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"Oral History as Political Resistance

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**ORAL HISTORY AS POLITICAL RESISTANCE:
*Posse & Once Upon a Time in Mexico***

In the introduction to his *The Western Reader*¹ Jim Kitses observes that the Western film, a genre long-heralded as the "cornerstone of American identity," (16) is itself not exempt from an undertaking of racial and cultural revisionism. He points to a resurgence of films from the 1990's that, in an era of multi-culturalism, hybridity, and counter-strategies, have functioned to redefine the codes of the traditional Western, bringing to life the postmodern Western. The subversive politics of Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995), and Maggie Greenwald's *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993) are two such examples. In its de-stabilization of traditional Western values, *Dead Man* reinterprets the wilderness/civilization dichotomy that is fundamental to the genre's structure. Where classic Westerns like John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) and *My Darling Clementine* (1946) articulate the progression from the chaos of the wilderness to civilized society, *Dead Man* features a protagonist whose journey takes him from civilization to the wild, and ultimately from life to death. Similarly, Maggie Greenwald's *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993) departs from classic Western values, with its discourse of female empowerment, and a willingness to challenge patriarchal notions of masculinity and femininity.

Dead Man and *The Ballad of Little Jo* are uncompromised illustrations of a progressive genre whose frontier is no longer defined by the iconic cowboy hero, but

instead by a plurality of racial, cultural, and gender-specific terms. Accompanying these films in their break from the codes of traditional Western mythology are the bold discourses of Mario Van Peebles's *Posse* (1993), and Robert Rodriguez's *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* (2003). As appropriations of one of cinema's oldest genres, each film is indicative of Michel Foucault's postmodern politics, in which he calls for multiple, autonomous strikes against totalizing discourses, the cultivation of multiple forms of resistance against forms of power, and the proliferation of cultural difference (Best & Kellner 57). Both *Posse* and *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* carry out the task of destroying existing historical identities that have been fashioned by suppressive Western discourses such as *Stagecoach* and *My Darling Clementine*, establishing a unique cultural voice that is intended specifically for members of their respective oppressed groups. These traditional Western conventions, translated into a culturally specific counter-discourse that is aimed directly toward marginalized audiences, operates as an effective method of resistance for such groups against the dominant Western narrative.

The cumulative effects of Michel Foucault's social critiques concerning the relationship between power and knowledge have been applied to a wide range of subjects, across many different fields of academic study. Central to a reading of Foucault's postmodern perspective is a breakdown of his politics of genealogy, a project he theorizes as "the claims to attention of local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory" (Foucault *Knowledge/Power* 42). Confined to the periphery, Foucault calls for the re-emergence of these "naïve" knowledges as a starting point of resistance for marginalized groups to contest the

hegemonic discourse. The Western genre can certainly be looked upon as such a totalizing discourse. In her essay "Generic Subversion as Counter-history: Mario Van Peeble's *Posse*," Alexandra Keller identifies it as "lay(ing) claim to a universalizing...totalizing approach to narrative rhetoric" (30). Similarly for Kitses, his introduction notes the "totalizing system" of "masculinist individualism and racist Manifest Destiny" (Kitses 16) that is inscribed in the traditional Western form; a set of codes and conventions that the postmodern Western seeks to delegitimize. The political task of Foucauldian genealogy is to recover the autonomous discourses, knowledges, and voices suppressed by these totalizing narratives; objectives that both *Posse* and *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* attempt to negotiate through their resistant narrative strategies, postmodern stylistics, and oppositional cultural politics.

Both films favor a narrative strategy that resists the formal conventions of dramatic realism, in favor of a postmodern, oppositional cinema that is heavily coded with imagery pertaining specifically to marginalized groups (African Americans for *Posse*, Hispanics for *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*). Ella Shohat and Robert Stam note that an alternative aesthetic such as this is often rooted in "non-Western or para-Western cultural traditions featuring other historical rhythms, other narrative structures, other views of the body, sexuality, spirituality and the collective life" (292), as a means of interrogating the dominant discourse. With its revisionist re-positioning of the Black cowboy and his place in the Western myth, *Posse's* counter-discourse speaks to its audience with the implementation of a postmodern griot, which is in keeping with the cultural traditions that inform African and African-American modes of storytelling. The

