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## 'I Get a Kick Out of You': Cinematic Revisions of the History of the African American Cowboy in the American West

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'I Get a Kick Out of You': Cinematic Revisions of the History of the African American  
Cowboy in the American West

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A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty  
of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of  
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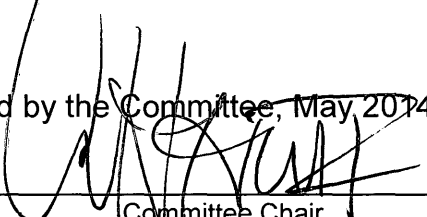
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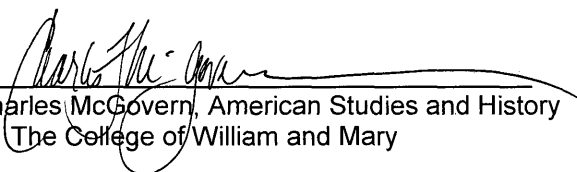
Master of Arts

  
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'I Get a Kick Out of You': Cinematic Revisions of the History of African Americans in  
the American West

Stephanie Maguire

**Introduction**

In the first scene of Mel Brooks's *Blazing Saddles* (1974) a group of black railroad workers are subjected to hard and humiliating labor at the hands of white overseers. One of the overseers tries to make the workers sing a "nigger work song" to pass the time, perpetuating the same humiliation black laborers experienced during slavery. When the workers fail to comply by feigning unfamiliarity with any work songs and singing the nightclub hit "I Get a Kick Out of You" instead, the overseer demonstrates by singing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." The rest of the white men then join him in singing "Camptown Races" and performing a ridiculous dance that they think will encourage the black workers to reciprocate with their own performance. Instead, the workers laugh at the spectacle, not only because the white folks look foolish in their song and dance, but because the white people have fallen for the trick that they hoped to set for the black workers. Instead of watching a black spectacle of degrading performance, the white folks become the spectacle and fail to realize they have been outsmarted.

Not only does this scene demonstrate the humor of ignorant racism that is foundational in Brooks's parody, but it demonstrates the genuine shift in power that takes place through film. Like the black men in this first scene, by the 1970's, African Americans throughout the nation were increasingly capable of breaking free from a stereotypical identity that was previously defined by white America. More and more, African Americans resisted submitting to whites' demands and seized upon the

opportunity to take charge of their own identities. African Americans did not only achieve re-appropriation of themselves from white people in everyday life, but were starting to do so on a national scale through film.

*Blazing Saddles* is an excellent example of the type of Western films that allowed African Americans to redefine a collective black identity that is grounded in both humor and history. Despite its satiric traits, *Blazing Saddles* revises the traditional Western narrative by including the heroic black cowboy figure, who represents a larger African American presence in both the cinematic and historic West. The film joins a small subgenre of other Westerns interested in demonstrating the role that African Americans had in settling the American West which was greatly ignored by many previous Western films. I will look at a number of these films, including ones that precede and follow *Blazing Saddles*, to explore the connections between the appearance of the heroic black cowboy in American Westerns and black political movements. The films often directly coincide with the movements and act as forms of cultural resistance and activism for African Americans. Black Americans cannot rely solely on their political efforts to redefine themselves, but must make use of and manipulate popular culture and its consumption to aid this political project.

While *Blazing Saddles* is an important example of a film that features African Americans in the West released in the midst of political struggles for African Americans, it was not the first to demonstrate this pattern. *Buck and the Preacher* (1972), directed by and starring Sidney Poitier, was released two years before *Blazing Saddles* and demonstrates a similar interest in placing black bodies in the American West. Both *Buck and the Preacher* and *Blazing Saddles* attracted audiences at the close of the Civil Rights

Movement, when African Americans were adjusting to new rights they received the previous decade and negotiating the limits of these new rights.

Some thirty-five years earlier, a series of all-black Westerns starring Herb Jeffries, a nightclub singer who would later become part of Duke Ellington's Orchestra, were released just as the Harlem Renaissance ended in the late 1930's. Although the Harlem Renaissance may be considered a short-lived artistic experiment, it is also considered one of the first opportunities African Americans had to display themselves to the rest of the world and finally define themselves rather than be defined by others. Black cultural expression, whether literature, music, or film, was produced at a high rate in the 1930's and demonstrated black Americans' desire to create a positive, collective identity for themselves.

Similarly, the short-lived "blaxploitation" era, which took place during the first half of the 1970's, allowed for a brief celebration of black faces in film while telling stories of African American revenge against white oppression. Although some regard the era as only a brief moment in cinematic history, the films produced during those years attracted large black audiences eager to pay to see their own image become on-screen heroes. Despite lasting only about five years, blaxploitation era films greatly influenced those that would be released for years to come.

In the late 1980's and early '90's, rap and hip-hop became signifiers of a contemporary urban black lifestyle and a population that was frustrated by the nation's persisting racial problems. This new aspect to black identity combined with influences from the blaxploitation era allowed for another important appearance of the black cowboy in film: Mario Van Peebles's *Posse* (1993). Van Peebles, son of the pioneering



black filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles, not only exposed the role black Americans played in settling the West, but criticized the fact that such a history had been long ignored in mainstream interpretations of the nation's past.

Barack Obama's recent election as the first African American president and a seeming developing sense of equality in the new millennium set the stage for another rendering of the Western narrative in Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012). The release of Tarantino's film coincides not only with the election of the first black president, but also with the marking of the sesquicentennial celebration of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Such a celebration not only recognizes a milestone anniversary of black Americans' freedom and their progress over the last 150 years, but also reminds non-black Americans of the journey that African Americans have made and continue to make in a nation that still presents racial obstacles.

### **Race Westerns: A Generic Hybrid**

Although they are spread throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, Westerns that include African Americans are a crucial aspect of the cultural movements with which they coincide and contribute to defining black identity and culture. Before discussing the individual aforementioned films, it is important to first characterize and contextualize them within the larger scheme of film genres. These black cowboy films have features of two major American film genres: the Western and the race film.

For many years, white audiences believed Western films represented an accurate portrayal of the American West. The sweeping vistas, seemingly empty landscape, and setting that contrasted all other parts of the nation became part of the magical lure of the West represented in the genre. White characters, too, contributed to the myth that the

American West was as fresh and new as the historian Frederick Jackson Turner supposed. Writing in 1921, Turner described the West as a "fertile field of investigation," unexplored and in need of white settlers to tame it.<sup>1</sup> Following suit, Western films depicted a large, mostly uninhabited space that centered around white Americans' use of the land that allowed them economic growth and progress. Like Turner, a majority of Western films hardly acknowledged the presence of American Indians nor did they suggest that anyone other than white Americans were part of Western expansion. This, of course, was largely untrue, as the West was occupied by Native people long before Thomas Jefferson acquired the land in 1803's Louisiana Purchase. Similarly, African Americans began populating the West as early as 1810, but they also find themselves often removed from Western films despite having worked side by side with white Americans in settling the land.<sup>2</sup>

While the Western virtually ignored their contributions to the American West, early race films served as a distinct counterculture movement for African Americans determined to represent themselves as free thinking and independent citizens. While the particular films I discuss were released some years after the first race films, they have similar goals of adding to the race's cultural accomplishments. Despite their presence, Western films made around the time of the first race films ignore the roles of non-whites in the West. When black characters did appear in Western films, they were marginalized figures, such as slaves and minstrels. For example, Lillian Yarbo plays Marlene Dietrich's

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1. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1921), 3.

2. Blake Allmendinger, *Imagining the African American West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 1. Allmendinger posits that James Beckwourth, whose autobiography *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth* was published 1856, was the first free black man to live in the American West. Beckwourth was born a slave in Virginia and then travelled to Missouri with his owners in 1810 and is believed to have been freed shortly thereafter.

maid in *Destry Rides Again* (1939), and is seen arranging Dietrich's clothes and expressing her dislike for the West, saying New Orleans "was a heap mo' peaceful." Similarly, Eugene Jackson appears as Eightball, Gene Autry's fiddle-playing, tap-dancing sidekick in *Tumbling Tumbleweeds* (1935). Unfortunately, Yarbo and Jackson's performances are commonplace among early Western films. Eventually, though, African Americans played more significant roles in Westerns, and would also have a hand in writing, directing, and starring in them as early as the 1930's. Still, the role of African Americans in Western films would change and shift with their role in American life, demonstrating the way that films tend to reflect their political atmosphere.

By combining race film's desire to demonstrate African Americans' abilities in film and art and a need to correct the Western's failed depiction of their role in the West, the films I discuss, which I will call "race Westerns," consciously use aspects of black culture to revise the Western genre in their favor. Through aspects like humor and music, race Westerns attempt to connect the audiences of their time period to the characters in the film. Although they were released during different times and vary their use of narrative elements, each of the race Westerns I discuss demonstrate a loyalty to the goals of race films and Westerns. Additionally, the race Westerns that were released after the blaxploitation era in the early 1970's exhibit important influences from that period. They represent a turning point for race Westerns and exhibit unprecedented characteristics that would influence the race Westerns that followed. While the films I am interested in are not strict examples of blaxploitation, they maintain effects of blaxploitation that further allow them to artistically insert African Americans in a Western setting.

## Relevant Scholarship

While there is a growing body of research on the black cowboy and the ways he functions in African American culture as well as mainstream American culture, it tends to favor either his cinematic or historic presence rather than a combination of the two. Despite this shortcoming, there are a number of texts on subjects related to the race Western that are useful for my investigation of the black cowboy hero. Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film*, first published in 1973, is a foundational text exploring the stereotypical roles offered to black actors throughout America's cinematic history. For Bogle, every black actor, from Stepin Fetchit to Sidney Poitier, has embodied one of the five stereotypes mentioned in the book's title, no matter what role they played in a film. Bogle suggests that while African Americans could not avoid being cast in these roles, a small number of those actors were able to interpret the role and turn it into one that demonstrated their humanity rather than perpetuated blacks as human props. For all of Bogle's interest in individual films and his detailed descriptions of the roles African Americans play in them, his scope is limited. Rather than expand the focus of his investigation, Bogle remains interested only in what he sees on screen. He fails to explore the history of a film's production, the previous work of its producers, directors, or actors. Still, Bogle represents one of the first examples of scholarship exclusively interested in the history of African American actors in film, which, for a study of race Westerns, is crucial.

Another scholarly contribution more distinctly interested in African Americans' role in the West is Blake Allmendinger's *Imagining the African American West* (2005).

Allmendinger looks at a variety of ways that black Americans appear in both the actual and fictional West, as well as the ways the West is interpreted through film, literature, and music. In his chapter that looks specifically at Western films featuring African Americans, Allmendinger actually refers to them as "race Westerns." His use of the term, however, is not as self-conscious as my use of it. Rather than using it as a way to blend the early race films with aspects of the Western film genre, Allmendinger uses the phrase in a casually descriptive manner that merely refers to the non-white race of the characters in the Westerns he discusses. I, on the other hand, use the term to specifically reference the contributions of the race film and the Western in creating the cinematic subgenre to which these films belong.

A final scholarly text that is even more interested in the different ways African Americans appear in the Western film genre is Michael K. Johnson's *Hoo-doo Cowboys and Bronze Buckaroos: Conceptions of the African American West* (2014). Johnson's interest in the role of African Americans in the cinematic West is far more extensive than most other scholarship. His research ranges from the limited roles black actors had in mainstream 1930's Westerns such as *Cimarron* (1931) and *Drums Along the Mohawk* (1939) to the apparent disregard for race demonstrated in 1970's television Westerns. Because Johnson's work is so recent, he investigates many of the same films I do and shares my interest in the relationship between the long history of the race Western and contemporary issues of race in America.

### **Shadowing the Movements**

Although *Blazing Saddles* came out in the 1970's and marked a significant shift in the appearance of the black cowboy, films of its era were not the first to use the figure in

a comedic manner. Bill Pickett, perhaps the first well-known black cowboy of real life, began performing in rodeos in 1900. Pickett is believed to have already been skilled at "bulldogging," where he would bite the lip of a bull in order to control it. The spectacle of such performances led to the now lost silent film *The Bull-Dogger* (1921), which displayed Pickett's impressive feats against the bulls while being loosely strung with a melodramatic plot. Although spectacle and sport appear to be the film's main attractions, a promotional poster for it advertises "Thrills! Laughs Too!"<sup>3</sup> That the production company promised entertainment in the form of exciting stunts as well as humor demonstrates an early role for African Americans in cinematic comedy. Certainly a black figure in a comedic role suggests a continuation of minstrelsy and other white-controlled exhibitions of African Americans, but Bill Pickett's unique skills and ability to please a crowd made him more than another black body put on display and ridiculed.

The next significant appearance of the African American cowboy would not be until 1937, when the first of four all-black Westerns starring the nightclub singer Herb Jeffries was released. According to a 2008 interview, Jeffries never wanted to act in all-black Westerns, but thought that such films would benefit the African American community by giving black children cowboy heroes of their own race to admire rather than whites like Tom Mix and Gene Autry. Jeffries took the idea to Jed Buell, one of Hollywood's known novelty film producers, and Buell, seeing the opportunity to make money off eager black audiences, agreed to produce. Jeffries reveals that they used a random script in Buell's office for the basis of the first film, *Harlem on the Prairie* (1937). Jeffries recalls that they "wrote in black comedy" and included songs that Jeffries himself wrote. From there, they auditioned black men for the lead parts. To find a black

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3. "Bill Pickett," American National Biography, image courtesy of Library of Congress, 2000.

actor who could ride, shoot, sing, and act proved difficult, though, and finally, Jeffries decided to play the lead himself.

As a light-skinned man of multiracial heritage, Jeffries urged the makeup artists to "darken [him] up" so that he might appeal more widely to black audiences and assure them that he was not white.<sup>4</sup> As Julia Leyda remarks, however, the fact that Buell allowed a light-skinned Jeffries to star is not mere coincidence but follows in the "convention in race movies of casting light-skinned actors in lead roles."<sup>5</sup> This casting decision also allowed for further distinction between the actors' differing skin tones. While Jeffries was the star, darker actors like Spencer Williams and Mantan Moreland were what studios preferred to use for stereotyped sidekick roles.

