

Deserting the Desert, Salvaging the Southland: The Re-Location of the American Hero and Cultural Identity in 1970s Outlaw Movies

Jeannette Vaught

This article explores the rapid declension of the popularity of western films in the 1970s alongside the simultaneous rise in popularity of trucker and "hillbilly" films, set primarily in the South. This examination follows the integrated paths of genre and political analysis to argue that acute political agitation during this time contributed to an abandonment of the imagined West and the cowboy as a location for and embodiment of heroic masculine American identity, and that the post-Civil Rights South was able to provide a new locale for a refigured "All American" hero.

Introduction

The Western film genre has proven to be an enduring American cultural touchstone despite its sharp decline in Hollywood productions starting in the early 1970s. Its sporadic recurrence, as in the Kevin Costner epic *Dances With Wolves* (1990), and its current resurgence in the form of remakes of older films (such as the 2007 remake of 1957's *3:10 to Yuma*) speak to the deep resonance of the Western and its continued relevance in the American imagination. The film adaptations of Cormac McCarthy's modern elegiac Western novels *All the Pretty Horses* (2000) and *No Country for Old Men* (2007) prove that the thematic and cultural provenance of the Western film genre wields enough clout to garner an Oscar nod. However, the genre, whose successful and prolific production was thoroughly underpinned by the cultural mores and assumptions of post-War and Cold War America, suffered from the fissure of political and social structures that occurred as a result of the Civil Rights Movement and the unsuccessful escalation in Vietnam during the 1960s. This juncture is a crux between political upheaval and genre upheaval. By examining the links between shifting political policy and filmic trends, these connections reveal that the classic Western as a genre was not able to sustain changing attitudes towards race and gender as American "subjecthood" moved away from a Cold War identity. The work of Fredric Jameson and Judith Butler, while neither is a theorist solely of film or politics, provides an enlightening platform from which to interpret this clash of policy and culture. Jameson's work on genre theory sheds light on how conventions of the Western became ineffective, and compliments Butler's thoughts regarding subjecthood as a meeting ground between selfness and Otherness. As the Western genre dissolved, the refiguring of race and gender into a post-Civil Rights, post-Vietnam heroic national identity benefits from the use of Jameson's and Butler's terminology.

This critical juncture sparked a seemingly overnight abandonment of the production of Hollywood Westerns at the beginning of the 1970s, which paralleled a massive cultural and regional reorganization throughout the United States, especially in regard to the American South. For a genre that held a huge and varied audience across class and gender lines, the sudden disappearance of the Western in mainstream film speaks to a sea change in audience expectation

based on swiftly changing cultural mores. In the aftermath of Civil Rights, the South faced the project of re-forming its identity, politics, and standing in the national arena. The war in Vietnam hastened the political divide that unraveled the legislative foundations that had held the Jim Crow South together. Yet the refiguring of the “solid South” was not the only regional deconstruction that was brought about by the crumbling of *policy*: Vietnam also prompted a crumbling of *cultural* ideology that effectively dismantled the structures supporting the iconic West in both filmic territory and, inseparably, in the American imagination. Westerns figured and reinforced the icon of the cowboy with an eye towards the formation and affirmation of national identity, but with increased awareness of cultural imperialism at home and abroad. The validity of Cold War romanticism and smug nostalgia was suddenly contested territory. Therefore, the very conventions upon which the Western film genre had depended for almost three decades were stripped of their relevance. The mythic “frontier” lost its glossy sheen, and its revered cowboy hero lost the locale in which his brand of valor could function.

Shifting Region, Shifting Genre

The South and the imagined West seemed to be, come 1970, in equal states of disrepair. However, the South, having just been cleansed of Jim Crow, was poised to re-Reconstruct: as such, though it remained a troubled region, it held great imagined potential for cultural redemption in the post-Civil Rights aftermath. Conversely, the once-pristine West was made foul. Though general disenchantment within the American mindscape in the immediate post-Vietnam aftermath contributed to the violent refiguring and gradual abandonment of the Western film and its cowboys, the need for an anchor to ground the pieces of American masculine identity still remained. This desire to resurrect the “All-American” male hero from the rubble of the deconstructed Western found its perfect potential in the re-emergent South. Riding the upsurge of countercultural “country and western” music production that blossomed in the late 1960s, the de-valorized cowboy found new breath in the revised persona of the Southern “good ol’ boy,” who rose to filmic prominence just as the Western genre lost its ability to sustain a heroic environment.

This palpable shift in filmic geography is exemplified most prominently by examining the transition between Clint Eastwood’s Western films made in the early 1970s and Burt Reynolds’ Southern bootlegging romps produced during the decade. Both actors spent the most turbulent years of the 1960s riding the ranges of Italian sets while making so-called “Spaghetti Westerns.” The two, once they returned to Hollywood, exemplified the split in masculine heroism that occurred in the post-60s political backwater: Eastwood embodied the disintegration of the West, making it inhabitable for the kind of hero that once governed it; Reynolds, inheriting the mantle once worn by that hero, took the complicated but revered Western outlaw ethos out of the West, and relocated it in the cheeky – but also complex and troubled – Southern “good ol’ boy” and his surroundings. In films such as *High Plains Drifter* (1973), Eastwood

deconstructs the mythic imagined West as a location for masculine heroism; in his wake, Reynolds and the South, in films such as *Deliverance* (1972) and especially *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977), refigure the outlaw/hero as the new bearer of American myth.

