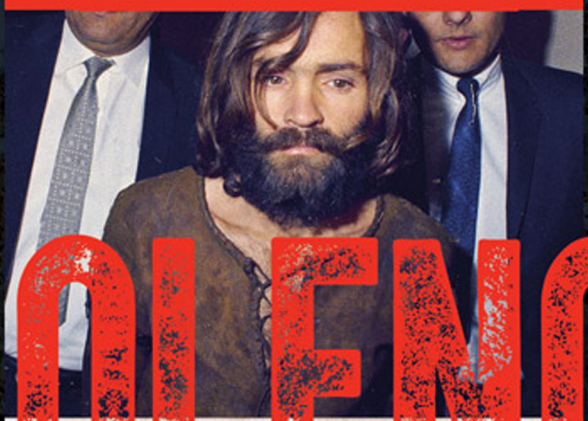

VIOLENCE

IN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

David Schmid, Editor
Foreword by Harold Schechter

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Volume 1: American History and Violent Popular Culture

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Foreword: American Popular Culture—There Will Be Blood

Harold Schechter

> He got hold of my two ears and gave me a butt right in the front part of my head that almost blinded me, for the feller's skull was as hard as the two sides of an iron pot. . . . So we wrassled and jerked and bit for a long time, till I got a chance at one of his eyes with my thum nail. Then I begun to put on the rail Kentucky twist, he knew it was all day with him, and he fell on his knees and begged for mercy. His eye stood out about half an inch, and I felt the bottom of the socket with the end of my thum.
>
> *Crockett Almanac*, 1839

In post–Civil War Boston, an adolescent sociopath named Jesse Harding Pomeroy—infamous as our country's youngest serial killer—perpetrated a string of attacks on younger children that began with savage beatings and escalated into mutilation–murder. After his arrest in 1874, outraged observers struggled to account for his fiendish behavior. It didn't take them long to find an answer. "There is plenty of evidence to show that the reading of dime novels constituted a good share of the boy's mental nourishment," declared the *Boston Globe*. It was Pomeroy's fondness for such insidious fare as *Bald-Eagle Bob, the Boy Buccaneer*, *Rattlesnake Ned's Revenge*, and *Mohawk Nat: A Tale of the Great Northwest*—"cheap blood-and-thunder stories" replete with graphic depictions of frontier violence—that "first put it in his mind to torture boys."[1] Educators and social reformers were unanimous in their condemnation of these "vile publications." "The dangers arising from such vicious literature cannot be overestimated by parents," warned Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, America's first female physician, while the eminent literature professor Brander Matthews railed against the

"villainous sheets" that wrought such "dreadful damage" on the minds and morals of "the boys and girls of America."[2]

Forty years after his diatribe, Professor Matthews made a startling confession. During his own boyhood, he himself had been an ardent fan of dime novels. Reminiscing about these disreputable diversions from the vantage point of old age, he now praised them for their "thrilling and innocuous record of innocent and imminent danger."[3] By then, of course, the dime novel had long been supplanted by new and presumably more pernicious varieties of pop entertainment that made the earlier, once-demonized genre seem positively wholesome.

One of these was the comic strip. Hard as it is to believe about the medium that produced *Krazy Kat*, *Li'l Abner,* and *Pogo*, the newspaper "funnies" were once widely condemned not just as lowbrow trash, but also as a leading cause of mental and moral degeneracy among the young. As early as 1909, magazines such as *The Ladies Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping* described the Sunday funnies as a "crime against the children of America," hideously vulgar productions whose "crude art" and "perverted humor" would promote "lawlessness [and] debauched fantasy" in their juvenile readers. By the 1930s, moralists were lashed into even greater frenzies of disapproval by the popularity of action-packed adventure strips such as *Flash Gordon* and *Dick Tracy*. "Sadism, cannibalism, bestiality," one Depression-era critic fulminated. "Torturing, killing, kidnapping. Raw melodrama, tales of crimes and criminals . . . All these, day after day, week after week, have become the mental food of American children. With such things are the comic strips that take up page upon page in the average American newspaper filled."[4]

The story was the same with every new medium of popular entertainment. Barely twenty years after it was invented, the motion picture was already being attacked as "a perverter of youth and a breeder of crime." Asked in 1918 "what proportion of disciplinary cases were attributable to movies," one child-rearing expert replied without hesitation: "I should say they almost all were."[5] In the 1930s, moral watchdogs proclaimed that the children of America were being "rendered psychopathic" by popular radio programs such as *Gang Busters*, *The Shadow*, and *Lights Out*, which glorified "every form of crime known to man," from kidnapping and extortion to assault and "sadistic abuse."[6] In 1947, the producer/director/actor John Houseman went after the "funny animal" cartoons that, in those pre-television days, were a vital part of the Saturday matinee movie-going experience for millions of American children: "The fantasies which our children greet with howls of joy run red with horrible savagery. Today the animated cartoon has become a bloody battlefield through which savage

and remorseless creatures, with single-track minds, pursue one another, then rend, gouge, twist, tear, and mutilate each other with sadistic ferocity."[7] Perhaps the most rabid of all the anti-pop crusaders was Gershon Legman, whose 1949 diatribe *Love and Death* excoriated everything from Disney cartoons to radio soap operas, though he reserved his most withering scorn for the comic books. "If every American child reads from ten to a dozen comics monthly," he calculated, "and if there is only one violent picture per page (and usually there are more), this represents a minimum supply, to every child old enough to look at pictures, of three hundred scenes of beating, shooting, strangling, torture and blood per month, or ten a day, if he reads each comic book only once."[8]

Clearly there is a highly predictable pattern here. Every time a new type of mass entertainment comes along, high-minded reformers are quick to denounce it as a sign of social decay and a danger to the young. Examples are adduced that purportedly demonstrate a direct correlation between the commission of sensational crimes and the consumption of the latest form of violent make-believe. Eventually, with the advent of a new technology, another, more exciting, fast-paced, and action-packed pastime is created, and the onetime media menace comes to be looked at nostalgically as a harmless, old-fashioned form of play. Can there be any doubt that, say, twenty years from now, critics will be decrying gore-drenched, virtual-reality first person shooters—games that allow players to actually *feel* the blood and brain matter exploding from the skulls of their targets—while pining for the good old days of benign diversions such as *Grand Theft Auto* and *House of the Dead: Overkill*?

History has proved that for all the hysteria of the finger-wagging moralists, their dire predictions have never come true. The little readers of dime novels didn't become a generation of outlaws. The boys who thrilled to *Little Caesar* and *Public Enemy* didn't grow up to be tommy-gun–toting gangsters. The teenage fans of *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* didn't put on hockey masks and run out to dismember coeds with chainsaws. My own generation, raised on a relentless barrage of television gunplay (*Gunsmoke*, *Have Gun Will Travel*, *The Rifleman*, et al.), turned out to be tie-dyed proponents of peace, love, and flower power.

Misguided as they are about most things, however, the anti-pop crusaders make one valid point. American popular culture—as the essays in the present collection make abundantly clear—is and has always been rife with what its critics like to call "gratuitous violence."[9] That phrase is, in truth, a serious misnomer, for—far from being uncalled-for—graphic violence is one of the essential features of popular entertainment, whose roots lie in the orally transmitted folklore of pretechnological times. Writing

about the "folkloristic" background of early cinema, the eminent art critic Erwin Panofsky argues that to evolve from a mere optical novelty into a medium of mass entertainment, the motion picture had to satisfy the public's perennial taste not only for sentimentality, slapstick, and sex, but also, importantly, for sadistic spectacle—for our "primordial instinct for bloodshed and cruelty."[10] Other cultural critics, Leslie Fiedler prominent among them, have made the same argument: that one of the central functions of art—and especially popular art—is to serve as a safety valve for those "undying primal impulses which, however outmoded by civilization, need to somehow to be expressed," to offer a socially acceptable way to gratify the "carnivore within" (as William James called the atavistic self that persists beneath the surface of our dutiful daily lives).[11]

Of all the scenes of violence that Huckleberry Finn witnesses in the narrative of his adventures, the most disturbing to me takes place when Huck, in the company of his new raftmates, the Duke and Dauphin, enters a little one-horse town in Arkansas and comes upon a bunch of young "loafers" mooching chaws of plug tobacco from each other while engaging in casual sadism. "There couldn't anything . . . make them happy all over like a dog fight," Huck reports, "unless it might be putting turpentine on a stray dog and setting fire to him, or tying a tin pail to his tail and seeing him run himself to death."[12] When I picture the contemporary counterparts of that shiftless young bunch, I see them not hanging around outdoors, chewing tobacco and torturing animals, but sprawled in someone's living room, smoking pot while blasting away at aliens, zombies, and terrorists on a PlayStation or Xbox, engaging in precisely the process that pop entertainment exists to effect: the transformation of our innate endowment of aggression and cruelty ("our aboriginal capacity for murderous excitement," to cite William James again) into play.

Notes

1. Schechter, *Fiend*, 97.
2. Blackwell, 90; Michael Denning, 29–30.
3. Denning, 9.
4. Ryan, 301.
5. Brownlow.
6. See Schechter, *Savage*, 127–130.
7. Houseman, 120.
8. Legman, 31–32.
9. Anyone who believes that American popular culture was less violent in the past is encouraged to consult the 1839 *Crockett Almanac*, a passage from which forms the epigraph of this essay. See Lofaro.

10. Panofsky.
11. See Schechter, *Savage*, 10.
12. Twain, 113.

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Introduction: Recovering American Violence

David Schmid

In his 1923 book *Studies in Classic American Literature*, D. H. Lawrence famously states: "The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted." If these words ever had the power to shock, that time is gone. As long ago as 1957, historian David Brion Davis was arguing in his landmark study, *Homicide in American Fiction, 1798–1860*, that "a generalized image of America in the eyes of foreign peoples from the eighteenth century to the present . . . would surely include . . . a phantasmagoria of violence, from the original Revolution and Indian wars to the sordid history of lynching; from the casual killings of the cowboy and bandit to the machine-gun murders of racketeers."[1] Today, nothing could be more banal than to assert that violence played a foundational role in American culture and continues to cast a long shadow right up to the present moment. If this was ever denied, now it has become so accepted as to have apparently lost any critical edge it might have once possessed.

Related to the banality of its presence for the critic writing on violence in American culture today is its excessive visibility. Like the purloined letter in Edgar Allan Poe's eponymous story, violence, perhaps especially in the American context, is hiding in plain sight in our popular culture, excessively visible everywhere we look—but, perhaps for that very reason, we are prevented from seeing what is most germane about it. In *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2008), Slavoj Žižek suggests precisely this possibility when he advises us to resist the temptation to focus exclusively on visible forms of violence: "[W]e should learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible 'subjective' violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent."[2]

This possibility assumes that we can agree on a definition of what actually constitutes violence, but that assumption proves to be highly questionable. Everyone seems to know what violence is, but when it comes to actually defining it, violence means a multitude of different things to different people. In the words of a recent study of American violence, "While at first glance the concept seems clear enough, the more closely we examine violence the more elusive it becomes."[3]

To some, violence should be thought of primarily as a physical phenomenon, something that results in the "injury of other human beings."[4] To others, violence is not only physical but also systemic and should include such phenomena as class, gender, racial, and religious stratification crucial to the smooth running of forms of social organization across the globe. The job of the cultural analyst, according to this argument, is to resist the temptation to concentrate only on the visible forms of violence and instead to draw out and study the normally hidden forms of what Žižek calls "objective" violence.[5]

As complex and widespread as these understandings of violence are, however, they disclose an understanding of the term that is primarily physical. But there are those who argue that the most fundamental form of violence is much more abstract, a quality of language itself. As Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse put it, "writing is not so much about violence as a form of violence in its own right."[6] Against this tendency to present violence as most fundamentally (although not exclusively) a linguistic phenomenon, still others have insisted upon violence retaining a sense of irreducible materiality, or what the 2009 edition of the *Socialist Register* describes as "Violence Today: Actually-Existing Barbarism" (see Panitch and Leys). Contrary to those whose focus on the relationship between violence and representation is primarily philosophical or linguistic, those who emphasize the physicality of violence are often oriented toward political or public policy solutions (see, for example, Castelli and Jakobsen).

The banality of American violence, its excessive visibility, and problems associated with its definition all constitute impediments to a productive analysis of violence, but these impediments are made worse because the dominant ways of discussing violence in the American public sphere today are themselves banal and in urgent need of reinvention. In this introduction, I will review some of the most common frames currently used to discuss violence and then go on to suggest some ways in which a humanities-centered perspective (a perspective exemplified by this collection of essays) organized around the concept of the American character may represent a productive direction for future analyses of violence.

At the present time, violence is defined in many different ways in the contemporary American public sphere, but generally not as a humanistic issue. Instead, a number of other discourses currently dominate discussion of the subject. Foremost, violence is defined as a problem of law and order and legality. Whenever events such as school or workplace shootings take place, for example, the primary frame used to make sense of the event is that provided by law enforcement and members of the legal profession. Representatives of law enforcement are the ones to whom the media turn first to understand what is going on, and to the extent that media coverage of these events is interested in examining the larger ramifications of these events, those ramifications are usually constructed in ways heavily influenced by legal discourse, such as debates about gun ownership. In instances in which the perpetrators of violent acts survive the acts themselves, their subsequent passage through the legal system provides an ongoing narrative that helps "make sense" of the violent act to the public at large.

Following close behind legal discourses comes the psychological, the other primary way that violence is framed and thus made legible in the contemporary American public sphere. Psychological analyses of those who commit violent acts tend to bear an uncanny similarity to each other, but not just because people who engage in such acts may share a similar psychological profile; rather, these similarities emerge because the events and their perpetrators are interpreted in broadly similar ways. Public debates about violence in the United States, in other words, are characterized most of all by conventions, largely unstated and unacknowledged, that render violent events legible and comprehensible by suturing them into larger narratives that allow certain interpretations of these events while simultaneously disallowing others.

