

STARING DOWN THE BARREL: PORTRAYALS OF BLACK HEROES IN THE  
WESTERNS OF THE 1970s AND TODAY

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Thesis Director: Dr. Keith Green

The scope and topic of my thesis project is to investigate the figure of the black western hero, primarily in films from the 1970s. I analyze Sydney Poitier's *Buck and the Preacher* (1972), Martin Goldman's *The Legend of Nigger Charley* (1972), and Mel Brooks's *Blazing Saddles* (1974). My argument rests in the consideration of filmmakers who use western tropes and cultural cues to provide an alternate understanding of American social and racial realities by incorporating blackness into this tradition. On a grander scale my thesis topic forces re-evaluations of the usual questions of mimesis, genre reproduction, and authorship that plague film study. To ground my study in theories of visual representation, I use Laura Mulvey's concept of visual pleasure and gazing in film and Homi K. Bhabha's theory of colonial mimicry. My thesis project argues that studying the black western protagonist brings forth questions of American artistic, economic, and socio-political realities. I also look at a recent manifestation of this phenomenon, Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012), to grasp what about these realities has changed and what has remained constant.

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1: Charley and company experience the objectifying gaze of the white community upon arrival in *The Legend of Nigger Charley* (pg 19).

Fig. 2: Django's head in a noose has several implications as he experiences a familiar, aggressive gaze upon arrival to Daughtrey, Texas in *Django Unchained* (pg 42).

Jeff Kanew's 1972 documentary *Black Rodeo* follows the story of the first all-black rodeo to be held in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. The film is rife with themes of historical revelation, sociocultural uplift, and the important promise of black youth. It is set up as a series of "man-on-the-street" interviews of participants and spectators alike, all providing insight on the cultural importance of the event and the technical prowess of its spectacle. The film also makes use of two prominent black celebrity voices: Woody Strode, a black actor who has starred in many of John Ford's westerns and who brought a black western presence into the mainstream with his portrayal of the title character in Ford's *Sergeant Rutledge* (1960), and Muhammad Ali, the renowned boxer and black cultural icon who attended the event due more to his importance in the black community than any connection with western iconography. His appearance underscores the novelty of the event and brings to attention the concern of cultural assimilation that it raises. Many times interviewees comment on their prior knowledge of black pioneers and the historical truth that needs to be told, or their delighted surprise that such a thing as a black cowboy existed and still exists. Conflating these two reactions is the refrain in the film's theme song sung by Sammy Turner and the tagline appearing on its posters, "Nobody ever told you there were black cowboys."

The transfer of these ideas from the documentary to fictional films is fairly even, from the attitude of historical fidelity to the concern for black youth. Motivated by the spectacle and surprise created by black western figures, this study starts by examining black western male heroes in films released during the same year as *Black Rodeo*: Sidney Poitier's directorial debut *Buck and the Preacher*, and Martin Goldman's blaxploitation western *The Legend of Nigger Charley*. In looking at western films from the 1970s that

feature black heroes as the protagonist, a litany of issues is revealed regarding representation, racial politics, the cultural power of genre, the practice of American historical narratives, and the complications of artistic reproduction. What happens when character and audience alike are faced with “staring down the barrel”? That is, when the danger and the challenge of the western’s gaze is met, when the blackness within this space of violence is discovered, what then do the black western hero and his spectators learn? Ultimately, the black interaction with what is largely held to be a white cultural framework provides an American narrative of agency, subversion, identity formation, and confusion. What is more, the faithful reproduction of this era of film history in Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained* (2012) implies that issues of racial inclusion are still on the American psyche, that a constant attitude across the western genre is that the key to true social progression is a direct engagement, respect, and understanding of the past, or a complex and contradictory meshing of both.

A few theoretical frameworks are central to my readings of these films. First is Laura Mulvey’s dissection of the act of looking or “the gaze” in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In it, she traces the psychoanalytic implications of viewing films and the outright oppressive results this has had on women via objectification and male egotism. She starts by addressing the “preexisting patterns of fascination” on both individual and cultural levels that are inherent to the cinematic experience (Mulvey 483). The impetus for Mulvey’s study is that there is a distinct dichotomy between gazing as pleasurable form or act and gazing as threatening in content. In other words, films can be nice (pleasurable) to look at but the images they present can be harmful in terms of their gender politics. Following Mulvey’s lead, I argue that fascination marks each of these

films, in that the presence of a black western hero is shocking or remarkable in some way. At the same time, both the act and the content of the gaze in these films are directly harmful, indirectly oppressive, or both. These heroes also fulfill Mulvey's call for an alternative cinema that "challenges the basic assumptions of the mainstream film," "highlight[s] the ways in which its formal preoccupations reflect the psychological obsessions of the society that produced it," and reacts "against these obsessions and assumptions" (484). In other words, they meet the gaze of the western with authority. The power here comes from the ability to critique or offer an alternative to a narrative while partially adhering to it.

Mulvey argues that filmic masculinity is both a form of oppression and agency. The central tension that creates this masculine image is that between the objectifying libido and the introspective ego. Libido and ego are certainly part of the visual codes of the western genre, with libido seemingly folded into ego: an imitable and image-forming portrayal of American masculinity is presented, one that requires virility and sexual authority. These images are popularly and historically held to be white, as *Black Rodeo* shows with its opening montage of white western film stars, but the blackening of this character provides a challenge to this white patriarchy. There is a certain irony to mapping Mulvey's theories onto any western, because despite the racial challenge there is still a distinct masculinity at play. The best compromise is to argue that Mulvey posits oppression as somewhat of an emasculating power, so that the masculinity that these characters claim is not so much an oppression of femininity as it is a means of agency. Mulvey's model is one of disrupting or "destroying" the phallogentric order of beauty and pleasure to "make way for a total negation of the ease and plenitude of the narrative

fiction film...leaving the past behind without rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, or daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire” (485). The trajectory of the black western hero of the 1970s and his modern day reincarnation responds to this model in a complicated manner. How can a film move beyond the past, oppressive forms, and pleasurable expectations all while mimicking or recreating them? The answer lies in a version of mimicry that does not appease authority, but dissolves it.

Homi K. Bhabha argues that mimicry represents “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (Bhabha 235). Genre reproduction is its own form of mimicry; not only is the act of cinema mimetic to a degree, and the codifying of genres buttressed by repeated and repeatable acts or images, but the western specifically is often dedicated to mimicking a specific historical moment. Many notable western films (especially those of Sam Peckinpah and Sergio Leone and to a lesser extent John Ford) allow for this slippage by noting the contradictions in the social order that western narratives so often advertise. Thus, the barring from social integration for western heroes like the title character in George Stevens’s *Shane* (1953) and Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) in Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956), and the moral ambiguity of protagonists like the bandits in *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and Blondie (Clint Eastwood) of *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1967). Westerns with black heroes also produce this ambivalence and difference, but do so beyond the “self-conscious and ironic” attitude known to some Hollywood films because

of the racialized subject matter of both image and theme (Mulvey 484). Indeed these films reproduce some of the same conventions that are laid out by other western critics, such as the “shooting lesson” and the importance of the hero’s arrival. They also engage in their own unique acts of historical mimicry, as they attempt to recreate or expose the historical reality of a black presence in the West. This presence is a fact, as suggested in books like *African Americans on the Western Frontier* and laid out in a string of historical anecdotes from Woody Strode in *Black Rodeo*. These films then operate in the same acts of mimicry as other westerns, but with the added pressure of a racialized environment. In doing so, they are “*almost the same*” as other western characters, “*but not quite.*” Characters like Buck and Charlie react to prior images of western heroes, but also shape their own.

Surprisingly, the black western hero has not seen much analysis. Michael K. Johnson focuses on black artists working with the frontier narrative in literature and film. His book, *Black Masculinity and the Frontier Myth in American Literature*, defines stories of black men participating in narratives of exploration and establishment in the American frontier as a literary tradition that displays contradictory vacillations between participation in white cultural visions of masculinity and power and the presentation of alternatives to these visions. He also finds precedent for the same formulae and traditions in stories that are not specific to the American West, like William Gardener Smith’s *The Stone Face* and John A. Williams’s *The Man Who Cried I Am*. His argument that “black writers do not simply imitate dominant cultural forms but adapt and revise those forms” is crucial to my readings (Johnson 19).