The “Cowboy Code”: The Cold War West as a Land of Myth and Honey

Before we get too far into this relocation, it is important to define the prior conventions this analysis is based on. The genre of Western film was primarily built upon the figure of the cowboy hero/outlaw, who may not have been law-abiding, family-oriented, or even particularly well-mannered, but upon whose countenance a popular American audience could largely depend to uphold the “higher truths” of its own imagined “folkmind” (Folsom 1979: 87).¹ From the late 1930s through the 1950s, these cowboys of novels, radio, television and film – most ardently and voluminously expressed by characters such as the Lone Ranger, Roy Rogers, and those played by John Wayne – but recapitulated in various incarnations by the thousands in all of these popular media – constructed the living hero from its mythic dime novel² and horse opera origins. The post-World War II and Cold War West was the perfect location for its somewhat paradoxical heroes: the constructed cowboy West of the 1950s still retained the patina of frontier romanticism not yet tarnished by social conscience. Its geographical and ideological embodiment of the United States’ “origin story” still held powerful sway in affirming cherished American “fortitude,” the benefits of which (to follow the paradigm) many post-war Americans were reaping as a result of their growing affluence (Coyne 1997: 3). This is not to say that the frontier or western landscape was untroubled in the American imagination; rather, its troublesomeness had not yet matured out of the imagination instilled by cultural productions such as Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, or Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales*. The triumphant cowboy hero’s yodels echoed of Manifest Destiny; the violence he committed in “reverence for law and order” (ibid.) was that of (white-dominant) natural law; he upheld and defended the comforting precepts of national (white) primogeniture that justified (white) American ascendance and economic progress on a newly global scale, and did so with the assurance of masculine superiority. Massacre, genocide, sexual repression, and imperialism had not yet dirtied the lens through which the West was perceived by the Western-viewing public. The “troubled” West was dark, for sure; it was violent, dusty, and difficult of both physical and mental terrain. Yet its glamour was its glamourlessness; it was a transitional area between civilization and wildness, which at once inspires fear and enticement, danger and appeal.

This gritty West was a place where the rules by which the popular audience were governed could be imaginatively bent (or broken) in the service of so-called higher ideals, which, as in many forms of popular leisure activities, made it a safe space to work out the anxieties of modernization³ and in this case the threat of the Bomb. Above all, however, it was in the past, which functions as the ultimate safe-zone of interpretation. The cultural distance provided by a Cold

War vantage point made it possible for the West to exist as a land of myth and honey – at once “real” in the past and revered in the present as a model society – despite the unfortunate circumstances of westward expansion. Indeed, as an already-conquered landscape, the West and its prior inhabitants, both Native and new, were ripe for nostalgic exotification. Likewise, the past-tense West makes possible the existence of its own cowboy hero/outlaw: like his geographical counterpart, the cowboy is a troubled figure who enacts masculine fantasies of solitude, lawlessness, and violence – none of which were “allowed” in Cold War domestic or corporate mores. The cowboy’s get-out-of-jail free card is his adherence to a “code,” an unwritten set of tenets espousing “justice, . . . the rights of the underdog, and acting with courage and integrity” (Loy 2004: 10-11) and any other such jargon along those lines. His darker, sinister side is subsumed by his higher purpose: his outlaw side is a necessary component of his heroism, yet is dominated in the American imagination by the positive outcomes of his heroic acts.

Outsiders and “Othering”: The First Rumbles of Unrest

While there are motions towards revisionism in 1950s Westerns, these films tend to revise cowboy masculinity in relation to his virility, complicating his relationships with women rather than his politics. R. Philip Loy makes a compelling case for *Raw Edge* (1956) as an early indicator of the breakdown of the cowboy code in this regard (ibid.). This complication does not manifest itself in an attempt to challenge the masculine nature of cowboy heroism by including women within its fold; rather, the heightened sexuality of *Raw Edge* incorporates women squarely within the realm of cowboy hero Tex Kirby’s violent outlaw side, using femaleness and Otherness to complicate his interpretation as a hero. In the film, the “lawless” Oregon town where men have decreed that any unmarried woman would become the property of the first taker (ostensibly through violence and cunning), presents a political problem by challenging the limits of gender domination. However, the dilemma, couched in terms of the fairness of competition over a “mate” rather than by challenging the limits of gendered exploitation, does not so much revise the tenets of the “cowboy code” as it approaches them from a darker perspective.

In *Raw Edge*, the play between “insider” and “outsider” drives the revision of the cowboy subject. Outsider Tex Kirby, in order to stabilize the chaotic insider environment, *must* murder and connive to restore the stability that is threatened by those very actions. As an outsider, Kirby is an Other to those in the town: despite being male and white, he does not play by their rules; however, to the audience, Kirby is an *insider*, whose adherence to the conventional rules of social and gender order Others the rioting townspeople. This suspenseful play between insider and outsider recalls Judith Butler’s sense of constructing selfhood, by which “the very being of the self is dependent . . . on the existence of the Other” (Butler 2001: 22), and by which Kirby and his audience can toe the line between self and Other in a masculine context. While this play occurs at first only between white men, Kirby’s timely rescue of Paca, his murdered

brother's half-Native American wife, from a leering circle of would-be rapists ties a Gordian Knot around what and who an outsider/Other can be. Paca is female and not white, making her conventionally an Other; yet she is married to Kirby's white brother. Further, as a member of the town, she is an insider to the plot, yet an outsider to the audience. Lastly, as a potential victim of the town's raucous actions, she elicits both Kirby's and the audience's desire for her to be rescued, and finally brings her into the fold of the audience's insider status, despite her race and gender. This rescue is heroic, and allows Kirby to retain his heroism intact; however, the assault-based sexualization of the rescued woman also makes him a captor, complicit not of rape but of sexualized masculine control. Her status as non-white, while complicating ideas of race and Otherness, nevertheless supports Kirby's dominance over her. In essence, the revisionism implicit here, and the general trend towards explicit sexuality in late 1950s Westerns, makes clear the connection between dominant cultural ideology and its dialogue within the culture of Western films.

This incorporation of the Other in Westerns shows a developing tension in the genre between its Cold War ideals and the expectations of contemporary audiences. Yet by the early 1960s, the genre itself remained intact. Fredric Jameson helpfully describes this circumstance by reminding us that "genre theory must always in one way or another project a model of the coexistence or tension between several generic modes or strands" (Jameson 1981: 141), envisioning genre as a fluid category in which certain conventions are adhered to, but others come and go. In treating Western films as a genre, the American imagination in the 1950s was not particularly challenged by such revisionism as that in *Raw Edge*; the structural "sedimentation" (ibid: 140) of the genre through the previous two decades had sufficiently established what Jameson has termed the social symbolism of textual – in this case, filmic – representation. The practice of film theory proves useful in evaluating the generic conventions and counter-conventions of Westerns; however, as texts of a clear and specific but multi-tiered genre, Westerns lend themselves to a productive interpretation through Jameson's literature terminology. These films, through the "uneven development of a number of distinct narrative systems," have filtered their syntactical essence down to its fundamental social symbolism, reflected in its audience's expectations and experience. If we can follow Jameson's theory that this development exposes the genre text in its variegated, yet settled, form as the "ideological ... response to a historical dilemma" (ibid: 139), then its application to the Western film is clear. The "historical dilemma" of the West, from the Wild West Show to *The Wild Bunch* (1969), is the codified rhetoric and imagery of (white male) expansionism. While its internal structures and narratives complicate themes of male/female, community/individualism, race/power and the like, the genre's fundamental politics do not change. Therefore, in the 1950s, the largely repressive sexual culture of Cold War domesticity is challenged by heightened sexuality in Westerns such as *Raw Edge*, but the criticism seen here does not go beyond the politics of gender. The ideological validity of the cowboy is not called into question: rather, his adherence to the "code" is tested, refined,

