

# Altered States: Landscape, Genre, and the Burden of Guilt in Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*

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In a genre already rife with tensions and contradictions, Clint Eastwood uses the form of the “revisionist western” in *Unforgiven* to examine the unexpiated guilt that not only burdens the hero but seems embedded in the genre itself. His critique is particularly significant because this genre has long been a favorite vehicle for dramatizing patriotic myths of founding and sovereignty, centerpieces of American political iconography. Eastwood’s treatment of western themes thus suggests that the genre markers themselves constitute a problematic media residue, which impairs our understanding of the real American west, perhaps even the real American nation. This judgment is in keeping with western historiography of the new millennium (as practiced by Ned Blackhawk and Susan Limerick, among others), which challenges Frederick Jackson Turner’s image of a benign and peaceful westward migration.

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In “Ideology, Genre, Auteur,” scholar/critic Robin Wood (2009) recognizes mainstream Hollywood cinema as “riddled with hopeless contradictions and unresolvable tensions,” conflicts masked by conventions of genre which typically prevent them from directly confronting each other (p. 594). Hence romantic comedy asserts that chance meetings beget fruitful partnerships, while the thriller warns us to beware of strangers on a train. Often, the logic of genre takes its cue from a particular setting, the unlit alleys of film noir threatening us in ways unknown to the high-key interiors of *Ninotchka*. In no genre is this bond between place and performance stronger than in the western, where heroic landscapes imply larger-than-life behavior, as the wagon master, the lawman, and the homesteader draw moral energy as well as political legitimacy from the earth they touch and the air they breathe. But the western has so long dominated the American popular imagination that its vivid binaries of garden/wilderness, settler/native, sheriff/gunslinger, and wife/saloon-girl have proved susceptible to remarkable variations, sometimes complete reversals, like those that turn the conquering Cavalry into oppressors and Indian savages into worthy land stewards. Few films participate in this revisionist spirit more intensely than Clint Eastwood’s *Unforgiven* (1992), which goes well beyond a simple inversion of stereotypes to a critique of the genre itself. It’s hardly a surprise that several critics have already identified this film as a “meta-text,” i.e., a text that investigates textuality. Ingrassia (1998) treats the film as an exercise in “writing the west” (p. 53) while Kupfer (2008) speaks of the “seductive and subversive meta-narrative of *Unforgiven*” (p. 103). Both critics look closely at the role of the writer W. W. Beauchamp in the film, noting his attachment to one gunslinger after another from English Bob to Little Bill Daggett

and finally to the Eastwood character William Munny. For Ingrassia, Beauchamp “signals the film’s recognition that the textually constructed myths must and will endure, even if careful readers can discern their gaps and limitations” (1998, p. 57). Plantinga (1998) approaches genre from the standpoint of the Eastwood persona, reaching conclusions that resemble those of Smith (1993), “the film’s discourse . . . demonstrates that whatever kinds of revisionism are attempted (even if ‘truthful’), the mystified, mythological (and vicious) ‘spirit of the West’ always returns. In other words, *Unforgiven* represents the fiction returning in overpowering form to literally blow away the demythologizing truthfulness of the sheriff” (p. 268). My own reading of this scene takes us in a slightly different direction.

Speaking of his attraction to the narrative that generated this film, Eastwood says in his interview with *Cahiers du cinema*, “what I liked about this story was that people aren’t killed, and acts of violence aren’t perpetrated, without there being certain consequences” (Coblentz & Kapsis, 1999, p. 177). While clearly accurate, this disarming understatement does less than full justice to the way the narrative subverts both western convention and ideology. *Unforgiven* is a narrative that voices skepticism as to political legitimacy, technical progress, and moral identity, which are the core themes of the American western. What it leaves in their place is a powerful sense of unexpiated guilt, which gives resonance to the film’s title. As William Munny, “a known thief and murderer,” frames the issue with his cynical eloquence: “We’ve all got it comin’.”