griot is a West African poet, wandering musician, singer, and keeper of the oral tradition (Oliver, 52-54). His function as a multifaceted teacher, genealogist, and oral historian has been predominantly explored in the works of African filmmakers like Ousmane Sembène (*Borrom Sarret*, 1966) and Djibril Diop Mambéty (*Touki Bouki*, 1973). Though he is becoming increasingly marginal to contemporary society, the griot figure has been appropriated by filmmakers like Van Peebles, Julie Dash (*Daughters of the Dust*, 1991), and Kasi Lemmons (*Eve's Bayou*, 1997), as a means of providing a relevant point of engagement, and emancipatory mode of address, for African-American audiences. In its postmodern appropriation of the oral tradition, *Posse* employs Woody Strode as its narrator,² occupying the position of storyteller, historian and teacher. His defiant speeches about the biased perspectives of Western history are situated in the opening and closing moments of the film, inciting the narrative action, and sealing its resolution around his recollections of Jesse Lee and his posse of outlaws. His perspective is more than that of a passive observer. He instead speaks from a position of genuine lived-experience, a dynamic that is revealed when he is reintroduced into the narrative midway through the film.

On their way through the desert to Cutterstown, Jesse and the outlaw bunch come across an abandoned horse-carriage lying in ruins. A flashback reveals Jesse's haunted memory of his father's lynching, his own brutal beating, and the subsequent burning of Freemanville's newly erected church. Lying bloody and beaten, Jesse screams out in agony as he looks upon the body of his father hanging Christ-like on the burning church scaffolding, the words "EDUCATION IS FREEDOM" scrawled on a

wooden sign behind him. Jim Kitses writes that the image of a half-built church in *My Darling Clementine*, with the American flag flying high above its architecture, ultimately comes to embody the spirit of pioneer America (65). For Jesse and the inhabitants of Freemanville, the image of his father's crucifixion is as much a symbol of the struggle for freedom and community for African-Americans, as the American flag flying high over the newly erected church tower is an embodiment of promise and civilization for white Americans in *Clementine*. In the carriage lies a small boy, our narrator, and his faint coughing interrupts Jesse's violent flashback. Jesse collects himself in the present, and he and the outlaws take the boy with them on their journey. Throughout the rest of the film, a subtle emphasis is placed on the action of the young boy as he eavesdrops on conversations, and observes the events of the narrative. He sits huddled behind a thicket of bushes, watching as Jesse and the residents of Freemanville decide to fight back against Sheriff Bates' planned assault on the town. He peers out from behind a chicken coop as Jesse destroys a gatling gun with a stick of dynamite, and looks on in horror as Sheriff Bates and his men pummel Little J to death with their clubs. He even participates in the film's climactic gunfight, handing Jesse his six-shooters so that he can gun-down the villainous Colonel Graham. His presence in the film is a quiet emphasis of the importance of a passing of history onto the youth culture; a new generation of hope against the cycle of oppression and violence aimed towards African-Americans.

This history of the outlaw posse's struggle that is presented through our narrator's eyes is also embodied in Jesse's telling of the legend of the African prophet Nicodemus, whose chronicles are preserved in a small book that Jesse carries with him

in his vest pocket. Nicodemus' story is impenetrable, much like the book's metal covering, which stops a bullet meant for Obobo during the climax of the film. As Obobo lies wounded in front of the saloon, Jesse reads from the book, passing it to the boy who continues with the passage, while a flashback of Jesse's father reading the same story analogizes the images. A flash-forward to the present situates us with the boy, now the grown narrator, who upon completion of his story passes the book to a young reporter who has been listening to and recording the history for himself. From Jesse's father to Jesse, to Obobo and the little boy, and finally from narrator to the reporters and the spectator, this channel of communication effectively functions to keep past histories alive in the consciousness of those living in the present, helping to shape the identity of the culture as it evolves through time. *Posse* eschews the disengaged, third person voice that has been the hallmark of the conventional Western, instead favoring a communication that is fully engaged with, and specifically tailored to an African-American audience.