I will also be drawing from some important critics in the field of western genre analysis to get a sense of some of the precise codes being used or purposefully misused in westerns featuring black heroes. Thomas Schatz, an auteur-structuralist who studies the binary systems inherent to all American film genres, argues that the western's formula lies in a structure that works "to reestablish social order" (Stam 127). Part of the project of this paper is to observe how these films redefine that social order in terms that are more egalitarian and inclusive. The essential outlook of any auteur-structuralist is that they allow for the foundational auteurist argument that the primary force behind a film's *mise-en-scene* is its director, but they add the caveat that these auteurs are subject to or influenced by very specific and engrained cultural codes and systems. The western became a favorite source of study for these scholars, as evidenced by Jim Kitses's *Horizons West*, Will Wright's *Sixguns and Society*, and John G. Cawelti's *The Six-Gun Mystique*, most likely because of how codified it can seem and the sheer volume of works from which to draw observations on these codes<sup>1</sup>

John Saunders's analysis of the hero's arrival and the shooting lesson can be mapped onto these films to show that part of the concern of a black presence in the western is the learning and establishment of a new American literacy. However, the concept of learning a new tradition in the face of racial specificity is troubling given the frequent invisibility of another racial presence in the West with its own traditions. The consideration of portrayals of Native Americans in western films is important, but has garnered considerable attention of late. Critics like Saunders, Jane Tompkins, Edward Buscombe, and JoEllen Shively have done some provocative work on the subject<sup>2</sup>. Shively's piece is a sort of hybrid between sociological study and spectator response

interrogating how contemporary Indians watch western films, with results that show an interesting pattern of identification more with the white heroes than the Native American villains. This recognition of body of work on American Indians in westerns does not preclude their inclusion in my project. As an alternative, I explore the moments when these films offer a side-by-side analysis of representational issues.

Because appropriate attention has been given to the issue of a Native American presence in the general body of westerns, I would like to ultimately shift attention to the black presence. Julia Leyda starts her “Black Audience Westerns and the Politics of Cultural Identification in the 1930s” with a similar approach to Shively by examining the effect that Herb Jeffries, the first black “singing cowboy” in film, had on young black male audience members. She writes that in the 1994 documentary *Midnight Ramble*, Jeffries describes his inspiration for the character he created as being a result of a crystallizing moment in his career:

Jeffries saw a young African American boy crying in frustration. The boy explained that he wanted to play [white western star] Tom Mix but that his white playmates insisted that he could not because Mix was white and there were no black cowboy stars. As a result of that encounter, Jeffries promoted the idea of black cowboy movies and subsequently became the first African American singing cowboy in the movies. (Leyda 46)

The implications of this encounter speak volumes to the idea that the western genre is an engrained psychological narrative on American masculinity and identity-formation. It also addresses the sense of not belonging and pushing against a current of history that arises from portrayals of the black western hero. My project extends these analyses by observing how this striking against obstacles and forging an image is inherent to the frontier narrative, which implies that the African-American experience finds mirrors in that of the western pioneer.

The interrogation of the black western hero in the 1970s that comprises this project is made up of analyses of four films: Sydney Poitier's *Buck and the Preacher*, Martin Goldman's *The Legend of Nigger Charlie*, Mel Brooks's *Blazing Saddles* (1974), and Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*. Released in the 1970s or after, each of these films operates under the shadow of the blaxploitation movement. This strand of film production in the 1970s is the result of a few influences, namely the radical exploitation films of the 1960s and 70s that tested the boundaries of censorship and audience approval, and the Black Arts movement of the 70s that sought a more positive and independent black image in artistic production. While the Black Arts movement primarily meant encouraging more black artists and artistic industry leaders, this does not mean that blaxploitation films and white filmmakers are mutually exclusive. In fact, the majority of the films I am examining are directed by white men. Of course, this distinction cannot be ignored and becomes especially relevant in considering the gaze. Perhaps it is just the filmmakers who find a black western hero so remarkable, not the genre or surrounding characters. But another of Johnson's writings, "Cowboys, Cooks, and Comics: African American Characters in Westerns of the 1930s," argues that even the aforementioned black-produced, black audience westerns in the still-nascent stages of film embodied stereotypical characterizations of black characters as reductive and as damaging as those made by whites. The general point to be drawn from this is that often the gaze from within can be as harmful as the gaze from without. However, the characters that these directors of the 1970s black westerns create have the agency to revise the history written by black and white filmmakers alike of black protagonists in the western genre. Though Poitier's film contains thematic and formal parallels to the others,

the films with white directors seem to spend more time on the gaze, the burlesque, and the tension of a black man in the western genre. It also comes first chronologically, pointing perhaps to a sense that the assumption of belonging must be established before any productive meditations on oppression can be staged.

Two films that exceptionally establish the black hero in the western genre during the blaxploitation era are Sidney Poitier's *Buck and the Preacher* and Martin Goldman's *The Legend of Nigger Charley*. Poitier's film stands as a landmark in the field of black western heroes because it is the first high budget, big-name western with an all-black cast of protagonists. The co-production of this film with a star and director like Sidney Poitier (Buck) by co-star Harry Belafonte's (Reverend Willis Oaks Rutherford) Belafonte Enterprises at a time of black empowerment in cinema provides a beacon for subsequent westerns in the Black Arts movement. Consequently, *Buck and the Preacher* is stripped somewhat of the exploitative features in blaxploitation cinema, due most likely to the participation of a bigger name like Columbia Pictures in the production of the film. However, it is the mere presence of a black western hero in a Hollywood film which makes this an indispensable source. *The Legend of Nigger Charley*, a film with a noticeably lower budget, follows not too long after. Though the quality of the film may cause one to argue that the phenomenon of black westerns in the 1970s quickly dissipates after *Buck*, the establishment of a *Nigger Charley* trilogy and the prolific career of football-player-turned-actor Fred Williamson (Charley) that follows would beg to differ. In looking at these films, the remarkable nature of a black man in the role of western hero becomes a common trope. That is, a few characters in *Buck* and especially the protagonists in *Charley* garner considerable attention from surrounding characters in a

way that accentuates the sense that they do not belong. This disbelief or refusal of acceptance could potentially prove corrosive as a re-inscription of difference, therefore a barrier to tolerance. Instead, it seems to be converted into motivation for Buck and Charley as they forge their presence in narrative and genre. After all, the establishment of presence on an uncharted territory is one of the true acts of western mythology. Viewed in this way, the black western hero is not compromising legitimacy due to mimicry but fulfilling his own Manifest Destiny. These films are not just about the re-forming of a historical narrative, they also reflect hyper-allusive tendencies in reflecting contemporaneous social issues. Blaxploitation films often attempt to draw the attention of a black audience to problems affecting their communities, providing warnings against social ills like drug use or organized crime. *Buck* and *Charley* are no exception, as they put occasional emphasis on issues surrounding black youth and potential. If blaxploitation films are dedicated to challenging conceptions of the American experience, then the blaxploitation western is an admission that not only is the genre a deeply embedded practice of American culture, but black artists and audiences want their own interaction with this practice.

Though *Buck* and *Charley* are both invested in the accentuation of difference, they offer variations on its execution. The contrast can be felt from the opening credit sequences. Robert McRuer says of opening credits that they “often provide filmmakers with a space in which to present ‘background information’ efficiently” (90). If this is true, then the credits for *Buck* and *Charley* set up both thematic and formal concerns prevalent in their respective films. *Buck and the Preacher* opens with a familiar visual sense of the Old West: sepia-toned images on a weathered surface. Instead of a “black-

and-white” sense of antiquity, the viewer is presented with varying shades of brown. This color scheme signals the predominant and endorsed skin-tones of the film. It also foreshadows the film’s muted race relations, and the variance of the same color implies more of a flattening of racial representation than would a title sequence with stark contrasts in color schemes. The music provides an aural support for this notion and cues for the generic environment of the film. Familiar mouth harps and harmonicas reminiscent of a frontier setting are backed by drum beats more closely associated with soul music. Again the title sequence provides a background of combination or integration, not segregation. The audience is also presented with a title crawl providing historical background. The gist is that the film is set in post-Civil War America, when it was unsafe for black Americans to remain in the “land of bondage” and they instead sought “new frontiers where they could be free at last” (*Buck*). The conflation of Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” is a case of the allusion to contemporary American issues mentioned above. Where this epigraph does its real work is in its dedication “to those men, women and children who lie in graves as unmarked as their place in history.” The film’s stated *raison d’être* indicates a sense of historical recovery and revelation that prevails over many films from this era. This recalls the tagline to *Black Rodeo*, “No one ever told you there were black cowboys.” It would seem that at this stage in the development of black western heroes, the revelation of certain truths is itself a powerful act. Therefore, the opening credits of *Buck and the Preacher* ask for acceptance into an American cultural canon and social structure.

If *Buck*’s opening credits ask for acceptance, then those of *The Legend of Nigger Charley* demand it. From the onset, the subversive advantage of a lower budget can be

seen and felt in the film. The title sequence starkly depicts the production information and the film's title as white letters on a black background. If the color scheme was reversed it would assume a familiar trope, one of black subjects struggling to stand out in a white man's genre. Instead, it signals a concept important to the film: that black men have a right to be in the west, and that from here on out whiteness will only be remarkable in its interactions with blackness. There is an important production detail in the difference between these titles and the film's history; in broadcast and video release versions of the film, the title appears as *The Legend of Black Charley*. With the removal of the word "nigger," it is assumed that the film would have a better chance of picking up syndication deals. This is a complex issue, because just as the posterity of the film is important to studies of African-American culture and cinema, so is the use of the word "nigger" to the film. It is important to identity and character formation, and to the subversive potential of the film's production.