Critics have generally recognized the fiercely contrarian bent of Eastwood’s film. Keller attributes *Unforgiven* to “the seismic shifts in American culture that were the Reagan-Bush I years” (2005, p. 240), while Countryman and Worland (1998), in much the same vein, describe it as a “post-Cold War Western,” which is also informed by the “acute racial consciousness fostered and reinforced by the civil rights movement” (p.188). Walker (2001) coins the term “traumatic western” to describe films like *Unforgiven*, where “events of disturbing proportions, events that are markedly anterior to the fictive present, propel the actions and the retaliatory violence of the narrative.” This point leads Walker to one of her most valuable insights: “the trauma which governs the narrative may in some sense originate beyond the explicit plot of the film itself,” inhering, as she says, in “genre memory, the continuing existence of an earlier generic paradigm in the narrative sediment of a later one” (pp. 220-22).

Pursuing this argument somewhat further, I would draw attention to the landscape of *Unforgiven*, or more specifically, to what Mikhail Bakhtin calls its “chronotope,” the web of space and time that envelops the human figure and posits the fictive universe whose laws define him. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin (1981) argues persuasively that “the chronotope in literature has intrinsic generic significance” (p. 84). In fact, he continues, “it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions,” because “the image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic” (pp. 84-85). In Bakhtin’s example from Greek romance literature, not only does this genre require a magical landscape peopled by “exotic and marvelous ani-

mals” but also a sense of “adventuristic time” that is equally magical, completely divorced from causes and consequences. Hence storms at sea arise spontaneously, without any prefiguration, just as do the arrivals of pirates, kidnappers, and evil wizards (pp. 86-97). Applied to the American western, the chronotopic principle demands a double-sided construction of the frontier: it is both a spatial border where the wilderness meets civilization and a moment in the transformation of that border, which projects a vector towards an intelligible future. The western hero is created from this landscape and thrust towards this future. Revisionist criticism, as evidenced by anthologies such as Bascombe & Pearson (1998) and Carmichael (2006), has taken particular interest in western landscapes, recognizing the intimate connection between the political legitimacy of the western hero and the dominion over nature which the classical western unreservedly asserts. (For more along this line, see, for example, Leutrat & Liandrat-Guigues, 1998, Rollins, 2006, or Bapig, 2006).

John Ford’s *My Darling Clementine* (1946) provides an ideal paradigm of the classical western chronotope. Completed immediately after WWII, it links the patriotic virtue of Capra’s “Why We Fight” series to a narrative of the American character framed by Frederick Jackson Turner in “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” It stars Henry Fonda, whom Ford had used a few years earlier to personify “young Mr. Lincoln,” as Wyatt Earp, a frontier marshal who will bring law and order to Tombstone, Arizona. “Mighty rugged country,” says Earp when he first sees Monument Valley, but he soon proves equal to the challenge of the landscape as well as the human tasks that demand his skills.

Expecting little in the way of amenities, Earp is surprised by the grooming practices of barber shops, though flattered when his natural decency and handsome bearing arouse the interest of Clementine, an educated woman of far more sophistication, who is destined to become the local schoolmarm. Like the majority of heroes who belong to what Tompkins (1992) calls “the inner life of westerns,” Earp appears to have exfoliated from the landscape, “for the setting by its hardness and austerity seems to have selected its heroes from among strong men in the prime of life, people who have a certain build, complexion, facial type, carriage, gesture, and demeanor, who dress a certain way, [and] carry certain accoutrements” (p. 73). Yet Earp is a character of some malleability, with potential for more than he himself realizes. Significantly, he is drawn into the role of marshal after he single-handedly disarms Indian Charlie and then expels him from town with a firm kick. Although Earp scolds the saloon-keeper for giving whiskey to an Indian, the Indian himself is the only character to be punished. The ethno-racial implications of this incident could not be clearer. Moreover, Earp’s personal development is of a piece with the town itself, which is being carved out of the wilderness. He first connects socially with Clementine when he is introduced as the new marshal and they dance to celebrate the laying of the floor for Tombstone’s first church. Inevitably there will be the shoot-out at the OK Corral but Ford is at pains to show that this is neither casual violence nor a family feud. At the climactic moment, Earp asks the head of the Clanton family to lay down his guns

“in the name of the state,” explicitly characterizing himself as invested with sovereign authority.