and slowly reimagined, but not contested. The gradually emergent darker themes of the 1950s Westerns serve to bring the cowboy more towards outlaw/hero from hero/outlaw, but leave his long-deposited image completely intact. It is not until the 1960s, when the onrushing floods of Peckinpah's Western films make it harder to locate the heroic qualities in the cowboy outlaw, and the once-sturdy sediments of convention start to become a muddy swirl.

The End of the Romance: Political Dissolution and Its Cultural Impact

The cowboy's image manages to survive the turbulence of the early 1960s in a manner similar to how Kirby survives *Raw Edge*: the outlaw/hero is certainly in a continual dialogue with the increasing anxiety surrounding the domestic political, industrial, and economic landscape, closing the distance between his audiences' present unrest and his own past-tense troubled landscape. However, as yet the relationship between his masculinity and his "good guy" side is largely unchanged. As both Coyne and Loy assert, while his outlaw side becomes concurrently more prominent and more sinister,⁴ the cowboy of the 1960s is still moored in familiar thematic and generic territory. However, by the end of the decade, the immensity of ongoing upheaval experienced by the popular audience – and the escalation of international involvement in Vietnam into the Cold War mindset – began to infiltrate the Western genre's systemic parameters, making its territory less and less of a safe space. Its narrative system became unable to support its own historical distance from Jameson's "dilemma" in the wake of 1968.

The politely distanced inference of violence, such as the implied rape in *Raw Edge*, gave way to ever more explicit scenes of sadism and savagery in the mid-decade Westerns, testing the limits of nostalgic heroism against its outlaw boundaries. Just as explicit "violence became ensconced as a ... hugely profitable cinematic theme" (Coyne 1997: 125) in Western films, itself becoming settled as a recognizable generic convention, the political sands underpinning the Cold War platforms of romance and nostalgia were eroded by the tide of violence in 1968. The once-safe past and the violent present collapsed onto each other as My Lai burned, King and the Kennedys were buried, and the perceived solidity of American politics dissolved.

This dissolution of the Cold War political landscape is most clearly evident through the breakup of the Democratic Party in the wake of the Johnson administration. The "solid South" Dixiecrat hierarchy crumbled around the legislative success of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Southern resistance to the Civil Rights Act was not a surprise. Lyndon Johnson, himself a card-carrying Cold War Southern Democrat who had presided over a number of like-minded southern legislators as majority leader in the 1950s, understood their sense of doom at this proposed "second Reconstruction," but at the same time knew that the passage of this act and token Southern compliance with it was paramount to his election in the fall of 1964. Despite their vocal opposition to the bill, conservative Dixiecrat Senators knew it needed to pass in order to ensure party unity, especially

against radical Republican Barry Goldwater, whose pro-war and anti-Civil Rights rhetoric showed the potential to draw disgruntled New Deal Democrats towards the Republican party (McGirr 2001).⁵ However, the presumed unity that Dixiecrats spoke to, and that Johnson desperately tried to hold onto, had already begun to unravel, much as the presumed stasis of cowboy iconography was already being revised. Dixiecrats themselves represented a regional sectioning off of the Party as early as 1948 (Scher 1997: 96). Even though John F. Kennedy had carried the South in the 1960 election, voting statistics revealed that his election was “the end of the line for the southern Democratic presidential express” (ibid.: 99). The border South tipped towards Nixon, who just edged Kennedy in the popular vote; and Texas, despite having native son Johnson on Kennedy’s ticket, just barely managed to scrape 50,000 more votes for its Democratic ticket than for Republican Richard Nixon, out of a total of 2.2 million cast (ibid.). Johnson’s “landslide” election in 1964 nonetheless saw the Republican Goldwater – to whose camp the formerly staunch “Southern Dem” Strom Thurmond dramatically defected in the fall of ’64 – take five southern states (Pascoe et. al. 2005: 228). By the 1966 midterms, the Democratic Southern bloc received a mere 63.4% of the vote, as compared to 83% in 1958 (ibid.). As both the violence in the South and the conflict in Vietnam escalated, conservative dissenters split from the Democratic Party altogether.

Johnson’s adherence to Cold War militarism – and his attempt to equate the war in Vietnam with his own Great Society programs at home as two sides of the same Cold War coin – left him mired in an outdated liberal ideology as the New Left took hold in the 1960s (Rossinow 1998).⁶ While Johnson envisioned himself leading African Americans, lower-class whites, and Vietnamese citizens by the hand into the light of democracy, the swiftly forming New Left and the burgeoning anti-establishment counterculture “argue[d] that paternalism was no way to encourage the vigorous citizenship required for participatory democracy” (ibid.: 182). Lawmakers were proving to be equally uncooperative: though he had expected both token dissent and token compliance from his fellow Southerners regarding Civil Rights, he was not prepared for their change of heart regarding Vietnam, which to his mind was offered to them as a placation to Cold War-minded Southerners in return for supporting him on the domestic front. Southern Dems had unequivocally supported the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in 1964, yet many, such as Arkansas Senator J. William Fulbright, quickly felt betrayed as Johnson used the Resolution to blatantly intensify military action abroad. By 1966, Fulbright, who had historically been a steady supporter of Southern Democratic politics, had grown so disillusioned with Johnson’s static vision as to become “persuaded that the Vietnam War was eroding the political liberties of the American people” (Woods 1994: 543), rather than espousing civil liberties both at home and, as a form of Cold War protectionism, abroad. This shift paralleled the escalation of violence in Hollywood Westerns, which steadily eroded the established conventions of cowboy hero behavior. From television news to Sunday afternoon double features, the popular audience was continually exposed to the gradual disintegration of both real-life political leadership and the imagined fantasy of Western “higher truths.”