The opening of the film cuts from these title cards to a framing sequence without much dialogue that details what the audience assumes to be Charley's origins. Contrary to audience expectations of setting and subject matter established by trailers and posters, the first visuals are of an African tribal war that results in a woman being stripped of her infant child and that child being given to a slave ship. The screen then dissolves from the infant's face to the face of the film's title character as he works at his blacksmithing craft. Here, the work seems fulfilling as a virile, shirtless man sweats and works away to a song about fulfillment and virility. Adhering to McRuer's maxim, this sequence sets up labor as a thematic background important to the world of the film. There is a sense of agency, ability, and the forging of an identity in this montage alone. Charley's status as a

blacksmith is itself a loaded role, given that a rudimentary etymology of the term is that of a person who creates things out of blackness. The problem with this reading is that Charley has trouble with agency for the better part of the film's first act. For one, he is a slave. The implication is that western literacy gives him the means to lift himself from this oppression, but the film takes some time and vacillation before getting to this point. In fact, the opening of the film is a string of sentimental tropes reminiscent of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that further inscribe attitudes of contentment and passivity onto its black subjects. The film opens with the benevolent plantation owner Hill Carter (Alan Gifford) in failing health and the fear of the slaves on the plantation that when he dies, they will all be sold and made to leave the place they have come to call home. Charley's mother Theo (Gertrude Jeannette) actually chides Carter for offering her freedom in his passing, and asks him to take her son instead. *The Legend of Nigger Charley's* title sequence is slightly at odds with the racial politics that immediately follow, but it aptly gives off the general sense that black empowerment in the west is going to take hard work.

*The Legend of Nigger Charley* shows that learning the narrative of the western is not an easy process for black citizens. This process is typified in a few ways in the film, and handled by the film's core group of Charley, Toby (D'Urville Martin), and Joshua (Don Pedro Colley) with behaviors ranging from humorous self-deprecation to erratic distress. For one, it does not seem that Charley knows how to handle the masculinity suddenly thrust upon him in becoming a western hero. He vacillates between a virility that involves hard work and a confident way with women and a naïve sentimentality that sees him adhering to the paternal model of slavery and trusting that he would never be sold by his master no matter the circumstances. Charley is eventually able to recognize



that it is not the conditions of slavery but the slavery itself that must be challenged. He kills his potential owner Houston (John Ryan), essentially the Simon Legree character of the film, by picking him up and slamming him against the wall so many times that he stakes a claim of power and agency in a visceral, surely crowd-pleasing scene. However, he immediately follows up this act by crying in the arms of Toby as they run away, pleading “Hold me!” and “I want to go back home” (*Charley*). On one hand, this sets up Charley as a truly human and emotional being, not a mindless killing machine as some black stereotypes at the time of both the film’s setting and its release may purport. Racial issues aside, it holds potential as a clever narrative trick that ensures that the audience sympathizes with Charley. On the other hand, it discredits Charley’s place in the tradition of the western genre. The classic western hero is a “man of action,” one whose decisions are made with conviction and whose decisions often drive the plot. This notion of characterization as the space for plot progression in the western is not limited to the hero, as John Saunders remarks generally that “the characters in the western are inseparable from their actions” (Saunders 10). Even in the Revisionist Western Era, the period of westerns in the 60s and 70s that *Charley* falls into, the protagonist commits to his decisions with assurance despite the atmosphere of moral ambiguity in which he acts. Charley’s display of such crushing regret following his act of powerful vengeance is a weakening of the myth of self-assured masculinity so crucial to the western hero. His position is not entirely compromised however, as he controls his western world and claims his particular western identity by the end of the film. Instead, this emotional breakdown seems to be part of the pain in creating a blaxploitation western persona. He cries not because he is truly remorseful or sorrowful, but because he has been forced to

abruptly face a genre that will ask him to do this many more times. It could also be born of a place of illiteracy in the western genre, a condition of slavery that he must overcome by the end of the film. This illiteracy is in full display during the “shooting lesson” scene featured shortly after Charley’s escape.

In Saunders’s recognition of genre archetypes through his reading of *Shane*, he touches on the “shooting lesson” as a scene critical to the construction of western films (23-24). Likewise, the brief shooting lesson in *Charley* reveals the film’s complexly empowering interaction with the genre. First, it exists as a moment of comedic relief. Second, it displays the learning process that comes with claiming western heroism. Charley and company have just escaped their plantation, but now that he has come down off of his hysteria, they must face the reality of being pursued by bounty hunter Niles Fowler (Keith Prentice). Fowler’s motives are rather unclear, as it is not established whether his pursuit of Charley is a contract from the plantation or if he is acting purely out of revenge for the death of Houston. This obscurity seems less born out of any specific thematic purpose and more-so a result of scriptwriting in a low-budget exploitation film. Just before the trio escapes the pursuit of Fowler, Joshua takes guns and horses as if to signal an urgent need for the trappings of the western in order to survive. Charley and his companions take a moment to shoot at a rock they have set up to test their skill with the pistols they stole from the plantation. If the blaxploitation western were to be figured as an alternate slave narrative, then gunplay stands as the new literacy. Instead of learning how to read and write, the three men learn to shoot as a means of empowerment. However, this process does not go smoothly, hence the comedic nature of the scene. For one, Toby is chided for closing his eyes in his attempt at practicing. This

gag gets carried out later in the film; when Toby initially closes his eyes in facing down an opponent during the group's first big shoot-out, narrowly dodges a shotgun blast, and then opens his eyes to gun down his attacker. That most hallowed of western acts, firing a revolver, is figured in this scene as a revelation. Toby's initial refusal to open his eyes can be read as a reluctance to commit to the language of the western, or reverence and awe at the empowerment it enables. If at first he is ambivalent in his mimicry as Bhabha might suggest, he eventually accepts his own gaze and becomes witness to his actions. He and his fellows learn the language and the majority of them are better for it by the end of the film. Of course, the vehicle for this translation is Charley's interaction with the shooting lesson; as the hero, he represents the action and outcome of the film's themes and plot. He fails initially to hit his target, but eventually proves to be the most competent of the bunch. Western literacy is not an easy process, but it is an attainable goal. The shooting lesson scene leads to the group's riding into town, claiming a bar in which to defend themselves (accompanied by a "barbaric yawp" from Charley, true American agency at its best), besting their bounty hunting opponents, and meeting a mysterious young gunslinger in the process. All signs in these subsequent scenes point to promising futures offered by the western. The film is filled with scenes that contain moods and actions like those in the shooting lesson: laughter, sociable chiding, development of competency, a general sense of camaraderie. Despite the prevalent violence and its grave consequences by the end of the film, these characters meet the challenge of learning the western with a sense of excitement and enjoyment.

Though this same lighthearted tone and enjoyment in the western prevails over *Buck and the Preacher*, there is an important detail missing. The audience is not

presented with the pains and pleasures of developing literacy in the western. Instead, Buck is a seasoned expert in the ways of the open range, a drifter providing assistance to the disadvantaged à la Shane (Alan Ladd) in *Shane* or Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers*. This comparison to those western heroes of the 1950s, otherwise known as the western's Golden Age, is somewhat anachronistic given contemporaneous developments to the western hero in the 1960s and 70s. Buck is noble, helpful, and just to those in the wagon train he protects, but for a price. He also has fractures in his morality, like when he steals the horse and food of Rutherford in the midst of his flight from the film's primary antagonistic group of "night riders." The film implies that Buck is not only well-versed in the ways of surviving the west, but that he is weathered, even worn out. When his wife Ruth (Ruby Dee) sees him in a pensive state and surmises that he is "troubled 'bout all that killing," he responds, "No, I've killed men before. I just don't know which way to turn no more. I think they beat me. Couldn't the drivers do it in slavery days nor the rebels in the war, but now I think they beat me." He has lived an array of American narratives, but the viewer is not to forget that the first of those was slavery. The meta-commentary on a black man's place in the western genre inherent to this scene implies that someone like Charley has the opportunity to continue his proficiency in the west and profit from it. Indeed by the end of his trilogy Charley becomes *Boss Nigger* (1975), hinting towards a superior western image. The thing that complicates *Buck* as the tale of a black western hero who has already made it to a level of expertise in the genre is the fact that Poitier's film comes before *Charley*. Instead of watching the rise and development, the viewer is immediately presented with the end result. There are a few responses to this issue. For one, a viewing audience would already have been familiar

with a name like Sidney Poitier and would expect nothing less than the seasoned expert with which they are presented. The narrative of overcoming obstacles is still present as customary moments in an adventurous plot which enhance the narrative of black cultural prowess, but the stakes are not as high in this film as they are in *Charley*. Seeing Poitier fulfill his western duties with such aplomb and acuity is the most effective way of establishing a sense of righteous belonging for a black presence in the genre. This touches on the other issue informing Buck's position as an expert in the western, which is that he lends legitimacy to the idea of a black western hero for all audiences. In inserting a black character into an otherwise traditional western plot, a standard has been established. After this, artists can experiment with the idea by creating a film like the slave narrative/exploitation/origin story that is *The Legend of Nigger Charley*.