Leyda also notices that a lack of other dark-skinned races, such as Mexican or American Indian, further allows for a focus on African American bodies in the West without disrupting the films' all-black Western landscape. While this omission may seem like a way to avoid the confusion of too many non-white races gathered in a Western space, I see it as a deliberate attempt to focus on positively revising the role of African Americans in the Western narrative. By making African Americans the only race of the characters, Jeffries's Westerns follow in the tradition of other race films that "invited black Americans to see black men as fully vested American citizens and as righteous heroes" who are not threatened by Mexicans or Indians and live unchallenged by any sense of white authority.<sup>6</sup> The black characters are allowed an independence in the West that black audiences in urban theaters were likely to admire. While Herb Jeffries suggests

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4. *A Colored Life: The Herb Jeffries Story*, DVD, directed by Kim Clemons (2008; Dallas, TX: AMS Production Group, 2008).

5. Julia Leyda, "Black-Audience Westerns and the Politics of Cultural Identification in the 1930's," *Cinema Journal* 42, no. 1 (2002): 60.

6. Leyda, "Black-Audience Westerns," 61.

that his race Westerns were meant only as entertainment, his efforts to present African Americans with a positive portrayal of their own race are abundantly clear.

Unfortunately, there are no known prints of *Harlem on the Prairie* (1937), the first of Jeffries's Westerns. The rather limited scholarship on Jeffries and the films suggest that the film's plot and production are similar to the ones that followed. The four are collectively characterized as following the basic pattern of other Westerns at the time with an interest in the same "highly moralistic plots deemed appropriate for young children" as Gene Autry and his contemporaries' films.<sup>7</sup> *Harlem on the Prairie* allowed Jeffries not only to achieve his goal of finally providing African Americans with a cinematic Western hero of their own race to admire, but it was also heralded "both as a colored theatre attraction and as a novelty for white show houses" by reviewers.<sup>8</sup> The early success of *Harlem on the Prairie* then led to the production of the three others: *Two-Gun Man From Harlem* (1937), *The Bronze Buckaroo* (1938), and *Harlem Rides the Range* (1939).

Each of the four films makes clear that a black cowboy could be as skilled at ranching, romancing, and fighting as any white cowboy star. The simplistic plots posed similar stories of corrupt businessmen whose greed and lust caused them to commit terrible crimes. Herb Jeffries's Bob Blake would then team up with his friends and neighbors, no matter how simple-minded or incapable they may seem to be, to solve the problem with skill, cunning, and, when absolutely necessary, justifiable violence. Bob always comes out the hero, winning the respect of the community and the heart of whichever woman he rescued from peril. The basic yet entertaining nature of Jeffries's

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6. Leyda, "Black-Audience Westerns," 56.

8. "Colored Film Seen as Box Office Boost," *Chicago Defender*, n.d.



film and character most resemble the hero portrayed by Gene Autry, who would make over eighty films during his own career.<sup>9</sup> Autry first grew to fame on the radio show *National Barn Dance* and listeners became familiar with him as a family friendly, good-natured rancher who was determined always to be fair. Not only was Autry a symbol of the genial range wanderer, but he actively challenged the ethics and persona of the more gruff brand of cowboy characters. In films such as his archetypal *Tumbling Tumbleweeds* (1935), Autry solved problems with his words rather than his fists, used a gun only as a last resort, and charmed his leading lady with impeccable manners and lulling songs. His easy-going approach to problems showed the error of violence and suggested the best way to solve a problem was to think it through.

Autry's pure spirit made him something of an honorary family member in countless American homes. Autry and other stars of *National Barn Dance's* variety show "performed music and comedy that emphasized its mission to help former Southerners cope with their continuous longing for home" as they migrated to jobs in urban places throughout the nation.<sup>10</sup> Establishing personal connections with audience members was an early goal of Autry's and it would become part of his signature cowboy character, the same one that Herb Jeffries would eventually emulate. Along with reminding his young fans of the Ten Cowboy Commandments, Autry would encourage his listeners to write him letters to let him know how things were in their lives, showing them that he was just as interested in them as his own family.<sup>11</sup> Autry's version of a Western hero became a

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9. Thomas W. Collins, Jr., "Gene Autry," *American National Biography*, (accessed 24 April 2013).

10. Kristine McCusker, "'Dear Radio Friend': Listener Mail and the *National Barn Dance*, 1931-1941," *American Studies* 39, no. 2 (1998): 175.

11. Examples of Gene Autry's Ten Cowboy Commandments stated that a cowboy, "Never takes advantage, never goes back on his word, always tells the truth, etc...." The full list can be found in

role model for young people everywhere as well as the model for other cowboys like Tex Ritter, Roy Rogers, and Herb Jeffries for many years to come.

Despite the undeniable similarities between Gene Autry and Herb Jeffries's films and characters, the fact that Jeffries fought to give African Americans a presence in the American West goes deeper than simply making movies and establishing a fan base. Jeffries was not just a black version of a white cowboy, but a black cowboy rewriting and reimaging African Americans' role in American history. As a black man helping to create and starring in a film series during the 1930's, just on the heels of the Harlem Renaissance, Jeffries revised the history of African Americans at a time when artists and intellectuals did the same through their own work. When the Renaissance began in 1925, Alain Locke and other black intellectuals expressed a desire to create a model of a new African American, a modern figure brimming with potential and no longer held back by former racial constraints. Although film is not always associated with the art produced from the Harlem Renaissance, the Jeffries Westerns are not the only examples of the medium to be produced at the time.

The black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux, who was also a writer and a farmer, demonstrated his faith in land ownership and farming as the keys to African Americans' success in the early 20th century. His perspective was greatly influenced by Booker T. Washington, who believed that black Americans should work hard to build better lives for themselves in order to gradually achieve racial equality. Through his films and literature, Micheaux encouraged black Americans to move Westward and make their homes in the seemingly endless mid-West, believing that hard work on the frontier

guaranteed success in the future. But Micheaux's earnest belief in the power of the self-made man suggests that he was dismissive and unaware of the varied needs of his own race. A poor black Southern sharecropper, for instance, could not so readily relocate his family to the West as Micheaux did, nor could the masses that relied on work from urban factories. His philosophy was not wholly accepted, either by his contemporaries or by scholars, who continue to debate the merit of his contributions to African American culture. Like Jeffries, Micheaux hoped to elicit a successful black presence in the West. But Micheaux described the cost of such success as hard work and dedication, where Jeffries artistically and entertainingly offered a version of an African American West that simply existed without the sacrifice Micheaux demanded.

Jeffries's ability to redefine the role of African Americans in the West came at a crucial time. The films not only connect Jeffries to the Harlem Renaissance through his participation in creating and starring in the Westerns, but the films and their characters also look Eastward to the site of African American rebirth and redefinition. Aside from using "Harlem" in three of the four films' titles, there are a number of ways that East and West meet, from the films' settings to plot details. Rather than perpetuating the understanding of the West as the traditional "meeting point between savagery and civilization," Jeffries's West was a meeting point of black urban sensibility and Western landscape.<sup>12</sup>

The first and perhaps most interesting way that urban black life appears in the Jeffries films is the use of music. Gene Autry popularized the singing cowboy genre in the 1930's, but his style of singing greatly differs from what we hear in the Jeffries Westerns. In *Two-Gun Man From Harlem's* opening scene, Herb Jeffries/Bob Blake

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12. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, 32.

sings, "I'm a Happy Cowboy" as the opening credits roll. He is backed-up by the Four Tones, a jazz quartet who experienced brief popularity in the 1930's and who appeared in all four of the Jeffries films and accompanied Jeffries in live performances throughout the nation.<sup>13</sup> Although incorporating jazz musicians into the film certainly calls upon African American culture, audience members, black or white, may have been surprised by a jazz quartet singing in the middle of the prairie as they might in a Harlem nightclub. None of the members of the band are directly referred to as characters, but they reappear in the series whenever another of Jeffries's musical numbers is performed. "I'm a Happy Cowboy" appears in all the subsequent Jeffries Westerns as the theme song for the series, further defining Jeffries's character as comparable to the serial popularity enjoyed by Autry, Rogers, and other white singing cowboys.

Another musical number that similarly uses the Four Tones along with Jeffries occurs in the third of the Jeffries Westerns, *The Bronze Buckaroo*. In this film, Bob Blake's neighbor is held hostage and threatened with the death of his family if he does not sign the deed to his farm, where gold has been discovered, over to the villain. Bob and his crew learn of the scheme and, of course, put an end to it before the neighbor and his family are harmed. A break in the action shows Bob and his boys relaxing and singing together in a barn. The Four Tones scat an opening for "Got the Payday Blues," which Bob begins to sing:

    Took my roll, went to town  
    with some gal and played around  
    And she cut my bankroll down  
    Oh! Got the payday blues

    Rolled the dice to my surprise  
    not so nice, two snake eyes

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13. "Herb Jeffrey Gets Welcome," *Chicago Defender*, May 13, 1939.

And I never will get wise  
Oh! I got the payday blues

Now I am confessin',  
Got that gamblin' craze  
Will I learn my lesson  
Oh I'll be broke for thirty days

I'm not trusted at the store,  
I got busted that's for sure  
I'll be broke for one month more,  
Oh! I got the payday blues.

I can't beg or borrow  
from my friends of course  
I might find tomorrow  
I may have to trade my horse

Not a dime in my jeans  
I can't find pork and beans  
Now I know what misery means  
Oh, got the payday blues.

#### TAP DANCE

Why can't I be thrifty  
when I get my change?  
What comes when I'm fifty  
and I'm too old to ride the range?  
Oh, oh! Got the payday blues.

Although this scene takes place in a barn in some unnamed part of the West, there are several characteristics of a black urban sensibility that complicate the idea that these cowpokes are like the white ones featured in earlier Westerns. The words and style of "Got the Payday Blues" distinctly reflect a black urban sensibility that changes them from the generic cowboy figures mimicking Autry-style cowboys and transforms them into street-wise black men who turn their commiserations into literal song and dance.

Additionally, the tap dancing interlude further distinguishes "Got the Payday Blues" as a song created and enjoyed by African Americans.

While the song may seem like only a two-minute interlude, it raises and reflects upon concerns that are far more common in art, literature, and music that characterize an urban *and* Western setting rather than one or the other. From a night out on the town to facing a month without pay, the concerns over personal economy are undeniable. The song describes womanizing and gambling, and the speaker fears he will never break these habits. His worries extend into thinking about his future and he wonders "What comes when I'm fifty / When I'm too old to ride the range?" With an awareness of the limited number of jobs for a range worker, the speaker feels that he will inevitably experience the payday blues again in the future and perhaps for a longer period of time. Additionally, in dealing with little or no money, he is aware of the potential damage to his reputation. He knows that to "beg or borrow from my friend" would expose his difficulties to his neighbors and potentially worsen his circumstances. All these concerns directly echo ones that African Americans living in urban settings dealt with, demonstrating the connection that black settlers have to their urban counterparts and suggesting a commonality between black struggles regardless of location.

Most importantly, the "Got the Payday Blues" scene demonstrates undeniable characteristics of community long associated with African Americans. The men are gathered together in a homosocial space where they talk, laugh, and sing about women, gambling, and money. The comfort with which they sit together is reminiscent of the long tradition of "telling tales" in African American communities. Such an activity is connected to African Americans' use of humor and appears from the rural South in Zora Neale Hurston's literature to the comedic material of contemporary black comedians, film, and television stars. This scene is the best example of effective black humor that

clearly aims to appeal to African American audience members. While Herb Jeffries himself proudly remarks on the effort to include black comedy in the films, most of the jokes come across as little more than "the same corny dialogue as Buck Jones or Roy Rogers" and fail to demonstrate humor meant for mostly black consumption.<sup>14</sup> Instead, the exaggerated manner of the men's stories, song, and conversation are unique to its long history as an African American tradition. It is an excellent example of the exclusivity of the black experience present in the Jeffries Westerns, and also is an important way the characters create a bond between themselves and their black audiences.

Music is the most obvious connection that the Jeffries Westerns have to urban African American lifestyles, but there are a number of other less obvious examples. While the plots of the films are simplistic, complicated issues face a number of the characters. In *Two-Gun Man from Harlem*, geography plays an important part in both the current plot and the characters' background stories. Bob Blake's new neighbors, a woman, Sally, and her young brother, Jimmy, are faced with the possibility of eviction if they cannot pay the hefty taxes on their ranch. Jimmy tells Bob that the only reason their father bought the ranch was because "it's the only place he could get on credit. He ain't got no money." With the death of their father later in the film, Sally is then faced with the choice of marrying the banker or losing the ranch. She seems to think that accepting the banker is her only option for fear of having nowhere for her and Jimmy to live. Again, then, money troubles accompany the characters in their Western setting despite the myth of immediate success associated with Western expansion. For Sally, living on the ranch was a new start and way for her family to finally exercise their independence, and she

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14. Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying -- The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor That Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 354.

never imagined failure once they moved out West. Indeed, Sally never expresses what will happen to her and Jimmy if she does not marry the banker, suggesting that, naively, she never considered experiencing anything but success in the West.

Geography influences the main character, Bob Blake, after he is framed for murdering his boss and escapes town, hoping to return when the trouble dies down. Title cards appear on screen to show that Bob travels through Chicago, New York, and, finally, to Harlem, where he sits in a restaurant and flirts with a dancer. Also in the restaurant are the Four Tones again, but they are seemingly different characters. They sing again, extending their presence beyond the one they had out West and tempering it with a more expected one in a Harlem bar. That Bob actually travels to Harlem and assimilates enough to feel comfortable in the city suggests that for him, Harlem is not only a far away, intangible "Mecca of the New Negro," but a refuge accessible to all African Americans.<sup>15</sup> Bob is not an outsider here; indeed, he enters the bar, orders a drink, and talks to girls with the utmost ease and, other than his cowboy duds, is never betrayed as not belonging to Harlem. It does not take long, however, before Bob encounters the city's underworld. The Deacon, a preacher turned gangster, warns Bob of the dangers of hanging around Harlem with the ladies. In a series of scenes that take place off-camera, Bob Blake kills the Deacon and then assumes his identity thanks to a conveniently strong resemblance between them. As the Deacon, Bob returns West and solves Sally's money troubles by outsmarting the banker and his group of thugs.

Bob's experiences in Harlem and his masquerade as the Deacon contribute to the "edgier quality" that Blake Allmendinger credits *Two-Gun Man* with having compared to

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15. Alain Locke titled his 1925 essays published in *Survey Geographic* "Harlem: The Mecca of the New Negro."