Fulbright's increasingly vocal dissent through 1966, including televised hearings and speeches in which he soundly renounced executive policies abroad,⁷ anticipated the rift in the party that developed as a direct result of Johnson's bullying at home. After the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, Johnson expected local southern leaders to follow the example of their national legislative counterparts, and comply with the Voting Rights Act of 1965. However, their token compliance was proving insufficient for civil rights leaders on the ground, whose elevated campaigns created heated social and political unrest that Johnson simply could not adequately attend to while waging a foreign war – and a foreign war budget. He was strained on all sides: Southern Dems were betrayed by having to implement Civil Rights; local activists and African Americans were not satisfied by Johnson's attempt at token-based compromise in the South, and, increasingly, his fellow Democrats were becoming disillusioned with his project abroad. The Civil Rights movement and Vietnam were now inseparably intertwined in common dissent, with Johnson unable to appease either side without relinquishing support from southern legislators, civil rights activists, and his own ambitions in Southeast Asia.

This schism proved to be the fault line along which the Democratic Party cracked, thereby heralding a comprehensive reorganization of the Southern – and national – political and cultural landscape. Johnson's announcement to not seek reelection in 1968 admitted to the deep sense of division in the Party and in the national mood. This profound moment was at once reflective and refractive: it encapsulated the division and reorganization of the once-solid South into the modern two-party system, in essence allowing the completion of the long and painful process of Reconstruction which had begun a century prior; it illustrated the possibility of executive failure, which to Americans coming out of Cold War ideology was heretofore inconceivable. Most profoundly, however, it spoke to a loss of faith and cultural innocence experienced not only towards the government, but from *within* the very seat of power. Such depth of disillusionment played as much a role in the fundamental cultural confusion that ended the decade as did the spectacles of violence and protest surrounding it. Students, activists, and workaday citizens were all forced to redefine not only what "liberal" or "conservative" meant, but also had to redefine who they were as citizens, and most importantly, what it meant to be a citizen of America.

Politics in Pieces: The Dissolution of the Cowboy Hero

The trajectory of Johnson's demise enacted what Loy has termed the "descent of the hero" in Western films made through the 1960s and into the early 1970s (Loy 2004: 35).⁸ The ideological structures that had supported the same American mind that found identification and justification in the mythic West had, in the wake of Vietnam, dissolved the very tenets upon which the word "hero" were defined. As such, *the* fundamental Western generic convention was called into question, pushing the boundaries of how much adjustment a Jamesonian genre could sustain. As described by Pauline Kael, those generic tenets supported a hero who "symbolized American democracy and virtue and justice,"

who “fought fair and punished the guilty” (Kael 1994: 549) and who, as a “virtuous man” with an outlaw side, “knows whom to clobber” (ibid.: 554). Yet the American valorization of democracy, landscape, and progress, narratively structured across and around its “historical dilemma” of expansionism, was no longer normatively viable at the beginning of the 1970s. What had been a firm platform of sedimentation was now swirling in the backwash of political breakdown. The nation was fundamentally divided between “establishment” culture and New Left counterculture. Even the haphazard reorganization of regional political structures led to polarization as the definition of “conservative” and “liberal” experienced a sea change, forcing Americans to either reject the culturally familiar, or hang on to it for dear life.

As director Sam Peckinpah presented a string of increasingly anti-heroic counterculture outlaws in a bloodied Western landscape devoid of recognizable romanticism through the 1960s, John Wayne continued to churn out classic Cold War Westerns, himself becoming an icon upon which displaced nostalgia could rest. Wayne, as “a monument of Manichaeian certitude in an age of ambiguity” (Coyne 1997: 138),⁹ still did not dominate the Western genre; rather, he served as a point of reference against which we can evaluate the “Vietnamization” of the imagined West and the eventual dissipation of the West and the Western as a location in which the outlaw/hero can survive.

Vietnam explicitly complicated the notion of expansionism as an acceptable vehicle for romance and glamour. By 1969, the schism between the Cold War imagined West and its Vietnam-era incarnation was quite apparent. A political re-awakening was afoot that would, essentially, strip the old imagined West of its ability to uphold its earlier substance as the location of cowboy-code-wielding hero/outlaws. The consciousness of political and cultural imperialism, from Senator Fulbright’s public remonstrances of Johnson’s imperialist foreign policy (Woods 1994: 550) to the publication of Dee Brown’s seminal *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* in 1971, recast the territorialization of the West. To borrow Rick Altman’s terminology of genre, the symbolic and syntactic imagery of the frontier lost its resonant relevance after Vietnam; the outlaw could no longer fight for (symbolic) justice if, for his viewing public, justice was no longer (syntactically) seen as a fundamental American value. The racial struggle experienced by African Americans in the South now reinterpreted the slow but systematic extermination of Native Americans – the perennial filmic “bad guys,” or, to recall Paca in *Raw Edge*, the perennial victim in need of white-dominant rescue/capture – that predicated westward expansion. The imagined West was thus denuded of its romance, nostalgia, and quaint inhabitants in one gesture, symbolically defoliated as if by Agent Orange; it could not exist in the minds of those Americans whose new notions of nation included complicated challenges to racial and national hegemony. The new focus of Western expansion as a racist and imperialist endeavor revealed that the West in which the old heroes were revered no longer existed, did not ever exist, *cannot* have existed in the ways in which Americans constructed it. The “descent of the hero” in Western film is thereby not so much a hero’s fall as it is indicative of his cultural rug being pulled

out from beneath him, de-mythologizing his symbols and garbling his semiotic referents (Altman 1999: 87-90; 208-210). Not only could audiences no longer recognize the Western characters as heroic, but the genre was in such a state that, if a recognizable hero was presented, he would no longer be believable.