Natural forces, forward-looking technology, and Earp’s quick wits all collaborate almost magically to support the marshal’s claim to political authority. As he and his deputies square off to confront the Clantons, Earp notices the arrival of the morning stagecoach, which spreads a cloud of dust behind it. Timing his assault perfectly, he uses the swirling dust from the wheels of the coach as cover for his deputies, gaining an advantage that assures the new order will triumph. The rigorous narrative of *Clementine* leaves no doubt that law has suppressed banditry, civility has conquered drunkenness, and moral discipline has replaced loose living, all under auspices of Anglo-Nordic authority that is as natural as the buttes, the sagebrush, and the dust of the desert.

Now contrast the dynamic coherence of *Clementine* with the complicated and frustrating ellipses of *Unforgiven*. The opening image is already riddled with gaps, interstices, and puzzles. We see a western homestead isolated in a spacious landscape, flat and empty except for one tree. The sky is bright with golden light, though the land in the foreground is dark, and the lone figure diminished in the recesses of space is an illegible silhouette against the sky. The look of the sky suggests twilight but the action would more appropriately be performed at dawn, so it could be finished with the assurance of good daylight. Prompted by scripted narration that soon appears on the screen, we conclude that the protagonist is beginning to dig a grave, using a double-bladed axe to break the sod, then exchanging this tool for a shovel with which he continues the task. But what is highly exceptional in the visual treatment is that our conclusions must remain pure surmise. The sequence is a single continuous take, without a close-up that would really show us the action or a key-light from a frontal position that would allow us to identify a face. It’s the on-screen script, not the visual enactment, which offers whatever clues we have as to the action performed.

And the narrative itself is full of riddles. We read of a “comely young woman, not without prospects” who has left her mother heartbroken because she consented to “enter into marriage with William Munny, a known thief and murderer, a man of notoriously vicious and intemperate disposition.” We also learn that this woman is dead, though not at the hands of William Munny, “as her mother would have expected, but of smallpox.” The scripted information certifies that we are witnessing a burial but does nothing to clarify the circumstances of Mrs. Munny’s death, much less explain what drew her to Munny or persuaded him to give up a life of crime. We have so little hint of motivation or narrative cohesion that the reform motif feels almost like parody, particularly since the story about to unfold reveals an entirely different Munny, one who has reverted to his outlaw persona, carrying back into the wilderness verbal tributes to his wife’s memory, which he repeats incongruously while performing murderous acts. Furthermore, what rather exceptional circumstance would have caused Munny’s wife to die of smallpox in 1878? William Jenner and his medical associates had been performing vaccinations since the beginning of the 19th century and Jefferson had determined, early in his presidency, to make vaccinating the new

American nation, even its western provinces, one of his highest civic priorities (Bowers, 1981, pp. 17-33). As early as the 1750s, the British military had understood the disease well enough to use it as a weapon of biological warfare against Pontiac and the Ottawa nation, a practice imitated by the American settler culture of the 19th century against native peoples of the Mississippi and Missouri Valley (Fromm, 2000, pp. 1560-65). By the 1870s, vaccination was so common, especially among the urban middle class, that it was beginning to be represented as a ghetto disease, infecting social undesirables like the Chinese community of San Francisco (Trauner, 1978, pp. 70-87).

At this point we find that the burial scene carries an added charge of irony. The interred corpse is the missing center of moral inspiration as well as a bodily rebuke to social and technical progress. It's almost as if the anonymous, silhouetted figure were burying the myth of "the west," using crucial elements of Turnerian iconography, building tools like the axe and the shovel, as grave-digging instruments. We are about to launch a narrative that deals ironically with other favorite motifs of the western—redemptive violence and political legitimacy. But these values have already been rendered problematic by a framing device that denies viability to the genre itself and reduces Munny's violent adventure in *Big Whiskey* to a meaningless parenthesis within his quotidian post-marital life.