The most fundamental, and therefore the most unstated, of these conventions is that the violent subject is an aberrational exception. Despite a wealth of evidence to the contrary, public discourse about violence insists in amnesiac fashion that each new case is an aberration and that these individuals are simply that—individuals, having individualized psychological problems that have no larger social or cultural significance beyond that of these individuals' immediate personal or familial circumstances. There are, of course, some exceptions to this rule. The actions of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who killed thirteen people before killing themselves at Columbine High School in 1999, were given a broader cultural and social significance (as David McWilliam's essay demonstrates), but that significance only extended to larger groups that could in turn be rendered abject as aberrational outsiders, such as goth teenagers.

How hegemonic discourses about violence combine to either deny or limit the extent to which that violence has broader social meanings suggests a possible way forward for a humanistic intervention in this field, but before delineating some of the details of that intervention, I want to explain why I think that intervention should proceed by means of the concept of the American character. It must be said that there can be few more unfashionable ideas within the academy today than the exceptionalism that seems to underpin the notion of the American character, and—surely—any useful discussion of violence must distance itself aggressively from precisely this kind of universalizing concept?

Answering this question means acknowledging that academics are just about the only people who have stopped using the concept of the American character. Everyone else has blithely continued to talk about this idea as if it is perfectly acceptable to the vast majority of people, which of course it is. This is precisely why I think the concept of the American character has so much potential utility: Everyone uses it, and both intervening in and resignifying its dominant meanings is a perfectly reasonable and achievable goal.

Not surprisingly, the American character was referred to very frequently in the weeks and months following 9/11. In a characteristic response, Michael Ledeen, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and author of *Tocqueville on American Character*, argued in an essay published in the *National Review* that the "most amazing thing about America has always been ourselves, as we are rediscovering in our exemplary response to the disaster of September 11th" (Ledeen). After having explained Tocqueville's continuing relevance for understanding the American character, Ledeen ends his article with the following rallying cry: "We must remember that those who wish for peace must prepare for war, remind ourselves that Americans are great warriors, and get ready to fight again. Because that's the way it is" (Ledeen).

Although I want to use the notion of the American character very differently from Ledeen, the 9/11 context has the virtue of highlighting the complex links between the American character on the one hand and violence and trauma on the other, and it is indeed the complexity of these links that I want to emphasize. For if the conventions that characterize mainstream debates about violence have one thing in common, it is their dedication to producing easy answers to the conundrum of violence. The purpose of these easy answers is to bring about a state of reassurance so beautifully summarized by the late lamented comedian Bill Hicks: "Go back to bed, America. Your government has figured out how it all transpired. Go back to bed, America. Your government is in control again.

Here. Here's *American Gladiators*. Watch this. Shut up. Go back to bed, America" (Hicks). That this reassurance may be achieved through popular cultural ritualized spectacles of violence is not the least of Hicks's insights.

What role do the humanities currently play in understanding the relationship between violence and the American character? The ideal of the humanities as an integral part of a healing response to violence is probably the most influential and familiar way in which the humanities currently make themselves visible in their relation to violence in the contemporary American public sphere. I do not want to denigrate this role for the humanities, but it should not be the only role available to the humanities. As important and valuable as healing is, we must consider the possibility that the aim of a humanistic approach to American violence might be to open up wounds as well as help close them. In this spirit, the essays in this collection are designed, among other things, to bring readers face to face with the central role violence has played in American culture, and how that violence has been refracted through our popular culture. Even though outlining the complexity of what Mark Seltzer has called our "wound culture," which Seltzer describes as "the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound" can come at a price, I believe it is a price worth paying.[7]

The common thread in the essays gathered in these two volumes is their shared willingness to resist easy answers about violence, no matter what form those answers take, and instead to muddy the waters, to make things more difficult and unpleasant, to break with, rather than be consistent with, the prevailing wisdom on the relation between violence and Americanness. In doing so, they resist in particular the tendency to describe the violent subject as aberrational and exceptional. Instead, they use the concept of the American character against itself, against its exceptionalist triumphalism, by suggesting instead the profound Americanness of the violent subject.

This brings me to D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*, a book that contains extraordinary moments of insight that provide effective antidotes to the common idea that violence and the American character exist in a relationship of mutual exclusion. Perhaps the most powerful of those moments comes when Lawrence discusses the famous character invented by James Fenimore Cooper, Natty Bumppo:

> He says, "Hurt nothing unless you're forced to." Yet he gets his deepest thrill of gratification, perhaps, when he puts a bullet through the heart of a beautiful buck, as it stoops to drink from the lake. Or when he brings the

> invisible bird fluttering down in death, out of the high blue. "Hurt nothing unless you're forced to." And yet he lives by death, by killing the wild things of the air and earth. It's not good enough. But you have there the myth of the essential white America. All the other stuff, the love, the democracy, the floundering into lust, is a sort of by-play. The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted.[8]

It is in this passage that Lawrence reveals his true utility for us today. Against the dominant contention that violence and Americanness are opposites, let us contend instead that, in Lawrence's words, "America is tense with latent violence and resistance"—and see what happens.[9] Perhaps in this way we can produce an analysis of the role violence plays in American popular culture that is fully attentive to the complexity of the concept without getting bogged down in a definitional quagmire. Perhaps this approach will provide us with a convincing explanation of not only how, but also why, we study American violence without lapsing into either simpleminded or instrumental optimism on the one hand or debilitating fatalism on the other. And if you're not entirely convinced that D. H. Lawrence is the best person to achieve these goals, let me conclude by suggesting noted historian and analyst of American violence Richard Slotkin.

Over twenty years, Slotkin published a monumental trilogy of books devoted to the study of American violence. Collectively, *Regeneration through Violence* (1973), *The Fatal Environment* (1985), and *Gunfighter Nation* (1992) attempt to describe what is peculiarly American about the role that violence has played in our culture, and the trilogy does so though the overarching concept of the "myth of the frontier," which Slotkin describes in *Gunfighter Nation* as "our oldest and most characteristic myth."[10] According to Slotkin, the frontier myth "relates the achievement of 'progress' to a particular form or scenario of violent action . . . the Myth represented the redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or 'natural' state, and *regeneration through violence*."[11] Slotkin thus enables us to see violence as something other than a negative force in American history; indeed, its "productivity" becomes the key to understanding successive stages of American self-fashioning, from colonial times to the present.

Slotkin's description of how mythological narratives work, and in particular the myth of "regeneration through violence," is still applicable to a study of the discourses of violence that structure definitions of American community today. Slotkin himself realizes this much when in *Gunfighter Nation* he describes how George Bush Sr. treated the first war in Iraq as

a ritual of regeneration through violence and in so doing asked Americans "to conceive our political and moral priorities in *exclusively* mythic terms—with primary reference to the conflicts, needs, desires, and role-playing imperatives that are exhibited in mass-culture mythology, and with secondary or negligible reference to the realities of public and political life."[12] Not surprisingly, such an analysis is even more pertinent to a reading of the role that violence plays in a post-9/11 America.

In her book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, philosopher Judith Butler discusses how the attacks that took place on 9/11 brought home to Americans "our exposure to violence and our complicity in it . . . our vulnerability to loss and the task of mourning that follows" and hopes that we might be able to find "a basis for community in these conditions."[13] In practice, as Butler knows all too well, the American response to the knowledge that the national border is permeable and vulnerable was characterized overwhelmingly by anxiety and rage. In this sense, the post-9/11 period did indeed witness a renewal of community, but one motivated by fear and anger rather than vulnerability and openness.

What myths influence and define this latest version of American community? This is a question answered persuasively by Susan Faludi in her 2007 book, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*, and that the book's headnote comes from Slotkin suggests her awareness of the relevance of his work.[14] According to Faludi, the national response to 9/11 was for Americans to cocoon themselves within a dream world made up of past imaginings of an inviolable America, a dream world above all characterized by the return of the language of the frontier and the myth of the Wild West: "From deep within that dream world, our commander in chief issued remarks like 'We'll smoke him out' and 'Wanted: dead or alive' . . . and our pundits proclaimed our nation's ability to vanquish 'barbarians' in a faraway land they dubbed 'Indian Country.'"[15] Faludi's language echoes in an uncanny way Slotkin's contention that at the heart of the "regeneration of violence" concept "is the symbol of the 'savage war,' which was both a mythic trope and an operative category of military doctrine. The premise of 'savage war' is that ineluctable political and social differences—rooted in some combination of 'blood' and culture—make coexistence between primitive natives and civilized Europeans impossible on any basis other than that of subjugation."[16] As the essays by Maryam Khalid and Katarina Gregersdotter in this collection demonstrate, careful attention to the precise lineaments of the dream world we have been inhabiting since September 2001 not only demonstrates the continued salience of the work of Richard Slotkin but also, more important, suggests both the ethical imperative informing and the future direction of work on American violence.

In closing, let me emphasize a point that this collection both demonstrates and asserts forcefully—that future work on American violence should be accompanied by a disciplined attention to and engagement with the popular. In far too many instances, analysts of violence have been unwilling to engage with popular culture other than to criticize or dismiss it. Once again, there are, of course, exceptions to this rule. A great deal of work has been devoted to a discussion of the films of Alfred Hitchcock, a director obviously obsessed with the role of violence in American life. With this said, however, a relatively small percentage of this work has taken seriously the possibility that Hitchcock's work constitutes a sustained examination of the relation between violence and Americanness.

And yet how can one avoid social readings of Hitchcock's treatment of violence, especially when we consider the concluding scene of Hitchcock's own personal favorite among his films, 1943's *Shadow of A Doubt*? In this scene, we see the town of Santa Rosa honoring the life of Uncle Charlie, who we know to be a serial killer of rich widows but who the town thinks of as a fine, upstanding citizen. What is fascinating about the closing scene of *Shadow of a Doubt* is that it features an exchange between two characters that contains a radically inadequate explanation of what was wrong with Uncle Charlie. Thus I'd like to think of this scene as a challenge to all of us to develop better explanations of not only popular culture itself, but also the popularity of violent popular culture, and to do so not only for products that can easily be rehabilitated as high culture, such as Hitchcock's oeuvre, but also for products that one cannot reclaim because they insist on remaining in the gutter, such as the homicidal revenge fantasies of Mickey Spillane, hated by both critics and the other writers of hard-boiled fiction discussed in Rachel Franks's essay but so popular that at one time seven of the top fifteen best-selling books ever published had been written by Spillane. What this means is that we should not be afraid to get our hands dirty and should be willing to engage with popular culture at the level of the video game entitled "Super Columbine Massacre" or with murderabilia websites such as "Murderauction" and "Supernaught." The costs of neglecting such cultural products could be high. In overlooking the popular, we risk ceding this ground to the right's language of moral condemnation. In doing so, we lose the opportunity to, among other things, point out the difference in degree rather than kind between the violent video games the right loves to hate and one of the most popular video games on the planet, "America's Army," invented and developed by none other than the U.S. Army. The right clearly realizes that popular culture is, among other things, a terrain upon which political meanings are won or lost. In our continuing efforts to rescue discussions of American violence from banality, we should do no less.

Notes

1. Davis, vii–viii.
2. Žižek, 1.
3. Alvarez and Bachman, 6.
4. Waldrep and Bellesiles, 3.
5. According to Žižek, the highly visible, or "subjective," forms of violence are seen as a "perturbation of the 'normal,' peaceful state of things. However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this 'normal' state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent" (2).
6. Armstrong and Tennenhouse, 2. Some critics have responded to the problems raised by the relation between violence and language by creating new terms reflecting this relation more accurately and vividly. Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero, for example, has claimed that as "violence spreads and assumes unheard-of forms, it becomes difficult to name in contemporary language" (2). With this difficulty in mind, Cavarero suggests the introduction of the neologism "horrorism." This new term, Cavarero argues, both emphasizes "the peculiarly repugnant character of so many scenes of contemporary violence," while also helping "us see that a certain model of horror is indispensable for understanding our present" (29).
7. Seltzer, 1.
8. Lawrence, 72–73.
9. Ibid., 60.
10. Slotkin, 10.
11. Ibid., 11–12, emphasis in original.
12. Ibid., 652, emphasis in original.
13. Butler, 19.
14. The headnote, taken from *Regeneration through Violence*, reads as follows: "A people unaware of its myths is likely to continue living by them, though the world around that people may change and demand changes in their psychology, their world view, their ethics, and their institutions."
15. Faludi, 5–6.
16. Slotkin, 12.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Vanishing Trace of Violence in Native American Literature and Film

Tim Bryant

Contemporary literature and films about North American Indians bear a trace of violence that is always vanishing. The cause of its vanishing is the rift between Native cultures and the Anglo-American overculture. Violence falls into the cracks between cultures, histories, and social needs to imagine culture and history in diverse ways. It leaves a trace as it falls in the remnants of diversely remembered, diversely imagined histories and futures. That this tendency should occur in Native American literature today should not surprise anyone: it is a cycle initiated during the many moments of "first contact" in the fifteenth century and beyond. Moreover, the ways that American Indian authors imagine violence in their works reflect a troubled relationship between cultures and between historical influence and aesthetic purpose. Between these points lies the question of audience, and the many desires and anxieties attached to an indigenous literature whose primary audience, by the numbers alone, is not indigenous. These factors are all reasons why violence, as one of the most direct expressions of the unequal nature of these relationships, is so often represented in trace—indirectly, even elliptically—in contemporary literature. Violence remains present as a form of truth about these cultural histories, but it appears only in trace forms as a means of accommodating other imaginary relationships among populations and their interrelated histories. The trace is always vanishing because it functions best when doing so: It is a reminder of historical realities, a past of brutalism, but a reminder

with purposeful omissions that make room for a more accommodating imaginary to take place in cultural exchange—one of its chief functions.