Jeffries's other race Westerns.<sup>16</sup> He suggests that Harlem's underworld and Bob's interaction with a notorious gangster complicate the plot in ways that the three previous films do not. However, Allmendinger also suggests that these complex aspects are more in the tradition of film noir rather than a connection to black urban sensibilities. Indeed, the film has a number of noir-ish characteristics, from the Deacon's status as a powerful gangster to the femme fatale who frames Bob for his boss' murder. But including Harlem as another of the film's settings allows for an important connection to "the capital of black America," that further demonstrates the film's interest in incorporating aspects of black life that a 1930's audience would recognize into a Western plot.<sup>17</sup> Along with all four films' constant references to problems with money, gambling, and women, using Harlem as a setting demonstrates an undeniable relationship between black urban sensibilities and Jeffries's West.

Indeed, the way that Bob/the Deacon fluently moves between the extremely different spaces of the Western frontier and Harlem's urban landscape suggests a strong connection between the spaces that most previous Westerns ignore. A place such as Harlem or Chicago is rarely referenced in an Autry film, but the constant reference to the black cultural hub in *Two-Gun Man* begs for investigation. Not only is Harlem a physical setting for the film, but news from the place reaches the African American characters living out West. Sally tells Jimmy that she read a newspaper article about the Deacon and his terrible deeds as a gangster, indicating that news from Harlem raises African American interest outside the immediate community. Similarly, Bob in the guise of the Deacon introduces himself to Barker's gang with a newspaper clipping titled "Missing

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<sup>16</sup> Allmendinger, *Imagining the African American West*, 78.

<sup>17</sup> Leyda, "Black-Audience Westerns," 64.

Gangster Believed Dead." While it may not hold the same value for daily readers who would live in Harlem, the multiple references to the printed news of Harlem demonstrates its value and validity amongst African Americans in various regions.

After the release of *Two-Gun Man from Harlem*, Jeffries hoped to continue making race Westerns. Another film, *Ten Notches to Tombstone*, was never completed and Jeffries instead joined Duke Ellington's band.<sup>18</sup> Jeffries enjoyed fame with the band, but left when he was drafted into World War II in 1942.<sup>19</sup> Although he would retain his celebrity for many years, Jeffries would never work on films like the ones of the 1930's. Still, his remain the first race Westerns to firmly connect a contemporary black audience to their role in a reimagined Western past. When many Western films failed to characterize African Americans as anything other than objects of inferiority, Jeffries empowered the race by creating an exclusively black Western environment in which the characters led successful and enjoyable lives. Despite their fictional and simplistic plots, the films suggested a previously unknown history of African Americans in the West that American films have continued to explore ever since.

### **Actors and Activism: *Buck and the Preacher* and The Civil Rights Movement**

As African Americans garnered national attention through various postwar liberation efforts in the 1950's and early 60's, their desire to achieve the equality they had long been deprived of was plain. From grassroots organizers to iconic racial leaders, large numbers of black Americans publicly sought improved status as American citizens. Earlier movements like the formation of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in 1925 led to large national events such as the National March on Washington for Jobs and

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18. Leyda, "Black-Audience Westerns," 55.

19. *A Colored Life*.

Equality in 1963.<sup>20</sup> All these efforts, regardless of when they occurred or who organized them, reflected African Americans' long-lasting struggle for freedom. Eventually, they led to legislative changes such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965, extending to African Americans legal rights that they desperately sought. Still, these changes were inadequate in securing black Americans' rightful place in the nation.

During the same period, a select few black entertainers who had enjoyed success prior to the 1960's became increasingly interested in acting on behalf of their race in the freedom struggle. Ossie Davis, for instance, and his wife, Ruby Dee, both of whom were known for their stage and film acting, served as private counsel for Malcolm X.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, singer and actor Harry Belafonte became known for his close relationship with Martin Luther King, Jr. and publicized his involvement in a number of marches and benefit concerts.<sup>22</sup> After King's death in 1968, Belafonte's participation in large-scale political efforts decreased drastically, but his desire to contribute to the improvement of African Americans' position in the United States continued.

In 1971, Harry Belafonte reached out to another of the few favored black actors, Sidney Poitier, from whom Belafonte had been estranged since 1969. Belafonte was in possession of a screenplay that described the journey of former black slaves to the West but were met with constant danger from gangs of white bounty hunters who try to intimidate the migrants into returning to their former plantation in Louisiana. When Belafonte shared the material with Poitier, they agreed they would work together to

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20. Stephen Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be: The Black Freedom Struggle from Emancipation to Obama* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010) 195.

21. Peniel, Joseph, "Malcolm X's Harlem and Black Power Activism," in *Neighborhood Rebels: Black Power at the Local Level*, ed. Peniel E. Joseph (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 25.

22. Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 254.

produce the film. With Poitier cast as Buck, the former Union soldier turned guide for the freedmen, and Belafonte as the corrupt preacher who would consort with the white labor agents, the film went into production in Mexico.<sup>23</sup> After only one week of shooting, Poitier and Belafonte were dissatisfied with the perspective from which the film was told. Unsure if they would maintain studio support, they ended their collaboration with white director Joseph Sargent and Poitier took over the film's direction. At this point, the film no longer felt like any other project Belafonte or Poitier had previously worked on. Poitier felt pressure not only as a first-time director but also as an interpreter for his race and their story. Realizing that most histories of the West had completely omitted black settlers, Poitier was compelled to correct all the former accounts and present a film that said "there were those of us, and not just a few, who were people of great courage, of great stamina, of great personality, of great conviction. People who should be a powerful influence on our sense of ourselves."<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, *Buck and the Preacher* masterfully delivers a narrative that is at once fictional yet faithful to the presence of a black population in the West. The narrative and characters in *Buck* allegorically match those of current African Americans at the time of the film's production. A cross-country pilgrimage to unknown places after gaining emancipation parallels the similarly unknown terrain of African Americans in post-Civil Rights America. Despite the significant legislative changes in both eras, there was no clarity regarding the next step for African Americans' newly granted rights. While the purpose of the Emancipation Proclamation was to free American slaves, they had few resources to transition from their enslaved status to free people. Similarly, the Civil

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23. Sidney Poitier, *This Life* (New York: Knopf, 1980), 328.

24. Poitier, *This Life*, 332.

Rights Act outlawed racial discrimination, but failed to consider the day-to-day difficulties African Americans might continue to experience. Changes to legislation could only take African Americans so far and they were faced with uncertainty as these changes slowly trickled down from the legislative level to daily life.

Although *Buck and the Preacher* is the most important race Western since the Herb Jeffries series, there were earlier instances when black actors appeared in Westerns. While their roles were often those of domestics or other marginal figures, there was at least one actor who seemed to be a growing favorite of Western film directors: Woody Strode. A former football player and wrestler, Strode first appeared in film in 1941 and would be featured in more than sixty films throughout his fifty-year career.<sup>25</sup> Born and raised in California to a black mother and mixed-race father, Strode was aware of his blackness, but rarely experienced racial prejudice in his community. After encountering prejudice in the film industry as well as in sports, Strode pursued small film roles and made friends with director John Ford, who used Strode in several of his films over the years.<sup>26</sup> Among them was one of Strode's most significant, as the title character in *Sergeant Rutledge* (1960), about the leader of the black 9th U.S. cavalry accused of murdering his commanding officer, Major Dabney, and the rape and murder of his daughter Lucy. The film stands outside of Ford's traditional Western in which the only non-white figures in a virtually all white West are threatening ones, such as Apache or Comanche Indians.

The film begins with Sergeant Rutledge already incarcerated and awaiting a court-martial. The courtroom is full of expectant townspeople who eagerly anticipate

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24. Frank Manchel, "The Man Who Made the Stars Shine Brighter: An Interview with Woody Strode," *The Black Scholar* 25, no. 2 (2011), 37.

26. Ibid.

Rutledge's conviction and subsequent hanging. But to the townspeople's disappointment, the defense attorney and president of the court-martial insist on hearing incriminating evidence against the accused before convicting him. Through the witnesses' testimony told through flashbacks, Rutledge is revealed to be a gracious leader whose unit trusts him unconditionally. He admits to killing his commanding officer, but only after Dabney shot him first. While the prosecution believes that Rutledge fled the scene out of guilt, it becomes clear that he actually fled in fear. Rutledge recognizes that the racial politics of the West nearly guarantee his guilt of involvement in "white woman business" even when he had nothing to do with it. Rutledge is arrested by his lieutenant (who is also his defense attorney) but helps rescue his unit from an Apache ambush in the desert on their way back to the fort. His actions further demonstrate his heroism and strength, but are not enough to redeem him from his involvement in the Dabney case. In a dramatic series of events, the true killer is revealed during the trial, and Rutledge is acquitted of the charges against him. He then returns to his post as First Sergeant with his dignity seemingly intact.

Although *Sergeant Rutledge* challenges audiences to conceive of a West that includes African Americans, it does little to actually grant agency to those black characters. While the men take great pride in their roles as soldiers, the film suggests that military service is the only reason for them to live in the West. None of them are ever out of uniform, reminding the audience that, unlike many of the film's white characters, the black ones are there to do a job commissioned to them by the government. Indeed, one of the soldiers injured in the ambush betrays his knowledge that the black cavalry men are

exploited by white America. As he dies, he tells Rutledge, "we're fools to fight the white man's war."

The main character is similarly deprived of control of his own actions. By beginning the film with Sergeant Rutledge already in custody and then introducing him through flashbacks as a wanted man, it is clear that his actions are more reactions to his circumstances rather than allowances of his own willpower. Only when he testifies on his own behalf does Rutledge present his story, but his words are once again twisted by the prosecutor. In Rutledge's only assertive moment of the whole film, he explains how he realized that running away from his responsibilities made him nothing more than "a swamp-running nigger." He insists that he is anything but that, crying out, "I am a man!" These words would later be echoed by black sanitation workers in Memphis who went on strike in 1968, demanding higher wages and the protection of a labor union.<sup>27</sup> Sergeant Rutledge's words in a film from 1960 speak volumes and relate to the struggle of black Americans in the film as well as across the nation.

The scene in which Rutledge testifies presented Woody Strode with an excellent opportunity to demonstrate leadership on behalf of the African American population, as Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier did. Instead, Strode was quick to separate himself from the connection between his personal work and civil rights efforts. Strode believed that his race had nothing to do with the parts he was given. Rather, he insisted that his talent was what ensured his acting jobs, and credited himself with being able to "make a part believable."<sup>28</sup> But as one of the only black men ever featured in the Westerns of Ford, Sergio Leone, and Richard Brooks, Strode's reputation remains that of a token

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27. Michael K. Honey, *Black Workers Remember: An Oral History of Segregation, Unionism, and the Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 286-93.

28. Manchel, *The Man Who Made the Stars Shine Brighter*, 46.

black cowboy. He plays the parts efficiently and with his signature stoic style, but does little to make the black cowboy parts he plays distinctly black. Indeed, with the exception of Sergeant Rutledge, most of Strode's Western characters, from *Stagecoach* (1939) to *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), often resemble what Michael K. Johnson calls "the raceless wanderer," which casts a black actor "in a role in which no mention of race is made."<sup>29</sup> In his hope to avoid qualifying his work by his race, then, Strode seemed to erase any trace of blackness from the roles he was given, perpetuating the pattern of omitting African Americans from the cinematic West.

### **Reflected in Cinema: Poitier Leads the Way**

*Buck and the Preacher* opens with grainy photographs of the actors, emulating style elements of the time period in which the film is set. The attempt to portray historical accuracy is reiterated with on-screen words that appear after the credits:

The Civil War was over and by law the slaves were freed. But when the promise of land and freedom was not honored many ex-slaves journeyed out of the land of bondage in search of new frontiers where they could be free at last.

They placed their hopes in the hands of the few black wagonmasters that knew the territories of the West.

None of this came easy, for not only did they have to overcome a hostile wilderness, but nightriders and bounty hunters were hired by 'persons unknown' to hunt them down and turn them back to the fields.

This picture is dedicated to those men, women, and children who lie in graves as unmarked as their place in history.

Not only do these words mention the historical importance of the story about to be told and dedicate the film to the men and women neglected by history and cinema, but they further situate a comparison between the struggle of the African Americans in the film and the black struggle at the time of the film's release. Just as an end to slavery implied

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29. Johnson, *Hoo-doo Cowboys*, 159.



drastic changes for blacks, legislation of the 1960's promised changes. The differences between legislation and daily life, however, were painfully obvious and the opening of *Buck and the Preacher* reminds audiences that, for African Americans, there has never truly been an end to their struggles.

Although the member of the group from Saint Anne's Parish have stayed together since being emancipated, they do not agree on how they should use their status as newly freed people. Some members of the group succumb to their fear of the labor agents and begin to rethink their decision to move West. They suggest that turning back and returning to work under the familiar constraints of the same Louisiana plantation where they were enslaved will allow them a certain degree of comfort while still being free. Such characters represent the accommodationist spirit that Booker T. Washington and Oscar Micheaux promoted; they believed that accepting small victories guarantees success for their race. They are not willing to risk what few advances they have already made to pursue better conditions when they believe their current state is good enough.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are industrious and adventurous members of the group who want to continue their journey despite the uncertainties. They provide seasonal labor to farmers they meet along the Western route, experiencing monetary exchange for their services possibly for the first time. These characters seem the more practical of the group, understanding that an exercise of their newly granted freedom requires hard work and vigilance. Still, they are dedicated to improving their conditions for future generations. While they value Buck's opinion regarding what crops to plant, what supplies to buy, and what route to follow, they also look to their elder, Uncle Cudjo, who urges them to continue on to Colorado. Although the party acknowledges Uncle

Cudjo to be "more conjure than preacher," his visions provide them with a sense that connects them with their history of black folklore and tradition. Such characters are representative of African Americans who work diligently for their individual betterment as well as that of their whole race. This character type resembles many of black participants in the 1960's marches, demonstrations, and sit-ins. They realize the need for perseverance to ensure that they receive the long sought after rights and privileges they have been deprived for generations.

In the film, the group enlists Buck's help in negotiating the unfamiliar Western landscape. He gives them directions, teaches them to read maps, and shows how to best manage their resources until they reach their final destination. Buck is not only skilled in navigation and agriculture, but he establishes a rapport with the American Indians who populate the nearby areas. He parleys with them on a number of occasions, paying them to allow for the safe passage of black people and arranging for the conservative use of the land's natural resources, such as buffalo. In the first scene that Buck meets with the Indian chief and his wife, who translates for the men, he is followed by the Preacher, who fears the Natives. Buck dismounts his horse and respectfully waits for the Indians to arrive for their meeting. The Preacher, on the other hand, panics and, no doubt fearing his own scalp, urges Buck to run away. Buck convinces the Preacher to calm himself and silently watch what passes between the two races in their meeting. As the conversation begins, the Preacher silently but apprehensively watches the diplomatic way that Buck conducts business with the Natives. The respect that Buck shows for them demonstrates a necessary aspect in leadership; respect for others and cooperation with them is the only way to ensure success for yourself and your people. Just as Buck leads groups of

freedmen through the West, so Sidney Poitier hoped to guide black Americans in knowing what they were capable of at the close of the Civil Rights Movement. In a similar light, the Preacher represents those who fear for themselves and operate on assumptions they have about others rather than taking the time to explore ways they may cooperate with others. As the film goes on, the Preacher changes from a greedy race traitor who is willing to deliver Buck to the labor agents for \$500 to a man who trusts and relies upon other members of his race to live a fair life.