This syntactic breakdown in the Western genre paralleled Hollywood's seeming inability to successfully make a "war film" about Vietnam. By the early 1970s, only John Wayne's *The Green Berets* (1968), an unsurprisingly pro-war missive, had managed to pass the pre-production stage (Smith 1975).¹⁰ Perhaps the ideological unmooring brought about by Vietnam was too fresh for direct treatment; whatever the cause, before 1975, New Left and counterculture treatment of the war "went underground in the movies, tunneling into our subconscious ... surfacing in strange places" (ibid.: 25), making new sedimentary deposits and reordering the semantic patterns of existing genres. Julian Smith, in his 1975 examination of Hollywood and Vietnam titled *Looking Away*, made a case for the Western as being a particular repository for Vietnam subterfuge, revealing the imperialist attachment to the West in the American imagination. Smith's nuanced argument follows the basic idea that the "classic settler-Indian conflict of so many Westerns provides a natural metaphor for the war in Vietnam" (ibid.: 29). So natural, in fact, that the filmic West in the 1970s became a locus of iconic *deconstruction*, which reversed its prior status as a safe space for constructed convention. This trend ultimately deconstructed the genre by the middle of the decade.

The "Man With No Name" and new Subjectivity

The principle figure taking over this denuded West is Clint Eastwood, who had risen to prominence while making popular – and violent – "Spaghetti Westerns" in Europe during the 1960s for Italian director Sergio Leone, whose movies were popular counterparts to Peckinpah's. Notably, though the European films he made were Hollywood-funded and produced for American, not European, consumption, Eastwood spent the tumultuous years of the 1960s abroad. During this time he developed the characterizational basis with which his domestic Hollywood films of the 1970s – most prominently *High Plains Drifter* (1973) – would exemplify the deconstructed imagined West.

Indeed, Eastwood was the only figure who *could* carry a Western – in the non-John Wayne sense – by 1970. Already made famous by his "Man With No Name" persona from Spaghetthis like *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966), Eastwood, as the anti-hero, was the ablest inheritor of the new deconstructed post-Vietnam West. Eastwood's Man With No Name spits on the floor: he needs no valorized apparatus, no previously conceived narrative or ideological underpinnings, and no recognizable landscape. In *High Plains Drifter*, the only context necessary to identify him as a Western character were the now-decrepit tokens by which his audience would place him in the Western genre – his hat, but now crushed and dirty; his serape, filthy, stained and torn; dusty streets, false-front buildings, now shanty-like, and perched

on the precipice of the ocean, as if at any time they could crumble off the very earth itself. As he rides from the hazy deserts into the seaside town of Lago, its residents stare, sighting his path through town with evident fear. They sensed his malaise would soon be their own, though they feared as well their inability to label him as good, or evil, or even human; neither they nor the film's audience could name him or his representation.

The myth of heroism is here exposed by Eastwood as "the myth of the subject": his countenance in *High Plains Drifter* dominates nearly every frame, clearly denoting his role as the main character, which in a pre-Vietnam Western would automatically also denote him as the "hero," outlaw or not: however, Eastwood's character "reduc[es] heroism to ground zero – narcissism," thus replacing the semantic language of the deconstructed Western genre in the only way that it can be done in the post-Vietnamized landscape. The "traditional Western loner," even the complicated and largely non-heroic characters, such as gritty Pancho Villa in Peckinpah's *Villa Rides* (1968) and the bloodied Pike Bishop in *The Wild Bunch* (1969), is now "made strange" in its barest semantic form (Bingham 1994: 169). Where, for Peckinpah, "soured romanticism is better than no romanticism at all" (Coyne 1997: 160), as evidenced by the *Wild Bunch*'s last hurrah on a chaotic and reordered but still recognizably conventional Western stage, Eastwood takes the latter condition and strips its still-inherent idealism to virtual nonexistence. Yet Eastwood's character also challenges subjecthood in relation to Otherness: as one who never asks the fundamentally self-forming question "who are you?" to a presumed Other, and who would have no way of answering such an address to him (Butler 2001: 24), it is nearly impossible for his audience to establish a relationship with either his character or others in the film. With the absence of ideals – and in a setting wherein very clear ideals used to function – the only essence left for the Western hero/anti-hero to espouse is the primacy of the masculine ego. Whereas revisionist Westerns, like *Raw Edge*, challenged but ultimately reinforced the old "cowboy code" and masculine heroism, Peckinpah's films opened the door for a more complete criticism of the validity of conventional characterization. By the 1970s, politics on a larger scale finally come into play in the revision of the cowboy character, as not only gender but selfhood and nationhood become fair game. As Dennis Bingham explains, Eastwood's characters in films such as *High Plains Drifter* "expose the extent to which the moral grandeur and 'Americanness' of previous Western heroes had been based upon a glorification of self in which subjectivity translates, probably by definition, as 'good'" (Bingham 1994: 168).

Subjectivity, then, is reworked semantically from its original generic form to mean the polar opposite of what it had previously signified. Indeed, as an unnamed entity, he thwarts any attempt at relation to an Other, and thus also thwarts conventional selfhood. Eastwood's masculine ego is "remove[d] farther from realism," thereby "reliev[ing] the character and that spectator of language and the responsibilities that follow from it" (Bingham 1994: 174). Eastwood's *Man With No Name*, in following the shifting political sensibilities of post-Vietnam America, makes a "gestur[e] of exorcism" (Smith 1993: 38), stripping the Western hero of

semantic and syntactic burdens of meaning and performing, ultimately, the dislocutive act of genre annihilation. Indeed, when Pauline Kael wrote in 1974 that “the Western is dead” (Kael 1994: 549), she acknowledged that without the possibility of American “self-glorification,” there can be no Western hero, and that without the possibility of heroism in the West, there can be no Western.

Kael’s and Bingham’s definition of self-glorification, however, does not eliminate the subjective self-projection that Eastwood’s characters invited. In deconstructing the symbolic myth, Eastwood performed a double reflection: his characters reflected the recent troubled sensitivity towards cultural and colonial imperialism as evidenced by the post-Vietnam political backlash towards Cold War “Americanness”; at the same time, the very bareness of his countenance allowed the viewer, most likely a male viewer, to reflect his own subjectivity against Eastwood’s unlabeled, un-located, and un-defined persona. His “minimalist” subjectivity, while profoundly narcissistic, invited the viewer to assume their own subjectivity onto his body, which, in the absence of distinctive mannerisms, speech patterns, and the like, actually forces the viewer to participate in his own characterization. This minimalism required, on Eastwood’s part, extreme self-awareness; likewise, it encouraged self-projection as a method for male viewers to re-define “foundations of masculine identity [which] had been lost and needed to be massively reconstructed and reperformed” (Bingham 1994: 174). This is not to say that Eastwood’s characterizations formed a collective or proverbial “blank slate,” or that *High Plains Drifter* solved the problem of symbolic masculine heroism. Rather, the Man With No Name furthered the West as untenable, breaking the habit of homage to the “ritualized dream of the past” (Kael 1994: 549). By conflating his character with the self-involvement of his viewers, Eastwood’s films crushed the present and the semantic past together, eliminating even the floating sediments remaining of the generic requirements of romance, nostalgia, and heroism. The West was like Vietnam: defeated, untenable, unfixable, stripped of its protective foliage; it was no longer a viable location for a positive American identity.