Philosopher Jacques Derrida explains the significance of trace in terms of the dualistic nature of language, which signifies the presence of one idea or figure as the absence of another.[1] Irresolvable opposites motivate the project of literary deconstruction under the assumption that the subordinate term in each opposition, the one repressed, will always return in some form as an influential absence legible to those who pay attention. This is the sense of trace that I invoke: a sign of violence that is always absented in texts and thus always present as a threatening return of all that has been suppressed, or oppressed, in the awareness granted by history, psychology, and interpretation of forms.

This linguistic theory of presence as absence applies to cultural representations as well. A second sense of "vanishing trace" is an intentional pun on the concept of "vanishing race," a characterization of North American Indians popular in nineteenth-century publications whose authors wished to imagine the essential, and essentially different, attributes of indigenous peoples that was consistent with widespread Anglo-American desires to displace those populations from their lands and from the unfettered expansion of white populations and cultures. The conversion of race to trace is an attempt to invoke this notion of essential identity and at the same time to question its validity by introducing, through the renaming, the possibility for an alternate, resistant meaning. The pairing of "vanishing race" is a contradiction that serves the cultural function of disappearance through representation of a people from without. The "vanishing trace" identifies this function as violence itself: It is a violation of a people by naming them as beyond representation, having attributed an inarticulate quality as an internal attribute of the people themselves, rather than an intentional consequence of historical contact, geographical dislocation, and linguistic erasure. Native American literature and film continues to bear this vanishing trace of violence in representing the operation of violence indirectly in various ways.

In the following pages, I examine the work of some of the most popular and bestselling authors—including N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, James Welch, Louise Erdrich, Gerald Vizenor, and Sherman Alexie—to explore the dynamics of trace violence in literature and film. The American literary marketplace has afforded a place for literary representations of indigenous peoples dispossessed by institutional, intentional violence—such as preemptive warfare, coercive removal, and broken treaties—but also, supposedly repossessed of self-representation since the "Native American Renaissance" movement inaugurated by N. Scott Momaday's

Pulitzer Prize in Fiction for *House Made of Dawn* in 1969. Select novels from these authors capture moments in which historical violence is referenced within discrete constraints upon what is and is not said about the history, especially the responsible parties and the affected populations. The literary representation grapples with the presence and absence of trace violence, as a product of historical relations and as productive of continuing cultural relationships.

Contemporary North American Indian literature represents historical violence indirectly and elliptically for several reasons: (1) not to offend Anglo-American readers, who constitute the majority of the readership and market for these publications; (2) not to restrict indigenous political and aesthetic identities to these materially reductive determinants; (3) to appeal to an Anglo-American constituency including secondary-level and higher education students who may read these texts as cross-cultural instruction; and (4) to appeal to indigenous readers who may read these texts as means of cultural communication.

Concrete references to historical violence remain as milestones in the history of Anglo-Indian relations. The Trail of Tears and the Massacre at Wounded Knee are two of the most dramatically remembered moments of the official policy and practice of Indian removal of the nineteenth century. Such events are referenced in the literature but not always revealed fully within the narrative. Instead, references to violence are muted or personalized in ways that may be more acceptable, or less accusatory, to an Anglo-American audience. These two broad tendencies, to avoid offense and appeal to cultural sensibilities, establish the general framework in which historical violence is portrayed in contemporary North American Indian literature. It is a literature preoccupied with the legacies of violence but also intent on negotiating representations of such legacies across two audiences, whose interests and sensitivities influence how the history may be told.

Native American literary scholar Alan R. Velie identifies the Christian and native sources of the mythic prototypes that underwrite much contemporary Native American fiction. Most usefully, Velie identifies Abel, the protagonist of Momaday's foundational work, as the "prototypic victim" made in the mold of his Biblical namesake.[2] The narrative tendencies toward framing native status as primarily victimized and toward internalizing Christian worldviews to express that status run the risk, as Velie notes, of oversimplifying native perspectives and potentials. I wish to explore how contemporary Native American literature articulates relationships to violence, including the consequences of narrative conventions, and critical resistance to such violations.

Imaginary depictions of the indigenous peoples of North America originate from a long history of Anglo-American desires and anxieties about intercultural contact. Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* exemplifies the tendency to frame native populations as, in themselves, trace elements within the landscape. Progressing from measurements of rivers, sea-ports, mountains, and cascades to estimates of population, military force, marine force, and aborigines, his opening "queries" imagine a natural continuum between geographical and cultural landscapes. Within that imagined relationship, Jefferson characterizes indigenous populations as desirably present for the purposes of trade, but inevitably vanishing due in no small part to their own choices. Briefly acknowledging potential obstacles to trade, Jefferson writes, "Add to all this, that in case of a war with our neighbors the Anglo-Americans or the Indians, the route to New-York becomes a frontier through almost its whole length, and all commerce through it ceases from that moment."[3] War, and those who wage it against the United States, are pragmatically reduced to an effect of trade blockage for Jefferson's readership. His history thus reduces the violence of war and the presence of Native Americans to their effects upon the ventures of Anglo-American acquisition. Those are the traces by which they are to be known in the Anglo-American worldview promoted here. Evacuating an entire history of forced displacement, Jefferson asserts, "That the lands of this country were taken from them by conquest, is not so general a truth as is supposed. . . . The upper country we know has been acquired altogether by purchases made in the most unexceptional form."[4] After these rationalizations for U.S. expansionism, Jefferson rounds out this reduction of native peoples into a trace presence by bemoaning the diminishment of their populations: "It is to be lamented then, very much to be lamented, that we have suffered so many of the Indian tribes already to extinguish, without our having previously collected and deposited in the records of literature, the general rudiments at least of the languages they spoke."[5] It is the lost knowledge about Native cultures and the violence that loss commits against Anglo-American literature, rather than the loss of the living people and the violence committed against them, that lies at the heart of this lament. Jefferson's *Notes* effectively models the operation of intentional erasure that Native American populations would come to suffer from U.S. expansionism and its whitewashed history. Where Jefferson grants the indigenous people trace presence in his record, the violence by which they are removed from their land remains unidentified in origin and portrayed as inevitable in its ends.

The tendency to represent native cultures through trace violence permeates contemporary film as well. Film critic Edward Buscombe notes

in his study *Injuns! Native Americans in the Movies* that the majority of Hollywood films depict Indians in relationship to whites, rarely granting them independent representation that is not, through plot or context, somehow dependent upon a storyline motivated by Anglo-American characters. For example, Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990) is credited with breaking away from stereotypical conventions of the Hollywood western. Despite the sympathetic view Costner promotes, the film nevertheless retains the perspective of a white man, John Dunbar, making use of Indian culture for his own ends. The film reinforces selective, stereotypical demonizations of indigenous peoples by having "good" Indians and "bad" Indians, which is visible in the framing of the battle scene, in which the Pawnee, who have been characterized as bloodthirsty murderers, make a full-out attack on Dunbar's group.[6] Furthermore, the Sioux help Dunbar recover himself when his own culture fails him. In doing so, Indian culture is put to the service of a narrative common in the Anglo-American overculture: that of recuperating oneself by being re-created in faraway lands, by traveling to another place before returning to the work within one's own culture. As the film ends, Dunbar and his wife (like him, an Anglo-American assimilated into the Sioux) separate from the Sioux to forge ahead on their own. Dunbar becomes a witness to the "vanishing race" as he loses sight of the Sioux just as we, the viewers, do.

Mainstream American films continue to allay potential anxieties about native presence by making them present onscreen in unthreatening ways, as a presence whose meaning audiences can understand as a part of their own cultural landscape. Among these imagined notions of the people, many stereotypes exist. One of the most prevalent images of Native Americans is that of a transcendent race of spiritual environmentalists, an image popularized and co-opted by the New Age movement. Other popular notions of Indians from history include that of the "noble savage," a figure credited with an inner nobility of spirit, as well as an essentially uncivilized, or un-civilizable, character; the "peaceful warrior" whose military expertise is translated into spiritually pacifistic contexts; and the "virginal maiden," an archetype of innocent femininity, very loosely based on the historical figure of Pocahontas, who is imagined, by Disney among others, as eagerly awaiting the arrival of white explorers. My argument addresses the social functions of such stereotypes within the context of personal and structural violence in order to highlight the strategies by which popular Native American authors have attempted to compensate for a history of misrepresentation. Through literary ritualism, minimalism, and ironism, the traces of violence achieve new representation opposed to long histories of erasure and forgetfulness.

Ritualism

Two prime examples of this tendency to reference history elliptically exist in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977). Both texts feature a protagonist—Abel and Tayo respectively—traumatized by experiences as a U.S. soldier during World War II and unable to reincorporate into his native community. Traumas more exclusively suffered by American Indians haunt these texts, which often serve as lessons in Native American history for student readers, but the most explicit traumas remain U.S.–national in scope. The appropriate response to suffering traumatic violence is framed by these authors as a return to communal traditions, especially spiritual and religious ones. Both novels perform a dual service in communicating several divergent aspects of native spirituality as the means by which to reclaim one's identity after cross-cultural trauma. The traces of violence, which inform characters' susceptibilities toward alcoholism, depression, and abuse, may find answer in these texts when characters reconnect to lingering traces of traditional native culture. The promise that these works imply is that tradition persists more strongly than the traumas inflicted by past histories of personal/specific and cultural/broad violence.

Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* has been credited with inspiring the proliferation of native literature in nonnative communities, as well as the rise of departments of Native American studies at many college campuses. "The Native American Renaissance" movement, which accompanied Momaday's influence, has been dismissed for its perceived implication that native literature was not vibrantly alive before it achieved popularity in bookstore chains, college campuses, and prize committees. This objection draws attention to the question of audience: For whom is native literature written?

The novel tells a multigenerational, pan-Indian saga of native struggle for cultural and spiritual survival against the dispiriting traumas of war, plague, the reservation system, cultural disinheritance, and forced separation from traditional, communal ways of living. The protagonist Abel suffers vague visions of wartime atrocities that also seem to flash back to historical atrocities committed upon the North American Indian peoples by Anglo-European colonizers. When army doctors do nothing to help him, he resorts to alcohol to drown out his troubling visions. Abel's inebriation thus serves as a metaphorical justification for Momaday to blur perceived lines of historical and contemporary influence.

This intentional blurring permits the author to speak across audiences. Momaday's vision is based in ritualized reintegration of the individual back

into community and, perhaps, of the nonnative reader to an understanding of a community not necessarily his or her own. It is a vision rooted in a variety of Native American spiritual traditions, but also holding out the possibility of sympathetic understanding to outsiders. Momaday accomplishes this appeal to dual audiences by making Abel feel for a time like an outsider to his own community. The generalization to outsider status shared by both protagonist and reader grants native character and reader, as well as nonnative reader, the ability to seek access to native cultures on equal footing.

Momaday's novel enhances its ability to foster both native and nonnative identification with native cultural practices by embracing a pan-Indian perspective in its plotting and characterization. The work of healing and reintegration operates diversely in the novel through the rituals of four native holy men from different peoples: first, Abel's grandfather Francisco, The Longhair of the Walatowa/Jemez Pueblo; second, Tosamah, a Kiowa holy man referred to as the "Priest of the Sun," whose sermons are inspired by peyote-induced visions; third, a Navajo man named Benally, who is Abel's "Night Chanter," cleansing him of illness; and fourth, Abel himself, who, once purified, becomes a holy "Dawn Runner" to complete the cycle of healing and integration. The cyclic nature of this process is hinted at in the opening and closing words of the book. The book opens and closes, respectively, with the Jemez words of story-starting and story-ending: "Qtsedaba" and "Dypaloh." Ritual pervades the entire book, with no clear ending or beginning. As such, the novel perceives violence ritualistically, as something already undergoing transformative healing, rather than a trauma whose history must be isolated for study.

Abel's lack of vision is demonstrated most vividly in his participation in a ritual horse-race during the Feast of Santiago, or St. James. The object of the race is for a rider to gallop full speed before leaning down to grasp up a rooster staked to the earth; the winner is to use the recovered rooster ritualistically to ward off his rivals. According to the original tale, the royal knight Santiago, disguised as a peasant, rides into a Mexican village, where he receives the hospitality of a poor couple, who kill their only rooster to feed him and give him their only bed. Later, upon winning the hand of the king's daughter in a royal competition, Santiago receives warning of a plot against his life when a live rooster emerges from his mouth. After Santiago uses the rooster's spur to defeat his enemies, he sacrifices his horse and the rooster, which transform into entire herds of horses and a flourishing of plants and animals. The peasants' original act of hospitality thus signifies a respect for and continuation of original creation, but this kind of respectful relationship is hidden from Abel. In the race, Abel loses to an albino

rider, who violently throttles him with the rooster. Abel will later kill this same rider in a drunken rage, mistaking the man's embrace for an attack. Momaday intentionally leaves the true nature of the albino ambiguous. Thus both the identities of Native character and the identification of their actions as either violent or nonviolent remain as trace for the reader to interpret more fully. This act of violence, ambiguous in its perpetrator's drunken intent and committed upon an ambiguously threatening target, sends Abel to prison, after which he will resume his journey of healing far from home.

The story resumes seven years later in Los Angeles, where Abel meets Rev. J. B. B. Tosamah, "The Priest of the Sun." Invoking Kiowa rituals of the Sun Dance, Tai-me, and peyote consumption, Tosamah preaches a mixed message of hope and despair, infused with references to not only native religious traditions, but also Christianity and U.S. popular culture. At this point, Abel has become an urban Indian, geographically and culturally cut off from his people by his inability to see the significance of their ways. The mixed content and confusing form of Tosamah's preaching reflects this in-between state where Abel finds himself a fish out of water, a metaphor Momaday uses throughout the novel.[7]

Working out of the Los Angeles Holiness Pan-Indian Rescue Mission, Tosamah preaches two sermons: "The Gospel According to John" and "The Way to Rainy Mountain." In the first sermon, the proud but beaten minister takes up the theme of the divine Word, quoting from the Gospel of John ("In the beginning was the Word") and from the Hebrew creation story ("And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep").[8] The second sermon recounts the mythic origin of the Kiowa people. These dual origins for his preaching focus on the formlessness of the world at its moment of origin and the potential to find meaningful form in words.[9] Tosamah's tone alternates between cynicism and reverence and from colloquialism to high lyricism as he criticizes Christian evangelists for corrupting language while also warning his congregation not to become victims, but rather to embrace the healing power of the Word.