No sooner does the film begin than Buck reveals himself to be extremely different from previous cinematic cowboys, both white and black. Rather than concerning himself with the business of his own ranch or farm, Buck spends his time guiding his people to the best location to start life anew. Like other cowboy heroes, he works diligently to keep his word, even if it means risking his own life time and again. His promises to the black settlers are never broken and he demonstrates a strong desire to deliver them to safety. Although he is their leader, Buck still manages to be part of the Saint Anne's Parish people's community. Aside from guiding them through the West, Buck shares mundane activities with them, demonstrating the special bond with the people that allows them to trust him implicitly. A true sense of brotherhood and reverence develops between Buck and the people, and his concern for their well-being is clear.

When Buck is confronted with the labor agents' escalating violence towards the settlers, he is at a loss for what more he can do to protect them. On the verge of a breakdown, Buck supposes that he has finally been "beat." He reflects that in his rather difficult life, it was neither slavery nor fighting in the Civil War that posed the biggest challenges, but being a free man in the West. The vulnerability that Buck exhibits is

uncommon for a cowboy figure who rarely betrays his fear even in the face of an impossible task. Still, like the typical cowboy figure, Buck rises above the challenges at hand and, with the Preacher, devises a plan that successfully defeats the labor agents. Through humbling a figure long portrayed as invincible and demonstrating the difficulty he faces in achieving his goals, Poitier humanizes Buck, making him more accessible and relatable to black audiences who faced similarly staggering challenges during the early 70's. Poitier suggests that in difficult times, African Americans can overcome any trial with teamwork and perseverance.

Buck's relationship with the American Indians also challenges previous conceptions of the cowboy figure. Westerns traditionally treat American Indians in one of three ways: the films either completely ignore their presence, such as in *The Iron Horse* (1912); they quickly identify them as dangerous enemies that must be exterminated like in *Stagecoach* (1939); or, they revere them as knowledgeable first inhabitants while still insinuating their inferiority such as in *The Searchers* (1956). *Buck and the Preacher* resembles the last of these in its approach to an American Indian presence but revises it in powerful ways. Buck is expert in communicating with the American Indians and arranges regular meetings with them to negotiate trades. He seeks their permission for his actions as wagon master, telling them how many people he is bringing and attesting to their intentions to work the land rather than fight the natives. Clearly, Buck is interested in showing the American Indians the appropriate respect that other settlers seldom paid. In turn, Sidney Poitier wishes to draw attention to the fact that both history and cinema have treated the nation's first inhabitants poorly, misunderstanding and often dismissing them

entirely. Poitier writes that part of his goal in directing the picture was to show the relationship between blacks and American Indians that is, not surprisingly, also ignored.<sup>30</sup>

The violence in *Buck and the Preacher* seeks to demonstrate the actual hardship of black settlers as they moved to new lands. The aggressive nature of the night riders' attacks reminds audiences of the literal violence that African Americans were long subjected to and, in some regions, continued to experience into the 1970's when the film was released. At the same time, the constant fear that the settlers feel at the potential of being attacked again and having their freedom taken away so soon after achieving it suggests a similar threat looming over black Americans, even after groundbreaking legislation and years of struggle and protest.

For all that Poitier accomplishes with *Buck and the Preacher*, his reception among the black artistic community had been problematic for a number of years before. After initial success in a number of mainstream films like *The Defiant Ones* (1958), *Lilies of the Field* (1963), and *To Sir With Love* (1967), there was a backlash from some African American audiences. In his review of *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) titled "Why Does White America Love Sidney Poitier So?," New York Times writer Clifford Mason wrote of the disappointing way Poitier's roles continued to portray him as nothing more than a "showcase nigger" eager to solve white people's problems without accurately

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30. Although Poitier is vague in his description of the relationship between African Americans and American Indians that he wished to depict, there is a great deal of evidence that supports a variety of relationships between the two races. These relationships range from the violently antagonistic to the reverence for each other as non-whites. For specific instances of these respective examples, see Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), James N. Leiker "African Americans in the Nineteenth-Century West," *African Americans in the Nineteenth Century: People and Perspectives*, ed. Dixie Ray Haggard (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2010), and Darrell Millner, "York of the Corps of Discovery," *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 104, no. 3(2003): 302-33.

portraying the black community.<sup>31</sup> Mason wrote that until Poitier took a different type of role, "there can be no true portrait of the Negro and no true art."<sup>32</sup> Poitier wrote of his surprise and anger at Mason's article, calling it, "the most devastating and unfair piece of journalism."<sup>33</sup> But Clifford Mason was not alone; Donald Bogle described Poitier's characters as "throwbacks to the humanized Christian servants" of early cinema.<sup>34</sup> With descriptions of him as an "antiseptic, one-dimensional" tom, Poitier approached his future projects with the pressure of having to prove himself capable of more than Mason accused him as.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, *Buck and the Preacher* altered his public image favorably. One reviewer instantly noticed that with this film, neither Belafonte nor Poitier "will sit still for being typecast," and praised the actors for extending their acting skills into the Western genre.<sup>36</sup>

### **Blaxploitative Effects: *Buck and the Preacher* and *Blazing Saddles***

At the same time that Sidney Poitier worked diligently to demonstrate how the current African American struggle paralleled that of a century ago, a new era of filmmaking was underway. Films made almost exclusively by white studios but finally starring black actors appeared, telling revenge stories that thrilled African American audiences throughout the nation. Black audiences were an untapped resource for these studios, and they seized upon the opportunity to profit from featuring previously marginalized black faces on screen. Exploiting black actors as well as black patrons gave

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31. Clifford Mason, "Why Does White America Love Sidney Poitier So?" *The New York Times*, September 10, 1967.

26. Ibid.

33. Poitier, *This Life*, 335.

34. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Films*. 176.

35. Mason, "Why Does White America Love Sidney Poitier So?"

36. Robe, "Film Reviews: *Buck and the Preacher*," *Variety* 266, no. 10 (1972): 18.

this era its name -- "blaxploitation." Certainly, such a term limits deeper understanding of the films made during the period because it categorizes them hastily into the blaxploitation genre rather than any other. For instance, Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), which is generally acknowledged as one of the first films of the blaxploitation era, is known almost exclusively as a blaxploitation film despite including elements of crime and detective fiction. Still, the concept of the blaxploitation era/genre is useful in determining the politics and overarching goals of the films.

For my purposes, I am interested in Novotny Lawrence's series of essays in *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970's*, in which he defines a number of elements generally found in blaxploitation films: 1) a socially and politically aware black protagonist; 2) a large supporting cast of African Americans; 3) an urban, black location as the setting; 4) white villains defeated by African Americans who will stop at nothing, and who thus allegorically defeat racism; 5) a sexually liberated protagonist who is desired by both white and black audiences; and 6) soundtracks that blend contemporary sound with more traditional aspects of black music. Lawrence focuses exclusively on films made during the first half of the 1970's and considers them most relevant to his understanding the patterns and effects of blaxploitation.<sup>37</sup>

Films of this era differ from all the other films that previously featured African American characters and actors. No longer are they found only in the submissive roles such as servants and minstrels, but they are given lead parts with a host of African Americans as their supporting cast. Although blaxploitation films were not the first films

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37. Novotny Lawrence, *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970's: Blackness and Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 18-20.

white studios used to exploit black actors, they were the first films that gave black stars/actors a sense of empowerment through more significantly developed characters and plots. While the plots are not always the most cerebral, sophisticated, or even interesting, they do offer a fresh attempt to situate African Americans in the film industry. Rather than following the traditions of race films of the early 20th century or "Negro cycle" films produced by white post-war liberals. Blaxploitation films do not make use of the lone black character overwhelmed and overcome in a white world, but situate black characters in a contemporary setting and empower them in a way that appeals and relates to black audiences.

*Buck and the Preacher* was released in the midst of the blaxploitation era, and while the film features the revenge murder of a number of the white labor agents, none of the characters act with the extremity that Lawrence describes as essential to blaxploitation films. Instead, *Buck* is most interested in the reinterpretation of history and grounds audiences in a simultaneous appreciation of the past and realization of the present. Still, the use of so many black actors and characters is significant, as is Poitier's role in overtaking the direction of the film from a white director who failed to bring the right quality to the film. Despite Poitier's success in maintaining creative and directorial control over *Buck*, he was concerned about it being released in the midst of the blaxploitation era. He recognized blaxploitation films as part of a trend instead of a sincere move towards equal racial representation in films. Indeed, after the first few years the revenge plot seemed to run its course, and African Americans faced familiar hurdles in the film industry. Still, the blaxploitation framework remains one that is constantly adjusted and used in many later films, from comedies to dramas.



Two years after the release of *Buck and the Preacher* and also within the time frame of the blaxploitation era, comic director Mel Brooks's *Blazing Saddles* (1974) premiered. A parody of a Western film, *Blazing Saddles* tells the story of Bart (Cleavon Little), a black sheriff hired in the hopes of scaring away the white citizens of Rock Ridge, a town that sits directly in the path of the coming railroad. Once the town is vacant, the corrupt State Attorney General (Harvey Korman) will profit from the building of the railroad and will advance his political career while getting rich. Unfortunately for him, the sheriff earns the respect of the townspeople and rallies them against the Attorney General and his army of henchmen, ruining their plans.

With a combination of slapstick humor and witty references to both classic and spaghetti Westerns, *Blazing Saddles* has long been a favorite for audiences, whether because they are Brooks fans or because they appreciate the way that the film seems to mock every clichéd Western theme, from pure-hearted saloon girls to climactic shoot outs. On the surface, Brooks goes after laughs any way he can. He shamelessly characterizes idiotic ranchers as good-for-nothings and employs countless racial slurs to shock the audience into laughter more from his audacity in using the words than from any actual humor inherent to them. However, there is complexity behind the nature of Brooks's jokes and language. While they easily laugh, audiences are also forced to reconsider Brooks's creative decisions and question the covert meaning of the film.

After completing work on *The Twelve Chairs* in 1970, writer and producer Mel Brooks received the outline of a comedy titled *Tex X*. Learning that the material was in its early stages and already had a unique humor about it, Brooks took particular interest in

the piece and bought the rights to it.<sup>38</sup> He enlisted the help of comedian Richard Pryor to help write the screenplay, and along with Norman Steinberg, Andrew Bergman, and Alan Uger, they created a coherent project that executives at Warner Brothers studio took interest in. According to Brooks, Pryor was his first choice for the part of the black sheriff, but the Warner Brothers executives would not allow him further involvement. It is impossible to know the executives' exact reasons, but Pryor's departure from the "colorless" stage performances he gave in the '60's in favor of racially charged routines made many in the business wary of working with him.<sup>39</sup> Brooks also speculates that Pryor's reputation as increasingly dependent on drugs made him an undesirable prospect. Nevertheless, Brooks says that Cleavon Little, who had performed on Broadway, was the obvious choice at his audition and a more than adequate alternative to Pryor.<sup>40</sup>

Another creative change that Brooks had to consider was the title of the piece. "Tex X" was meant to reference Malcolm X and the possibilities of black power in a Western comedy. Brooks apparently liked the title but after being told that the film sounded too much like a blaxploitation film that would attract only a black audience, he agreed that the name needed to be changed. Ultimately, Brooks settled on "Blazing Saddles" because "it says Western and it says crazy."<sup>41</sup> That Brooks wanted to avoid labeling his work as a blaxploitation film says a great deal about his intent for the film. Brooks believed that giving the film a title that evoked humor rather than social criticism

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38. Mel Brooks, "Blazing Saddles Director Commentary," *Blazing Saddles*, DVD, directed by Mel Brooks, (1974; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2009).

39. Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 540.

40. Mel Brooks, "Blazing Saddles Director Commentary," *Blazing Saddles*, DVD, directed by Mel Brooks, (1974; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2009).

41. Ibid.

would help attract a broader audience and give the film a longer life than many of the other films released during the blaxploitation era.

As a comedy, the range of humor in *Blazing Saddles* is what makes the film as popular and perennial as it is. While there is plenty of physical slapstick and simplistic humor, there remains a level of sophistication and complexity. The most significant joke of the whole film is one that many audiences, both of the 1970's and currently, fail to grasp: the premise of the film is that a black sheriff in a Western town is unheard of, forcing the white characters and audiences to laugh at his presence. The reality of the matter is that there was an African American population in the West, and therefore the presence of just one black man would not be much of a stretch. However, because of history and cinema's erasure of African Americans in the West, audiences from the 1970's perceive Bart's authority as the main joke. The simultaneous ignorance of the white folks in Rock Ridge and the white folks in the audience then becomes the hidden joke that some audiences appreciate. If the joke is lost on an audience, however, the exaggerated caricatures of railroad workers, henchmen, and corrupt politicians engaged in clichéd Western scenarios are fallback jokes that still entertain them.

Aside from the overarching comical themes, there are many other humorous aspects to *Blazing Saddles*. Among these is the film's constant use of the word "nigger." Ultimately, the audience laughs at the frequent use of the word, but uncovering reasons for why so offensive a racial slur carries humor is challenging. Nearly every character in the film says the word, from the white foreman yelling abuses at the black workers to an elderly woman who, after Bart greets her, she glares at him and says, "Up yours, nigger!" The repetition of the word ultimately forces the audience to laugh, especially when it is

unexpected, as, for example, from an old lady. It is also unexpected from any film; neither the Jeffries Westerns nor *Buck and the Preacher* use the word as liberally as *Blazing Saddles*. Indeed, it does not appear at all in any of Jeffries's films and is used only by the labor agents in *Buck and the Preacher*. The surprising ways that "nigger" is said in *Blazing Saddles* allows for yet another revision of the Western; even when African American characters appeared in earlier Westerns, their race was rarely a topic of conversation. In *Blazing Saddles*, race is not only an important issue, but is brought to the forefront with the abrupt use of slurs.