Cultural Regeneration through Country Counterculture

Despite John Wayne’s persistence in marching, monument-like, through the early 1970s, his brand of cowboy classicism was notably outdated, and served to sustain the markers of what Western films *used* to be. Between Wayne’s indomitable yet decidedly anachronistic Westerns – what Kael described as Wayne “dragging [his] world-famous, expensive carcass through the same old motions” (ibid.: 137) – and Eastwood’s embodied ghost of the genre itself, there seemed to be little demand for the old “good guy” hero/outlaw. Yet on further inspection, it is not that the new American imagination did not want the hero to show himself, but rather that it was difficult to find a place to locate him now that the West was debunked and its audience disenchanting. For the increasingly dominant countercultural scene, as recalled by their attitudes towards Johnson’s Cold War stasis, certainly Wayne’s alignment with the “stolid patriarch[al]” Nixon presidency eliminated Wayne from assuming the mantle once worn by filmic

cowboys (Coyne 1997: 143). The abandoned cowboy, then, left horseless in the last shootout and stripped of his costume by the newly hostile desert chaparral, found his identity in need of a new vehicle, a new hat, and a new landscape.

Fortunately enough for him, the South entered the 1970s in desperate need of a “good guy” to help it recover from the rubble of the 1960s’ sociopolitical upheaval. In the aftermath of Civil Rights, the split of the Democratic Party, and President Johnson’s dejected departure from office, the South had reached perhaps its deepest trough and, by 1970, was ready for a cultural and political regeneration. Now topically freed of Jim Crow’s stranglehold, the South was able to – and desperately needed to – re-assert itself as a positive region of America. In this way we can see the South as a perfect inheritor of the estate of the “dead” imagined West. This transition is made almost more perfect in the post-Vietnamized American terrain by the stain of its past centuries of oppression; the South did not need to be de-mythologized in order to be legitimated, as the West was now experiencing. In an imperial context, while the genocide of Native American peoples and cultures was still a fresh wound to the dominant American mind, the legislative success (if not its immediate implementation) of the Civil Rights Act of 1965 brought new hope for African Americans in the South. Just as the mythic West suffered from the political and cultural deconstruction of “the myth of benevolent conquest” (ibid.: 163), the South would benefit from being un-mythed: at its nadir, the complicated and scarred South was the most appropriate location for the refurbishment of the male American hero/outlaw.

Territory so ripe for cultural re-inhabitation was not lost on the post-Vietnam counterculture. Yet in order to re-create an American identity in the South in the face of Western dislocation, Southern cultural productions melded elements of “western” with the more ambiguous denotation of “country,” a hybrid which first appeared most visibly on the music scene. The introduction of rock-and-roll instruments and amplifiers into what had been the folk provinces of the bluegrass fiddle and the slide guitar brought formerly regional Southern-produced music onto an established national stage, and laid the groundwork for music-driven Southern films in the 1970s. The explosion of country and western music through the 1970s, parallel to the popularity of *High Plains Drifter*, speaks to this cogent relocation of identity. The South lent itself to an appropriation of values that had formerly been located in the West, while still leaving room for countercultural progressivism and a revised popular identity. The rustication of cultural normativity, seen in the inherent “nostalgic desire to return home, always located in the South or in a rural setting” (Coggleshall 1985: 126) that typified older country music and came through in its rock- and western-infused form, revealed that the South was seen as a safe space in which to locate a geographical “false familiarity” necessary to the reconstruction of the hero/outlaw. The conservative nostalgia of Cold War country music – evidenced by a large number of its fans, whose “prowar, progun, antifeminist” and “anti-intellectual ethos” frightened many a critic (Pascoe et. al. 2005: 185) – was, by the 1970s, matched by countercultural progressivism. This economic and political distance between the counterculture “longhairs” and the older-minded “rednecks” was

bridged by the adoption of the electric guitar into mainstream country music, which brought together country music, western music, and rock and roll all under one Southern umbrella. As cultural historian David Stricklin observes, “just about the time national observers were becoming aware that country music had a huge following, and not just in the South, its militancy towards longhairs and countercultural types softened, largely because of the appeal of ... the electric guitar” (ibid.).

This infusion of rock into country and western music thus melded certain signifiers of “values” held by the John Wayne crowd with the creative ideas of those whose heroes were abandoned in the sullied wake of Clint Eastwood. Sedimentary bits and pieces from Western conventions – cowboy hats and boots, the longing for the “open road” as a recapitulation of the “open range,” and most importantly, the outlaw as hero – popped up in Southern music and culture, acting much like Jameson’s “strands” of genre, though in a somewhat disembodied context. This musical generic bridge exposes the lived geographic shift from West to South across class and political lines: even skeptical historian John Coggeshall recognized that the national re-location of nostalgia to the South was “more than merely a recent social response to liberalism” (ibid.: 129). Indeed, a good deal of the new country and western music being produced promoted such counterculture values as “drug culture, ... critici[sm] of the Vietnam War, advocat[ion] of the women’s movement, and expose[d] racism” (Lock 2007). By the middle of the decade, well-known southern-western rock-country performers such as Willie Nelson, Jerry Reed, and Kris Kristofferson, strumming the electric strings of cultural integration and experiential politics, produced what came to be termed “outlaw music” (ibid.),¹¹ thus helping to solidify the parallel of rustication and counterculture within a Southern context. From Waylon Jennings’ bald anti-war statement in 1970’s “Six White Horses” (“to hell with the fighting/I want my son home...I found his tin soldiers and threw them away”) to Gram Parsons’ refiguring of Roy Rogers’ Nudie suit (Parsons’ was adorned in classic sequined style, except the sequined designs were cannabis leaves), these country and western “outlaws” helped to present the South as a haven for a battered American identity. The recovering South thus functions alongside the reconstruction of the nation after Vietnam as a *redeemable* location – not just for “values-oriented” conservatives, but equally for countercultural productions. The outlaw/hero, having been effaced from the West in Eastwood’s narcissist/nihilist masculine un-heroism, could truly come home to the South.