Similarly, Rodriguez's *Mexico* aims its counter-discourse towards a Mexican audience, employing a gun-slinging mariachi as the film's solemn hero. Rodriguez further personalizes the film by situating the narrative in a contemporary Mexican society that is imprisoned by a government at odds with a corrupt military force, and by positioning the action in conjunction with the traditional Mexican holiday, *El Dia de los Muertos*³. Sharing a political affiliation with Brazil's Glauber Rocha, Rodriguez's film borrows from his "aesthetic of hunger" (Xavier 40) and its aggressive stance towards dominant cinematic codes, to assemble a unique film language of his

own through the assimilation of issues that are of specific interest to Mexican culture. A postmodern re-tooling of Rocha's aesthetic, Rodriguez's syncretism balances traditional Mexican thematics with an excessive visual style that overindulges in violent imagery.

As is the case with *Posse*, the spectator is introduced to El via a mythical telling of one of his bloody clashes with General Marquez. The film opens in a small Mexican cantina, where Belini is recounting El's legend to Agent Sands. Belini describes how El dispatches of Marquez and his men with a guitar shaped machine gun that sprays bullets from its neck, and launches grenades from its body. A flashback of the action provides a visual accompaniment to the story, the images echoing Belini's words as El cocks his weapon and unloads on the group of soldiers, sending bodies flying over tables and against walls with violent force. For El, the film's hybrid protagonist, the eloquence of his guitar-playing is equally matched by the precision at which he is able to dispose of his adversaries. He is a mariachi, a representative of the spiritual and cultural tradition that encompasses the essence of the Mexican people. He is also a gun-fighter, as tough as any from the old West, and when he exercises his skill as such, it is carried out with great force and accuracy. Much like the African griot, the mariachi is an orator, musician and historian; the sum of a cultural revolution whose tradition is rooted in the singing of folk ballads that share stories of home, region, love, politics, and adventure. Dressed in his iconic *charro*,⁴ El is a postmodern embodiment of the traditional mariachi storyteller, a neo-Mexican revolutionary, carrying his acoustic guitar that is both a symbol of his oratory power and a metaphorical and literal weapon for change. El's other weapon of choice is the *pistola*, which he retrieves from his guitar

case at opportune times, unleashing mayhem on those who seek to oppose him. True to postmodern form, the violence in the film is brutal and excessive. The impact of a gunshot does more than just kill the human body in *Mexico*, it propels it from one side of a room to the other, sending it through banisters and off balconies, into tables and other objects where it lands with a destructive force. The gunfights in the film are drawn-out episodes of gratuitous violence that terrorize local city merchants, and destroy Catholic cathedrals. The damage to these cultural elements is rarely sustained by the direct discharge of ammunition itself, but is primarily felt through the impact of the dead Mexican body crashing through church pews and merchant tables; the internalized violence of the region taking its toll on local commerce and religion.

El's mission to avenge his murdered wife and child intersects with Barillo and General Marquez's attempted usurpation of the Mexican government. The rebellion is short-lived, and their defeat comes at the hands of El, his team of mariachis, and the Mexican people, who rise up and fight to protect their country. That this attempted coup d'état takes place on *El Dia de los Muertos* is a calculated device, as it is customary during this two-day celebration for family members to prepare offerings of bread, candles, and flowers for the spirits of their departed relatives. Having dispersed of Barillo and Marquez, El and his band of mariachis, the self-proclaimed "sons of Mexico," offer a new land freed from corruption as their *ofrenda*⁵ to the people of Mexico, reborn and rightly restored to the those who were willing to fight for it. The residents of Freemanville in *Posse* are also faced with an impending attack on their town. When Sheriff Bates discovers that the railroad will soon be making its way

through Freemanville, he conspires with Sheriff Carver to buy up as many deeds to the land as possible, knowing that they will both be rich when the time comes to sell the property to the railroad. When Jesse rides back into town after fleeing from this military assignment, Bates sees the opportunity to kill Jesse and his outlaw bunch, while simultaneously destroying Freemanville in the process.