The use of "nigger" and the audience's initially uneasy reaction to it mirrors what often happened when Richard Pryor used it in his on-stage comedy routines. When he first incorporated the word into his performances, he was often met with "baffled silence."<sup>42</sup> But as Pryor's character-based comedy routines gained popularity, the word was used "not for shock effect, but as [an] intertwined and inseparable part of his comedic phrasing."<sup>43</sup> Using the word, "nigger" allowed Pryor to establish a connection between himself and black audience members, but also to call attention to the word as both a familiar and inappropriate term. Pryor's use of the word allowed him to achieve the two-fold nature of humor that is crucial to African American culture. As Mel Watkins notes, black humor is often both inclusionary and exclusionary; through referring to black people as "niggers," Pryor maintains a sense of understanding between the black audience members that non-blacks are not privy to. Again, the importance of community occurs here, and Richard Pryor's comedy routines become an opportunity for African Americans to come together with the understanding that they are allowed a more thorough

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42. Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 539.

43. Audrey Thomas McCluskey, *Richard Pryor: The Life and Legacy of a 'Crazy' Black Man*, ed. Audrey Thomas McCluskey (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2008), 12.

understanding of Pryor and other black comics' messages than what is merely on the surface. Likewise, *Blazing Saddles* appeals to multi-racial audiences through the clever use of words and phrases. Although he was not chosen for the lead role, Pryor's style of jokes as well as his comical interpretation of social criticism are present in the film.

Despite a plot that revolves around a racial issue, there are very few black characters in *Blazing Saddles*. But like with *Buck and the Preacher*, the non-black characters play an equally important part in rectifying racial wrongs. After Sheriff Bart arrives in town to a cold reception, he finds a drunk man sobering in the jail. The man is Jim, the Waco Kid (Gene Wilder), a washed-up gunfighter who was known to have the fastest draw in the entire West. Jim is surprised to see a black sheriff, but is not appalled like the rest of the townspeople. After revealing to Bart that he drinks to recover from the trauma of his past, Jim and Bart develop a strong relationship that seems stronger because they are both outsiders in the town. Bart makes Jim a deputy and the two spend a great deal of time together. Jim clearly sympathizes with Bart and his desire to prove himself worthy of the role of sheriff, and by the end of the film, Jim has been the only one to consistently support Bart. Their brotherly friendship ultimately moves away from its homosocial nature at the beginning of the film and comes to border on the homosexual. In fact, the film ends with the two riding off into the sunset together in a limousine rather than on horseback. Still, the inclusion of the buddy trope in this film is sentimental rather than humorous, demonstrating the power of Bart and Jim's relationship. They work together to defeat the enemy just as Buck and the Preacher do. That Jim is white is of little consequence since his interest in justice is as clear as Bart's.

Early in their acquaintance, Jim asks what a "dazzling urbanite" such as Bart could be doing in the West. Such a question immediately reminds the audience of the apparent premise of the film -- that African Americans do not belong in the West. It also harkens back to the presence of a Jeffries-type character in Western films. And like Jeffries, Bart is both urbane and fully capable in a Western setting. He rides well, has ability as a marksman, and possesses a wit that serves him in making his way through an otherwise white Western world. Recognizing that Bart is right at home despite the white citizens' discomfort, Jim uses the expression "dazzling urbanite" sarcastically, suggesting that most of the town considers Bart to have lost his way on the journey to New York.

Interestingly, the "dazzling urbanite" conversation is not the only reference to the urban sensibilities that are common to Jeffries's race Westerns. After Bart receives his post to be sheriff of Rock Ridge, he rides through the prairie on horseback, wearing new clothes and looking the part of Western hero. All of a sudden, Bart encounters Count Basie conducting his band in "April in Paris" in the middle of so unfitting a landscape. Bart reacts with the same surprise that audiences may have when seeing the Four Tones appear with Herb Jeffries. He slows his gallop, passes and makes eye contact with the band leader, then continues on his way, visibly more optimistic. In a way, it seems that the new clothes, rope, horse, saddle, and gun (all things Herb Jeffries sings about in "I'm a Happy Cowboy") are the necessary ingredients for Bart to become sheriff, but the secret ingredient, the strong note of confidence, comes from Count Basie's personal endorsement. As the two look at each other, it is as though they are having an unspoken conversation about the importance of black men in the West. Suddenly, he seems to have the approval of African Americans who were actually in the West, those who were in

urban locations, and those who watch the film to do his duty and represent their race both to the people of Rock Ridge and the people who make up the film's audience.

While *Blazing Saddles* was created and released in the midst of the blaxploitation era, it does not incorporate the themes of its contemporary films in the formulaic way that most of them do. Instead, a number of twists on the themes of blaxploitation films appear in *Blazing Saddles*, though they are hidden beneath layers of casual humor and irony.

Referring back to Lawrence's explanation of the main components of blaxploitation films helps clarify the ways that Brooks is influenced by yet deviates from the blaxploitation formula: Bart is keenly aware of the social and political implications of his being sheriff in an all-white Western town yet operates with an easy-going and helpful spirit. While he does not live in a black urban setting, the population of black railroad workers acts as his supporting cast who represent the black race and its potential to outsmart the white oppressors, which is particularly evident in the film's opening scene. In the midst of the trouble, Bart becomes far more appealing to the townspeople. No longer do little old ladies insult him on the street, but they bring him pies and are sexually attracted to him in a way that would have seemed impossible at the beginning of the film. He ultimately recruits the entire town to rebel against Hedley Lamar and his henchmen, expanding the supporting cast to include a multi-racial group dedicated to overthrowing their shared oppressors. Incidentally, Hedley, Taggart, and the other white villains are evil not solely because they are white, but because they are greedy and willing to do anything for their own benefit, much like the villains of other films of the era. Rather than defeating racism the way that traditional blaxploitation film heroes do, Bart exposes, ridicules, and

succeeds in spite of it. Under his leadership, the people of Rock Ridge outsmart rather than outright conquer their enemies.

Many of the undercutting and humorous aspects of *Blazing Saddles* might be lost on some white audiences, but not lost on those who are most attentive. While it may seem a stretch to suggest that *Blazing Saddles* is an attempt to illuminate social and racial conditions to audiences, there is a good deal of evidence to support the idea. The evidence, however, is cloaked in easy jokes, drawn out scenes, and well-established comic actors, all of which distract from the film's central interest in revising and criticizing the standard Western narrative. Because Brooks continues to characterize the work as a parody, he succeeds in his interpretation of comic history rather than failing to convince audiences of the importance of a black Western history during a time when films that tried to make such statements were marginalized.

Although Mel Brooks is far from being considered the figurehead of white civil rights sympathizers, his work has a certain quality that suggests racial equality was on his mind. Growing up in a lower class Jewish household in the Brownsville section of New York City during World War II, Brooks was aware of Americans' prejudices and the way that humor helps interpret them.<sup>44</sup> Brooks's bit role as the Yiddish speaking Sioux chief in *Blazing Saddles* speaks volumes about his attitude toward the effect of race on social conditions. Seeing that young Bart and his parents are excluded from the otherwise white wagon train, the chief allows them to pass into the wilderness unharmed (much like the passage that the American Indians allow in *Buck and the Preacher*). As the black settlers continue on their way, the chief's counsel looks to him questioningly and he responds by

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44. James Robert Parish, *It's Good to be the King: The Seriously Funny Life of Mel Brooks* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2007).



saying, "They're darker than us! Oof!" Both the Sioux chief and, in effect, Mel Brooks recognize the varying degrees of marginalization that subalterns face. Both the American Indians and African Americans were subjected to racial prejudice from white America, but there seems to be some acknowledgement that it is not the same for all groups of "others." So as the chief does a small part in granting black settlers access to the West, he considers it no great favor because, after all, they are black and are sure to encounter countless other challenges along the way.

### **The Hip Hop Western: the 1990's**

Blaxploitation ended with the close of the 1970's, but many films continued to be influenced by the era for years to come. The heroic black cowboy made another appearance in Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992) in which he and Morgan Freeman star as retired guns for hire in need of money: Bill Munny (Eastwood) and Ned Logan (Freeman) set off for a Western town to avenge a prostitute named Delilah, who was brutally stabbed and slashed by one of her customers. The bounty hunters are met with hostility from the town's sheriff, Little Bill (Gene Hackman), who believes a whipping should serve as adequate punishment for the attacker's crimes. The other prostitutes disagree, though, and pool their money to pay Munny and Ned for their services.

Although Morgan Freeman, a prolific black actor by the 1990's, appears in the film, he perpetuates the "raceless wanderer" that Woody Strode often played decades earlier. No explicit reference to Ned's race is made during the entire film. His marriage to a Native American, Sally Two Trees, is similarly ignored. Ned is welcomed by the prostitutes and receives their services in exchange for his own with no racial discrimination whatsoever. Only when the sheriff catches Ned, who is perceived as a

vigilante, is there any allusion to his race. Little Bill arrests Ned and brutally whips him inside the jail. The beating he receives is so severe that he dies, and his body is displayed in the streets with a sign reading, "This is what happens to assassins around here." While a brutal whipping harkens back to the punishment black slaves often received and the connection that the humiliating public display of his dead body has to public lynchings, *Unforgiven's* racial undertones are not enough to fully capitalize on Freeman's role as a black cowboy. There are no other details about his race mentioned in the film, and he is seemingly treated the same as his white counterparts. Even the prostitute's attacker, a white man, was whipped for his crime, suggesting that the tactic is standard in this Western town. It seems that Eastwood hoped to raise questions about race in the film, but does not quite commit to doing so.

With the heroic black cowboy nearly absent from films since *Blazing Saddles*, Mario Van Peebles, son of legendary Melvin Van Peebles, writer, director, and star of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), approached the genre with a goal not unlike that of Sidney Poitier twenty years prior. The younger Van Peebles was influenced by classic and spaghetti Westerns, his father's desire to demonstrate "racial uplift and financial success" with blaxploitation films, and the more recent success of young black filmmakers like Spike Lee.<sup>45</sup> Through directing and acting, Mario Van Peebles self-consciously worked to correct history's longstanding neglect of African American cowboys in *Posse* (1993), which he hoped would "serve as an educational tool for both Blacks and Whites."<sup>46</sup> *Posse* tells the story of a fictional group of Spanish-American War

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45. Jesse Algeron Rhines, *Black Film, White Money* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 103.

46. "Mario Van Peebles Heads an All-Star Cast in 'Posse,' A Film About Black Cowboys," *Jet*, May 1993, 59.

deserters who move westward after seeing themselves on wanted posters in 1898. Their journey quickly becomes one of revenge as the leader, Jessie Lee (Mario Van Peebles), pursues the men responsible for murdering his father, King David, in a Western town years before.

The film opens with the elderly Woody Strode, briefly explaining the rich yet virtually unknown history of African Americans in the West. He specifically references Bill Pickett and Cherokee Bill among others and then begins the story of Jessie Lee and his posse of African American soldiers and one white soldier, Little J (Stephen Baldwin), who abandon their posts after finding gold on a mission. After making friends with a gambler (Big Daddy Kane) and escaping from their commanding officer (Billy Zane) in New Orleans, they travel West to avoid punishment for their crimes. Jessie allows the men to accompany him on to the all-black Western town Freemanville, where they learn that the white sheriff named Bates (Richard Jordan) of the neighboring town, Cutterstown, frequently interferes with the success of black citizens. He leads Klan raids and causes trouble in Freemanville, arresting citizens and charging them with false crimes that warrant execution. After they are executed, the deceased's property is then bought by the corrupt sheriff of Freemanville, Carver (Blair Underwood), who, with Bates, hopes to make a fortune when the railroad comes through.

When Jessie Lee arrives in Freemanville, his reception is mixed. Although the town is filled with his former friends and acquaintances, they fear that his desire for revenge will exacerbate the racial tension between the two towns. Indeed, when Bates, who was involved in King David's murder, learns of Jessie's return to the area, he leads a group of thugs to Freemanville to harass the people and make the posse reveal Jessie's

whereabouts. Only Little J, the sole white person staying in Freemanville, stands up to Bates and his men. His bravery antagonizes the mob from Cutterstown so much that they take him into the street and beat him to death in a way that eerily relives the murder of Jessie's father years ago. The martyrdom of Little J then becomes akin to that of King David. Despite being white, Little J's loyalty to the posse since they deserted the battlefield and the fact that he died in defense of his black surrogate brother suggests that he is another victim of racial prejudice as an honorary black man. Little J is made a hero also by comparing him to Carver, the sheriff of Freemanville. In the scene when Little J is killed, the whole town watches a confrontation between Bates and Carver. Carver points his gun at Bates and is encouraged by the townspeople to shoot him, but when he literally fails to pull the trigger, he is proven unable protect his people. Just when the citizens of Freemanville want Carver to embody the hero of blaxploitation films and finally defeat the allegorical figure of white racism, he cannot stand up to the challenge and yet again, Freemanville is bullied into submission.

For all of Mario Van Peebles's efforts to revise the Western narrative that neglects African Americans, his fidelity to historical accuracy comes into question almost as soon as the film begins. After the Strode character introduces several actual figures of the black West, the story quickly strays and turns the film into an indiscernible jumble of action in an unspecified, clichéd, Western climate, where the railroad is built by Asians and the unknown mountain paths are littered with dangerous Indians. Van Peebles wastes opportunity after opportunity to create an interesting Western story that details actual events and people. While he assembles a diverse cast of characters, from business-minded African Americans, to blood-thirsty whites, to mixed-race schoolteachers, he

fails to explore the historical or fictional possibilities of such characters. Similarly, Freemanville and Cutterstown present a fascinating doubling of stereotypical Western towns, but the characters who live in them remain mostly unnamed and uninteresting. They are extras rather than supporting characters and ultimately become targets for the Cutterstown fight rather than distinguishable figures in a community. Even the casting of black film legends Pam Grier, Melvin Van Peebles, and Isaac Hayes does not save the film. Their parts are small and not at all reminiscent of what the actors are known for. While Pam Grier had previously graced the silver screen as bad-ass prostitute Foxy Brown, she disappears into a nameless character with no more than three lines in *Posse*. Most of Grier's screen time occurs as she runs away from the final shootout and hides with the town's children. Rather than reprise their roles as blaxploitation heroes, the actors fade into the background as members of a hesitantly militant black population.

