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### Screening Cowboys. Reading Masculinities in Westerns

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

## Hippie Appeal of the "Indian"

In his published lecture "1968: Periodizing Politics and Identity," Kobena Mercer presents a brief inquiry into historical redefinitions of white American identity based on its (perceived) differences with black identity. He distinguishes two overlapping ruptures. The first shift occurs around 1956 and lasts for ten years. Norman Mailer's text "The White Negro" is exemplary of this "break." Instead of constituting white and non-white as oppositional identities, the literary bohemian appropriates black signs as iconic elements (Mercer, "1968" 432) in an attempt to assimilate difference (434). His "wedding" with the black man, above all, serves his project of developing an intellectual counterculture. Mailer's mode of appropriating the fashionableness of a projected "Negro" identity functions to articulate his own "antagonism to the square society of postwar consensus" (445).

Mercer links the second rupture to three specific historical and political shifts between 1964 and 1968. The most important one was the process of "coming to voice" by the black community with a "dialectical flux of slogans such as Black is Beautiful and Black Power" (433). Second, on the basis of perceived similarities with black oppression, women and gay movements annexed black civil rights slogans and promoted feminist sisterhood and gay pride. The third event Mercer mentions is the way French writer Jean Genet was adopted in May 1968 by the radical black community, after he was smuggled over the Canadian border by members of the Black Panther Party. Rather than acting out imitative fantasies (as Mailer did), Genet participated as an equal member of this community (434). Racial difference and inequality were not overcome in the mid-sixties but American blacks did claim a subject-position of their own. According to Mercer, Genet sustained this claim. In their company, the French writer acted as "merely an other amongst others" (434). Genet did not participate in the black community in order to enrich his own identity. He did not stand out as an "I" above the blacks; rather, his "I" evaporated within the group.

According to Mercer, the rupture that took place in the sixties was the shift from Mailer's self-fashioning via the black man as other towards Genet's positioning in dialogue with the black other. In chapter seven I pointed out that it is practically impossible to speak of a direct parallel in white American men's attitudes towards blacks and Indians. Nevertheless I want to suggest, by way of a discussion of Thomas Berger's novel *Little Big Man* (1964), how the shift in the sixties described by Mercer reverberates within the genre of the western. Berger's novel functions not only as a historical variation upon the westerns discussed in chapter seven, but it also has serious repercussions for the construction of white

heroism. *Little Big Man*, described by Max Schulz as a “comic apocalypse” (66), is outstanding for its unconventional story-telling. As a consequence of this story-telling, white male identity is not so much constructed at the expense of the Indian other but at its own expense.

### Oscillating between Whites and Cheyennes: *Little Big Man*

*Little Big Man*, a narrative spanning the momentous decades from 1852 to 1876, has an “epical sweep” (Schulz 72). The book is set in the period which witnessed the construction of the transcontinental railroad, the Santa Fe Trail, the silver strike in the Rocky Mountains, the boom growth of Denver, the near extinction of the buffalo, and ongoing heavy battles between white cavalry men and Indians. The novel’s climax is the Battle of the Little Bighorn, America’s most renowned military defeat by Indians, a defeat that, paradoxically, would come to mark the end of the Indian menace (Schulz 72-73). The novel states that it has been reported that every white man who participated at Little Bighorn died during the fight. A man named Jack Crabb claims to be its sole survivor, however, and the novel describes his eye-witness account of pre-eminent events on the American frontier leading up to the battle.

The novel is unconventional as a western due to the way it tells the story. First, it has an extensive narrative frame. Being nursed in the psychiatric ward of a state hospital, aged 111, Jack Crabb narrates his biography from the age of ten to thirty-four. Crabb’s recollection is written down, as the foreword clarifies, by Ralph Fielding Snell, a “Man of Letters” (Berger ix). Snell, in turn, wrote the frontiersman’s life story ten years after the death of the book’s protagonist, because the editor himself suffered a nervous breakdown that interrupted the book’s completion. In an epilogue, Snell discusses the possible unreliability of Crabb’s account. The writer declares that although the narrator’s account is accurate in terms of names, dates, and places, Crabb’s name itself is missing from every index and dossier related to the events he narrates. Correspondingly, Snell concludes that Crabb is “either the most neglected hero in the history of this country or a liar of insane proportions” (Berger 422).