The third holy man Abel encounters is Ben Benally, who befriends Abel in L.A. and performs for him the Night Chant, a sacred rite of the Navajo between one healer and one patient intended to cure spiritual and physical disease. Momaday refers to religious rituals based on song and word as "chantways": Of these rituals, the Night Chant is considered one of the most sacred. From Benally's ritual Abel attains the capacity to assume his own role as healer.

Upon his return home, Abel performs two important actions: helping his grandfather die and taking up his own position as a holy man in the

very same room where Abel was born and his mother and brother died. Written in the present tense, like much of Momaday's novel, this section, upon a second reading, is shown to be running throughout the book. Abel has been healed, and is healing others, before the book started. And, by the same token, he is in need of healing before and after the book has started.

Where Momaday's work promises recuperation from violent acts through the acceptance of cross-cultural identification, making sacred native cultural practices present to other cultures, Leslie Marmon Silko draws out more explicit lines of violence defining the terms of that exchange. As a member of the Laguna Pueblo who also possesses Anglo-American and Mexican ancestry, Silko grew up at the literal and cultural edges of the reservation, excluded from community in some ways. In an interview with Alan Velie, she claimed, "I am of mixed-breed ancestry, but what I know is Laguna."[10] Silko acknowledges the possibilities of feeling oneself a cultural outsider, even from one's own people, in the story of Tayo. The violence he suffers is explicitly a product of U.S. warfare not only abroad, but also within its borders via nuclear testing and mining for radioactive materials on native lands. Like Abel before him, Tayo is a native veteran of World War II returned home suffering from shellshock, alcoholism, and a loss of conscious connection to his people. Structurally, Silko's novel is told in a nonlinear fashion, lacking chapters, to simulate the cyclical nature of ceremony. Interwoven with Tayo's plot are fragments from Laguna tales about Fly, Corn Woman, and other mythic figures. In its form and structure, the book attempts to resemble the oral nature of ceremonial storytelling. Unlike Momaday, whose use of sacred ceremonies in his fiction received commendation, Silko found herself defending the inclusion of native myth in her work when Paula Gunn Allen criticized her for divulging tribal secrets in *Ceremony*.[11] The nonnative audience of Silko's and other American Indian authors' work raises the question again: Who is this written for? In her choice of literary form and content, Silko seems to write for all audiences, because all audiences are, in her view, interconnected.

Silko's *Ceremony* progresses through Tayo's encounters with a series of mythical and mundane, holy and unholy, men and women: Corn Woman, Tayo's auntie, his grandmother, the holy man Ku'oosh, Betonie, Night Swan, Yellow Woman, and the evil witches. Making the perpetrators of evil a generalized force, as opposed to the personal figures of good, Silko obscures the question of responsibility for historical violence. Instead she focuses on the personal effects of trauma on Tayo. The emphasis on personal character may satisfy the expected conventions of the novel as a

literary genre, but it also permits the novelist to delay her identification of specific causes or agents of violence. Silko maintains a wide audience by intentionally not casting blame upon Anglo-American histories of violence and U.S. governmental policies supporting that violence. Instead, the reader is left to deduce the sources of antagonism through their effects on the native protagonist. In the opening passages of the book, Tayo's inner monologue shows him to feel like white smoke, invisible, already dead, and without a place in the world.[12] Others suffer, too, from the start: His friend Harley is also an alcoholic, with his own illness, and fellow veteran Emo's sense of frustration fuels a maniacal bloodlust.[13] More broadly, the community to which he wishes to return, and that might heal him, no longer exists, because its other members have been just as affected as Tayo.

The influence of Christianity on native communities arises subtly in both Momaday and Silko. Where Momaday uses the naive character of Fr. Olguin to make oblique references to the possibility of Christianity disinheriting native populations from traditional religion, Silko is more direct in her characterization of Tayo's auntie as a hypocritical agent of a Christian faith embraced at the expense of native spirituality. In his youth, Auntie dismissed Tayo as an unworthy half-breed because of his white father. During wartime, she had hoped that the army would withhold Indian medicine from her nephew.[14] When he returns, she preaches family reconciliation and Christian forgiveness but continues to distance herself from him.[15] These are personalized figures of un-Christian faith, acting both as references to the history of Christian collusion with Indian oppression and as underdeveloped traces of that history. These points of moral and cultural purity are ones both Silko and Momaday complicate. Fr. Olguin may be naive and half-blind, but even Francisco participates in Christian worship with little evidence in the story of any especially ill effects.

Silko champions the principle of hybridity over simple binary divisions between cultures and ethnicities. Characters share connections across such conventional divides. In one of his flashbacks to the war, Tayo recalls seeing the face of his Uncle Josiah on the face of a dead Japanese soldier.[16] Violence becomes the site of identification, one traumatized soldier with one dead soldier. Hybrid identity, as it is the ability to identify across divisions and cross borders, both real and imagined, is central to Silko's goal of speaking to multiple audiences. The presence of trace violence, rather than a fuller historical account that may appear oppositional, permits her to address such audiences together.

Shared responsibility for cultural disintegration is a topic Silko addresses directly throughout the novel. She gives evidence in the historical practices

of the U.S. government to promote alcoholism, reeducate native children, deprive populations of native religions, and turn locations of spiritual significance into tourist destinations.[17] Despite these injustices, Silko leaves open the possibility of sympathy across populations by asserting that "whites were not always alien" but have become so due to the work of what she calls the witches, evil forces pretending to be human, taking on others' skins to deceive and lay blame.[18] The vague witchery is responsible for the problems of the reservation, as well as new acts of violence, including murder.

Murder occurs at an abandoned uranium mine, which refers to one of the most destructive legacies of modern warfare that Silko identifies as an evil threatening all cultures: the nuclear bomb and its fallout. References in the novel to a uranium mine on the reservation allude to four mines operated on American Indian reservations in the twentieth century: (1) mining started during the Gold Rush (1870s) in the Black Hills and on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, South Dakota; (2) the Midnite Mine (1955–1981) on the Spokane Indian Reservation, Washington; (3) the Cyprus Tohono Mine on Tohono O'odham land near Tucson, Arizona; and (4) mining on the Colorado Plateau/ Navajo Indian Reservation (1947–1959) near Gallup, New Mexico.

Silko alludes to Gallup, and to the catastrophic spill of radioactive waste that occurred there in 1979, to link Tayo's illness with the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.[19] This same uranium mine is where Emo murders Harley.[20] Like Tayo, who stays his hand from exacting revenge upon Emo, Silko refrains from pursuing these kinds of particular acts of violence and their perpetrators as the cause of violence and, thus, the site of redress. Instead, her narrative evokes a general condition of violence, shared among cultures, due to the category of "witchery" that is both supernatural (witchcraft) and manmade (nuclear technology). This hesitance to identify violence in anything other than generalized, categorical terms introduces an intentional omission of the long, material history of violence between Anglo-American and Native American populations. The trace of violence that is permitted visibility Silko recuperates by invoking the equally generalized categories of traditional spiritualism and storytelling.

The generalized violence of nuclear warfare and its toxic byproducts on reservation lands join together in Silko's novel to offer a story relatable to both native and nonnative audiences without necessarily rallying readers to action beyond that acknowledgment. The terms of war and land remain too broad in her narrative for adequate response beyond it. The grounds for action seem, also, to vanish. Government coercion, ethnic hybridity, and nuclear radiation appear to form the grounds of meaningful progress in Michael Apted's Hollywood blockbuster *Thunderheart* (1992), starring

Val Kilmer and Graham Greene. Kilmer plays FBI agent Ray Levoi, who is Sioux on his father's side but whose stereotypical 1980s yuppie lifestyle bears no visible connection to his native heritage. He is so far assimilated into the culture of U.S. nationalism that members of the nation, resentful of federal intrusion, refer to him with derision as "the Washington Redskin." Like Costner, Apted leaves possibilities for audience sympathy; in the film, Levoi is not just a tool for the FBI to cynically have a so-called insider perspective on the case. On the contrary, Levoi's initially suspect character is redeemed when Grandpa Sam Reaches, a revered holy man, tells him and the people that Levoi comes from strong blood—that of a man named Thunderheart, who died at the Wounded Knee Massacre.

Apted's film attempts to capture a truer character of American Indians by portraying native characters in less stereotypical and less idealized ways. Apted's film walks the fine line between stereotype and authentic representation, a goal that may be impossible to achieve but to which the film nevertheless clings. Foreshadowed by the plotline of Maggie, a teacher and activist investigating toxins in the local river, the film's ending has Kilmer and Greene discover uranium mining on the reservation, conducted illegally and covertly, as the motive for the murder central to the film's plot. This ending clearly references illegal, governmentally run mining on Indian reservations. But Apted's film also references his other work released the same year, a documentary narrated by Robert Redford about Leonard Peltier, serving two life sentences in federal prison for the murder of two FBI agents at the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. The most immediate sources for Apted's Hollywood blockbuster are the federal murder investigation and his documentary about it, but many of those connections remain as subtext, only traceable by viewers who are already aware of the history.[21]

Despite the material history of Peltier's trial and continuing incarceration, as well as the long history of the reservation system, in which Pine Ridge is one of the most impoverished, Apted concludes *Thunderheart* with an optimistic conclusion. A corrupt FBI agent, his GOON squad cronies, and their native collaborators are defeated by an armed native force who come to Levoi's aid and confront his pursuers as an armed band in the final chase scene. Levoi departs from the reservation redeemed, having solved the murder and retraced his native roots. Like Momaday and Silko, Apted offers a ritualism of healing and storytelling that displaces historical traces of violence—caused by government corruption, forced assimilation, and destructive warfare, among many other forces—to offer mixed audiences more positive and comforting signs of native cultures' survival, always in trace form.

Minimalism

Other authors like James Welch and Louise Erdrich offer less transcendent outlooks on the possibility of returning to traditional religiosity as a viable means of recovering or withdrawing from cross-cultural contact and its attendant varieties of violence. These authors suppress the violence of history so that, in the style of minimalist writers, it infuses character and story with the effects of understatement, implication, and allusion. By no means lacking depictions of direct and immediate violence of the most visceral kind, Welch and Erdrich's works nevertheless communicate forms of systemic, historical, and pervasive violence and violation that define the entire world, one in which each individual act of explicitly recognizable violence is only a manifestation of an entire culture, or cross-cultural relation, steeped in wrongful violation.

Whereas the ritualistic approach of Momaday and Silko proffers commercial writing as also sacred, including the casual reader in ceremonial storytelling practices, the workings of minimalist native authors deny such aesthetic presumptions. Instead, these works confront the immensity of historical wrongdoings and ongoing inequities with the acknowledgment that literary writing cannot represent all those complexities, nor find remedy for them in traditional religious and narrative practices. Instead, writers like Welch and Erdrich return to moments of mystery, more often mundane than transcendent. These moments, when characters implicitly feel but do not fully comprehend the impact of violence on their lives, define native subjectivity as implicated in structural cycles of violence.

The nameless protagonist of Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1974) is obsessed with the loss of his truck and gun, stolen by his Creek girlfriend when she broke up with him and left town. She, too, figures as a sign of loss, one far greater than any of these lost possessions can figure in part or as a whole. The absence of a name for Welch's protagonist is joined with the absence of a native presence in the land. On the first page, the "Earthboy place" that defines the native population also lacks a name: "[N]o one by that name (or any other) had lived in it for twenty years."[22] Throughout the novel Welch performs a double motion to capture this sense of dislocated, barely traceable native identity. These references link Welch's protagonist to the author's own biography and serve to particularize this narrative as one of specific native populations, thus diverging from the pan-Indian ethos of other authors, especially Momaday, who includes fragments of story and ritual from several native populations in *House Made of Dawn*. The animosity expressed toward the Creek people in Welch's work also particularizes this story as one in which traces of

violence persist across native populations based on historical rivalries and competition for resources.

When he attempts to recover what he has lost by tracing his girlfriend's whereabouts to the nearby town Havre, Welch's protagonist utterly fails. Having discovered her in a bar, he is soon knocked unconscious by his romantic rival and wakes up on the street outside. He is given a second chance at connection by the similarly impoverished and lost Marlene, who wakes him up and accompanies him to a motel. Yet, when they attempt to engage in sex, the romance of the second chance is undercut when he violently strikes her during sex and she eventually accepts it as a part of their lovemaking.[23] Bereft of his seemingly heroic quest to recover himself, the protagonist has internalized the structural violence and become its agent. He soon leaves town, returning to the mundane cycle of his life without hopes of escaping his life as a cycle of violence.

Culturally and economically bereft, Welch's protagonist is stuck in present moments of oppression without resort to future-based hopes of redemption or past-based recollections of tradition to rationalize, recuperate, or otherwise reframe the situation of living within a history of violence. Where ritualism may displace violence by offering the ability to trace out other options, past- or future-oriented, the minimalism of Welch's work offers no such trajectory. The cultural resources displaced include hope in such storytelling devices, whose force is implicitly less powerful than the all-pervasive, material effect of historical deprivations.