Another of the film's shortcomings has to do with Van Peebles's ignorance of the complex relationship between American Indians and black Americans in the West. He dismisses the threat of the Indians by suggesting that their shared hatred of the white man constitutes an alliance between the colored races. While *Buck and the Preacher* suggests a similar relationship, Poitier makes a tremendous effort to demonstrate the truth behind such an assertion. Rather than following suit, Van Peebles features Lana (Salli Richardson), Jessie's love interest, whose father is black and mother an Indian as a stand-in for the entire Native population. Lana wears Native American inspired outfits and acts as Jessie's confidant in considering how best to treat his enemies, but the film does little to explore any other aspect of her identity or the way that she lives in a world most interested in black and white rather than brown. Two other Native characters are in the

film. The first is Two Bears, who fights on behalf of the people of Freemanville but otherwise has no lines, and the second is a woman whom Bates hangs for apparently trespassing on government property, which used to be her own land. Despite the presence of these characters, like Lana's, their stories are ultimately unheard and they are homogenized into Van Peebles's "non-white" category. It seems that despite Van Peebles's strong aversion to cinema's neglect of African Americans' part in settling the American West, he falls into a similar pattern of behavior and nearly ignores American Indians altogether.

A number of other aspects of race are equally unexplored in the film. While the towns of Cutterstown and Freemanville act as sites of racial development and tension, their narrative potential remains untapped. The respective sheriffs of the towns, Bates and Carver, are revealed to be corrupt, deceitful, and harmful to the black community in their own ways: Bates is an outright racist who exploits his position as sheriff to persecute American Indians as well as African Americans who resist his power, while Carver uses his position to gain the upper hand in the business landscape that will present itself once the railroad comes through. The complexity of both characters is clear, but rather than grapple with the tangled concepts of race and morality, the men simply meet the same fate -- death at the hands of Jessie Lee, the only hero the town can trust.

While the frequency of violence in *Posse* is practically standard for the Western genre, the over-the-top nature of the gunfights, shootouts, and explosions call into question the serious nature of the film. These excessively violent aspects of the film contradict its efforts as a revisionist Western and situate it more in the action/adventure genre. After a long shootout with Bates and his men in which many of Freemanville's

citizens die, Jessie Lee is confronted once again with his commanding Army officer, who has captured Lana and trapped her in the burning saloon. With the help of the last surviving member of the posse, Jessie mortally wounds the commander, rescues his friends, and escapes the saloon just as his last stick of dynamite explodes, destroying every remaining structure in town. With nearly nothing remaining, Jessie optimistically tells Lana that he can afford to rebuild all of Freemanville with his stolen gold.

All the problems that previously riddled the town and Jessie's troubled past have been solved with a combination of firearms, dynamite, and money. Such an interest in the power of material possessions greatly contrasts the apparent goal of Van Peebles's film, which was to expose hidden truths of the West. It is clear, then, that, like *Blazing Saddles*, *Posse*'s goals are barely perceivable amidst material that its director felt would be more appealing to mainstream audiences. Indeed, much of *Posse*'s plot resembles that of several other Westerns, and, interestingly, is a variation of the narrative of *Blazing Saddles*. Both narratives are interested in revealing a certain truth about the West and embellish that truth with more attractive and luring characteristics that mainstream audiences take interest in. Just as audiences treasure Brooks's constant humor, they also enjoy scenes of action and violence that are prevalent in *Posse* even if not wholly understanding the other purposes of the films.

By framing the story of Jessie Lee's posse with the brief appearance of Woody Strode at the film's beginning and end, Mario Van Peebles is able to pay direct homage to the cinematic black cowboys who are as neglected as the historical ones. Strode not only acts as a signifier of black Americans' history in Western film, but he also contributes to the plot. By the end of the film, it is revealed that Strode knows about Jessie Lee and his

posse because they saved him, as a young boy, from the small wagon train that he and his family were part of that never made it to Freemanville. Jessie and the posse encounter an overturned covered wagon and find the young black boy inside, his parents dead. The posse takes him to Freemanville and he joins the rest of the town's children in playing while consistently spying on Jessie throughout the film. After the battle in Freemanville ends and the town is destroyed, Jessie's optimism for the future is made plain as he looks to the boy, a clear symbol for the future of a black West. The boy's image then fades into that of the elderly Strode, who the audience realizes has told the entire story to two reporters and a photographer. These men then thank him for his time and regard him with reverence and awe, demonstrating that his story has corrected the reporters' understanding of the importance of African Americans in the West.

Despite its many shortcomings and wasted opportunities, there are successful aspects to *Posse*. The most successful of these is Van Peebles's incorporation of the gangsta figure, which emerged from popular culture during the 1980's and shortly after the popularity of blaxploitation films. In telling the story of a mostly all-black posse riding through the West, Van Peebles self-consciously casts men who represent a contemporary image of black masculinity. The black members of the posse are Angel (portrayed by rapper Tone Loc), Weezie (played by filmmaker Charles Lane), Obobo (played by basketball player turned actor Tiny Lister), and Father Time (played by Big Daddy Kane, a rapper and hip-hop artist). Van Peebles's interpretation of a black Western posse as contemporary black men is totally original. While they observe aspects of the Western through the plot and their acting, the men's public personae come through and demonstrate blackness in a way that brings the issue to the foreground. While Van



Peebles's film is working to correct an understanding of a black presence in the West, he, in effect, questions what that presence actually looked like. His actors' portrayals then allows fascinating connections between black men of the past and black men from the present. The diversity amongst the group of black men also suggests that through neglecting the presence of black men in the West, history also neglects their differing qualities that make them a diverse rather than the homogenized group African Americans are often portrayed as.

Because *Posse* was released in 1993, Van Peebles is heavily influenced by the gangsta figure who became a representative for black urban lifestyle throughout the nation, particularly on the West coast. Rather than shy away from the clear connection between current black men on the West coast of the United States and their predecessors, Van Peebles takes advantage of it, wholeheartedly embracing the gangsta of the contemporary hip-hop age and placing him in the West of generations ago as the black cowboy figure that most audiences are unaware of. The combination of cowboy and gangsta calls for immediate comparison between the two figures as politically motivated yet marginalized by mainstream America. Blake Allmendinger makes a number of connections between "cowboys and 'homeboys,'" but his observations seem to stop at the conclusion that both types of men carry guns and stake claims to the streets as romantic members of the anti-establishment.<sup>47</sup> Allmendinger is correct in assuming that many West Coast rappers of the 1980's and '90's connect themselves to cowboys merely as petty criminals and loners who avoid conformity through their own action. But rather than reflecting on the types of struggles common to the two groups, Allmendinger suggests that this connection in *Posse* is more for marketing than history or culture, and

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47. Allmendinger, *Imagining the African American West*, 79.

he therefore minimizes the success of Van Peebles's use of the figure. Still, Jessie Lee and his black friends closely resemble popular gangsta figures of the 1990's: they search for ways to be at once happy and safe while encountering racial tension and violence in unstable Western areas. They fight with one another and law enforcement and ultimately come out as anti-heroes whose inner conflicts make them sympathetic. Not only do all these characteristics connect historical black cowboys to 1990's gangstas, but also to contemporary black men not involved in gang warfare or the hip-hop scene who find similar struggles in their own lives.

By including rapper Tone Loc and hip-hop artist Big Daddy Kane, Van Peebles allows for an even stronger visual connection between cultural icons on the 1990's and characters based on actual black cowboys of the American West. Additionally, the film's soundtrack, which features the song "It's the Posse (Shoot 'em Up)" by Intelligent Hoodlum (currently known as Tragedy Khadafi), further suggests a connection between the black Western heroes and black men struggling for the same recognition and success in contemporary urban areas. The song self-consciously parallels the two groups, and again references the forgotten black cowboys, such as the Rufus Buck gang and Cherokee Bill, insisting that, at the very least, they get recognition for their presence in West. Through the use of this song and the deliberate effort to align a contemporary portrayal of black manhood in a Western setting, Van Peebles suggests that while black cowboys are nearly forgotten, their descendants are determined to make the presence and importance of all black men, past and present, known. Again, the urban and the Old West collide in this revisionist Western, but this time it is much more conscious than in any of the Jeffries films or in *Blazing Saddles*.

### ***Django Unchained: A Neo-Race Western***

After the release of *Posse* in 1993, there were few Westerns released in the United States and even fewer that incorporated African Americans into the traditional Western setting. It would take nearly twenty more years before a well-developed attempt to incorporate a black presence into the West would surface. Quentin Tarantino, who rose to fame in the 1990's and early millennium as the director of several violently gritty noir-ish films, wrote and directed *Django Unchained* (2012) in an effort to tell a story about slavery but tell it as a Western.

The film tells the story of Django (Jamie Foxx), a black slave bought by Dr. King Schultz (Christoph Waltz), a German bounty hunter. Because Schultz abhors the institution of slavery, his relationship with Django is a nurturing one, and he teaches Django how to read, keep figures, ride, and shoot. Schultz quickly sees, however, that Django already possesses skills in using a gun and suggests that he may earn himself the title "the fastest gun in the South" if he accepts Schultz's offer to partner up in the bounty hunting business. After collecting a number of bounties, the two concoct a complex plan to buy Django's wife, Broomhilda (Kerry Washington) from her new master, Calvin Candie (Leonardo DiCaprio), owner of the notoriously hellish Mississippi plantation Candyland. Schultz's and Django's plan requires that they make Candie's acquaintance by way of business without revealing that Django and Hildi are married. Their true motives are exposed, however, by Candie's head house servant, Stephen (Samuel L. Jackson). Violence ensues when Candie discovers that Schultz and Django manipulated him and the film ends with an extended shoot-and-blow-out where Schultz and Candie are killed and Django and Hildi are recaptured. Django is then sold by

Candie's sister to a mining company, but tricks the miners into setting him free yet again. He then kills them, rides back to Candyland to rescue Hildi and kills the rest of the enemies he made on the plantation.

An all-star cast and a polarizing director ensured a large audience for the film. Chock full of cinematic allusions, statements on American social conditions, and a keen interpretation of arguably the most brutal part of American history through a contemporary critical lens, *Django Unchained* drew large numbers of curious crowds for weeks after its Christmas Day premiere. Almost instantly, an R-rating for language and violence situated *Django Unchained* amidst a great deal of criticism from fans and critics alike. Opinions vary on every possible aspect of the film, from the unnaturally explosive orange blood splatter to the treatment of a sensitive topic like slavery.

Much controversy arose around the frequent use of the word "nigger," which is heard about 110 times throughout the film's two hours and forty five minutes. Immediately after the film's release, some African Americans protested the use of the word, suggesting that it was not done artfully, but disrespectfully. Spike Lee weighed in on the issue, writing via social media that Tarantino represents slavery as though it were nothing more than a spaghetti Western and that it would be "disrespectful to my ancestors to see that film."<sup>48</sup> Many other fans and critics came to Tarantino's defense, saying that the film uses the epithet appropriately, not only reflecting its actual use in the antebellum South, but demonstrating the different ways the word was used and continues to be used both against and amongst African Americans. Like most of the exaggerated aspects of the

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48. Melena Ryzik, "Spike Lee Goes After *Django Unchained*," *ArtsBeat: The Culture at Large*. The New York Times Company. [http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/25/spike-lee-goes-after-django-unchained/?\\_php=true&\\_type=blogs&\\_r=0&module=ArrowsNav&contentCollection=Arts&action=keypress&region=FixedLeft&pgtype=Blogs](http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/25/spike-lee-goes-after-django-unchained/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0&module=ArrowsNav&contentCollection=Arts&action=keypress&region=FixedLeft&pgtype=Blogs) (accessed 12 January 2014).

film, it is clear that the repetitive use of the word is also for the sake of style and helps to define the film as Tarantino's work.<sup>49</sup> Whereas *Blazing Saddles* repeats the word "nigger" in a comic way, Tarantino's use allows for a wide range of reactions depending on the scene.

Despite addressing the issue of slavery in the antebellum South, *Django Unchained* is clearly interested in participating in the Western genre. Gun fights, stage coach robbery, and mining are among the smaller details that align the film with the Western tradition, and much of its first half takes place in Western settings, from small towns in Texas to the snowy mountains of Wyoming. After buying Django from the Speck brothers "somewhere in Texas," as on-screen text reveals, Schultz takes Django to Daughtrey, Texas, where one of Schultz's targets lives and works as the town's sheriff. Upon arriving in Daughtrey, both Schultz and Django are immediately marked as outsiders; Schultz is a German dentist dressed in fine clothes, driving a wagon, and Django is a black man on a horse. Neither German doctors nor black men appear common to the town, and they elicit stares from the people merely by riding through the main street. Despite the fact that neither of them seems wholly at ease in the West, Schultz is far more comfortable negotiating his way through it than Django is. Schultz confidently presents himself as a representative of the American judicial system, claiming to have the law on his side and thereby justifying any actions he commits, like shooting the sheriff in order to claim the reward for his bounty. After Schultz artfully explains to the town marshal why he shot the sheriff, the townspeople recognize his legal authority and allow the men to leave town on their own accord.

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49. Tarantino faced similar criticism for using "the n-word" in *Jackie Brown* (1997), a film starring Pam Grier that pays homage to blaxploitation era films.

From Texas, Schultz and Django travel to Tennessee, where three brothers who Schultz is hunting work as overseers for a man called Big Daddy (Don Johnson). The trio previously worked on the Carrucan plantation, where Django and his wife were enslaved prior to being sold separately. Django confronts two of the brothers, Roger and John, who are preparing to whip a young woman the same way that they once whipped Hildi after she ran away. Just as they are ready to flog the girl, Django arrives, shoots John, then mercilessly whips Roger. A crowd of slaves gathers around and as Roger whimpers on the ground, Django asks the crowd, "Y'all wanna see somethin'?" and shoots Roger from point-blank range five times. The excessive violence with which Django treats John and Roger demonstrates the personal nature of his revenge. But as witnesses gather, Django feels compelled to show them the power he has over these white men and finishes killing Roger as though it were a performance meant to please the slaves. In this short scene, then, Django quickly shows his desires for and ability to exert vengeance against his and his race's oppressors. Not only have the men personally hurt Django and his wife, but they pose a threat to a greater population of African Americans.