Second, the internal narrator disqualifies himself as hero because of his role as story-teller. *Little Big Man* is a variation on the generic convention that a hero does not tell his own deeds. Usually, the hero’s actions are witnessed and subsequently told by other characters. In other words, the narrative of masculinity needs a “third.” Jack Crabb claims that he was a “frontiersman, Indian scout, gunfighter, buffalo hunter, adopted Cheyenne” (Berger ix) but there is no other character to verify his claim. Hence, the story of his heroism is not to be taken at its word. In fact, the internal narrator himself already alludes to the questionable nature of his heroism. Crabb constantly survives dangerous situations either by accident or thanks to

smart but cheap tricks. During his gunfighter phase he is challenged by the renowned gunman Wild Bill Hickok. Crabb is sure to lose if he obeys the unwritten rules of the straightforward showdown. Since there is no witness to the incident, he resorts to blinding his opponent by using his mirror-ring to reflect the sun into Hickok eyes (296-99). He makes a proper showdown impossible and gets away with cheating.

The consistent use of first person narration encourages Crabb to constantly reflect on his position. Born as a white man, he is raised by Cheyenne Indians from the age of ten and in subsequent years he occasionally moves between the white and Indian communities. During this period he is as much insider as outsider in both cultures. Among whites, “[I] kept telling myself I was basically an Indian, just as when among Indians I kept seeing how I was really white to the core” (136). This self-reflexive quotation portrays Crabb as an in-between figure: he is neither completely white nor Indian. He realizes that he does not represent the best of both worlds, but that he is always and everywhere accepted because he is a bit out of joint. Since he is not enmeshed within a specific culture, he implies that he sees both whites and Indians from a distance.

This distance seems to provide internal narrator Crabb with a broader, more insightful perspective. In his story Crabb indicates how quite average, as well as neurotic, men are mistaken for “bigger than life” Wild West celebrities and how whites’ racial stereotypes obscure historical fact and insight. Wild Bill Hickok has a reputation as a famous killer but he owes his name to the fact that he simply guns down any suspect type, often without warning (272-75). The well-known general George A. Custer, posthumously considered a coward by the Indians because they read his baldness as signifying a fear of scalping (411), is an example of an influential white man duped by stereotypes about Indians. Whereas Crabb gives valuable and appropriate advice, Custer is only amused by the words of the “frontier eccentric” (375). The general appoints Crabb as official jester to his cavalry, since he considers Crabb’s clues idiotic, by definition. The general has his own ideas about fighting the Indians but his strategy ends in complete disaster. His whole cavalry is massacred except for Crabb who is saved by one of his Cheyenne acquaintances. Just before dying Custer admits his failure to Crabb. He confesses that he had relied upon the “beautiful romance” between white frontiersman and the “noble red man,” described in Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales* (394).

Custer’s excessive reliance on textual sources is here a case of faulty judgment. The general realizes that he has always seen the Indians from the wrong perspective. But as narrator Crabb makes clear he is not the only one. Crabb notes that Indians were “right useful in them days for explaining every type of flop” (184): for most whites they function as excuses for all kinds of (personal) failures. In the case of misfortunes and blunders, whites blame Indians.

Crabb's acquaintanceship with the Cheyennes might seem to make him a privileged observer but the Cheyenne peace chief Old Lodge Skins makes clear what price he has to pay for this position. Old Lodge Skins is Crabb's most important teacher in life, and they consider their relation one of grandfather and grandson. Their "family" bond has been particularly close since the day Crabb saved Younger Bear's life. Crabb rescued the young Cheyenne by shooting a hostile Indian from an enemy tribe in the back, conventionally an act of cowardice (66). Unaware of the specifics, the Cheyennes take the murder to be a deed of courage. As token of respect Old Lodge Skins grants Crabb the title of "Little Big Man." At the end of the novel, while in conversation with the Cheyenne peace chief, Crabb addresses himself by his own honorary nickname:

"So with me, Little Big Man -" I realized my error as soon as I said it. "Ah," says Old Lodge Skins, "a person should never speak his own name. A devil might steal it, leaving the poor person nameless." (417)