In her introduction to Welch's novel, Louise Erdrich credits the author with writing "about Indians without once getting pious, uplifting, or making you feel sorry for The Plight."[24] These are the very same tendencies, as reactions against and solutions for violation of Native peoples, that Momaday and Silko embrace. Welch's minimalist writing, which rejects such promises of moral uplift, has been far less popular, as Erdrich notes, than the ritualists' more open sharing of native religious ritualism in mass-market novels. Erdrich, on the other hand, has enjoyed enduring popularity while writing in a similar vein as Welch. Her style, however, retains the appealing possibility of supernatural intervention—not for the purpose of healing past wounds, but for inflicting upon the oppressor unforgiving violence in exchange for violence already suffered by native populations. Remaining true to the ethos of a minimalist literary voice, Erdrich adds to that voice the possibility of vengeful retribution as the trace by which one might know the legacy of violence.

Louise Erdrich's novel *Tracks* (1988) is characterized by internalized cycles of violence that both define and destroy intermixed communities of Anglo and Native Americans. The protagonist Fleur Pillager is believed by

local communities to possess supernatural powers of destruction by her marriage to a water monster.[25] Her destructive threat is also traced to the wrongs her people suffered when Anglo-Americans misappropriated their lands. The action of the novel takes place from 1912 to 1924, and Erdrich alludes to the geographical displacement and dispossession associated with the infamous Trail of Tears in the 1830s, arguing by implication that the cycle of violent displacement and cultural disruption continues.

Sexualized violence is central to Erdrich's storyline, as it is in Welch's. In one of the book's most important scenes, Fleur wins money in a poker game with a group of men, her coworkers for the past several months, after which the drunken men ambush and rape her. Soon thereafter, a tornado hits and wipes out the entire town, with the townspeople explaining the storm as a manifestation of Fleur's malevolent power.[26] The townspeople's process of storytelling is premised on the ability to trace one violent act for another without ever questioning whether they have played a role in fostering such a cycle of violence. Instead, Fleur is invested with the dual roles of victim and avenger by the social illusion of magical powers to make pervasive violence more acceptable.

Pauline is the character Erdrich uses to figure a particular variety of bad faith that romanticizes natives as mystically charged others whose inherent capacities for vengeful supernaturalism counterbalance wrongs done by whites. Pauline literally witnesses the men's ambushing of Fleur and remains silent. She confesses to the reader that as Fleur's constant shadow, enthralled by the older woman's beauty and self-possession, she might have been able to prevent the attack.[27] This confessional mode is another form of violation, a standpoint at a distance from violence, a privileged perspective whose possessor will never be the target of such violence. Pauline's apotheosis comes not when she makes amends for her indifferent witness, but when she becomes a nun who aspires to saint-hood by self-denial and bodily mortification. Pauline figures the church and its interactions with native populations, historically to their cultural dissolution and conversion to Christianity. She is named well, after St. Paul, the chief evangelist of the early Church. Aligned with the hypocritical Christians found in Momaday and Silko, Pauline embraces religion as a solipsistic form of ritualized self-effacement bordering on narcissism that blinds her to others' suffering.

Pauline figures, as well, as the violation of mundane existence as her constant quest for sanctity only leads her to deprive herself of any ability to help others. When Fleur is suffering a difficult childbirth, Pauline stands helpless even though she is the only person present who could possibly help.[28] At the nunnery, her Mother Superior repeatedly corrects Pauline

for performing mortification rituals upon her body, but she does not cede to that authority. In a sympathetic light, it is clear that Pauline suffers from cycles of violence while at the same time acting as their agent. Erdrich grants Pauline narrative voice second only to Fleur and the trickster figure Nanapush, but the author invests in Pauline's singular character the wrongdoings of many historical patterns of violation. Pauline is overrepresentative of wrongs inflicted by geographical and cultural dispossession, enacted as land cessations, compulsory Christianization, and the institution of the reservation system. Nanapush characterizes Pauline as "the only trace of those who died and scattered" among a collective of animal skinners; she is to him "an unknown mixture of ingredients" due to her mixed heritage and now absent family.[29] Within her self-negating figure rests a massive concentration of violent history for which she cannot rightly be adequately punished without making her a mere scapegoat. Erdrich's minimalistic technique thus connects traces of violence to one character but refuses to dispel the complex historical causes of that violence by tracing out a clear judgment or resolution.

The HBO film *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (2007) adopts a similar tone of minimalism in its depiction of the Sioux's displacement onto the U.S. reservation system under the authority of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The film's opening depicts Custer's defeat at the Battle of Little Bighorn, which motivates a discussion in the next scene during which President Grant plans for the removal of the Sioux from their land. The film adapts this history and minimizes its complexity by focusing on the lives of three historical figures: Senator Henry Dawes, Chief Sitting Bull, and Dr. Charles Eastman (played by, respectively, Aidan Quinn, August Schellenberg, and Adam Beech). Dawes, author of the eponymous act of 1887, was overwhelmingly responsible for the logistics of Indian removal to the reservation system, but the film dramatizes his efforts as well-intentioned and, ultimately, frustrated by Native Americans who fail to understand that his plans are in their best interest. Sitting Bull is dramatized as an overbearing leader who submits, too late, to U.S. authority after his people suffer harsh winters during their Canadian exile, to spend his last days chafing not only at his people's degradation, but also at his own lost status. Eastman, a Sioux assimilated into Anglo-American culture by his father's choice, struggles to serve the people, many of whom prefer alcohol over medical care, while also speaking for them among white communities, who almost without exception prefer not to know about their problems.

The one exception to Eastman's frustrated quest to straddle both cultures is his romantic subplot with Elaine Goodale (played by Anna Paquin), whom he eventually marries. Although marginalized as a minor character in the

film's plotting, Goodale serves an essential function of minimizing the traces of violence in the film and displacing them with a melodrama of empathy, which she bears for Charles in particular and for his people in general, and of long-suffering as she witnesses the atrocities committed against the Sioux while powerless to help them. Eastman expresses this functional powerlessness, of his status as a functionary working under the BIA system, when he reminds Elaine of her past comment, made in despair, that he and she were on the reservation not to heal and improve lives, but merely to be witnesses. The audience is thus permitted the minimal role of witness as well, watching another iteration of Indians becoming a vanishing race. In the worldview of minimalism, those who possess notions of resistance exist only as the trace of violence upon which the inevitable history writes itself.

Ironism

A third option within Native American literature and film is to adopt and adapt native practices of signification ironically to comment on the untenable nature of representing the vanishing trace of violence. Gerald Vizenor and Sherman Alexie are notable for their use of ironic humor, often characterized as postmodern in their use of narrative structure self-consciously to comment on narrative's political function to represent, or more often misrepresent, native peoples. Whereas ritualists attempt to convert the grounds of story to the sacred and minimalists wish to infuse their fictions with the weight of understated trauma, ironists play with the forms of story to invoke and subvert conventional narratives of American Indian history and culture in contact with Anglo-American encroachment. Irony here serves as a means not primarily of distancing past narratives of victimization, but of re-engaging concepts of Native identity to subvert stereotypes and make room for new representations.

In *The Trickster of Liberty*, Gerald Vizenor adopts a constant stance of ironic engagement in telling various trickster tales of a family of modern-day tricksters, members of the Browne family whose wild exploits resist simplistic notions of native victimization under irresistible cycles of oppression. The patriarch Luster Browne sets the family's trickster resistance in motion by appointing himself the "Baron of Patronia," a tract of land that is "a wild crescent on the White Earth Reservation northeast of Bad Medicine Lake" in Minnesota.[30] The Baron's progeny populate picaresque adventures across loosely related exploits in their eponymous chapters, given such provocative, mixed-case titles as "CHINA and the WARRIOR CLOWN" and "The LAST LECTURE at the EDGE." The novel's final chapter, in which Vizenor cites various sources in pseudo-academic format, is

entitled "Epilogue: LOSS LEADERS from the UNIVERSITIES," a playful jab at the academic study of Native American issues. Vizenor writes that past academic work attempting to "harness the trickster in the best tribal narratives and to discover the code of comic behavior, hindered imagination," and so repeated acts of cultural misunderstanding and erasure.[31]

Across these variegated chapters, the Baron's children succeed at various unusual tasks, including smuggling goods, performing verbal striptease, and solving a case of embezzlement. Perhaps the most successful of all, Ginseng Browne, in the penultimate chapter, manages to negotiate exclusive rights to a lucrative, multinational, multi-organizational commercial exchange of ginseng root with the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong traders, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs.[32] To consolidate the terms of cultural and commercial exchange, her assistant See See Arachnidan accepts an invitation from the China National Medicines and Health Products Import and Export Corporation to become a Chinese citizen. Vizenor characterizes the tricksters' bargain as "agreements between traders, spies, agents, shamans, sister, heirs, and a wild genetics engineer" that cause a federal judge to dismiss charges against the Indians, who have thus prospered by their ingenious manipulation of others' systems of governance.[33] Vizenor meticulously and ridiculously evacuates narratives of victimization from the text, instead investing native characters with mischievously unlimited agency in negotiating new terms of relation—cultural, economic, and political—in contradiction to historical violations of cultural and political sovereignty whose losses were facilitated by the U.S. legal system's disrespect of treaties and other agreements.

These intentional acts of effectual deviance align with the concept of "survivance," a portmanteau of survival and endurance that encapsulates the ability of indigenous peoples to surpass mere survival in the face of such oppression and to achieve intentional self-creation through cultural forms, traditional and revisionary. Gerald Vizenor defines the term as "an active sense of presence, the continuance of Native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name . . . renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry." [34] The members of the Browne family lay claim to land rightfully theirs, after and beyond unethical displacement, and persist not by means of spiritual or subdued resistance but by surprisingly creative, even commercialized adaptations to their new terrain. Though Vizenor's fiction may be postmodern in its wordplay and world-play, it is also highly effective at dismissing romantic notions of Indians as transcendent and timeless, essentially separated from the rest of the world. Again, the vanishing race appears as subtext. Notions of Native American timelessness may indirectly align with ritualists' promotion of returning to traditional

ways, but Vizenor introduces the possibility that adaptation to and in the present moment may build the groundwork for traditional endurance in a more material sense. Likewise, ironic engagement offers an alternative to the minimalist internalization of oppressive violence by offering the hope of action that violently breaks from such cyclical oppression through an expansive imagination.

Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer* (1996) conjures references to multiple acts of historical violence but places the responsibilities of generic and historical violence in the hands of both American Indian and Anglo-American characters and audiences. Alexie's novel assumes the murder mystery form, in which procedural investigations concern both criminal and cultural justice, as in Tony Hillerman's *Chee* series.[35] Alexie's novel is a postmodern narrative in which criminal guilt exceeds the immediate, generically defined situation of a single death to encompass cultural patterns of violence whose sources are complex and multiple. Alexie's story is about guilt itself: Indians are both suspect as exotic, inscrutable killers and the victims of killers who continue historical practices leading to cultural deprivation. Situating his story within a white-dominated urban center, Alexie highlights the many contradictions faced by American Indian culture within and against the overculture of the United States. Alexie's story is not about a warrior returning home from war, but about an urban Indian named John, who may be an innocent victim of ethnic profiling or, in fact, a serial killer operating in downtown Seattle. Alexie is of the Cœur d'Alène people and Spokane tribe, upon whose land the Midnite Mine operated. But Alexie places responsibility for wrongdoing not only with the U.S. government, but also with anyone who seeks justice by conjuring false images of native identity.

The main text begins with an origin story. It is the story of John Smith's birth at a reservation clinic and his adoption by a white couple living in a suburb outside of Seattle. The chapter is written in the style of magical realism or surrealistic fantasy. After John is born, a military helicopter, right out of a Hollywood movie about Viet Nam, dramatically swoops down to the clinic to steal John away from his ailing mother and deliver him directly to the home of his adoptive, white parents. The only trace of his mother that remains to John Smith is a photograph, which he reflects on at the close of the first chapter. He does not even bear her name, but instead a combination of the most generic Anglo first and last names that also mirrors the name of an early European explorer, who was himself responsible for the deaths and eventual displacement of the Powhatan confederation of Virginia. In name and in reality, John Smith is what he has lost.[36] Even his memories are inauthentic, borrowing the tropes of a Hollywood war

movie in place of the true story of his birth. In this way, Alexie critiques the Hollywood glamorization of warfare and of native identity as a means of erasing more authentic identity and memory.

Alexie complicates the story further by attributing to John emotional problems that may be due either to an inherited imbalance that is psychological in nature or to a lack of inheritance, that is, his displacement from cultural traditions that could have offered him a stable identity. John never knows what particular tribe he comes from, only that he is American Indian and not white, as he is reminded by his well-meaning but ill-equipped parents, Daniel and Olivia Smith.[37] Alexie never resolves the nature of John's condition because it is such a universal one, caused by a host of historical and social factors responsible for countless displacements and destabilizations of native communities by both well-meaning and not-so-well-meaning whites. John is an everyman character caught between both white and native communities, commenting on the nature of both through their uneasy contact.

As a consequence of John's ambiguous condition, the reader is invited to suspect him to be the nameless Indian Killer whose first-person narration runs throughout the novel. After two chapters about John's birth and his emotional instability, the third chapter brings us the voice of this killer, contemplating what white men to kill next.[38] In the same chapter, John suffers several indignities that could fuel such a desire and thus give the reader cause to suspect him of being the killer. Together, the well-meaning and mean-spirited members of the native community and the white community misunderstand John, casting stereotypes upon him that could turn him into a killer. With the provocative title of *Indian Killer*, Alexie's novel invites the reader to participate in this generic typecasting.