After seeing Django's skills and fervor, Schultz extends his offer to make Django a partner in bounty hunting in exchange for finding Hildi. Django hastily agrees, reveling in the prospect of getting rewarded for killing white people, which foreshadows his thirst for blood that will develop by the end of the film. Django and Schultz's relationship develops into a variation of the buddy trope found in many Western films. The two spend a great deal of time together, practicing their skills, using their skills, and reaping the benefits of their skills throughout the course of the film. Still, for all the familiarity and camaraderie that develops between Django Schultz, there are also troubling aspects to

their relationship. For one, Schultz purchased Django in the beginning of the film, bought him a horse, and gave him a coat. From this moment on, a paternalistic Schultz provides for Django, from furnishing his wardrobe to giving him daily reading lessons. Schultz refers to Django as "my boy" and acts as a barrier between Django and the white men they encounter, from Big Daddy to Calvin Candie. When he is first offered the bounty hunting deal, Django skeptically asks why Schultz should help rescue Broomhilda. Schultz explains that because he has purchased and then granted Django his freedom, he cannot help but feel "vaguely responsible" for the course of Django's life. Aside from that, the heavy-handedness of "Dr. King" Schultz's name suggests that Schultz is a sincere ally for Django. It is Schultz's naturally strong aversion to slavery that gives Django more subjectivity than he ever had previously and nurtures Django into the powerfully confident avenger that he is in the end of the film in contrast to the self-deprecating shell of a man he is in the beginning.

While *Django Unchained* deals specifically with Southern sensibilities and culture, Tarantino works to create an understanding of the American South through Schultz's global perspective. Schultz's feelings on slavery and America in general resemble that of many German immigrants who came to the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. He values education and the arts, is self-sufficient, and seeks to alleviate some of the world's evil through pursuing criminals. While little of Schultz's personal history is revealed in the film, the audience is given to believe he could be a German Forty-Eighter, who came to the United States after his own nation failed to support significant reform in 1848. Because the film's narrative begins in 1858 and Schultz stopped practicing dentistry about five years ago, it is plausible that the character

is modeled off someone who came to the United States with the hopes of bringing his liberal ideals and applying them to his new life in America, which he eventually does through his relationship with Django.

Although Schultz is not explicitly characterized as a revolutionary, the possibility makes Schultz one of the film's most complex characters. While he prefers freedom and fair treatment of people over slavery, he possesses traits that contradict those ideals. When coaching a hesitant Django through killing his first bounty, Schultz reminds Django that despite what it seems, the man is a murderer and thief and deserves to die rather than live happily with his family. With more coaxing, Django shoots the man in front of his son, but without being plagued by guilt. The scene helps Django steel himself for the coming hardships, but it also changes the dynamic between the partners. Django becomes slightly less inclined to trust Schultz and considers the advice from his mentor evidence that for all his good qualities, he can, at times, be brutally heartless.

Dr. King Schultz's interests in human rights is clear, but so is his repugnance of certain aspects of American culture. For instance, while Calvin Candie's interests in showmanship and extravagance are part of his understanding of Southern hospitality, Schultz interprets them as evidence of the depravity of Candie's lifestyle. He acts as the gracious guest but is clearly bothered when Candie offers women to him and allows D'Artagnan, a runaway slave, to be torn apart by dogs, both of which are meant to ensure his guest's entertainment. Schultz is careful not to betray his true feelings when conducting business with Candie, but there are times when his discomfort is palpable. Prior to arriving at Candyland, Schultz warns Django of the danger they may encounter if they are not careful, saying, "I, for one, do not intend to die in Chickasaw County,



Mississippi, USA." In spite of Schultz's intensions, this is what eventually happens and his words to Django reveal his low opinion of the area, its people, and its practices.

For some critics, Schultz is not a believable character. While his generosity seems sincere and his relationship with Django based on compassion, the extent of his benevolence strikes some as unlikely for whites before the Civil Rights Movements, let alone the Civil War. They consider the character of Schultz to be a spokesman for contemporary feelings of white guilt rather than a genuine representation of nineteenth century abolitionists. Instead, they suggest that Schultz is an example of the "fictional reparation" that the entire film attempts to convey.<sup>50</sup> Certainly, using such a character helps develop the counter-narrative to American history that Tarantino creates; while there may not have been former slaves with white benefactors who gave them the means to exact revenge against their oppressors, Tarantino imagines the power that such a man could have had if he had a friend like Schultz. Interestingly, for all that he does to help Django when they are both alive, it is Schultz's death that finally allows Django to throw caution to the wind and wholeheartedly pursue his oppressors.

The exaggerated violence in the film is at once shocking and purposeful. While the constant use of "nigger" seems an abuse and overuse of the word, the violence in *Django Unchained* is far more purposeful. The majority of the murders Django commits symbolize his desire for revenge, not only for himself, but for his entire race. Beginning with his murder of John and Roger Brittle, Django becomes an agent of revenge on behalf of the African American race. While the Brittle brothers happily made Django and

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50. Henry Barnes, "The 10 Best Films of 2013, No. 5 - Django Unchained," *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/dec/16/10-best-films-2013-django-unchained> (accessed 7 January 2014).

Broomhilda suffer, such sadists were likely to inflict pain on other slaves that lived on the various plantations where the brothers worked. After exacting his revenge against the Brittles, Django helps Schultz to hunt other white men, whom he enjoys killing mostly because they are white and represent a threat to his race. These early murders are deliberate executions, and through performing them, Django is christened a racial avenger, correcting what racial wrongs he can with his newfound power.

Revenge, of course, is what eventually overtakes Django for the rest of the film. The practice of bounty hunting transforms Django from a soft-spoken slave to a self-confident black man. After learning that Hildi is being punished for running away from Candyland, his desire for revenge against her oppressors increases. He reaches for his gun several times when he sees his wife abused and humiliated, but calms himself, heeding Schultz's earlier warning: "Don't get carried away with your retribution -- you'll lose sight of why we're here." After Candie discovers Django and Schultz's charade and Schultz is killed, however, Django completely dismisses that warning and loses all moral and rational thought as he is met with an army of nameless, faceless white men who pour into the big house after their master is shot. Django frantically shoots them before they can shoot him, killing eighteen men before running out of ammunition. Stephen then convinces Django to give up, and he and Hildi are recaptured and separated once again.

Despite the new challenge he finds himself in, Django still manages to exert his newly discovered strength to save himself. He learns he has been sold to a mining company and Stephen promises that the work will be so hard that Django will wish he were dead. As he is carried off with the other black men who have been sold, Django demonstrates his self-assuredness once again by tricking the miners into releasing him

and giving him a gun. He then kills the four of them, performing the execution in front of the other black men just as he performed the murder of the Brittle brothers in front of a black audience. From there, Django storms the shack where the white overseers live, seeking revenge against them in D'Artangan's name, and kills all eight of them. Next, Django returns to the big house, where the walls and floors are still stained in blood from his previous conquest. When Calvin Candie's funeral party returns to the house, Django reveals his intentions, telling the two black female servants to "get away from these white folks" before shooting Candie's sister and two white men who accompany her. The last one standing against Django is Stephen, who Django then immobilizes by shooting in the kneecaps and leaves in the house, which is laced with dynamite. Lighting the fuse, Django exits the house, where Stephen screams epithets and profanity, only to be silenced by a tremendous explosion that destroys the house. Django grins at the explosion and he and Hildi ride away, finally reunited.

### **Tarantino's Accidental Western**

There are many aspects of *Django Unchained* that qualify it as a race Western. At its most basic level, the film fuses issues from early race and blaxploitation-era films that focus on issues of revenge and black identity. By placing these concerns in the Western mise-en-scène and referencing dozens of other Westerns, *Django Unchained*, too, becomes part of the Western genre. Despite these facts, it becomes clear that Quentin Tarantino's interest in creating a race Western is relatively low as is his awareness of it already being an established, if unknown, genre. As Michael K. Johnson writes, aspects of the race Western that appear in *Django Unchained* "seem to have developed logically from the situation of placing an African American character in a Western plot rather than

from any extensive awareness of that tradition by writer-director Tarantino."<sup>51</sup> So while *Django Unchained* is a unique film and was released at a time when both Westerns and blaxploitation-like films are scarce, Tarantino still contributes to the race Western genre rather than inventing it, which, in some interviews, he seems to believe he was doing.

Tarantino admits that he incorporates a story he already wrote into the Western genre, but through changing the film's focus from the historical role of African Americans in the antebellum West, he concentrates on the South during the same time period. It is this fact that makes *Django Unchained* suffer in its negotiation of an African American presence in the West. The scenes during the first half of the film in which Schultz and Django live and work together in Wyoming as well as their brief time in Texas are the only examples to examine. When in Texas, Django is treated similarly to how he is treated throughout the rest of the South. White people refer to him as Schultz's "nigger," object to him riding a horse, and consider him a troublemaker, and this treatment is reflected during his time on Big Daddy's plantation as well as Candyland. In Wyoming, however, the partners encounter only Sheriff Gus, a white man who extends hospitality to them without referencing either Schultz's German heritage or Django's black skin. The three men are equals in Wyoming, and they commune together without any mention of their differences, racial and otherwise.

Despite being adamant that the film resemble a Western and feature a black hero, Tarantino does little to fuse the two in as self-conscious a way as previous directors of race Westerns like Mario Van Peebles in *Posse*. For Tarantino, making a Western is not about revising history, but incorporating contemporary trends of black life and culture, such as violence, revenge, and a sense of empowerment that do not necessarily reflect

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<sup>51</sup> Johnson, *Hoo-doo Cowboys*, 236.

fact. Additionally, the creative collaboration of African Americans like Jamie Foxx and Samuel L. Jackson help Tarantino to adjust his narrative in a way that is more likely to appeal to black audiences. Like Van Peebles, Tarantino is interested in connecting current interpretations of blackness into a film set in the 19th century, but he is more successful through his use of seasoned actors and a carefully constructed narrative that does not hesitate to address brutal aspects of American history.

With an impressive body count, over-the-top gunfights, and spectacular explosions, many critics described *Django Unchained* as an entertaining and thought-provoking film. Quentin Tarantino and the cast appeared on the talk show circuit, giving interviews about the experience of making the film as well as their opinions on the story and speculating about the characters' psyches. During many of these interviews, Tarantino addressed his desire to tell the story of an empowered slave from the Western's point of view. Inspired by the Westerns of Sergio Leone, Sergio Corbucci, and Sam Peckinpah, which represent a bleak, and desperate West, Tarantino wanted to tell the story of a black bounty hunter in bleakest terms. For him, this meant using American slavery as a backdrop, forcing audiences to confront an issue that is rarely dealt with in mainstream film.

It is clear from many of *Django Unchained's* details that Leone and Corbucci greatly influenced Tarantino's film. Not only does the scene in Daughtrey, Texas feature the same dusty, muddy landscape and unrestrained violence that the two Italian directors are famed for, but Tarantino borrows the title character and theme of Corbucci's *Django* (1966). Corbucci's film is about a mysterious gunslinger (Franco Nero) who is haunted by the murder of his lover. Like Tarantino's Django, Corbucci's character seeks revenge

on those who are responsible for his pain. Although Corbucci's Django ultimately comes out the hero, he is physically damaged (his hands are crippled by his adversaries stomping on them) and continues to be emotionally tormented by the fact that revenge did not bring his lover back.

"Django" means "I awake" in the Romany language and was the name of the famed Gypsy musician Jean "Django" Reinhardt, a European jazz artist from the 1930's who still played his instruments despite a debilitating injury to his hand.<sup>52</sup> While the hero in *Django Unchained* never injures his hands, he replicates a figure overcoming odds in order to reach his goals. Foxx's Django overcomes every disadvantage from slavery to illiteracy to conquer his racial oppressors. Both Nero and Foxx portray Django in a powerful manner, representing Reinhardt's original intention of awakening and rising to the occasion for personal success and satisfaction.

Although earlier films inspire Tarantino in his selection of music for *Django Unchained*, they are not the only source he uses. He works with the veteran spaghetti Western composer Ennio Morricone to create new pieces for *Django Unchained* as well as rearrange pieces Morricone made for other Westerns throughout the 1960's and '70's. But even more important is Tarantino's incorporation of contemporary hip-hop and R&B into *Django Unchained's* soundtrack. Music from James Brown, Tupac Shakur, John Legend, and even a song co-written by Jamie Foxx and Rick Ross are among the songs that demonstrate a distinctly contemporary black identity. Like Mario Van Peebles in *Posse*, Quentin Tarantino is interested in collaborating with African American artists to blend the art forms of film and music. Whereas Van Peebles uses music made

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52. Michael Dregni, *Django: The Life and Music of a Gypsy Legend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

specifically for his film, Tarantino makes use of work that already exists yet speaks to the point of *Django Unchained*. He includes new pieces from John Legend and Rick Ross, but these songs are not nearly as self-conscious of the narrative they accompany as the ones from Intelligent Hoodlum in *Posse*. Rather, a combination of new, old, and adapted music subtly demonstrates the soundtrack's dedication to a range of artistry while reflecting the mood of the scenes and the overarching goals of the film. It seems, then, that for Quentin Tarantino, a race Western must consider a contemporary African American presence rather than over-rely on the historical black one. Mario Van Peebles's interest in exposing the untold truth of the West is stifled by his over emphasis on that goal and neglect of relevance for a contemporary audience. Tarantino does the opposite by focusing on an inclusion of contemporary blackness and applying what that concept currently is to a specific historical moment.

The music from traditional and contemporary black artists, such as James Brown's funk and Tupac's rap, makes the themes of revenge and retribution in *Django Unchained* all the more prevalent. James Brown's "The Payback" and Tupac's "Untouchable" are blended into a mash-up original to the *Django Unchained* soundtrack called "Unchained/The Payback/Untouchable," which plays during Django's eighteen body massacre. Both artists' original songs echo the prediction that racial oppressors will one day be held accountable for their actions. Indeed, Tupac spent much of his life and career advocating violence as a way for African Americans to put an end to their continued oppression throughout the nation in the 1990's. The son of Afeni Shakur, a member of the Black Panther Party, Tupac established himself as a prophetic figure in the black community from a young age, witnessing to young African Americans through his poetry

and rap music and convincing them of his legitimacy as a leader. While Tupac did not quite follow in his parents' footsteps by seeking direct political changes for African Americans, his music was a substitute for the political rhetoric of the previous generation. He believed the violent and volatile nature of his songs allowed for a connection to everyday people, just as using violence allowed the Black Panthers to gain the interest of "brothers on the block" and encourage them to take part in the political discussion.<sup>53</sup>

Tupac's influential music also established him as a religious figure for a black community eager to find spiritual strength in the midst of earthly troubles. In the version of "Untouchable" used in *Django Unchained*, there is an interlude in which Tupac speaks the words, "Expect me, nigga, like you expect Jesus to come back." This blatant connection that Tupac establishes between himself and Christ qualifies him as an agent of God. Similar signs of divine action are heard in other songs featured in the film. For instance, the lyrics to John Legend's song, "Who Did That to You?" mention retribution on behalf of God: "Now I'm not afraid to do the Lord's work / He said vengeance is His but I'ma do it first." The words reiterate the sense of empowerment that Django finally has at the film's end. Django takes this concept to heart and delivers revenge for himself, Broomhilda, D'Artagan, and, symbolically, all other oppressed African Americans.