By calling himself "Little Big Man" Crabb appears to have chosen sides. Oscillating between white and Indian cultures, he apparently prefers the Cheyennes after the battle at Little Bighorn. Old Lodge Skins warns him about speaking his Cheyenne name, however: "you might lose your title." This warning confronts Crabb with a deadlock. Born as a white man he can only express his Indian affinity via a speech act, which may run like this: "I am Little Big Man, a title I received from the Cheyennes." Old Lodge Skins points out the impossibility of this particular speech act, since it is either destroyed by a devil or interrupted by him as a teacher. The old Chief warns Little Big Man that as soon as he names himself, he loses his position as a man in-between two cultures. It is impossible for the white Crabb to adopt a position as "I" within the Indian culture. The moment he becomes an "I" or a "white Indian," by speaking his Cheyenne name, he will immediately vanish as an "I." Hence, his most positive option is to become an "other among others."<sup>1</sup>

In *Little Big Man*, the white man "disappears" among the Indians as distinct (he is white after all) but not outstanding (since he may not speak his Indian name). Disappearance here means merging with a group of outcasts (relative to Euro-American society) who practice non-linear life-affirming meditations. According to Old Lodge Skins, Cheyennes - who refer to themselves as Human Beings - believe that everything is alive instead of dead (203) and unlike whites, Indians do not live in straight lines and squares but in circles (416). In the American sixties, when the increasingly pressing forces of modernization created a longing for those things perceived to counter the evils and errors of Western modernity, such meditations triggered a white hippie idealization of Indians as communal and nature loving tribes.<sup>2</sup> If, as Fiedler notes, Indians return in the American imagination of the six-

ties, they primarily function as carriers of a "back to basics" philosophy of freedom and spontaneity. This philosophy was perceived by hippies as a "happier alternative" (Lenihan 155) to the "dull monotony of a cookie-cutter corporate identity" (Kimmel 264) in America's managed economy of the sixties.

There is a striking difference separating the hippie fascination with the Indian in the sixties from the rebel's alignment with the Indian as a reaction to white conformity in the fifties. This is where I believe Mercer's documentation of a shift in white/non-white relations, described above, resonates within the genre of the western. In the "white man among the Indian"-western *Run of the Arrow* from the fifties, the hero thought he was like the Sioux but he finally was forced to admit his unbridgeable difference from them and to leave the tribe. He was disappointed that it was impossible for a white man to rediscover his identity among the Indians.

In Berger's novel *Little Big Man* from the mid-sixties, the internal narrator also realizes his difference from the Cheyennes but it is precisely this insight that enables him to live among them. The price Crabb has to pay for being "Little Big Man" is to vanish as an "I" among the Indians. This vanishing is to be taken quite literally in two ways. First, his name does not appear in any historical record although he partook in many extensively documented events at the frontier. Second, due to the internal narrator's death, his recollection of his life story ends at just the moment when he has come to understand that there is a way to live as a white man among Indians, namely by accepting that he cannot be a "white Indian."

In Mailer's "The White Negro," white subjectivity is constituted via the self-enriching principle of "I am both white and cool/hip as blacks." In *Run of the Arrow*, the construction of white male identity as "both/and" is exposed as being grounded on an illusion. In *Little Big Man*, dis-illusionment is turned into a benefit. Being "an other among others" becomes Crabb's way of life. This is a way of life that not so much gives shape to the hippie ideal of participating within a loving community circle of outcasts,<sup>3</sup> but also requires political identification with a race that is dying, as history books teach us, after its greatest victory. The paradoxical tragedy of the Battle of the Little Bighorn is that this supreme moment of Indian power courts their disaster. Similarly, it is just in the process of telling his own story that Crabb gains his subjectivity, but also, in accordance with generic conventions, loses his masculine identity as a white Indian. The Indians gave him the name "Little Big Man," but he himself is not allowed to speak his name. Crabb is prevented from using his association with the Cheyennes to enrich his "I" at their expense. This limitation prevents him from ever truly becoming a white Cheyenne. Accepting this restriction, he is adopted within the Cheyenne community, ultimately making Crabb a Human Being with attitude.<sup>4</sup>