Whether classical or revisionist, the western is always a meditation on violence, the duel with Colt revolvers its unfailing event. But brutal behavior is rationalized in terms of the frontier chronotope, according to the schematic provided by Slotkin (2000). In this exceptional world of permeable borders, says Slotkin, settlers from the East and from Europe could find "an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation" (p. 5), so long as they had the courage to embrace violence, yet curtail it under the rubric of rescue and self-defense. He calls this trope a "captivity narrative," originally based on the Biblical myth of "Israel in Babylon," and reconfigured in the New World as God's Chosen People resisting the infidel Native American culture of the wilderness that enveloped them. Often this resistance would take literal form as the recovery of women and children stolen from the settlers by hostile tribes (pp. 94-115). Pruned and secularized, the Puritan captivity narrative survived as the story core of the western, which in the 19th century was often constellated around the exploits of Daniel Boone and included the rescue of imperiled wives and children. In "Rescue Group," the Horatio Greenough sculpture from the mid-19th century that Slotkin analyzes in close detail, Boone as woodsman/savior forcibly restrains "a naked Indian brandishing a large tomahawk," relieving a dire threat to a "woman huddled over her infant, shielding him from the hatchet" (p. 440).

Three elements of the captivity narrative are crucial to the moral credibility of the Hollywood western: (1) the intimate connection of the hero to the landscape, which entitles him to land perversely occupied by savages; (2) the sense of the hero as representing a higher stage of civilization, which reinforces the privileges already owed to his ethnic and religious identity; (3) the reluctance of the hero to resort to

violence, his conscience insisting that it be defensive or retaliatory, though in some cases pre-emptively defensive.

In both its rhetoric and iconography, *Unforgiven* deconstructs each of these premises, effectively denying to the western hero the genre's venerable claim to sovereignty over the frontier. Consider, for example, the protagonist's relationship to the land. The classical western provides a seamless bond between a spectacular but challenging landscape and the high-mounted rider who masters the terrain through the mediation of his horse. In George Stevens' *Shane* (1953), which dates from the same period of patriotic conservatism as *My Darling Clementine*, the lone horseman in the first shot of the film follows a trail out of the mountains, the composition framed so as to suggest that the mountains have generated him, that he is a human expression of their force and power. So complete is Shane's identification with the natural world that as he rides up to the homestead of the Stark family, horse and rider are briefly framed between the antlers of a deer that is drinking from a shallow stream in front of the farmer's property. The curvature of the antlers creates an unmistakable embrace. Surveying western landscapes much more expansively, Tompkins (1992) generalizes this image with perfect pitch for its implications:

The interaction between hero and landscape lies at the genre's center. . . . In the end, the land is everything to the hero; it is both the destination and the way. . . . In the faithfully and minutely recorded passage of the hero's body over the body of the land, in his constant interaction with it, mental and physical, the hero plays out his social relationships, answers his spiritual needs, foreshadows his destiny. (pp. 81-82)

In the case of *Shane*, this destiny is to "rescue" Stark and his fellow homesteaders from an unruly cadre of threatening ranchers who clearly represent a more barbarous stage of civilization that deserves to be superseded. In the inevitable duel at the saloon, Shane kills the hired gunfighter whom the ranchers have employed to drive off the homesteaders. His mission concluded, Shane remounts his horse and vanishes into the picturesque mountains that magically produced him.

It is quite otherwise in the case of William Munny. First of all, the landscape is toxic and he in no sense possesses it with authority. His pigs have "the fever," presumably because of unhygienic animal husbandry or unexplained environmental contamination (hence distantly analogous to the disease that killed his wife). Nor do we have anything to suggest that nature ennobles sons of the west. We see Munny struggling with the pigs, almost pig-like himself, sharing the dung-ridden mud of their pens, as he falls and rolls on the ground while trying to control them. The camera composes the scene from an unflattering high-angle, which pins the protagonist to the earth, emphasizing a grotesque writhing, like that of a snake. The deliberate subversion of western iconography continues as Munny attempts to mount his horse. While his two children look on, embarrassed by their father's ineptitude, Munny consumes 55 seconds of screen time before getting astride his mount, meanwhile taking a further fall that again leaves him lying in the dirt. Trying to excuse, or at least explain his behavior, he lamely tells his children, the uncooperative horse is "getting even for

the sins of my youth,” words hardly imaginable from the mouth of a western hero. His difficulties with the horse persist throughout his mission to Big Whiskey, but more importantly, so do the visual reminders of his unheroic relationship to the land. After his beating at the hands of Little Bill in the saloon, he is again crawling like a reptile through the mud, unable to assert his human bipedalism, let alone mount a horse like an Alan Ladd, a John Wayne, or a younger and more adept Clint Eastwood.

