the sixties – Van Peebles Indians are ultimately considerably more one-dimensional than Poitier's in *Buck and the Preacher*, where they are awarded a sense autonomy and power to negotiate. Poitier's representations of Native Americans prove that revisionism in a Western production can extend to include multiple ethnic minorities while maintaining their individual autonomy.

One last element of *Posse* that I personally considered to be particularly thought-provoking was Van Peebles' approach to the closing credits. Instead of following Hollywood conventions of star-billing, intended to draw audiences in as fast as possible, listing the acknowledgements of the most prominent contributors by importance – which would actually require Van Peebles to list his name first in multiple categories – the director choses to list his cast, at the start as well as at the end, alphabetically. Once again, Van Peebles undermines Hollywood's codes by breaking with tradition and choosing in favor of an egalitarian approach in his acknowledgements. A subtle, but effective counter-discourse.

Conclusion

The American Western has traditionally brought mythic and romantic reconstructions of the Old West to cinema screens. Because one of the primary functions of the Western is to mythologize a history of white conquest, questions of race are at the heart of the matter. As a white cultural product, intended primarily for a white audience, the genre has persistently and effectively perpetuated ideological notions of white racial supremacy since the early 1900s. Hollywood's hegemonic, totalizing discourse has notoriously marginalized people of color when memorializing the mythic Western frontier. The Western constructed a powerful sense of Self in its creation of the white, cowboy hero. Traditionally, the Indian Other has persistently existed in opposition to the heroic white cowboy, fulfilling the role as his binary opposite. Nevertheless, as Hollywood is not extraneous to the society in which it functions, its images of the Other have transformed over time, revising history to reflect contemporary hegemonic point of views. Society's hopes and anxieties exact influence on Hollywood's screen images. Consequentially, American audiences saw Hollywood's Indian transform from a Reactionary Savage in the '30s to a New Age Environmentalist in the '90s as the industry adopted a more revisionist approach to the American past.

However, the Indian Other was not the only minority whose presence has systematically been erased or pushed to the savage borders of the mythic frontier landscape. Despite its historical erroneousness, African American characters have largely been excluded from the Western frontier experience. Hollywood's demeaning and stereotypical portrayal of black Americans has known a long and elaborate history. But just as was the case with the Indian character, in time the motion picture industry was pressured into rethinking its discriminatory stance towards (domestic) questions of race, also concerning African Americans. As Washington sent its interracial military forces abroad to fight in a racially charged war against fascism, and subsequently redirected these efforts in South-East Asia during the Cold War, Hollywood could no longer afford to sustain its practice of exclusively casting African Americans in racially submissive and demeaning

roles. With the civil rights movement on the rise in the United States the Western became a vehicle for both white and black producers to re-write history.

Reflecting contemporary sentiments John Ford's revisionist Western *Sergeant Rutledge* set out to restore the legacy of Buffalo Soldiers in the American military by promoting assimilation as a means to solve America's racial tensions. Despite his revisionism Ford's African American characters lacked emotional depth, agency and the capacity to be sexually intimate; a common Hollywood practice that infuriated black audiences. As young black Americans increasingly lost faith in the effectiveness of non-violent civil rights efforts, the protests became more violent under the lead of black nationalists. They also directed their frustration towards Hollywood and demanded powerful black heroes to which young African Americans could relate. Hollywood responded by commissioning Blaxploitation films, which in turn led to the production of several Black Westerns. Sidney Poitier's *Buck and the Preacher* effectively appropriated the Western genre by inverting stereotypes and empowering his black characters. Not only did his Western offer young black audiences a black cowboy hero, but it also extended its revisionism towards Native Americans. *Buck and the Preacher* empowered black Americans by rewriting the history of the Western frontier, effectively putting color back in the Western. Mario van Peebles likewise set out to recuperate the legacy of African Americans in the Old West in *Posse*. By utilizing oral history and transplanting other distinctly African American traditions onto the frontier *Posse* 're-territorializes' the West and challenges Hollywood's hegemonic narrative of white supremacy. The black characters become the Self that audiences are likely to relate to rather than their white counterparts. Moreover, Native Americans and African Americans are united in battle by a common enemy, just as their black brothers, effectively breaking with the tradition of confinement as the Indian Other.

Despite Hollywood's more recent attempts to empower African Americans by adapting the Western, like Tarantino's *Django Unchained*, it is ultimately the black-produced Westerns by Poitier and Van Peebles that more successfully appropriate the genre and empower African Americans by laying emphasis on community values and distinctly African American traditions. Therefore it is safe to say that the Western has

proved to be an effective tool for re-reading the American past, allowing African Americans to reclaim their position on the mythic frontier, where they rightfully belong.

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