The novel offers another invitation, which is to see John better than his fellow characters do, to see him potentially better than he is able to see himself—that is, to see him not as an Indian who is a sociopathic killer but rather, beyond the murder mystery genre, to look to the factors that cause others, including his own people, to kill him in spirit—to kill the more whole human being that he has the potential to become. In contrast to *House Made of Dawn* and *Ceremony*, the primary rituals in Alexie's novel are, at first glance, the ritualized slayings of a serial killer, who preys equally upon whites, Indians, and the homeless. The book's opening holds out the promise that John will encounter healing characters, like Marie, who might save him from becoming the fearful killer or from becoming prey to other kinds of stereotyping and cultural death. Alexie uses the cast of characters to comment on a variety of sources that cause such a man as John to exist as trace between communities and unaided by either in

his desire to create a meaningful life. Alexie's characters are not traditional healers, but ordinary people living in Seattle from native and nonnative communities: Marie Polatkin, an idealistic college student who feeds the homeless and rails in anger against historical injustices against American Indians; her brother Reggie, a college dropout who wants revenge for his expulsion from school; Dr. Clarence Mather, a naive college professor of American Indian literature whose choice of texts include authors who pretended to be Indians in order to sell books; Jack Wilson, the blond-haired, blue-eyed author of the *Aristotle Little Hawk* Indian mystery series; and Truck Schultz, a popular talk radio personality who titillates his listeners with images of a savage Indian killer to generate higher ratings. It is through the series of encounters, and missed encounters, with these characters that John's problems are revealed to be a consequence not only of historical inheritance and disinheritance, but also of ongoing problems in the present day.

Alexie makes direct reference to Momaday's and Silko's novels by observing that the Indians living in Seattle are familiar with the stories of Abel and Tayo as types of Indians, but no one recognizes John Smith.[39] He is a type unacknowledged in a society filled with stereotypes. Deprived of any form of network of healers who could help him reclaim his identity, John Smith defines his struggle, ultimately, as one of self-definition. Alexie refers to traditional rituals sparingly throughout the book, often using elements of traditional rituals at crime scenes to show the killer leaving clues, true or false, of his Indian-ness. The closing chapters of the novel, however, build upon an image of ritualized resistance, first introduced in the prologue. In her final interview with the police, Marie proclaims, "Indians are dancing now, and I don't think they're going to stop." The novel ends with the chapter entitled "A Creation Story," in which Alexie's masked killer expresses his intent to dance forever.[40] The text's multiple repetitions of this image of a death dance makes its performance an act of resistance for the community, not just one individual, to take on. The threat of destructive re-creation, without a simple answer about who is responsible, resonates throughout Vizenor's and Alexie's ironic texts. The image of the masked dancer originates from the many tools of tradition, storytelling, and self-representation. To wield these tools responsibly is the rightful cultural work of contemporary American Indian literature.

Contemporary Native American cinema, by natives and for natives, holds the promise of fulfilling that responsibility of accurate cultural representation. Chris Eyre's *Smoke Signals*, based on stories and characters by Alexie, tells the story of two young men struggling with the legacy of reservation living, which has robbed them of their childhoods and, more

specifically, their fathers. The majority of the film traces the journey of Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-Fire to recover Victor's father Arnold in both body and spirit, through a road trip filled with flashbacks to their troubled lives on the reservation. As does Alexie's writing in general, the film uses very self-conscious humor to critique stereotypical portrayals of Native peoples.

The film evokes several moments of historical violence obliquely. Arnold Joseph accidentally sets fire to the home of Thomas Builds-the-Fire, killing his parents, while drunkenly staggering with a lit firework during a Fourth of July celebration. One of the film's final images is of Suzie Song lighting Arnold's trailer on fire as an exaggerated version of a smudging ritual of purification. Although the film's ending addresses these recurring acts of violence as a question of forgiveness, of fathers specifically, it only briefly addresses the underlying causes of Arnold's alcoholism, depression, and violence. The ironic framing of the film suggests, rather, that traces of systematic violence can never be fully resolved, or fully erased, by a society that refuses to address their underlying historical and material causes.

Conclusion

The past five decades have exhibited a wider cultural interest in and engagement with Native American culture and literature, but the literary representations that have resulted demonstrate troubling patterns in how historical and contemporary violence are and at the same time are not represented. Some narratives allude to more acceptable, patriotic forms of violence such as warfare, rather than acts specifically against American Indian populations. Some minimize past violence by resolving it in a return to past spiritual practices. Others acknowledge historical violence as a continuing pattern, without the conventional promise of positive closure. Others still offer humor as the only sane response in the face of the insurmountable realities of past, present, and future suffering resulting from inexorable violence that shapes these texts without fully manifesting itself in these works. Whereas the indigenous peoples of North America were once collectively referred to as a "vanishing race" in the country, in the literature, violence leaves a vanishing trace of influence, ever in effect but without a clearly authorized mode of representation.

One of the problems with representing indigenous cultures through literary and film narration rests with the form itself. Narrative shows often without telling, without full exposition: Literature imagines states of being and film literally projects external visions that, in turn, create inner visions of our imaginations. But those images and what they suggest may lead

viewers astray from truthful representation when not tempered by other sources of knowledge. The dominance of mass media today makes this reference to other points of information especially important. A careful regard for history, a healthy skepticism about the pleasures of sympathy, and a good sense of humor are all invaluable tools in taking in what knowledge mass media can give us about Native peoples without being taken in by false images. Those images hold the two-sided power, for good or ill, to determine the people we are willing to recognize and the people we are willing to become.

Notes

1. Derrida, 3.
2. Velie (2013), 59–60.
3. Jefferson, 16.
4. Ibid., 96.
5. Ibid., 101.
6. During the ensuing battle, Dunbar demonstrates his superior ability, instructing the Indians how to fight effectively and ethically. He corrects one elder not to use his rifle to bludgeon the enemy with its butt, but to shoot it. When his band converges on the last remaining member of the invading force, Dunbar is stunned into silence when the Sioux warriors not only shoot their enemy many times, but also close on the downed man and pummel him. Dunbar may have "gone Native" in establishing sympathetic relations, but he retains a sense of superior Anglo-American civility, even in battle, as well as judgment over those who lack such restraint.
7. Momaday, 79.
8. Ibid.
9. In his second sermon, "The Way to Rainy Mountain," Tosamah addresses the very point of suffering "confusion" to the eye, similar to the condition Abel suffers. For the Kiowa, the enormity of Rainy Mountain against a desolate plain represents an ability of "far seeing" ritualistically through mundane distractions to a transcendent, spiritual reality.
10. Velie (1982), 106.
11. Allen, 380.
12. Silko, 13, 14, 25, 30.
13. Ibid., 18–21, 56–57.
14. Ibid., 31.
15. Ibid., 60–64.
16. Silko, 7.
17. Ibid., 36, 87, 94, 107.
18. Ibid., 114–115, 121.
19. Ibid., 227–228.

20. Ibid., 233.

21. The basic elements of *Thunderheart*, two FBI agents' investigation of multiple unsolved murders on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, adapt and rearrange the factual evidence reviewed in *Incident at Oglala*, with many scenes in the film containing visual or verbal cues to the documentary. The film alludes to the American Indian Movement (AIM) in naming the Native resistance group Aboriginal Rights Movement (ARM). Likewise, the GOONS (Guardians of the Oglala Nation), an armed militia led by Jack Milton (played by Fred Ward) to suppress the Sioux who resist federal interference, are a direct reference to the real-life "GOON Squads," who served a similar purpose for Dick Wilson during his U.S.-supported chairmanship at Pine Ridge from 1972 to 1976.

22. Welch, 1.

23. Ibid., 98–99.

24. Ibid., xiii.

25. Erdrich, 11.

26. Ibid., 24–28.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., 60.

29. Ibid., 38.

30. Vizenor, 5.

31. Ibid., xiv.

32. Ibid., 153.

33. Ibid., 154.

34. Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*, vii.

35. Navajo tribal police officer Jim Chee is the title character in Tony Hillerman's bestselling murder mystery series, which includes *People of Darkness* (1980), *The Dark Wind* (1982), *The Ghostway* (1984), *Skinwalkers* (1986), *A Thief of Time* (1988), *Talking God* (1989), *Coyote Waits* (1990), *Sacred Clowns* (1993), *The Fallen Man* (1996), *The First Eagle* (1998), *Hunting Badger* (1999), *The Wailing Wind* (2002), *The Sinister Pig* (2003), *Skeleton Man* (2004), and *The Shape Shifter* (2006).

36. *Indian Killer* begins with an epigraph from Alexie's teacher and mentor, Alex Kuo, who writes, "We are what/we have lost."

37. Alexie, 31–32.

38. Ibid., 28.

39. Ibid., 219.

40. Ibid., 418.

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CHAPTER TWO

The Politics of Pain: Representing the Violence of Slavery in American Popular Culture

Erica L. Ball

Representations of North American slavery have been essential to the development and expansion of American popular culture. As scholars have long known, it was the figure of the enslaved man (represented by a white actor in blackface) that was both inspiration for and mainstay of the minstrel show—"the first and most popular form of mass culture in the nineteenth-century United States."[1] And from 1915, when director D. W. Griffith made slavery and the Civil War the subject of what some scholars have called "the single most important movie ever made" to 1977, when the television miniseries *Roots* became the most watched program of its era, representations of relations between white American masters and African American slaves have riveted American audiences and been crucial to key milestones in the history of American mass entertainment.[2]

These pop culture landmarks have inevitably required representations of violence, for North American slavery and the Civil War that ultimately ended the practice were thoroughly brutal affairs. With this in mind, authors, directors, and artists often dramatized spectacles of violence—especially interracial violence between masters and slaves—in novels, plays, and films set in the antebellum and Civil War–era South, sometimes even making acts of interracial physical or sexual assault essential

plot devices. As they repackaged the brutality of slavery for American audiences to consume, these writers and directors capitalized on American audiences' longstanding fascination with violent narratives and imagery.[3] And they paved the way for bloody twenty-first-century blockbusters such as Quentin Tarantino's 2012 film *Django Unchained*.

At the same time, however, embedding depictions of violence in popular tales about slavery did far more than serve as simple entertainment for American audiences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In addition to reflecting the dominant racial ideologies of the contemporary moment and the personal attitudes of writers and directors, melodramatic portrayals of violence between masters and slaves were also placed in the service of race-related political and social movements.[4] From *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the 1850s to *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and other early twentieth-century plantation romances such as *Gone with the Wind* (1936 and 1939) to *Mandingo* and other sexually explicit "slave fiction" novels in the mid-twentieth century to the *Roots* phenomenon of the 1970s, popular representations of the violence of slavery have been bound up with everything from the abolitionist movement to the anti-black violence and Jim Crow segregation of the post-Reconstruction New South to the twentieth-century civil rights movement. In the process, they have been instrumental in defining mainstream American ideas about the history of slavery and conceptualizing the possibilities and limits of American freedom.[5]

The Strange Career of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Antislavery writers, artists, and activists first began representing the violence of slavery in literary and visual culture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Abolitionists, increasingly active by the nineteenth century, sought to translate "the pain of slaves . . . into imagery and visual narrative" for a public more accustomed to the popular minstrel show characterizations of singing, dancing slaves, and the proslavery propaganda portraying slavery as a benign, benevolent institution.[6] By the mid-nineteenth century, abolitionists had created a set of images that served as metonymic devices, or a sort of visual shorthand dramatizing their arguments about the cruelty of slavery: engravings of human cargo chained and stacked in rows reminiscent of a "tightly packed" slave ship; daguerreotypes of the scarred and disfigured back of an enslaved man, or paintings of an enslaved woman writhing in pain under the lash or shrinking in horror before an impending sexual assault. Abolitionists also represented instruments of torture—such as shackles, collars, chains, or simply the whip itself—as visual symbols of the violence required for the ownership and

compulsion of chattel slaves. And, as scholars have shown, these images provoked an array of responses in the Victorian viewer, including horror, sympathy, distance, and, for some, even sexual excitement.[7]

This imagery was disseminated to unprecedented mass audiences through various incarnations of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.[8] First appearing in serial form in the *National Era* in summer 1850 through spring 1851, and subsequently published as a two-volume novel in 1852, the story was released to the public at the moment when the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 brought the plight of escaping slaves before the northern public eye. Although Stowe was not a prominent abolitionist, she was intimately familiar with antislavery imagery and rhetoric and sympathetic to the antislavery cause, and she hoped her novel would help persuade "the South to change its mind about slavery."[9] For Stowe, like many abolitionists of the day, the violence experienced by enslaved men and women was an expression of the absolute power given all slaveholders. And though abolitionists conceded that individual slaveholders might vary greatly in terms of their relationship with violence, they insisted that a system that gave some men total power over others bred moral corruption and thus should not be maintained.[10]

Stowe made her antislavery argument by constructing her novel around two parallel and contrasting plots. After opening on an idyllic Kentucky plantation, the novel narrates the stories of two main characters: that of the devout and devoted family man Tom, sold to a slave trader and transported southward, and of Eliza, who flees northward with her young son Harry (who is about to be sold to the same trader). Relying on the kindness of good-hearted strangers and abolitionists, and encountering many dangers along the way, Eliza and Harry move northward toward freedom. In one especially dramatic scene, Eliza barely escapes the hands of the slave trader by clutching little Harry and scrambling across a churning, icy river, leaving a trail of blood in her wake.[11] Tom, meanwhile, moves deeper into the South and is finally purchased by the brutal Simon Legree. Unlike the other—relatively sympathetic—slaveholders portrayed in the novel, the lecherous Legree reigns with terror; sexual, psychological, and physical violence abound on his Louisiana plantation. There two enslaved black drivers named Sambo and Quimbo torture the other bondsmen and women at Legree's command and seem to delight in lashing Tom with a whip.[12] In one especially violent episode, Sambo incapacitates an exhausted field hand named Lucy by "kicking the woman with his heavy cowhide shoe." Then, to rouse Lucy to consciousness, he removes a "pin from his coatsleeve" and "burie[s] it to the head in her flesh."[13] But it would ultimately be Legree himself, jealous and "foaming with rage" over

Tom's refusal to reveal the whereabouts of two enslaved women, who beats Tom so severely that he dies from his wounds.[14]