In all respects, even in his failing eyesight and the other limitations of his elderly body, Munny caricatures the natural aristocrat of the west, who is entitled to dominate the land because he already owns it physically and spiritually. We are worlds removed from the inspiring landscapes of Monument Valley, where Ford typically enacts his saga of national destiny. This alienation of the protagonist from heroic space, indeed the representation of the space itself as diseased and dystopic, sets the stage for Eastwood’s discourse on political legitimacy, which seems the most radical element of the film.

As a formal topic, sovereignty is introduced into the film by English Bob, a dandified bounty hunter who arrives in Big Whiskey slightly ahead of Munny’s war party. To make sure his exploits are duly noted, he travels with his own professional scribe, C. C. Beauchamp, who has dubbed him “The Duke of Death.” He serves the American Establishment as a hired assassin for the railroads whose assignment, we are told, is “to shoot Chinamen,” presumably day laborers who don’t show proper respect for authority. But English Bob is a staunch monarchist, unconvinced that a democratic culture can transcend the chaos of its revolutionary origins. On his way to Big Whiskey to carry out the same assassin’s mission as Munny, Bob passes time during his railway journey by taunting a loud-mouthed American nationalist about the lack of order in his own country, a debate precipitated by headlines that record the murder of President Garfield, the second violent death of a President within 20 years.

Unconsciously echoing Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, English Bob argues that only kingship confers “majesty” sufficient to deter men from violent behavior: “If you were to point a pistol at a king or a queen,” says Bob, “your hands would tremble, as if palsied.” Continuing, he tells us, “it’s uncivilized, shooting a person of substance. But a president . . .” The sneer which accompanies the trailing off of his voice suggests that respect for so commonplace a figure is close to laughable. We quickly see the implications of Bob’s political philosophy, as he treats his patriotic antagonist to a demonstration of his shooting skills. These are certified when he guns down the wild birds that present themselves as targets from the moving train, the surrogate victims which replace the assertive American patriot he arbitrarily elects to spare. That people, particularly people who lack “substance,” count for no more than pheasants or grouse is confirmed a moment later, when on the last leg of the journey to Big Whiskey, he begins casually to take aim at various lesser citizens of the town. At this point, we confront what Agamben (1998) calls “bare life,” the “biopolitical” designation he gives to human creatures so insignificant that their violent death is “neither capital punishment nor a sacrifice but simply the actualization of a capacity to be killed” (p.114).

English Bob is the ideal figure to lead us into the town of Big Whiskey. This site in rural Wyoming is immediately recognizable as one of Agamben's postmodern landscapes, an analogue of Dachau or Darfur, "a state of indistinction between nature and culture." It is "a threshold on which violence passes over into law and law passes over into violence" (1998, pp. 32-38).

Little Bill Daggett, the sheriff of Big Whiskey, stands precisely at the threshold Agamben describes. Critics have made much of how completely he humiliates English Bob, not only beating him into unconsciousness but also by ridiculing the heroic persona that Beauchamp has fashioned for him. What has received less attention is how Bob's remarks on the social system of the American west unmask Little Bill's pretensions to legitimate political authority: "You're a lot of savages," he shouts, as he leaves town, "without morals. You've got no laws, no honor." And truly, if a president lacks appropriate "majesty" to inspire the respect of his subjects, what are we to think of Little Bill, the self-appointed representative of law and order in Big Whiskey? His deputies are simply his drinking buddies, his leadership is no more than violent bluster, and his poor judgment, especially on issues of gender, provokes the vengeance plot that sets the tragic machinery in motion.

Moreover, and this is a crucial genre marker, he has no building skills. Unlike the dedicated settlers of *Shane*, or *Clementine*, or *Red River*, who build structures that defy both wild nature and human predation, Little Bill is "the world's worst carpenter" according to one of his subalterns. "There's not a straight angle in that whole damn porch," he adds, "or the whole house for that matter." Nor did his carpentry improve when he designed the jail. He winces perceptibly when Beauchamp, drenched by rain-water coming through Bill's leaky roof, exclaims in frustration: "They should hang the carpenter who built this place." Later Little Bill pleads for his life as Munny closes in on him, crying, "you can't kill me, I was building a house." Unimpressed, Munny pulls the trigger. The scene is black comedy, but the point is deadly serious. Little Bill fails as the agent of civilization, unable to link law to justice or represent violence as the necessary, though problematic partner of home-building.