These two films serve in conjunction to re-establish black interaction with the western genre, and the tension between black and white is felt in no greater symbolic gesture than the gaze. The gaze is represented in both the ways that characters visually interact with each other and the implicit or explicit symbols, images, and representations that the filmmakers want the viewer to notice. This gaze, attached to Saunders's analysis of the western hero's arrival, creates some of the more powerful and revelatory moments across these films. Saunders argues that "the duration of the action coincides with the hero's presence, and so it begins with his arrival" (14). It is a requirement for the arrival of the western hero to be remarkable, and the arrival of Charley and his compatriots to a town during their escape from Fowler is no exception. The difference between this scene and something like the arrival of Shane that Saunders uses as a stepping stone is the degree to which race is objectified or exaggerated. Upon their entrance, the three black

men are met with faces of confusion, disgust, or disbelief (see Fig. 1). When Toby learns that Charley wants to stop he remarks, “You wanna stop in this town? You crazy! Look how them people lookin’ at us.” No line in the film provides a better summary of its self-awareness and obsession with gazing than this. The stares that they meet reveal two levels of attention. First is the social reality of the treatment of black citizens in white communities. Second is the arrival of the black protagonist into the western community. Segregation is felt clearly in Charley, Toby, and Joshua’s interactions with the townspeople, as they are initially denied access to both the stables for their horses and a drink at the bar. These two instances of segregation expose the practice on levels of both a culture of social ignorance and of more organized, established institutions. When the group tries to have their horses stabled, they are denied access by the stable master. His explanation is simply that they cannot keep their horses there because they are black. Charley refuses this denial, grabbing the stable master’s hand, thrusting a wad of bills into the man’s hand, and stating, “But our money’s white.” This action reveals the hypocrisy of a segregated world in a rather Marxist way, exposing the power that capitalism has in compromising morals or values regardless of how skewed they may be. It also buttresses the idea that the black western hero is subject to concerns of capital influence, and that this influence is particularly sensitive for a black hero due to the monetary motivations in institutionalizing slavery. This scene marks a crucial touchstone in the development of Charley into a hyper-masculine, western protagonist. Upon the stable master’s befuddled acceptance of Charley’s money, Charley gives a command twice for him to take care of the horse, pointing his finger and stating, “Now I mean what I say, you rub him down real good.” Charley is on his way to learning the code of western

masculinity in this display of sexualized dominance. This display does not go unnoticed by a mysterious young gunslinger, who watches from the hay loft and tries immediately after to prove his worth to Charley by showing him his gun and ensuring Charley that he knows how to use it. Saunders has pointed out the phallic symbolism inherent to a cowboy's obsession with his gun, and the young man's desire to be included into Charley's group implies the desire to show and prove sexual prowess in the interest of inheriting a sexual mantle<sup>3</sup>. Charley's sexual bravado has inspired the young man to flaunt the development of his masculinity, and the audience assumes that he is next in a line of super-masculine black western heroes. The stable scene highlights issues of actual capital regarding the black western hero and segregation, and is followed by a scene in the bar that emphasizes the concerns of cultural capital and a general social attitude in segregation. Though the bartender purposefully ignores Charley's beer order, Charley's rage does not come out until a peripheral bar patron asks, "Don't you know your place nigger?" Charley responds by calmly sauntering towards the offender and manhandling him, both done in a rather John-Wayne-like fashion. He then growls for everyone to leave, and they do. The takeover of the saloon means that more cultural signifiers of the western genre, like the gun and horse, are being claimed by Charley and company. Charley does know his place, and it is here in the west just like every other American's. The irony here is that the removal of the gaze also means the removal of witnesses to Charley's assimilation, and the shoot-out that takes place in the saloon is seen only by the audience and those characters involved.

In line with the lack of spectatorship of racial issues, in *Buck and the Preacher* instances of gazing and attention to representation are more implicit and symbolic than

they are in *The Legend of Nigger Charley*. Perhaps the most explicit example is in the introduction of Buck to Reverend Rutherford. While on the run from the group he continuously defies throughout the film, Buck comes across a campsite with a fire, food, horse, and some other supplies. Buck intends to swap out his horse with the camper's in order to ensure anonymity, the implication being that horses are so indicative of identity in the west that one must focus on their horse as much as their own physical being. This moment potentially serves as a brief staging of racial representation issues in the film, and indeed it becomes important moments later when the preacher is discovered with Buck's horse by Buck's pursuers, but the importance of Buck's actions is overshadowed by Rutherford's nude disruption. Rutherford's ability to respond is compromised by the fact that he is bathing and is kept naked for the majority of the scene. His flesh becomes readable text on both a formal and thematic level. The formal concern is mostly in considering issues of production due to the fact that most audiences were probably unused to seeing black bodies in such a drastic state of undress. His nudity is twofold in its defiance, challenging both cultural norms of clothing and the ways in which white or even mainstream audiences interact with and experience blackness. On the verge of reducing the human body to being interchangeable with a horse's, the film instead reminds its viewers of that most shareable of bodily experiences: nudity. Thematically, it sexualizes the narrative in much the same way that Charley's stable scene is sexualized, by giving the male protagonist the opportunity of using sexually loaded moments to their dominant advantage. Buck remains voyeur to Rutherford throughout the scene, staring at him even as he takes a bite from the rabbit on the preacher's spit. Rutherford re-robos, but as Buck leaves he demands that the preacher remove his clothes again. Logistically,



this gives Buck a few extra seconds to get away. It also gives Buck a sexually charged power that asserts his masculinity. Ruth's attitude towards western living revealed later in the film furthers the potential for homoeroticism, given her verbal refusal to become part of the western narrative and her desire to raise a family in Canada instead. However, if the potential of a homoerotic tension between Buck and Rutherford is supported by Ruth's rejection of the western then this tension dissolves by the end of the film. Ruth becomes fully invested in Buck's western life, aiding his and Rutherford's bank robbery and helping to guard the wagon train that Buck is sworn to protect from the white raiders in the film's climax. The western demands that the plot take preference over character attributes, even sexuality, and at the end the viewer is left with the ambiguous visual of Buck, Ruth, and Rutherford riding together, with Ruth at the front and between the two men.

While the issues of racial tension in *Buck* are treated symbolically, the examination of race relations in *Charley* is much more overt. In *Buck*, there is a subtle assumption that the subversive or culturally enriching power of the black western hero sits chiefly in visuals or imagery. As the plot develops, Buck becomes more and more committed to the wagon train he protects on the grounds of moral, not contractual obligation. After a particularly brutal and destructive raid by the white bounty hunters, a member of the train announces that the group will continue on their path even if it means that they "dies in the snow." Buck assures him, however, that he "ain't gonna die in the snow." Buck defies and challenges the destructive power of whiteness. He refuses to let this power deter the re-writing of a western narrative, one that rightly and accurately includes black voices and lives. The unfortunate side effect in this symbolic association

is that the link between the blizzard and the white antagonists implies that a white refusal to accept the freeing of slaves is a natural occurrence. The power of this is successfully deflated not too long after, when Buck and Rutherford ride through a herd of white sheep. The visual is shot from a high angle, implying that an omniscient presence is involved in this act of trivializing white power. The sheep make way for the two men as they head home. This scene takes place after Buck and Rutherford ride into a town and cut down some of the white villains in a chaotic shoot-out, implying that their aggressive capabilities bring about a white docility.

Segregation is not the only social reality to which these films allude, as another occurrence both films give attention to is the killing of black male youths. In *The Legend of Nigger Charley*, the teenage boy that is so eager to become part of Charley's group is eventually shot down in the final gun battle with the racist Reverend (Joe Santos) and his henchmen. His death is given considerable attention, as Charley lays the boy's head to rest, grabs the boy's gun, and promptly uses it to kill the Reverend. He pushes Dewey Lyons (Doug Rowe), the white farmer whose ranch is the scene of this shootout, out of the way in the process of exacting his revenge. It is evident that this is an act of black agency, and that vengeance for the killing of black youths is the responsibility of black heroes. The image of the bullet-ridden teenager may have triggered recognition for a black audience of the unrest and violence in their communities. Urban communities were more often than not the target audience for blaxploitation films, evidenced by the settings of some of the more popular landmarks in the movement like *Shaft* (1971), *Super Fly* (1972), and *Dolemite* (1975). Seeing a black youth cut down by gun violence in a setting completely dissociated from a US city in the

1970s lends universality to the event, one that ideally inspires action for change.