Within a year of publication, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had sold more than 300,000 copies, approximately three times as many as the two previous best-selling American novels. One million additional copies of the novel were sold in the United Kingdom, and more than 2 million copies were sold in other parts of Europe and central Asia, where the novel appeared in numerous translations.[15] The cultural effects of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were further heightened by the rapid spread of "Uncle Tomitudes." Representations of popular scenes from the novel, Tomitudes included everything from engravings and paintings to card games, handkerchiefs, ceramic plaques, jigsaw puzzles, mugs, dice games, decorative mantelpiece screens, black woolen stockings, coffee, and licorice, as well as songs and plays based on the novel.[16] Additionally, multiple unauthorized versions of the story were staged in the northeast United States and in England within a year of the novel's publication.[17] Watching white actors in blackface portraying key plot points on the stage, audiences outside the American South (where the play was often banned) could gasp at Eliza's thrilling escape from slave-catchers, laugh at the antics of the mischievous slave girl Topsy, sigh over the short life of little Eva St. Clare (a slave owner's angelic daughter), and weep during Tom's savage beating and subsequent death at the hands of Simon Legree. As they did so, they would also imbibe enough of Stowe's political perspective to make antislavery seem less a fringe political movement and more a mainstream political stance on the eve of the Civil War.[18]

The immediate and massive success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* can be credited to Stowe's ability to weave the spectacles of violence she borrowed from antislavery imagery together with Victorian modes of sentimental domestic fiction, religious rhetoric, and even comedic minstrel forms.[19] But in the decades after the end of the Civil War and the emancipation of four million enslaved African Americans, Stowe's antislavery representations of violence were soon repurposed as cruel amusement for a new generation of Americans comfortable with the Jim Crow segregation, disfranchisement, and lynching that terrorized African American communities at the turn of the twentieth century. With an estimated 500 distinct "Tom shows" touring the nation by the end of the nineteenth century, stage adaptations of the novel "drifted away from sentimentalism . . . toward spectacle" and elevated the displays of violence to an epic scale.[20] For example, boxers were often hired to play the role of Simon Legree, who was now expected "to beat Uncle Tom at length both with the whip and on the head with its handle." Tom then smeared himself with red liquid to accentuate his pain for the audience.[21] Heavyweight

champion John L. Corbett (an avowed white supremacist) reportedly "whipped so hard and relentlessly that he actually injured a number of Tom actors" during his stint as Simon Legree in a traveling Tom show in 1901 and 1902. This made him a "sensation" among white audiences, "who could supposedly sympathize with Tom even as they took pleasure in seeing a black man become the victim of the bloody lash."[22] Indeed, turn-of-the-century white audiences and readers could gain enormous pleasure from these depictions of sadistic whipping scenes in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Some late nineteenth-century European psychiatrists reported that some of their patients "found sexual pleasure" in "the scenes of beating in Stowe's novel meant to dramatize the horrors of slavery."[23]

If white audiences derived pleasure from the pain inflicted upon the enslaved characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, white American children were encouraged to access this pleasure through scripted play with their dolls. Unlike expensive white dolls (usually constructed of fragile porcelain), black dolls were manufactured out of sturdy materials such as rubber or cloth, named after the enslaved characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (such as Tom, Dinah, and Topsy), marketed as indestructible, and designed for the rough play and abuse they received at the hands of their young owners. Historian Robin Bernstein has found that white children routinely cast these black dolls as slaves in the second half of the nineteenth century, some even using key chains to fashion manacles to restrain them or hanging them as punishment for some pretended offense. These children also "consciously linked literature and black dolls so as to perform fantasies about brutalized slaves." [24] After reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1855, Frances Hodgson Burnett acted out favorite scenes from the novel with her dolls. While her black rubber doll was usually pressed into service as Topsy, Burnett also "redesignated the black doll as Uncle Tom and cast herself as Simon Legree." And after binding her "Uncle Tom," she "brutally lashed" the doll in a performance of violent rage.[25] In another example, a woman recalled that as a child, she liked to imagine that the hole in her black cloth doll might be a "*bullet-hole,* where the Southerners had shot her when she was running from slavery." [26] In this way, children acted out the violent master/slave relationship upon their dolls well into the twentieth century. These forms of play worked hand in hand with Tom shows and Tomitudes in helping not only reverse Stowe's original abolitionist political arguments, but also counteract "one of abolitionism's most organized, long-standing, and successful arguments: that slaves feel pain, and that this ability to feel pain demonstrates African Americans' fitness for freedom."[27] Stripped of this progressive political meaning, public and private performances of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* now allowed participants to take

pleasure in the violence of slavery while tacitly endorsing the violence enforcing turn-of-the-century Jim Crow law and custom.[28]

The Eroticization of Interracial Violence

Ironically, in the same period when white children were learning to play the part of brutal master and American audiences were enjoying spectacles of violence staged by traveling Tom shows, writers and filmmakers were simultaneously popularizing narratives that represented slavery in a markedly less violent light. In short stories such as the turn-of-the-century "Uncle Remus" tales written by Joel Chandler Harris; novels such as those of Thomas F. Dixon Jr.'s Reconstruction trilogy *The Leopard's Spots* (1902), *The Clansman* (1905), and *The Traitor* (1907); and cinematic classics such as D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and Victor Fleming's *Gone with the Wind* (1939), writers and directors offered a version of antebellum slavery that appealed to a public hungry for romantic tales of "a land of Cavaliers and Cotton Fields called the Old South . . . a Civilization gone with the wind."[29] Drawing heavily upon antebellum proslavery propaganda and anti-Tom fiction, as well as the work of southern historians such as Ulrich B. Phillips, the most popular new literature and film released in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries represented slavery as a kind and benevolent institution, defined by harmony and affection between masters and slaves. In these representations, which film scholar Ed Guerrero characterizes as "spectacular, hegemonic masterpieces of anti-black sentiment," slaves labored happily in the fields without the threat of violence or the presence of a whip-wielding overseer.[30] Instead, productions such as these pointedly contrasted their representations of an idyllic and peaceful antebellum South with the deprivation and suffering endured by white southerners in the aftermath of the Civil War. In this nostalgic plantation mythology, emancipation brought not freedom to the slaves, but rather the "enslavement" of peaceful southern whites, forced to contend with African Americans who now sought to vote, hold political office, and define liberty on their own terms. These works were placed in the service of the larger turn-of-the-century project of reconciliation between the North and the South. And in the years surrounding the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Civil War, "white filmmakers produced a bevy of nostalgic movies set in the slave era."[31]

This does not mean that violence was absent from these cultural productions, however. In fact, popular works of fiction and films from this period explicitly linked black male freedom with sexual violence against white southern women and characterized white male quests to avenge

white southern women for assaults perpetrated by emancipated black men as the height of heroic white masculinity. For example, one of the most pivotal scenes in the legendary silent film *The Birth of a Nation* centers on a former slave named "Gus, a renegade negro" and his pursuit of the young daughter of the former slaveholding patriarch. After returning from service in the Union army, Gus (played by a white actor in blackface) asks for little Flora Cameron's hand in marriage. When a horrified Flora refuses, an undeterred Gus stalks the young heroine. In the long, melodramatic chase scene that follows, Flora scrambles up a hillside to escape Gus's advances. She then leaps from a cliff, ultimately dying in the arms of her older brother Ben, who wipes her bloodstained mouth with the Confederate flag she cherishes. With the deceased Flora now "safe" from any possibility of interracial sexual contact, the white men of the town unite to avenge her honor. Under the auspices of the Ku Klux Klan—which Griffith celebrates in the film's long, heroic conclusion—they lynch Gus, dump his body on the porch of the home of a prominent mixed-race politician, save Ben Cameron's love interest from a forced marriage to the same politician, rescue other endangered whites from a phalanx of black Union soldiers, and restore white supremacy and political rule to the town.[32]

Margaret Mitchell also offers a less openly violent but more sexually titillating variation on this same theme in her best-selling 1936 novel, the Pulitzer Prize–winning *Gone with the Wind*. In her formulation of white victimhood and heroic vengeance, it is the businesswoman Scarlett O'Hara who is attacked by "a squat black negro with shoulders and chest like a gorilla" who rips her dress "from neck to waist" and then "fumble[s] between her breasts" during an attempted robbery. Although it is her former bondsman "Big Sam" who helps Scarlett escape her black attacker and white accomplice, it is Scarlett's respected husband, friends, and neighbors in the Klan who are characterized as the true heroes for avenging Scarlett's honor by raiding the neighborhood and murdering the perpetrators of the attack.[33]

In these famous melodramatic scenes of sexual violence barely averted and subsequently avenged, the protection of white southern women served as the most significant impetus for white male characters to step into the role of "hero" and participate in a revenge fantasy against their former slaves. In doing so, they allowed white audiences to continue to enjoy the spectacle of anti-black violence long associated with slavery through Tom shows and scripted play with black dolls while simultaneously satisfying widespread demand for nostalgic, peaceful plantation fantasies. Not surprisingly, these depictions of anti-black violence worked seamlessly with the racist discourses of the day. For it was a moment when the lynching

of black men was commonly justified as necessary for the protection of white southern women and the enforcement of white supremacist laws and customs. Indeed, these scenes had the power to mobilize audiences as well as entertain them. In Atlanta, white men were so inspired by Griffith's groundbreaking cinematic spectacle of the conquering Klan in *The Birth of a Nation* that they "marched down Peachtree Avenue in full menacing regalia to celebrate the film's opening." And across the country, white Americans obsessed with racial purity rushed to join a revived and reinvigorated (and thoroughly violent) Ku Klux Klan in the wake of Griffith's film.[34] African Americans, meanwhile, appalled both by Griffith's misrepresentation of history and by its contemporary political implications, launched a campaign to rebut the message of *The Birth of a Nation* and even ban the film from theaters.[35]

The 1939 film version of *Gone with the Wind* would be the last time this particular narrative of interracial sexual violence and revenge was presented in a major Hollywood film about the South before and after the Civil War. Increasingly sensitive to the demands of African American civil rights organizations at a moment when black activism (along with white southern attacks on black civil rights advocates) was gaining mass national and international attention, Hollywood filmmakers were no longer comfortable celebrating slavery and glamorizing the Ku Klux Klan onscreen. At the same time, professional historians were thoroughly discrediting nostalgic plantation mythology by revealing the extent to which slavery had relied upon physical, psychological, and sexual violence against enslaved men and women. In this context, the film industry moved haltingly away from romanticized representations of slavery and the antebellum South toward depictions of African Americans as respectable citizens.[36] Thus consumers interested in experiencing the sexual frisson generated by depictions of mid-nineteenth-century interracial sexual violence and revenge would need to look elsewhere to find this sort of entertainment. They would find their expectations met in the "slave fiction" inaugurated by elderly dog breeder turned author Kyle Onstott in his 1957 novel *Mandingo*.[37]

In some respects, *Mandingo* departed in significant ways from the sweeping plantation romances that had dominated the popular market since the late nineteenth century. For Onstott's novel, unlike these narratives, placed some form of violence in nearly every chapter, describing the events in graphic detail. Set on an Alabama "slave-breeding" plantation, the owners—Warren and Hammond Maxwell (along with Hammond's young bride, Blanche)—regularly inflicted creative as well as more traditional forms of corporal punishment on the enslaved men, women, and adolescent girls and boys on their "Falconhurst" plantation. For example, in one

extended punishment scene, Hammond Maxwell ordered an enslaved man called "Memnon" to be stripped, gagged, hoisted upside-down, and paddled on the buttocks until "the bruised flesh spattered through the holes in the paddle with a spurt of blood."[38] Moreover, in Onstott's lurid imagination, violence also dominated the leisure activities of free and slave alike. Forced to fight for the entertainment and amusement of whites, enslaved men engaged in brutal wrestling matches, biting off toes, squeezing scrotums, and gnawing out the jugular veins of their opponents.[39] The novel even concludes with a double murder: Hammond Maxwell poisons his wife Blanche for having an affair and conceiving a child with his champion "Mandingo" fighter Mede; he then forces Mede into a cauldron of boiling water, scalds him to death, and simmers the body into a broth (which he will later order slaves to pour over Blanche's grave). In this way, *Mandingo* offered a much more depraved representation of slavery than readers would find in perennial favorites like Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*.

At the same time, however, Onstott simply made explicit for his readers the eroticism just under the surface of early twentieth-century Tom shows, novels, and films about slavery and the Civil War. In *Mandingo*'s innumerable scenes of sadomasochistic torture and abuse, characters derive unabashed sexual pleasure from participating in, or viewing the acts of violence. While watching Memnon's beating, for example, an adolescent slave boy wonders what it would feel like if it were his "own bottom that hung there bruised and raw" and imagines "the exquisite, the ecstatic pain of the impact of the paddle in Hammond's own hands."[40] Enslaved mothers, meanwhile, relished the nightly spankings they gave their young boys. Young masters gagged and whipped enslaved women as an act of sexual foreplay. And enslaved women, in turn, always "enjoyed [their] subservience to a man who had demonstrated his mastery over her."[41] This mixture of explicit sex and violence made *Mandingo* seem "morbid, fascinating, revolting," and very "interesting" to American literary critics and general readers.[42] And as the "APPALLING! TERRIFYING! WONDERFUL!" description on the front cover of the first paperback edition suggests, Cold War–era American readers responded enthusiastically to Onstott's novel. By the middle of the 1970s, more than 5 million copies of *Mandingo* had been sold, and the novel remained in print until the 1980s.[43] In addition to a plethora of knock-off plantation romance novels now categorized as a new genre called "slave fiction," thirteen official Falconhurst sequels and prequels by other authors followed over the next three decades.[44]

Hollywood even sought to cash in on *Mandingo*'s popularity and audience demands for more overt displays of sex and violence on screen by releasing a film version of the novel (as well as its 1962 sequel, *Drum*)

in the early 1970s. Keeping the structure of the original plot intact, but giving the film a "blaxploitation"-style makeover, the film cast the male slaves of Falconhurst in the mold of sixties militants waiting for their chance to fight back against the master.[45] Now "clearly shot from a point of view sympathetic to the African American perspective," the film also positioned itself as an antidote to plantation mythologies such as *Gone with the Wind*.[46] Urged by radio advertisements to "Expect the savage . . . Expect the sensual . . . Expect the shocking . . . [and] Expect the truth," audiences were invited to interpret Mandingo as an accurate representation of the violence of slavery and as "an education to the young and a reminder to the old."[47] Although critics described the movie as "wretched" and "racist trash, obscene in its manipulation of human beings and feelings, and excruciating to sit through," black audiences still turned out to see the film, reportedly laughing and cheering those moments when slaves got the upper hand or uttered lines like "Kiss my ass!" before being lynched by patrollers.[48] Complete with bloody Mandingo fights, murders, floggings perpetrated by jealous white mistresses, and gun battles between brutal masters and tough, rebellious slaves, the film versions of *Mandingo* and *Drum* offered an array of intra and interracial brutality for a generation of Americans hungry for explicit depictions of violence. These films also spawned an entire genre of "slavesploitation" films in the 1970s, demonstrating that despite the changes wrought by the civil rights movement and the shifting racial landscape, Americans had not lost their taste for erotically charged depictions of violence and revenge in the context of slavery.