How then should we read the climactic scene of *Unforgiven*, where Munny suddenly remembers his marksmanship and makes short work of the sheriff and four deputies? One might say, as does Kupfer (2008), that the scene ironically fulfills genre convention and in so doing "exposes how Western narrative has seduced by glamorizing violence and glorifying gunmen" (p.103), ultimately leaving us "disturbed in part by our own need for the climactic shootout" (p. 114). This is a valuable point, but I would handle it a little differently. It's not so much that we step out of the domain of realism and into the frame of convention as that the convention is directly juxtaposed to the realistic detail, which is never completely effaced. Though we can see how Beauchamp is gathering his notes for a fully mythologized account of these events, Eastwood himself is careful to hedge the heroism of William Munny's deadly escapade as well as to deny it any trace of moral import.

After congratulating the gunslinger for having "single-handedly killed five men," Beauchamp polishes the legend he will soon write into existence by noting



how Munny must have instinctively recognized the best shooters and picked them off in the descending order of their skills. “No,” says Munny, he was just lucky with the order, adding that he has “always been lucky about killing folks.” The rest of the scene also has a realistic feel. It is clear, for example, that several of the men in the bar might have shot Munny but were too frightened to draw their guns, or perhaps completely indifferent to the outcome of the gun fight. Realizing he must again expose himself to fire as he leaves Greely’s saloon, Munny is careful to exchange his six-shooter for a Spencer rifle, a multi-cartridge weapon of much greater range, accuracy, and firepower. Together with the threat to kill the wives and burn the homes of anyone who shoots back, Munny’s superior arms are sufficient to get him out of Big Whiskey unscathed. And his wariness as he makes his escape perhaps hints at an element of fear not evident in his threats or braggadocio.

This segment of *Unforgiven* answers nicely, though with considerable ambiguity, to what Wright (1977) names as “the vengeance variation” upon the classical western (p. 59). The “vengeance hero,” says Wright, resembles the classical hero, except for the fact that he is “motivated to fight—for himself, not for society” (p. 157). In other words, unlike Shane or Wyatt Earp, he avenges a personal wrong, which touches only in a tangential way upon a social wrong. Hence he is tainted by “antisocial fanaticism,” which may or may not be remediable, even with the help of a nurturing woman or someone else who represents “social, law-abiding, family life” (pp. 159-160). For Wright, however, the vengeance variation still assimilates to the classical western paradigm, because the protagonist is a wronged man, because he works (albeit contrary to his declared purposes) on behalf of a social good, and because he is perceived as worthy of reintegration into society (pp. 154-163). Eastwood’s westerns, from the time of his association with Sergio Leone, were typically formed around the vengeance variation. *High Plains Drifter* (1973) and *The Outlaw Josie Wales* (1976), undertaken shortly after Eastwood began to direct for himself, are further examples of the type: they valorize the resourceful loner, in one case an avenging phantom, in the other a simple “outlaw,” but in both instances a man whose grudge against corrupt authority leads to fierce retaliatory violence. At one level, *Unforgiven* simply reprises these earlier plots, but at the same time it works an ironic turn upon them, almost as if to suggest that the last conventions this film destabilizes are those Eastwood himself established in his earlier work. The vengeance that drives Munny and his band is not for a wrong done to them, but to a small cohort of prostitutes in Big Whiskey who hire the assassins to avenge them. Moreover, the story of the mutilation of Delilah is wildly exaggerated and she herself seems among the least inclined to be avenged. Insofar as the vengeance motif in any way animates Munny personally, this owes to his rage at the murder of his sidekick Ned, who is mistakenly thought guilty of the assassination Munny himself perpetrated. Any claim, then, that Munny might make to the moral high ground is deeply suspect. And in fact he claims none.