While his revenge is in full force in the last parts of the film, Django actively pursues vengeance even before Schultz frees him. Immediately after being unchained, Django goes to one of the Speck brothers who is pinned beneath a horse and steps on the animal, worsening the slaver's pain. Once Schultz reveals to Django that they are searching for the Brittle brothers, Django wholeheartedly pursues them in the interest of

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53. Kara Keeling, "A Homegrown Revolutionary?": Tupac Shakur and the Legacy of the Black Panther Party," *Black Scholar* 29, no. 2/3 (1999): 59-63.



making them pay for the pain they inflicted upon him and Broomhilda. After killing the Brittle brothers, Django's desire for revenge is tempered through his training and camaraderie with Schultz. Django's actions suggest that he was meant to kill and that his desire to do so is insatiable. Once all of Django's white nemeses are killed, he remains in Candyland's big house with Stephen, who is portrayed as equally threatening to the black race despite belonging to it. While Django yells abuse at some of the slaves while he is with Candie, Stephen is the only black person he physically harms or kills. Hurting Stephen is clearly as cathartic for Django as killing white people, but just before Stephen dies, he screams at Django with a sobering thought: "Can't no nigger gunfighter kill all the white people in the world." Certainly, the task is impossible, but the film ends by suggesting that if anyone were to avenge the wrongful treatment of the entire black population, Django would be the hero to do it.

Revenge is not only characteristic to Quentin Tarantino's films, but was the theme of the entire blaxploitation era, whose influences on *Django Unchained* are numerous. Tarantino is known for his fondness of blaxploitation films and his 1997 film *Jackie Brown* is a direct homage to the works, artists, and actors of that time. His incorporation of popular black music into *Django Unchained's* soundtrack echo Lawrence's list that suggests most blaxploitation era films take a similar approach by including a mix of contemporary and traditional black sound. Tarantino is not only influenced by the music of blaxploitation films, but also by many of their stories. In an interview with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Tarantino specifically cited the low-budget blaxploitation film *The Legend of Nigger Charley* (1972) as a major source of inspiration for the story of a black bounty hunter in the West. The film stars former football player Fred Williamson as

Charley, a Virginia slave who is granted freedom from his dying master only to be re-enslaved by his master's greedy beneficiary. After killing the man who took away his freedom, Charley escapes the plantation with two fellow slaves, Toby and Joshua, and heads West. The trio is pursued by a notorious slave hunter and his gang, who track them to a Western town, where they hole up in a saloon and engage in a shootout. Charley kills the enemy and is then asked to act as body guard to a poor farmer who is robbed by the same gang of thieves on a regular basis. Charley successfully defends the man, killing the robbers but losing Joshua and two new friends in the process. At the end, Charley and Toby ride away, knowing full well that wherever they go trouble will follow.

According to his interview with Gates, Tarantino suggested that *Django Unchained* was a reinterpretation of *The Legend of Nigger Charley* and strives to make the same statement of black male empowerment as the earlier film. Despite its low budget, Tarantino says that *Legend* "stands alone" in its ability to suggest the power that African Americans can have in spite of generations of oppression.<sup>54</sup> For all of Tarantino's original creativity, he remains clearly influenced by the work of other artists, from Spaghetti Western directors and composers, to blaxploitation era films, to contemporary artists. Tarantino embraces his unique style, which he likes to refer to as a "hip-hop aesthetic," where he takes existing work from various areas and combines it so that all the aspects of the film work together in a coherent and entertaining way.<sup>55</sup>

Part of Tarantino's so-called hip-hop aesthetic is apparent not only through his actual use of other artist's work, but also in generic terms. As previously mentioned,

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54. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Tarantino 'Unchained': Part 1: 'Django' Trilogy?", *The Root* [http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2012/12/django\\_unchained\\_trilogy\\_and\\_more\\_tarantino\\_talks\\_to\\_gates.4.html](http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2012/12/django_unchained_trilogy_and_more_tarantino_talks_to_gates.4.html) (accessed 7 March 2014).

55. "Quentin Tarantino on Charlie Rose - Django Unchained - Part 3," YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5xbcBNszzE> (accessed 12 February 2014).

Tarantino's goal for *Django Unchained* was for the story of a black bounty hunter to be told as a Western. The combination of Western and Southern characteristics is evident throughout the film, as is Tarantino's use of drama and comedy. His dark sense of humor is apparent in most of his films, but *Django Unchained* demonstrates a variety of interesting choices when it comes to a comedic style.

Humor and violence are combined in fascinating ways in *Django Unchained*. While there are scenes that are outright funny, there are other parts that reveal the sickening nature of humor. In a flashback to Hildi's whipping on the Carrucan plantation, Django does all he can to persuade the Brittle brothers to let him take her place. He tries reasoning with John Brittle, telling him that scars from a whipping will further anger the plantation owner. Django then drops to his knees and pitifully begs saying, "I'm keepin' it funny for you, John." Indeed, John laughs sardonically and tells Django, "I like the way you beg, boy." As brutal as the scene's violence is, it reveals an interesting enjoyment that white abusers had when exerting power over the slaves. The scene is reversed when Django finds John and Roger at Big Daddy's plantation. After shooting John, Django tells him, "I like the way you die, boy." Moments later, when he whips Roger, Django shouts that he is "keeping it funny." Just as the brothers took pleasure in torturing Django and his wife before, so Django relishes the opportunity to return the favor. In this scene in which violence and humor collide, the audience sympathizes with Django for his earlier hardships and joins him in enjoying his victory over the evil Brittle brothers.

Another scene that is similarly laden with violent humor occurs after Django and Schultz leave Big Daddy's plantation. They make camp nearby, while Big Daddy prepares to lead a raid against them. He and thirty night riders gather on horseback, and

Big Daddy eagerly rallies his men against Django and Schultz, saying they will "whoop that nigger lover to death ... and clip that gaboorn." Just as the men prepare to attack, Big Daddy realizes that the bag that covers his face is poorly cut and hinders his vision. The rest of the men begin to complain about the bags and discover that their plan was not as well-thought as they hoped. They bicker amongst themselves and decide that vision is not important in a raid.

The idiocy of the night riders and the way they discuss the shortcomings of their disguises tempers the violent plans they have for Django and Schultz. While their Tennessee drawls and ignorance provide humor, it distracts from the seeming pleasure they take in describing their impending attack. Just as Django and the other black characters enjoy making the Brittle brothers suffer, so the white folks look forward to inflicting physical pain on others. While these scenes of violence are disturbing, they represent the same violence prevalent in black culture and humor. Richard Pryor's black characters often described stereotyped aspects of black life, from drug use to seedy sexuality, and he asserted that his performances were rooted in truth. He explained that people laugh at these bits because, "They see themselves when I do a character."<sup>56</sup> Similarly, in the late '70's and '80's, Pryor would also use violent instances from his own life to connect with his audiences. In his "Killing My Car" routine, he describes shooting out the tires of his car " 'cause my wife was gonna leave my ass." Elements of domestic violence, gun use, and alcoholism are all present in this performance, but they attract laughter because they give an honest depiction of Pryor's life. While the violence in *Django Unchained* leads to irreparable damage, it also establishes an important connection between the film and black culture.

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56. Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 552.

The ending of *Django Unchained* resembles the excess and exaggeration in *Posse*'s conclusion. Both films end with drawn-out scenes with violent fighting and explosions and both end with reuniting the protagonist with his true love. A final component to the humor in *Django Unchained* comes from exaggeration and excess. Just as the film's conclusions are excessive, so are the actor's approach to those and other scenes. For instance, Christoph Waltz's flamboyant performance as Schultz earned him the Academy Award for Best Actor in a Supporting Role.<sup>57</sup> His character has a gift for stating the obvious and Waltz translates it masterfully, combining his physical acting with his lines in a way that immediately charms the audience from the moment that he shoots the Speck brothers then asks them for a bill of sale for purchasing Django. Indeed, Quentin Tarantino wrote the role of Schultz with Waltz specifically in mind. Appreciating what the actor contributed to his last film, *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), Tarantino was certain that Waltz could do the part justice.

Similarly, Jamie Foxx is known as a dynamic celebrity whose talents extend beyond acting in dramatic roles. Although the character of Django is written to have a certain humor throughout the film, there is much to be said about previous experiences with black humor that Foxx brings to the role. Audiences may recall his appearances in the comedy sketch show *In Living Color* (1990-4) and later his own television show *The Jamie Foxx Show* (1996-2001).<sup>58</sup> He then went on to appear in a number of other comic roles in the early years of the millennium before taking on dramatic ones in films such as *Collateral* (2004) and his Oscar-winning performance in *Ray* (2004). Still, Jamie Foxx

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57. "Awards for *Django Unchained*," IMDb, [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1853728/awards?ref\\_=tt\\_awd](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1853728/awards?ref_=tt_awd) (accessed 21 April 2013).

58. "Jamie Foxx," IMDb, [http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0004937/?ref\\_=tt\\_cl\\_t1](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0004937/?ref_=tt_cl_t1) (accessed 31 April 2013).

has hardly been a total convert from comic actor to a dramatic one. Instead, he has maintained an accessibility in popular comedy while still making his dedication to his craft known. He often cracks jokes during interviews and discusses his work good-naturedly, suggesting that his talent is immeasurable when considering the degree to which his Django must convey heartache and desperation.

### **Western Films in Post-Racial America**

By the time of *Django Unchained's* release in 2012, some Americans considered the nation to have entered a period of "post-racialism," where racial distinctions no longer influence aspects of daily life. There are a number of reasons why some Americans might believe such a concept: for one, many people consider the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's to have solved all of the nation's racial problems, and believe that racial concerns have only faded since then. They believe that racism is a thing of the past, that most everyone strives to fulfill the words of the Declaration of Independence, that "all men are created equal," and race plays an insignificant role in our "color blind" society. The idea of "color blindness" was first championed by African Americans in the 1980's, and mostly had to do with how they felt their applications for jobs and housing should be considered.<sup>59</sup> They objected to the obvious role that their race played in the selection of people to fill certain positions, and they believed a system that disregarded color would not only benefit the individual, but the whole of society.

Unfortunately, the core of these concepts has worn out over time. The current interpretation of "color blindness" suggests that the United States has achieved racial equality. Those who believe this point to diverse classrooms and work environments,

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59. Stephen Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be: The Black Freedom Struggle From Emancipation to Obama* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 401.

interracial marriages, and mixed-race Americans as evidence of a society unburdened by race. They suppose that overlooking race means that racism and discrimination are non-existent in the United States, that those practices symbolize a phase that the nation simply outgrew. Following the 2008 presidential election, those same people ask, "How can race be a problem when we elected a black president?" The supposedly diminishing importance of race in the United States is accompanied by hypersensitivity to racial upset and insult. *Django Unchained's* abundant use of "nigger," for instance, caused many Americans to protest the film, suggesting that its use of the epithet meant that the film was "politically incorrect" and harmful to African Americans. Such a combination of apparent disregard yet concern for race show a contemporary sense of guilt that some Americans have and shows how eager they are to apologize for the inadequacies of the past and express their uncertainty of the true fairness of the present.

But such a confused and complicated racial environment is what makes Quentin Tarantino's film all the more poignant. Rather than conform to the traditional approach to films that often dismiss racial concerns or the ones that hope to ease racial tension and therefore fictionalize history, Tarantino's film deals with historical settings and uses them as the background for a concerns that remain topics in current conversation. His film's use of racial slurs and profanity demands audiences' attention and forces them to consider why certain aspects of his film cause discomfort or confusion and why others cause excitement or sympathy.

The controversy that came with *Django Unchained's* release also demonstrates that this is one of the first films to explore difficult concepts of American history. Indeed, landmark anniversaries of the nation's history, such as the bicentennial of Abraham

Lincoln's birth and the sesquicentennial celebration of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation and end of the Civil War, further suggest a sense of completion and growth that the United States has accomplished. A cluster of other films recently released similarly deal with the relationship between issues of race, history, and memory. Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012), Lee Daniels's *The Butler* (2013), and Steve McQueen's *Twelve Years a Slave* (2013) accompany *Django Unchained* as part of a cinematic trend to challenge contemporary audiences' thought about the unimportance of race.

Despite the apparent popularity of dealing with the topic of American race relations in film, Tarantino's film does it in a unique manner that makes use of a variety of resources and inspiration. When so many feel satisfied with the efforts of a nation that once practiced slavery and subscribed to legal racial discrimination, Tarantino does a fine job of reminding audiences that the nation's violent and hateful past cannot be forgotten, nor can the promise of retribution and revenge. In a time when race becomes secondary or even non-existent in considering the makeup of a person, Tarantino reminds the audience that race remains a crucial part of the contemporary conversation and rather than being a problem solved long ago, race remains a fact of life that many continue to grapple with, some more than others.

The race Western is not a popular formula for American films, but the ones that make use of it do so in a conscious effort to demonstrate an aspect of history and culture that is generally unknown or overlooked. From Herb Jeffries's singing cowboy movies to Quentin Tarantino's fusion of the spaghetti Western and slave revenge story, race Westerns demonstrate a desire to correct a false interpretation of African Americans' historical and cinematic roles in the West. That all these race Westerns premiered in the



midst of various cultural and political movements shows their ability to connect a historical erasure with racial concerns contemporary to their own time. Jeffries's films act as an extension of the Harlem Renaissance, demonstrating black talent that goes beyond the period's commonly regarded novels and poetry. Sidney Poitier's efforts in acting in and directing *Buck and the Preacher* reflect his struggle to reassure a black population during uncertain days of their place in American society. *Blazing Saddles* reinterprets the common Western narrative, making light of its tropes in an exaggerated manner and ultimately making audiences' assumptions about African Americans in the West the film's biggest joke. Mario Van Peebles makes use of the 1990's hip-hop trend and a new image of black masculinity to draw parallels between contemporary black men and the neglected ones of the past. Finally, Quentin Tarantino challenges America's post-racial mindset with *Django Unchained*, which combines the Western with the story of an American slave, criticizing the nation's hesitance in confronting its own history. Despite each of the film's respective levels of success, they all resist the traditional narrative of the American West and demonstrate the power of film in revising history.

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