Reconceptualizing the Violence of Slavery in the Post–Civil Rights Era

As the differences between the paperback and film versions of *Mandingo* suggest, popular representations of slavery began to shift in the 1970s.[49] Rather than focusing on justifying Jim Crow practices or scandalizing American audiences, writers and directors now sought to prioritize the experiences of the enslaved and in the process connect their struggle for freedom with the modern civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Taking a cue from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African American writers who had earlier published memoirs or translated their personal history and family stories to stage and fiction, late twentieth-century American writers, both black and white, began producing creative works that granted complexity and interiority to enslaved characters.[50] These artistic efforts coincided with the emergence of a new wave of historical scholarship—work that sought to analyze the life experiences of

enslaved individuals and families—rather than simply focusing on the actions of the planter class.[51]

The 1977 television miniseries *Roots* introduced this African American perspective to white American audiences. Rather than defining enslaved men and women primarily in terms of their relationships with white masters, *Roots* depicted enslaved characters as complex individuals, parents, children, and friends, members of a vibrant and resilient community. Like the 1976 Pulitzer Prize–winning text on which it was based, *Roots* followed one family's story over the course of four generations, keeping the themes of community and perseverance at the heart of the narrative. Representing a black family's quest for freedom and triumphs over adversity, *Roots* proved enormously appealing to a generation of American viewers coming to terms with the profound gains and disappointments of the civil rights movement. Indeed, *Roots* became a phenomenal success, far exceeding the expectations of producers. With over 100 million viewers—nearly half the population of the United States at the time—tuning in to watch the finale on January 30, 1977, *Roots* became the most watched television event of its day, even surpassing televised broadcasts of *Gone with the Wind* and the Super Bowl. At the conclusion of "*Roots* Week," ABC estimated that approximately 85 percent of all televisions in American homes had tuned in to watch at least a portion of the series. And scholars now credit the series with discrediting much of the early twentieth-century plantation mythology, providing African Americans with a renewed sense of pride in their African ancestry and enabling mainstream white Americans to begin seeing African Americans as important contributors to the history and life of the nation.[52]

Over the course of the series, *Roots* used carefully selected examples of violence to demonstrate how slave traders, overseers, owners, and patrollers maintained and enforced the system of slavery. *Roots* also explored the various ways that men and women of African descent negotiated and resisted the violence of slavery. Emphasizing that the whip, the gun, and other instruments of torture were used to kidnap an African teenager named Kunta Kinte, transport him from his West African home, and sell him into slavery in Maryland, *Roots* insisted that violence was the mechanism that transformed a free man into a slave. *Roots* also characterized the rape and assault of enslaved African and African American women as painful and traumatic events rather than subjects for the amusement of modern audiences. Additionally, *Roots* refracted the struggles of Kunta Kinte's descendants through the lens of the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. The patrollers and night riders of *Roots* are not represented in the heroic terms used by Griffith and Mitchell, but instead are cast as the unmistakable opponents of freedom

and equality. In two now-iconic scenes of violence—when slave catchers cut off Kunta Kinte's foot as punishment for an escape attempt and when an overseer whips him into accepting the name "Toby"—*Roots* emphasized that slavery was the precursor to Jim Crow, characterizing both as systems upheld and enforced solely by violence.

Roots marked an essential paradigm shift in the way that North American slavery—as well as its concomitant violence—would be presented in American popular culture. As more television series, novels, and films dramatizing the experiences of enslaved men and women followed, they invariably built on how *Roots* had represented the violence of slavery. Defining violence as a method of social control, late twentieth-century American popular culture characterized it both as a historic fact of slavery and as something that enslaved African Americans resisted at every turn. In this period, novels such as *Kindred* (1979) and *Beloved* (1987) and films such as *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) explored how acts of violence against enslaved African Americans continued to haunt subsequent generations. Made-for-television films such as *A Woman Called Moses* (1979) and *Solomon Northup's Odyssey* (1984) focused on the varied ways that enslaved men and women resisted violence and created community. And major Hollywood productions such as *Glory* (1989) and *Amistad* (1997) positioned rebellious slaves as exemplary heroes, celebrating their shipboard rebellions and service in the Union army as emblematic of the highest ideals of the nation, laudable moments in a long struggle for American freedom.

Conclusion: Representing the Violence of Slavery in the "Post-Racial" Era

From the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to the broadcast of *Roots*, popular representations of the violence of slavery have played a complex role in American culture. In addition to entertaining audiences, scenes of interracial corporal punishment and sexual assault have been shaped by—and have in turn informed—a range of competing political and social agendas. These popular images have had an extraordinary influence on American attitudes toward slavery and ideas about racism. And the response to two films—Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012) and Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013)—suggests that Americans continue to be interested in the subject of slavery in an age sometimes called a "post-racial" era.

Using the lens of the spaghetti western, and drawing heavily upon the "slavesploitation" genre of the 1970s, *Django Unchained* places violence at the center of the narrative, expanding it to cartoonish proportions. Borrowing tropes from abolitionist imagery and twentieth-century films about

slavery, including *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Birth of a Nation*, *Mandingo*, *Slaves*, and *The Legend of Nigger Charley*, Tarantino pointedly mocks Hollywood's role in promoting nostalgic representations of antebellum slavery and glamorizing the Ku Klux Klan. Making the former slave turned bounty hunter Django the protagonist, Tarantino allows the young husband to step into the role of avenger as he travels to Mississippi to rescue his wife from a perverse and sadistic owner. When overseers lash an enslaved young woman, Django turns the whip on them before shooting them dead. Django and his German partner gun down or blow up innumerable slaveholders, traders, racists, and their supporters. Indeed, over the course of the film, every iconic racist representation of slavery, from the paternalistic "Big Daddy" modeled after the Cameron patriarch of *The Birth of a Nation* to the nefarious "Uncle Stephen" taken from the early twentieth-century racist caricatures of Tom shows to a plantation mistress evoking the worst traits of Scarlett O'Hara and Blanche Maxwell, is dispatched in the most outlandish and comedic fashion.

If *Django Unchained* uses displays of extreme violence to explode conventional representations of slavery, Steve McQueen takes a more a restrained approach in *12 Years a Slave*. Based on the 1853 memoir of Solomon Northup, a free black New Yorker who was kidnapped and sold into slavery in Louisiana, *12 Years a Slave* explores how the threat of violence affects all aspects of enslaved lives. We can see this in how McQueen employs acts of violence against Northup to propel the narrative arc of the film (and the story of Northup's liminality and ultimate fungibility) forward. First, it is through the beating Northup receives in Birch's jail that Northup is redefined as a runaway slave from Georgia. Then it is with an unexpected slap to the face that Northup is renamed Platt. And it is in a four-minute scene where he is strung up and hung by the neck, suspended between life and death, that Northup's status as chattel property, totally dependent upon the whims and desires of not just any white man, but his owner, is confirmed. Finally, it is when Northup becomes both witness to and perpetrator of violence against Patsey—a young enslaved woman who endures physical and sexual abuse throughout the film—that he completes his metamorphosis.[53] McQueen depicts this violence as sudden, unpredictable, and brutal, and he steadfastly refuses to sensationalize it or package it in the imagery audiences have come to expect since the mid-nineteenth century. In the process, he offers a new interpretation of enslavement as trauma and terror.

Though these two films differ markedly from each other—one presents the spectacle of violence as pure entertainment, whereas the other offers a harrowing realism—both characterize the violence of slavery as far more

than a form of social control. Moreover, the popularity of these two films suggests that twenty-first-century Americans are as fascinated by depictions of the violence of slavery as their nineteenth- and twentieth-century predecessors were. Exactly how these popular representations will affect the political and cultural climate of the twenty-first century remains to be seen. But it is quite likely that depictions of slavery and its attendant forms of violence will continue to reflect and influence the cultural zeitgeist for decades to come.

Notes

1. Rogin, 5.
2. Rogin, 14; Williams, 5.
3. As Karen Halttunen has demonstrated in her analysis of Gothic murder tales, Americans have long found depictions of violence to be enormously entertaining, and these depictions, in turn, have performed important cultural work.
4. Van Deburg, xii.
5. In his analysis of novels about slavery, Tim Ryan argues that any work of literature about slavery always inserts itself into historiographic, literary, and contemporary racial politics. As he sees it, "Any text that addresses the peculiar institution necessarily participates in multiple discourses, which—although inextricably connected—are ultimately quite independent. These include a discourse about the institution of slavery, a discourse about the culture and identities of those who were enslaved, a discourse about their enslavers, and—because the system of bondage that developed in the new World was organized around ethnicity—a discourse about race." Ryan, 77.
6. Wood, 216. For more information about the cultural work of blackface minstrelsy in antebellum America, see Roediger, chapters 5 and 6, and Lott.
7. For more on this, see Wood, Walters, and Hartman.
8. As Marcus Wood notes, "Abolition thought was constantly absorbed into nineteenth-century English and American culture," and "Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is the key site for the examination of what popular audiences in the mid-nineteenth century wanted to see as, and what publishers wanted to impose upon, the representation of blacks within slave systems." Wood, 143.
9. For the sources of Stowe's antislavery tendencies, see Reynolds, 92–114.
10. Walters, 83–85.
11. Stowe, 55.
12. Stowe, 325–326.
13. Stowe, 321.
14. Stowe, 376.
15. According to David Reynolds, the novel appeared in "French, German, Spanish, Italian, Danish, Swedish, Flemish, Polish, and Magyar," followed by "Welsh, Russian, Arabic, and other languages." Reynolds, 126–128.

16. Reynolds, 132–136; Bernstein, 94–100.
17. Williams, 77.
18. Reynolds, 149–150.
19. Tompkins, 122–146; Reynolds, 31–42, 77–80.
20. Bernstein, 128.
21. Williams, 86.
22. As David Reynolds notes, this "whipping scene tapped into the cruelest instincts of white audiences" and must be read as "a version of the gloating spectatorship of mobs who regularly gathered to watch blacks being hanged, mutilated, or burned to death in the South during that era of mass lynching." Reynolds, 200.
23. Williams, 86. Marcus Wood notes that Richard von Krafft-Ebbing and Sigmund Freud both reportedly had patients that shared this fantasy. Wood, 185.
24. Bernstein, 222–223.
25. Bernstein, 69–72.
26. Bernstein, 222–223.
27. Bernstein, 50.
28. For more on Jim Crow culture and its effects on African Americans, see Litwack.
29. *Gone with the Wind*.
30. Guerrero, 17.
31. For more information on this phenomenon, see Van Deburg, 122, and Blight.
32. *The Birth of a Nation*; Cripps, 48–51.
33. Mitchell, 732–733.
34. Guerrero, 14.
35. Cripps, 57–69.
36. Rogin, 209–250; Guerrero, 26–29.
37. According to William Van Deburg, "The basic concern" of novels like *Mandingo* "was to detail the patterns of sadistic sex, nymphomania, incest, and general promiscuity that prevailed on a fictional slave-breeding plantation." Van Deburg, 148. Literary scholar Timothy Ryan argues, however, that *Mandingo* must also be understood as a response to changing historiography which now examines "the way in which the oppressive nature of slavery shaped such slave psychologies." Ryan, 102–103.
38. Onstott, 124.
39. Onstott, 249, 413.
40. Onstott, 125.
41. Onstott, 50, 151.
42. Blurb from the Lexington, Kentucky, *Herald-Leader*, printed on the first pages of the Fawcett paperback edition of *Mandingo*.
43. Talbot, 27.
44. Talbot, xi.
45. Blaxploitation was the film industry's attempt to capitalize on the black cultural radicalism of the late 1960s. With this in mind, the early 1970s saw a

wave of "heady male action fantasies" starring black casts and marketed to urban audiences. Bogle, 241–242; Guerrero, 30–31.

46. Guerrero, 33.

47. Talbot, 281–282.

48. Roger Ebert, July 25, 1975. www.rogerebert.com/reviews/mandingo-1975. For an analysis of the gulf between critical and audience responses, see DeVos, 5–21.

49. Van Deburg, 104.

50. These works include Bontemps, Walker, and Styron.

51. Some of the most groundbreaking texts of this period include Stampp, Gutman, Blassingame, and White.

52. Van DeBurg, 155; Bodroghkozy, 160; Bogle, 239–243; Williams, 238–242.

53. In these scenes, McQueen economically refutes the cultural work of the moonlight and magnolias myth (antebellum American slavery supported by violence, not paternalism) and carefully skirts the iconic form of abuse (the lash on the bare male back) that audiences both expect and require to make sense of slavery to instead offer a less familiar and less sensationalized representation of violence that unsettles the viewer.

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