From the standpoint of evaluating outcomes, the scene where Munny leaves town after the shoot-out is worth close attention. The darkness and relentless rain set

the mood in the wide shots, while the expressive power of the close-up is used advantageously to recapitulate crucial themes. Beauchamp comes forward in close-up, putting on his spectacles, so as to catch every detail of Munny's highly theatrical departure. The image assures us that western convention, which here joins the vigilante hero to the captivity narrative, will surely endure whatever liberties it takes with fact and moral precept. The countervailing close-ups are those of the prostitutes, who have paid Munny and his henchmen to gain their revenge, but now seem to experience a rather dubious satisfaction. Of particular note is Delilah, framed in a facial close-up with rain drenching her face, so that she appears to be weeping, or that the natural world itself is in tears. This detail is particularly poignant since Delilah, who has cared for Munny after his beating, is the "nurturing woman" of the vengeance variation, who should have accomplished the hero's moral rehabilitation. (For more on this, see Johnson, 2005, 189-194: In contrasting the "saloon space" of the film with its "home space," Johnson is particularly adept in showing how Delilah's professional association with the saloon, specifically the upper room where prostitution is practiced, contaminates the "home space" where she nurses Munny back to health, an association that makes it impossible for her to play the redemptive role.) What's left of Little Bill's deputies cower in the darkness, no longer willing even to masquerade as representatives of the law. The final unforgettable image is that of Ned, Munny's friend and accomplice, who was drawn into the mission by Munny and now has been brutally tortured to death as punishment for Munny's crime. Shot in relatively tight framing, and illumined by the hellish flicker of candle light, the corpse of this black cowboy calls to mind not only a racist lynching from the era of the southern Black Codes, but also the whole spectrum of "torture, maiming, rape, mutilation, murder—all of the worst injuries that human beings inflict on each other" (p. 34), which Limerick (2000) sees as "haunting" the American west, where as she insists, "we live on haunted land, on land that is layers deep in passion and memory" (p. 73).

Like all contemporary revisionists, Eastwood has disowned the Turnerian myth of a progressive and peaceful west settled by Anglo-Nordic peoples migrating through the Ohio valley and following the great rivers to fertile farmland across the wide Missouri. This was apparent from the moment the Eastwood gunslinger first appeared at Agua Caliente among a horde of disreputable characters in *For a Fist Full of Dollars*. To Sergio Leone's image of a lawless and Hispanicized west ruled by the fastest guns and the fiercest predators, Eastwood in *Unforgiven* adds a serious commentary upon violence, most sophisticated when it moves beyond surface realism to a consideration of how genre convention performs a kind of cultural erasure. What tropes of the classical western, for example, take account of the anonymous "Chinamen" English Bob has gunned down or the forces that have destroyed the tribe of Sally Two Trees and left her to be the wife of a black outlaw? What is at stake here is a transpersonal guilt, not simply clinging to the various unsavory characters but also embedded in the genre itself, whose iconic shorthand compresses to the point of effacement the memory of large-scale national discord and ethno-racial conflict. (There is now an ample body of western scholarship, summarized by Jacobs, 1994,

dissolving Turner's relatively homogeneous image of the white, male "pioneer" into groups fractionalized by gender, tribe, ethnicity, and social status. More recent thinking also assumes a much less peaceful model of settlement, even to the point of questioning whether anything was finally "settled." See, for example, Blackhawk, 2008, particularly pp. 145-75, and Limerick, 1987.)

Perhaps the fullest significance of *Unforgiven* lies in its displacement of the Western hero (whether gunslinger, sheriff, or empire-builder), so as to open a path for alternate narratives that confound the stereotypes of genre. What story might explain the unrelenting rage of Strawberry Alice, the angry prostitute who will accept no settlement short of blood vengeance? On the other hand, what experience might give Delilah her surprising gentleness, a basic decency and good-nature that survives in the face of atrocity and terror? What fate is in store for the young children of William Munny, who apparently go off to San Francisco with their father, the "known thief and murderer," to help him launch a dry goods business. Are they the great-great-grandfathers of today's street gangs or do their progeny belong to the California Chamber of Commerce? While all these are clearly minor figures in the narrative, we see enough of them and read their subjectivity sufficiently to understand that they are more than just stock characters, like bartenders and stagecoach drivers. Eastwood's challenge to genre convention in *Unforgiven* has allowed him to explode the boundaries of the western, opening its spaces to more ambiguous characters and actions that resonate in a special psychological key. Whatever the ultimate reputation of this film, it seems inescapably clear that the American western will never again be quite the same.

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