Country Roads Lead the Hero Home

Screaming around the bend in the dirt road of 1970s filmic territory, the new outlaw/hero did just that, his horse replaced by hot-blooded hotrods, his hat reformulated into a profusion of chest hair, and his landscape now dominated not by cacti, but by the bayou. Burt Reynolds, himself an alum of the Spaghetti and a friend of Eastwood, had become by the late 1970s synonymous with the cheeky masculine “good ol’ boy,” who at the juncture of the Western’s demise provided the perfect Southern-located renewal of the old cowboy. After his

break-out role as Lewis in *Deliverance* (1972), Reynolds' appearance in such films as *White Lightning* (1973), *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977) and *The Cannonball Run* (1981) created and sustained the bootlegging, hard-driving bayou boy as a re-creation of the silver-tongued and silver-pistoled outlaw/hero. Having worked a tier or two under Eastwood in Europe – while Eastwood made the enduring classics *Fistful of Dollars* (1965) and *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* (1966), Reynolds starred in the unmemorable (even to himself) *Navajo Joe* (1966) (Reynolds 1994: 108-117) – Reynolds also returned to work in the States after the worst of the political and social turbulence had subsided. He, like Eastwood, reordered the semantic potential of masculine heroism in the political backwater of the 1960s; yet Reynolds assumed the mantle of the hero that Eastwood plainly discarded, and was able to do so by locating his masculine persona in the South.

The success of Reynolds' films in bridging the cultural gap between “longhairs” and “rednecks” lay largely in the development of a male *class* identity. While the depiction of class in classic Westerns is fairly straightforward, the South, as a “new socioeconomic frontier” (Nystrom 2002: 25), as well as a meeting ground for culture and counterculture, provided a template from which the “good ol' boy” could be reworked to embrace the “contradictory” class politics of film viewers still struggling to land on solid, identifiable ground following Vietnam. *Deliverance* (1972), Reynolds' first major Hollywood film after returning from Europe, performed a similar semantic reversal of identity that Eastwood would perform in *High Plains Drifter*, but this time the reversal was class-based and identity-productive rather than identity-reductive. The four urban professionals who attempt to canoe down the fictional Cahulawassee River in Georgia saw their imagined success as “proof of their worthiness of survival” (Williamson 1995: 157), thereby demonstrating their class – and gender – dominance over the natural world. However, the prominent Southern landscape, dense Appalachian forests, and their perceived hillbilly inhabitants proved fatal to the adventure-seeking city-dwellers, including Reynolds' *übermensch* character Lewis.

Set in deep Appalachia, the film draws from stereotypical conventions of mountain culture, and perhaps goes so far as to race Appalachian whiteness as “Other,” providing another avenue for refiguring selfness and subjecthood. Yet as such, the film is not so much a critique of perceived Southern backwardness as it is a “scalding depiction” of the “inchoate needs” and “loathsome fears” of urban outsiders. Recalling Tex Kirby's role in *Raw Edge* reminds us that Othering in this sense can be hard to pin down. In *Deliverance*, an “urban mirror” swings the definitive properties of class around to denigrate the white-collar dudes who invaded contested territory with arrogance and ignorance (ibid.: 159-160), clearly an anti-establishment sentiment. Though the Southern culture and landscape certainly is not valorized as a result – recall the subject of reflective and refractive narcissism in Eastwood's role-reversing minimalism – it nevertheless provides the “allegory of [the] new social landscape” (Nystrom 2002: 25) in which class, specifically the “country” Southern working class, can be reimagined into a form of masculine outlaw/heroism.

Reynolds' Lewis foreshadowed the masculine competence of his later incarnation of the Bandit, except Lewis was the inverse to the Bandit's image. Cited Lewis is all bluster, his defined musculature and sexualized language fronting his actual inability to survive once the natural world proves impenetrable. Lewis pilots his four-wheel drive Bronco through the muddy woods with much the same bravado that the Bandit later employs to escape "smokies" in pursuit, but Lewis is not running from the law; rather, he is lost, and running into trouble of a different sort. In his zeal to "get up there and *do* this river," Lewis, in assuming superiority over nature and class superiority over the mountain folk who inhabit it, himself becomes unmanned. The river rebuffs his assertions, leaving him unconscious and at the mercy of the abilities of his punier companions, who encounter their own versions of emasculation as their journey progresses. Though the physical act of rape depicted in the film is not endured by Lewis, it is his own attempted violation of Appalachian territory and culture that is cause for punishment. Reynolds' Bandit, in contrast, knows his territory, knows how to drive, and knows that the "real" adversary is not mountain nature or mountain inhabitants, but rather the imposed structures of "redneck" law. The hayseed-chewing sheriff Buford Justice parallels the sinister corrupt lawmen of classic Western films, but with a decided turn towards comic buffoonery. As a parody of Southern stereotype, from his bellicose smugness down to his honky racism and proclivity towards enforcing the laws that furthered personal gain at the expense of the "folk," Justice and his hapless son serve as comedic foils who allow the Bandit to prove that not all Southerners fit the old stereotypical mold, and that his brand of Southernness could carry a general masculine identity as the old cowboys had done before.