Charley's solution suggests that that action should be violent, given that he avenges the boy without much consequence. This outcome aligns the film very closely with scholarly interpretations of the genre. As Robert Warshow argues, it is not the actuality of violence in the western that is most important, "but a certain image of man, a style, which expresses itself most clearly in violence" (qtd. in Saunders 24). If Charley presents a model for black masculinity, then one of the requirements of that model is the capacity for violence in the name of justice or vengeance. This violence is not only in the name of preserving a black presence in the west, it is to protect or ensure black posterity in America.

*Buck and the Preacher* contains a scene similar in nature and function but less pronounced. One of the more devastating white raids on the wagon train that Buck protects sees the loss of money, supplies, and lives. Among the dead is Toby (Dennis Hines), a young boy whose wit in dealing with the charmingly conniving Rutherford provides one of the more humorous scenes of the film. As the camera pans across the bodies laid out after the raid, it pauses at Toby's body, cuts to Buck's face, then cuts back to Toby and zooms in on his face. The viewer is to make no mistake that Toby has been killed, and that his death has greatly affected Buck. Buck vows to help and protect the wagon train from dying "in the snow," despite his knowledge that they no longer have the means to pay him. He has transformed from the shrewd, Revisionist Western hero to a more classical version that fights due to a sense of justice and honor, not for profit. Toby's death brings about this change, signaling as it does in *Charley* that the destruction of black youth is an act of insufferable injustice. A brief instance of much apparent

importance happens just before Buck's promise to those in the wagon train, one that brings in considerations of religion's place in the narrative of the black western hero.

The divining oracle figure Cudjo (Clarence Muse) in *Buck and the Preacher* that periodically throws bones to predict the future of the wagon train and provide them with prophecies of their destination is a direct racial challenge to one of the most influential narratives of the western genre: the belief that expansion into the American West was an act of manifest destiny. The phrase itself was born out of this moment in American history, as John O'Sullivan coined it in reference to the United States' responsibility "to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions" (qtd. in Stephanson xi). The Christian rhetoric of this claim is undeniable, given the reference to Providence. Couple this with the framing bit of historical context in Michael K. Johnson's book, that conscious attempts were made at excluding black citizens from western traditions and practices, and the implication is that attempts were made at banning them from both the spiritual and practical elements of manifest destiny. Despite this historical environment, these films find ways of getting around or re-writing this narrative instead of forcing a black presence into it. Cudjo, for example, creates a West African alternative to white Christian hegemony by applying his ritual wisdom to the benefit of the wagon train. At first, it may seem as though his encouragement is naive to the hazardous realities of frontier life, to say nothing of the added hazards of being black on the frontier that the film chronicles. By the end of the film his premonitions are affirmed and the train reaches the verdant paradise in Colorado that he describes at various points in the film.

This outcome provides viewers with a message of hope, one that is carried out in *The Legend of Nigger Charley*. The difference is that *Charley* ends with the remaining black pioneers, Charley and Toby, continuing on their journey without any clear destination. Agency is displayed in their frank but exploratory manner of choosing a direction, as Charley asks, “Which way now?” and Toby points forward responds, “What about that way?” This scene is somewhat atheistic, despite the implications from the camera angle and backing track that there is some involvement of a celestial, omniscient presence. The high-angle, wide-shot camera perspective gives the viewer a God’s-eye-view implying that Charley and Toby are watched and protected. Despite its name, the backing track (Lloyd Price’s “In the Eyes of God”) does not necessarily find freedom or peace in a monotheistic belief. Instead, the listener is left waiting for the singer’s spiritual satisfaction. The verses are set up as a series of questions, each starting with the phrase, “Will I ever...?” The theme set up by this song, played at bookending moments in the film, is one of existential yearning. The ultimate resolution to this issue of establishment is suspended at the end of the film, leaving Charley, Toby, and the viewer in a state of tension. Therefore, the Christian model of religious justification is not portrayed as the ultimate solution to the problem of black integration or even agency in American culture. Furthering this distrust in Christianity is the portrayals of Christian figures that both films contain.

The idea that God has some influence over Western expansion or that Western expansion is in some way a manifestation of God’s will is rather prevalent in the mythology of the western. In addition to the importance of monotheistic power in western narratives is the importance of its presence in black culture. This importance is

best exemplified by Darwin T. Turner's claim that "the importance of the church in Black American life is unmistakably evidenced in Black American writing" (146). Given this impression, one would assume that the black western hero or works with black western heroes would express some sort of Christian affirmation. Instead, the religious models presented are either alternate to Christianity or not yet satisfied with its promise. In addition to these critiques of the religion in general is the films' specific treatment of an important religious figurehead, the preacher.

Each preacher in *Buck* and *Charley* is corrupt in some way. Yet in *Buck and the Preacher*, as implied by the title, the reverend is a protagonist. Despite his eventual narrative position as a favorable character and his overall characterization as a comic relief figure, it must be noted that there is some ambiguous moral ground surrounding him. First, before being portrayed as Buck's sidekick he is shown to be both a hindrance to Buck's progress and an inappropriately lascivious character. His opposition to Buck is understandable enough, as his horse and food are stolen by Buck in their first meeting. This resentment carries over into an exchange with Buck's white pursuers in which he pledges to turn over Buck if they ever cross paths again. Couple this with the reverend's lust over the wagon train's money and women, and the audience is presented with a villain as defined by the narrative economy of a classic western. However, he becomes a morally ambiguous character that is not all that out of line for the westerns of the 60s and 70s. He eventually leads Buck to Deshay (Cameron Mitchell) and his men, but with the stated intention of helping Buck to kill them. Rutherford later reveals that his plan all along was to side with whoever it looked like was going to win. This shrewd thinking that transcends or avoids morality is the stuff of most Revisionist Western heroes, like

that of Clint Eastwood's characters in Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Westerns. Therefore, what may seem like an unsound morality to some actually translates Rutherford contextually as a favorable character. This reading is supported by the aforementioned sheep scene that immediately follows the reverend's revelation, which lends his choice in Buck the air of righteous racial preservation.

Another fact troubling Rutherford's position as a religious authority is that in reality, he is not ordained at all. He explains in a moment of emotional heft that his preacher persona comes from the man that owned him and his mother; this man was an alcoholic traveling preacher that used to sexually abuse his mother and eventually sold her without even a warning to Rutherford. Rutherford admits that he killed the preacher that same night and inherited his effects, including his clothes and his "funny Bible." So the reverend becomes even further removed from any sense of wickedness in his questionable morality as it becomes excused as a learned behavior and not a mysteriously natural condition like that of an Eastwood character or even the reverend in *Charley*. In fact, his actions seem less guided by wickedness than by Twain-esque charlatanism. His reference to the Bible as an inheritance functions as severally ironic: not only does he gain this inheritance by force, but the Bible is later shown to be a hiding place for another pistol. His inheritance is not so much of a religious code as it is of the code of the West. His place as secondary protagonist after this scene becomes cemented due to both the pathos called upon in the mentioning of his enslaved past and the aid he provides to Buck from there on out. Some emotional manipulation is at play here. This sense that sympathy towards Rutherford has somewhat ulterior motives is highlighted by the fact

that the parish he claims to represent is the “High and Low Orders of the Holiness Persuasion Church.”

*The Legend of Nigger Charley* also features a corrupt preacher whose legitimacy as a religious figure is questioned upon his introduction. Unlike Rutherford, this character is a primary antagonist. Given that *Charley* is the more subversive of the two films, it makes sense that at no point is this reverend shown to be morally salvageable. Instead, he is a religious arm of racial oppression claiming that blacks are in some way marked by God as evil. His use of religious rhetoric in the interest of claiming white supremacy comes in full force towards the end of the film when he states, “When the devil was banished from hell, my brother he was pure white. He was as white, white as the gentle snows. Then God, dropped him into hell. The devil turned black!” This piece of dialogue, though heavy-handed, accentuates the complex relationship between religious affiliations, western personae, and racial issues. The reverend’s profession does indeed seem to be as much of an act as Rutherford’s, as he is not only a villainous extortionist but a person who frequently misquotes from the Bible. It stands then that his chosen western image is that of the gun-wielding preacher, perhaps a conflation of Manifest Destiny and frontier justice. However, some true semblance of Christian doctrine wins out in the end. Charley takes part in his own act of religious-historical revelation after he kills the reverend when he shouts, “The lost tribes of Israel were black!” This act offers two readings that can be portrayed as a microcosm of the issues of representation at hand in these films. On one hand, it could be the expression of a desire for integration and inclusion into a cultural narrative. Read this way, Charley offers a black perspective to the preacher in order to achieve some degree of equality. On the



other hand, Charley's revelation could represent a point of subversive contention and disruption of a commonly held belief in the Bible's overall whiteness. Given this film's several moments of accentuating difference, and the fact that Charley yells this at the reverend after he kills the religious official in the middle of a sermon-like monologue, it would seem that a violent explosion of cultural and narrative norms is the object of Charley's proclamation. As powerful an influence that religion has over both African-American culture and the culture of the West, there is still an even more powerful presence in these films that highlights how they deal with both representation and interaction with the western genre.

Few cultural groups are indicative of the western's othering power than Native Americans, and the ways in which Buck and Charley interact with these figures are revelatory of the films' projects of drawing attention to representation. JoEllen Shively's sociological study "Cowboys and Indians: Perceptions of Western Films Among American Indians and Anglos" reveals that the western has had just as much of an identity-forming impact on Native Americans as it has on whites. She finds that while westerns present Native American spectators with the opportunity to pinpoint how their people are being portrayed in popular culture, they most often identify with the white protagonists. When asked if they ever support the Native American characters, both they and their white co-subjects responded, "'Sometimes, when they're the good guys'"(Shively 348). Shively's results lead her to believe that John G. Cawelti's claim that "viewers use Westerns as a fantasy for exploring value conflicts and to affirm the value of their ideals and way of life" is vague but substantiated (357). So what can be done with the Native American characters in *Buck and the Preacher*, who are mostly

portrayed in the film as neither “good guys” nor “bad guys” but bitter spectators fed up with American racial politics?

One answer might be that the function of the nameless Indian Chief (Enrique Lucero) is as an outlet for venting frustrations over historical racial mistreatment in America, a racial caveat to Buck and Rutherford who provides a well-rounded view of these historical race relations, and at the end as an agent of containment and cooperation that slightly undoes the film’s project of racial observation. The Chief and his men help Buck with a grain of cynicism, claiming that men both black and white pushed them off of their territories during a speech in which he identifies his tribe’s need to fight the currents of American modernity and subjugating development. This scene provides a fair counter to the often reductive claim that non-white racial groups must band together to achieve any sense of equality or establishment. He refuses to provide any help to Buck and the wagon train beyond allowing them to travel across his territory, and even this has a finite deadline of five days. This policy of non-collaboration culminates in a telling scene of Native American spectatorship. In the final battle, when the remaining members of Deshay’s group attack Buck, Rutherford, and the wagon train, the Chief and his tribe stare silently from the bluffs and watch it unfold. They become the audience, claiming authority not through participation but through observation. However, this does not last and the tribe eventually intervenes and helps Buck and Rutherford to defeat the white menace. Thus, the Native American is set up in *Buck* as the most narratively powerful racial type, able to traverse the planes of spectatorship and participation. It is not so much the content of the gaze that holds final authority, but the act of gazing itself.

Pushing the considerations of this gaze a bit further, one discovers some problems

arising. For one, the reality of imperfect race relations set up by the Chief's neutrality is fractured. This fracturing allows for the dangerous assumption that cross-racial or even inter-racial collaboration is always guaranteed eventually. The other contradiction is that while the Chief's power to intervene gives him agency in representation, the production reality of the film weakens this narrative power. The Chief is played by Mexican-born actor Enrique Lucero, who had played Ignacio in Sam Peckinpah's groundbreaking Revisionist Western *The Wild Bunch* years prior. This structured and controlled racial passing is a common problem in Hollywood westerns, and indeed one of the dissenting voices that Shively heard from was a group of Native American college students who were critical of the false portrayals of tribal cultures in westerns. So, the Chief has some capital in the economy of the western genre but not in that of real American cultural considerations.

The appearance of Native Americans in *The Legend of Nigger Charley* is brief but loaded with the power of the content of the gaze. Charley and his friends get surrounded by a group of Native Americans after escaping the plantation. The tension in this scene is another aspect of the Native American presence in these films; both are initially alarming, and then disarming. This formulaic interaction is an added means of othering the black western hero, an admission that at first he is perceived as any other cowboy traveler but upon closer inspection must be treated differently. In Charley's case, one of the Native Americans rubs Charley's face, and then checks his fingers to see if any soil or color is on them. He sees that his hands are still clean, allows the group to continue, and leaves with his tribe without a word of dialogue. Charley and company pass through a nameless, voiceless threat unscathed. When one of the group remarks that it seemed as

though the man “was surprised that the black didn’t come off,” Charley replies, “I’d have been surprised if it had.” The commentary here covers two viewpoints: one from the outside looking in and one from the inside looking out. The Native Americans look in from without and recognize that perhaps a new presence is making its way into the frontier, but not without an exaggerated air of curiosity. Though Charley’s introspection is a bit of a laugh line, it addresses a very important issue of representation. Charley unconsciously makes it known that while he is partaking in a primarily white genre, he in no way expects for this whiteness to “rub off” on him.

The works in the western genre outside of the blaxploitation movement contain some of the same complexities of racial representation in American culture. Some new permutations arise as the black western hero leaves the 1970s and enters the late 1990s and early 2000s. The developments to consider alongside the above concerns of race and genre are: the evolution of the hero-sidekick relationship, the boundary-crossing effects of post-modernism on genre, the increasing presence of market demands on artistic production, and the hyper-awareness of tradition that comes with the progression of time. The 1980s serve as a gap in material for examining the black western hero. This is due mostly to a lack of audience interest in the genre, as the decade saw the rise of and preference for action heroes like Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jean-Claude Van Damme, Steven Seagal, and Bruce Willis. Of course the western informs some of their bravado, a point typified rather expediently by John McClane’s (Bruce Willis) famous “Yippee-ki-yay” catchphrase in *Die Hard* (1988). As westerns returned in the 1990s, the influence of this popular movement bleeds into the genre. A proclivity for hyper-masculinity, explosions, choreographed fight sequences, and whole arsenals of

weaponry is now just as likely in a film set in the 1870s as it is in the present day. Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles* anticipates this genre-mixing to some extent, but more importantly it is dedicated to drawing the audience's attention to the subversive potential of parody and the generic conventions being subverted by the black western hero. Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*, shares with *Saddles* not only this refusal to present the genre in its "pure" form, but also a race-pairing dynamic in the protagonist duo. With *Django* comes a new element in the complications that arise from mass-marketing the black western hero<sup>4</sup>. This issue is passively present in the blaxploitation era in the form of television-friendly excisions of racial slurs from titles. Marketing takes on an active role in the later films, raising ethical questions over the selling of the black western hero. Though the literary medium allows for a muting of the issues of representation in this tradition, Percival Everett's *Wounded* reflects and comments on them in a productively ambiguous way.

*Blazing Saddles* may seem like a strange entryway into this contemporary epoch of the black western hero. As a genre film made in the 1970s with a black star and by a white filmmaker, it may just seem like another blaxploitation film. However, many factors keep the film from this classification. The particular filmmaker involved is Mel Brooks, a director and writer whose career becomes fairly dedicated to genre parody after the release of *Blazing Saddles*. Though humorous moments and more sustained comedic efforts may arise throughout the trajectory of blaxploitation films, the aim is still to disrupt racially subjugating social codes and mores, not artistic conventions. While it may be argued that artistic conventions are not far removed from social conventions, it still remains that Brooks attacks a range of social issues and not just those affecting black

communities. The nature of parody is tricky, and there is a fine line between commitment to upholding a genre and farcifying it through hyperbole and burlesque. This issue of the door that genre reproduction opens for parody is addressed by numerous genre theorists. John G. Cawelti, for instance, addresses the complex relationship between the subversive films of the New Hollywood era and the “traditional literary mode of burlesque and parody in a well-established set of conventions or a style is subjected to some form of ironic or humorous exploitation” (*Film Genre Reader II* 234). He follows this up by citing a list of Brooks’ films as examples of “out-and-out burlesques.” Similarly, though more generally, Thomas Schatz notes a life cycle in film genres that moves “from birth to maturity to parodic decline;” a concept that Robert Stam notes to be flawed in its inability to see parody at the inception of genres, which is an angle that my project bolsters (Stam 128-129). Though not speaking to genre specifically, Bhabha’s concept of mimicry also leaves space for discussing genre and parody together in its assertion that mimicry ultimately leads to farcical irony. These considerations of the burlesque or parodic potential inherent to genre serve to complicate whether or not Bart (Cleavon Little) in *Blazing Saddles* is a vehicle for positive cultural work. In other words, is the film’s consciously subversive attitude a radical force for social change or does the attention it draws to social injustices operate as nothing more than a punch line?

In order to answer this question sufficiently the moments of subversive social commentary must first be addressed. The film consistently jabs at the notion that the American West reflects the country’s principle values by drawing out, mostly through jokes and sight gags, the racism, immorality, and ignorance inherent to the time period.

Condensing this commentary is the fact that the film's land-grabbing, conniving villain Hedley Lamarr (Harvey Korman) is also the State Attorney General. This characterization leads to several jokes on the American legal system and the political systems on which this new facet of American identity was founded. The most notable examples come in the opening minutes of the film, when the viewer is first introduced to Lamarr. His villainous plot is a familiar western trope; the greedy authority figure wants to scare innocent settlers off of land that shows potential as a big investment in development for the railroad company. Both the impetus and the agent for his plan diverge from typical western plots as part of the film's parodic interests. First, Lamarr is motivated to carry out his plan by the legal precedent that exists. He searches a law book from his desk and determines that a person is within legal rights to pursue a "land-snatching" scheme (*Saddles*). Lamarr's relationship to the law and the questionable nature of this law are both thoroughly established within minutes. He not only finds himself in the clear to intimidate the innocent people of Rock Ridge into leaving, he also oversees with nonchalance absurd death penalty gags involving men in wheelchairs and on horses on the gallows and goes into a trance of mimicking sex acts on a statue of Lady Justice. With his film Brooks argues that the West was a space in which American values and ideals were defiled, not upheld.