The Bandit, in order to defend the plebian right to bear liquor, enlists his trucking friend Cledus Snow (played by Southern rockabilly musician Jerry Reed) in a border-crossing bootlegging run. This melding of trucker culture, CB radio, and counterculture music exemplifies the reworking of masculine class identity seen in *Deliverance*, but with a lighter touch. The Bandit's plan perhaps would have gone off without the need for too much engine-revving and off-road antics, save for the intrusion of Carrie the runaway bride. Carrie lands – wedding dress and all – in Reynold's hotrod after taking off in the middle of her intended marriage to Justice's blundering son. Here Reynolds finds himself recapitulating the "social banditry" (Williamson 1995: 123) of the old outlaw/hero in every sense: though the recognizable markers of myth were converted from Western to Southern, the syntactic meanings held within made the shift with seemingly little revision. While striving (if not without ironic humor) to uphold public ideals over imposed oppression, the Bandit recalls the genre conventions of the "lawless" golden yodelers who once patrolled the range. Similarly, Carrie's escape from unwanted male dominance and subsequent re-capture in Reynolds' "heroic" Pontiac drew heavily from the gender constructions seen earlier in *Raw Edge*, thus situating Reynolds squarely within the realm of complicated yet recognizable Western generic conventions. Indeed, the cowboy connection was not lost on Reynolds and his bandit buddies: Cledus' fifty-three foot beer-conveyor

was a painted mural depicting the mythic Jesse James in the midst of a stage-coach robbery. By making truck drivers and good ol' boys into cowboy heroes, the American imagination could incorporate its post-Vietnam concern with reorganized class and gender structures into its new mythic ideology.

The Enduring American Hero

The early 1970s saw the American imagination in much the same state as Eastwood's bleak and crumbled nightmare-scapes; yet this loss of cultural innocence still could not kill off the need for redemption in the form of mythic identity. The South as "New West" thus became the clear location for the outlaw/hero, but with the added assumption of masculine class validity within the context of symbolic myth. Still, the resurgent South was not given the same ultimate *carte blanche* as the West: its outlaw/heroes perform social justice, but the South's complicated history on the national stage prevents them from being pristine. The post-Civil Rights, post-Vietnam South was complicated territory; the once-innocent Cold War cowboy now had to bear the burden of cultural responsibility. That the Bandit outdove and outwitted the pugnacious Sheriff aligned him with the Western's mythic heroes, yet the circumstance that his method was primarily comedic – supported by the fact that his partner was given the culturally "safe" stereotype Southern-hillbilly name of Cledus, and drove an eighteen-wheeler for a living – reminded and reassured the national audience that, while the South could blend the establishment with the counterculture in reclaiming itself as a valid location for national heroic identity, it could not rise to the unmediated idolatry of the now-deconstructed West.

As a form of political, social, and artistic regeneration, Reynolds' Southern "good ol' boy" movies in the later 1970s proved that such redemption was possible. Judging by the popularity of his films – and the making of *Smokey and the Bandit II* and *III* in the early 1980s, along with the wildly popular television show *The Dukes Of Hazzard* in 1979, for which Waylon Jennings provided the theme song – proved also that the Western genre and its conventions may have been subdued, but to the American mind it was not dead. The crumbling of political structures and the subsequent erosion of Cold War cultural assumptions necessitated a shift in location, presentation and theme, which destroyed the Western film genre as it had been; however, with the South poised for "re-mything" just at the time the imagined West had been stripped of its mythic trappings, the outlaw/hero – re-imagined, re-costumed, and revised – was able to assume the role of "All American" hero relevant to a post-Vietnam American imagination. By forging a bridge between the establishment and the counterculture and drawing from the links between Appalachian mountain culture and conventional Western markers, the heroic outlaw of the South resonated with an appeal that, for its time, recapitulated the popularity of the Cold War cowboy. The modern shift back towards the West as a valid filmic location, both for new approaches to classic material and for new explorations into the genre, speaks to the endurance of the genre in the face of near-annihilation, and to the success of Reynolds and the South in reconstituting the ideological validity of masculine mythic heroism in the American imagination.

NOTES

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1 Many scholars have given thoughtful consideration to the complicated iconography of Western conventions through literature, radio, and film. Notably, Patricia Limerick's work on identity and iconography in the Western milieu is helpful to understanding how these conventions are interpreted.

2 Perhaps the most foundational text of this nature is Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950), whose work lays the scholarly foundation for considering the West as a cultural touchstone for American identity, both through landscape and media, in which dime novels figure prominently.

3 Kathy Peiss' *Cheap Amusements* provides an excellent exploration of this topic. While she focuses primarily on immigrant working-class women and their consumption of leisure activities in the early twentieth century as indicative of a class and gender challenge to their workaday restrictions, the idea can be easily translated to function here as well.

4 The Western films of the 1960s witnessed an explosion of narrative development that unfortunately, in the interest of space, I must leave out of the scope of this paper. For further reading, Coyne traces the reflection of cultural anxiety onto the cowboy figure across several Western films from the mid- to late 1960s on pages 124-126; Loy's chapter "Sam Peckinpah in the 1960s" performs a similar exposition through a focused auteurist lens.

5 Particular attention to Chapter 5, "The Birth of Populist Conservatism."

6 A salient passage for this particular idea is "The Power Elite Revisited," pg 181-186.

7 Fulbright, as chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, conducted televised hearings throughout the spring of 1966. The full transcript of these hearings can be found in the *Congressional Record*. In the same year he published *The Arrogance of Power*, from which his speech "The Two Americas" was taken. His dissent was a crucial turning point in Johnson's administration, as Fulbright, an internationalist and Jeffersonian idealist, helped to bridge the gap between the "Southern Dems" and border Southerners.

8 The phrase titles a chapter in which Loy profiles films made primarily in the late 1950s; however, the theme is followed through subsequent chapters, culminating with Clint Eastwood in the 70s, who will be treated at length later in this discussion.

9 Coyne speaks of the "Vietnamization of the Western" during the 1960s; I wish to distinguish this work in speaking of the ideological "Vietnamization" of the imagined West following Jameson's sedimentation of text and meta-text.

10 Smith notes that "John Wayne came back from Vietnam, made a movie, and students booed; Robert Kennedy came back from Vietnam, made a John Wayne joke, and they cheered – but soon enough RFK was in his grave, shot down in the movie capital of the world" (*Looking Away*, 95). Also, in invoking the refrain of the classic Lost Cause anthem to title his work and the first essay within, Smith speaks (perhaps unwittingly) to an already palpable sense of connection between the South, Vietnam, and Hollywood iconography.

11 As an illustrative aside, these musicians, joined by Johnny Cash, formed a group called The Highwaymen in 1985 – thus solidifying their raucous Southern "outlaw" moniker.

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Jeannette Vaught, M.A.
Department of American Studies
University of Texas at Austin
jvaught@mail.utexas.edu