The power of Bart as a subversive figure rests on one guiding principle: that Americans are just as ignorant, intolerant, and violent in 1974 as they were in 1874. Despite the general absurdities that make up the bulk of the film, it makes some lucid points about the contemporaneous treatment of black citizens. One such moment is grounded in a largely humorous scene. Bart recounts some of his childhood experiences

to Jim (Gene Wilder) regarding life in a wagon train. He recalls, “Well, back in ’56, my folks and I were part of this long wagon train movin’ west. Well, not exactly part of it. You might say we was bringin’ up the rear.” The scene fades to a portrayal of the train as Bart narrates, and the camera pans right to reveal his family’s wagon about a mile behind the rest. Brooks anachronistically draws parallels between the experiences of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century pioneers and those of the black civil rights movement of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The year is no accident, as the scene implicitly references the Montgomery Bus Boycott that ended in success in 1956. When the wagons encounter a familiar scene of attack from a raiding group of Native Americans the family’s segregated position is highlighted further in a visual gag, as they make a one-wagon circle to protect themselves. Brooks conflates familiar contemporaneous social issues with familiar genre tropes in the interest of satire, but the film’s commentary does not come exclusively in the form of humor.

The scenes tracking Bart’s first outing as sheriff of Rock Ridge goes through a cycle of inspiring idealism, to stark and harsh reality, to intimate and comforting commiseration with his outcast comrade. Bart contests Jim’s attitude that the townsfolk will not accept him, arguing that “once you establish yourself, they’ve got to accept you.” Bart’s words resonate just as much, if not more, for black audience members in the 1970s and they did for settlers (black or otherwise) in the 1870s. They work as a mantra for those seeking civil rights just as well as they do for a fictional black sheriff. However, this philosophy of self-empowerment is quickly disrupted as Jim’s fears for Bart are very quickly made real. Before Bart can even make it a few paces out of the sheriff’s office he meets an elderly woman on the street, attempts to greet her, and is met with her reply of, “Up yours nigger.” Brooks creates a doubly subversive moment here, simultaneously



disrupting preconceptions of how elderly women typically speak or behave and destroying Bart's idealistic spirit in one fell swoop. This brief moment is followed by the most earnest and intimate moment in the film, as he returns to his misfit haven in the sheriff's office and receives consolation from Jim. The scene cuts immediately to a medium shot of Jim's face close to Bart's, which faces the camera directly but stares somewhere just above it, clearly hurt by an act that seconds ago played as a joke. Jim eventually lifts his spirits in explaining, "You've got to remember that these are just simple farmers. These are people of the land; the common clay of the New West. You know, morons." While what Jim says rings true to the generally satirical philosophy of Brooks' film, that America's great and mythic pioneers of the Old West were really a collection of dunces and criminals, the importance of this scene lies more in the narrative of social relations to which it contributes. Each of these westerns with black protagonists seems to create for its heroes a misfit culture, a grouping that works off of the assumption that all disadvantaged social groups should and will band together to exact either an acceptance into the status quo or the creation of their own community.

Jim's status as a washed-up, alcoholic gunslinger pairs with Bart's state of discrimination as both seek initial refuge in the sheriff's office, but it also stages a commentary on the western genre's attitude towards black heroes. It is only after the west has become faded or compromised in some way that an African-American presence is accepted. Of course, appearances can be deceiving; Jim is eventually empowered by Bart's boldness and, never really having lost his touch, is returned to his former glory as the fast-handed Waco Kid. Their proficiency allows them to carve a space of acceptance into the general community by the end of the film. However, as in classic westerns like

*Shane*, the heroes ride off for an unknown destiny to the chagrin of the rescued town. But the more compelling example of a misfit acceptance comes in the form of the story that Bart recounts to Jim in flashback, in which the party of Native American raiders spares Bart and his family because of the color of their skin. Brooks plays the chief and skews the portrayal of Native Americans in past westerns by blatantly speaking a combination of Yiddish and English to the frightened travelers. After he lets them go, he turns to his companion and exclaims in a Jewish-American accent, “They darker than us!” Brooks creates several circles of societal retribution in satirizing portrayals of Native Americans in film, sparing the black pioneer family from peril, and creating a bond of the subjugated across African, Native, and Jewish American cultures. This mingled exchange of sympathy and awe is common across these works; *Charlie* and *Buck* both have similar experiences. The danger or complication from such a scene arises from the assumptions that it creates for subjugated groups. It results in the creation of a myth of commiseration which encourages a lack of sympathy from forces of passive hegemony that would find comfort in imagining that these groups will settle for establishing their own community of subjugation. At least *Buck* attempts to dredge the depths of this issue by depicting the Native American chief as being reticent to helping Buck in any active way, but this complex issue is essentially erased by the end of the film.

This minor contradiction in *Saddles* regarding the address of social issues without giving them full consideration highlights the major outcome of Brooks’s film. The film, as in most works of parody, is largely invested in lampooning Hollywood and the culture of American film production. Inside jokes, rampant intertextuality, spoofs of general

western genre conventions, and the film's hyper-meta-cinematic crescendo add up and amount to a film that is concerned moreover with itself than with full-blown political commentary. It still has its place in at least drawing attention to social ills, and satirizing Hollywood does cultural work when one assumes some correlation between American film consumption and American social values and mores. However, where *Buck* and *Charlie* stand as direct challenges to white American hegemony by subverting and meeting the gaze of an imperialist past, Bart of *Saddles* is a relative punch line in a collection of many others.

Commenting on the state of the black western hero in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is a task laden with caveats, given that the most prominent creative voice in representation so far is Quentin Tarantino. It is difficult to consider Tarantino's conscious upholding of this tradition of 1970s black western heroes without allowing for a consideration of his habit of historical reproduction throughout his career. This facet of his work is especially difficult to ignore because he directly engages and explains it in interviews and commentaries. His films are challenging to work with on an academic level, given that he considers himself an academic in his filmmaking process. Therefore, he troubles readings of his films by doing his own readings. Engaging his films critically becomes an act of meta-commentary, because each film is an essay in its own way. This idea is supported by the story of the creation of *Django Unchained*, as he and others have explained in numerous interviews that the film is derivative of a piece he was in the process of writing about the culture of racism inherent to the production of D.W. Griffith's controversial landmark *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). This story appears in what is perhaps the perfect indicator of Tarantino's brand of pop academia: an interview

with Henry Louis Gates Jr. in the online African-American interest magazine *The Root*. The nature of this magazine reminds one that the ease of access to information in the internet age should also be considered as a facet of the issues that arise from postmodern considerations of race and artistic production. It is Tarantino's conscious engagement of film history and tradition that makes *Django* a good benchmark for considering where exactly contemporary culture stands regarding the two broadest types of implication that the black western hero raises: the trajectory of race relations in America and the nature of American myth-making. The problem that the film poses is in the way that financial considerations of popularity threaten any serious meditation on these issues. In more ways than Tarantino may care to admit, the burlesque nature of *Django* aligns it with the same problems of parody that *Blazing Saddles* presents to progressive thought. In the end, the distraction of postmodern kinesiology and blockbuster talents stalls what might have been development on new grounds of American cultural self-awareness.

Yet, Tarantino warrants some praise for his preservation of cinematic history and tradition. In fact, some scenes from *Django* are conscious allusions or responses to film moments from both classic and obscure films. He speaks to one aforementioned predecessor, *The Legend of Nigger Charley*, in his interview with Gates. He recounts a conversation he had with Reggie Hudlin, one of the film's producers, who reportedly said to Tarantino when *Django* was still in the pre-production stages, "Look, this is a movie obviously made with the best intentions, yet at the end of the day for black folks watching it, it's not half as empowering as *The Legend of Nigger Charley*" (Gates). Thus, Tarantino is approaching the tradition of black western heroes with the immediate assumption that it is a positive and empowering presence. Though there is some truth to

this, a blanket term like “empowering” problematizes a full and effective reading of the film and character. The implication is that Charley’s presence is empowering because he is a black man claiming a white cultural tradition for his own. This project has shown that such this practice is not that simple. Tarantino’s assumption that Charley’s appearance in the West is powerful simply because he is black is just as othering as the gaze of the townsfolk who simply cannot believe their eyes. Tarantino also mentions a problem that he sees in Charley, in that “it wants to be a good movie, but they had no money” (Gates). Such an admission of the capital influence over artistic production must be drawn out in order to fully consider the effect that the blockbuster watershed has on the black western hero. Each of the previously mentioned films was released before this phenomenon, which many argue began with the release of Spielberg’s *Jaws* in 1975. As a result Tarantino is selling blackness, which has its own unfortunate implications.

The direct allusions in *Django* to the previously analyzed films strengthen the assertion that Tarantino engages with a cinematic history. For one, there is Django’s (Jamie Foxx) arrival into the town of Daughtrey, Texas. He draws just as much of the attention of the townsfolk as Charley and Bart. In fact, Tarantino is willing to push the issue of the black western hero’s remarkable arrival even further through both visuals and dialogue. As Django rides alongside Dr. King Schultz (Christoph Waltz), whose name as an allusion to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. cannot go unnoticed, he rides past the town’s gallows with his head briefly framed inside of the noose (See Fig. 2). This image calls to mind not only the practice of race-specific lynching, a practice with its own impression on the American cultural psyche as an ugly blight on its not-too-distant past, but also the general practice of lynching as it pertains to frontier justice and the prevalence of public

executions by hanging as part of the cultural landscape of many western films. In much the same way that *Buck*, *Charley*, and *Blazing Saddles* present the audience with murdered children or reminders of segregation, the tradition of meshing social reality with mythic narrative continues in *Django*. Tarantino provides the most explicit address of difference throughout every one of these films in the brief bit of dialogue between Schultz and Django. Schultz takes notice of the town's attention as they ride through Daughtrey and asks, "What's everybody staring at?" to which Django replies, "They ain't never seen no nigger on no horse before." Schultz ignorance to the gaze is telling, as is Django's more overt re-living of the moment of arrival in *Charley*. He also, like Charley, takes control of a saloon from a discriminatory barkeep (Kim Robillard). The differences between his experience and Charley's are that the takeover of the bar is not his idea, and the audience is not presented with the details of the barkeep's harried escape so it is difficult to tell whether or not he leaves because of Django's triumphant expression of his agency. The odds are that it was Schultz's doing, who is presented throughout the film as a rational and well-mannered bounty hunter and expert in the deadly arts of the western.

Schultz represents a few complications that have precedent in the 70s black western heroes. He is a morally contradictory character like Reverend Rutherford in that he owns Django, but Schultz gives Django the promise of freedom if he helps him to track down and kill a group of bandits. So Schultz upholds the law and gives a slave the opportunity to seek both freedom and revenge, which is good, but holds ownership of a slave as a means of carrying out a job, which is morally reprehensible. Such a direct act of oppression puts him more in the sphere of Charley's racist, murderous preacher than Rutherford's corruption of religious rhetoric and shifty alliances in *Buck and the*

*Preacher*; this ownership of human life that *Django* attempts to subvert remains despite any of Schultz's ultimate acts of heroism.

Another facet of *Django* that troubles any notion of racial empowerment is its postmodern, globalized approach to interweaving cultural narratives. First there is German mythology, which recalls Tarantino's investment in that nation's culture in *Inglourious Basterds* (2009). The first name of Django's captured love, Broomhilda von Shaft (Kerry Washington), is an allusion to an important German folktale which the film ensures does not escape the audience (as well as an allusion in the last name to Shaft [Richard Roundtree] an important blaxploitation icon). Schultz explains to Django that "Broomhilda is the name of a character in the most popular of all the German legends." He then goes on to tell the story of Broomhilda and Siegfried, the hero that slays a dragon and "walks through hellfire to save [Broomhilda], because [she is] worth it." Schultz tells this story to an eager Django, who sits cross-legged on the rock-floor somewhat below the man who is still technically his owner. The staging of this scene is rife with the representation of Schultz as a father figure to Django, which presents a problem in that "benevolent paternalism" was often offered as a model of slave ownership that could possibly placate abolitionists by being a more humane way of keeping slaves. Tarantino may have intended the cave setting of this scene to represent some sense of the primordial acquisition of knowledge, but instead it seems to be Plato's cave pre-revelation in its masking or avoidance of truths. There are other international narratives at play in *Django*, like the allusion to Dumas's *The Three Musketeers* in the avenging of the slave D'Artagnan and the direct reference to the Spaghetti Western *Django* (1966) in the film's

title character, but the tale told by Schultz the father proves to be the most profoundly problematic.

This discussion of the current state of the black western hero can ideally open up studies of the effects of postmodernism and commercialism on cinematic treatments of both race and genre. The inclusive nature of *Django Unchained* allows for the idea of the black western hero as a democratizing force, but the film's project ultimately gets lost in the multitude of narratives that it presents. Of course *Buck and the Preacher*, *The Legend of Nigger Charley*, and *Blazing Saddles* are not perfect either. What I am calling for in this synthesis of issues raised by films portraying black western heroes is a cinema that is comfortable with race, but that is also conscious of the complications of presenting American audiences with these racial representations for entertainment. The potential is certainly strong. Hollywood and independent American cinema have seen a renaissance of sorts over the past decade or so that has given audiences unique, alternative, psychologically powerful, and socially progressive stories for which the western genre is particularly well-suited as a steadfast representation and reflection of American cultural values. Despite its faults, *Django Unchained* should not be discounted from this renaissance. Also included are Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), which explores the homosexual tension inherent to western camaraderie, Tommy Lee Jones's *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005), which uses the western to explore US-Mexico border relations and the American justice system, the Coen Brothers' *No Country for Old Men* (2007), which meditates on the American "war on drugs" and the excesses of the 1980s among many other concerns, and Andrew Dominik's *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007), which lends a very stark psychological realism



to the pressures and problems of western heroism. This last example is a personal favorite, and its self-reflection and psychological strength could prove a productive model for the black western hero in the future. In a similar vein, and perhaps the greatest example of culturally productive and useful meditations on blackness and genre in the postmodern age, is Percival Everett's novel *Wounded*. The novel is told from the point of view of the main character John Hunt, who ponders over a variety of subjects including his career as a rancher and subsequently his position as a black rancher in Montana, the signification of the western landscape, his relationship to the American justice system, the mourning of his wife, and his sexual identity. His remarks on his town of residence reflect his matter-of-fact attitude towards representation:

Highland was a small enough town that most people had a vague knowledge of who everyone was, but it did facilitate matters to be different in some way. In my case, it was the color of my skin. It could easily have been a problem for some folks, but it hadn't turned out to be. I, of course, realized that I was referred to as the 'black rancher.' I suppose had I been extremely handsome, I would have been the 'good-looking, black rancher'" (Everett 49).

The irony and honesty with which Hunt handles his othering reduces the shock of his remarkable appearance in a way that both respects difference and closes racial gaps. Of course the muting of the visual is inherent to the literary form, and it may seem counterintuitive to include this novel to sum up the issues raised by the cinematic black western heroes of the 1970s and today. However, there are definite philosophical and psychological cues to be taken from *Wounded* that could translate onto film for a fairer but similarly empowering black western image. The issue of racism is still alive in the western genre. Gore Verbinski's upcoming blockbuster *The Lone Ranger* (2013) has drawn some controversy because it will feature the white Johnny Depp in the role as the Native American Tonto. This fact is especially disconcerting given that the original

series from the late 1940s to the late 1950s featured a Native American actor in the role. Given the discussion that my project raises, however, Depp's cinematized racial passing is not all that shocking. His dark, eccentric characterizations throughout his career lend themselves to a racial ambiguity that could only exist in the gaze that enables ambivalent mimicry. The complex and sensitive nature of Depp's passing and the larger issue of racialized western heroes reveals that the western genre continues to be a site to contest whose presence, truthful or otherwise, belongs in American culture and whose does not. The black western hero can almost enter the town with ease, but not quite. Thus western mimicry continues to create cultural tension in its ability to hide, reveal, consolidate, expand, empower, and disempower issues of American race, gender, and sexuality.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The paradox inherent to my project is that it is founded on a black/white binary while also examining the gray areas within this binary. As a result, I would rather say that I am allowing for the influence of the auteur-structuralists than define this project within the terms of that theory.

<sup>2</sup> See Saunders's chapter "The Indians," which looks at the contradictions that Native American representation pose to the increase in liberalized sentiments in post-1950s westerns; Jane Tompkins's *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, which opens by discussing having found a surprising absence of Native American figures in early westerns; Edward Buscombe's *Injuns!': Native Americans in the Movies*, which offers a more global perspective on the issue of Native American cultural representation.

<sup>3</sup> Saunders points out the phallic implications of a cowboy's revolver in his analysis of the "shooting lesson" scene in *Shane*. He points out that the scene has "an element of sexual display" (24). He later refers to the gun-phallus symbolism as "clichéd," implying that the sexual displays are rather overt (118).

<sup>4</sup> See Barry Sonnenfeld's *Wild Wild West* (1999), which raises these same questions of the black western hero in post-action-film Hollywood, especially in its employment of the black and white male pairing, its abundant use of special effects, and the ubiquity of the marketing strategies surrounding its release.

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