In his essay, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," Cornell West describes the importance of the "demoralized, demobilized, depoliticized and disorganized" cultures to "trash the monolithic and homogenous in the name of diversity, multiplicity and heterogeneity" (257). Such an undertaking almost always comes at the expense of a crisis in civilization, and much like the town of Freemanville, under the siege of a racist sheriff, and the people of Mexico, under the threat of a General's coup d'état, each represented culture is appropriately situated in a position of resistance. As Foucault claims, the best methods of resistance for these groups are the "guerilla warfare" tactics of personal, localized strikes and diffuse power struggles (Poetzl 47). Such is the mode of opposition for the oppressed people in *Posse* and *Mexico*. The residents of Freemanville take preemptive measures, blowing up Bates' office, and initiating the final gunfight that serves as the climax of the film. The townspeople are mostly shop owners and laborers, surely not gunfighters, though when faced with the extinction of their freedom, they fight to keep it. The people of Mexico are mostly civilians and peasants as well, taking part in the festivities of *El Dia de los Muertos* when Marquez's army comes to take control of the government. They fight back with "guerilla" tactics like Molotov cocktails, lead pipes, sticks, and hot dog carts that they convert into mobile

machine gun platforms. Citizens in *calaca*⁶ masks scream out “Viva Mexico” as they disarm soldiers with their bare hands, as does an elderly woman with gun belts strewn across her torso, firing bullets into a group of Marquez’s soldiers. These images of the townspeople of Freemanville and the citizens of Mexico function as culturally specific symbols of the oppressed, striking back against totalizing forms of power. The films exhibit an amalgamation of heritage and Western conventions as a means of shaping a cinematic language that conveys its message of struggle and revolution directly to their respective audiences.

In conjunction with the subversive narrative structures employed by both films, the music plays a central role in the establishment of a dialogue with the films’ intended audiences. Music often functions as means of expressing thoughts, moods, and emotions, and in *Posse* and *Mexico* it serves as an effective channel for specific ethnic perspectives. *Posse* implements a *mélange* of diegetic and non-diegetic music, with its particular use of hip hop as a connection to the griot-style narrative of the film. Itself a postmodern form rooted in orality, hip-hop music derives from African call-and-response patterns (Shohat & Stam 300), encouraging an interaction between performer and listener. The acoustic tranquility of traditional Western guitar is replaced with an urban, energetic style that emphasizes percussion, movement and rhythm, complimented by the fusion of the speaking/singing voice. The film’s combination of hip hop with blues and gospel sounds that have similarly derived from African music, gives African-American audiences a point of identification that functions to draw them into a closer relationship with the moods and ideas of the film. A similar connection is

felt between Mexican audiences and the Mariachi folk ballads featured in *Mexico*. The *corridos*⁷ (ibid 301) are themselves an intriguing synthesis of orality and music, blending regional poems and stories with the traditional folk *sones*⁸ of Jalisco to form a musical style that has traced the history of Mexico throughout its existence. The familiar mariachi ballad “La Malagueña,”⁹ is heard several times in the film, over the opening title sequence and as requested by the president during his extravagant dinner party. In keeping with Rodriguez’s postmodern style, the arrangement of the song is modified each time it is heard; first as a grand orchestra piece, and later in its original form with two guitars and a *guitarrón*¹⁰. The film often diverges into long passages of these traditional ballads, where the music captures the attention, saturating the soundtrack as a momentary intrusion of the soul of the Mariachi, and of the *corridos* that infuse his story. These songs provide both a historical and cultural context for Mexican audiences to engage with the politics of the film.

Robert Shohat and Ella Stam reflect on the notion that Eurocentric ideology “values literacy over orality, and assigns the prerogative of interpreting history to the literate European” (298). The typical assumption is that an oral or spoken history is equated with illiteracy, while a written history is associated with literacy and knowledge. Both *Posse* and *Mexico* take this notion to task with a politics of orality that speaks outside of the established rules of discourse, as “a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (Foucault *The History of Sexuality* 101). A Foucauldian discourse politics emphasizes the contestation of hegemonic discourses by marginalized groups as a means of liberating the free play of differences (Best & Kellner

57). Because the dominant discourse enforces rules as to what is right, rational, acceptable, etc., counter-discourses provide a method of resistance to these “norms” by encapsulating a popular memory of previous forms of oppression, and finding an alternate mode of expression for the needs and demands of a culture. Each film asserts that the oral tradition is both an appropriate alternative approach toward the cultivation of one’s history, and an effective means of resisting the dominant Western discourse that has constrained oppressed cultures. George Yudice reflects on the space of modernity as one that is predominantly visual, and that the “postmodern space of the vocal (oral ethnography, a people’s history, slave narratives) can be used as a way of “restoring voice to the voiceless” (214). In *Posse* and *Mexico*, strategies of orality are employed not only as tools of resistance, but as a way of establishing a “polyphony of voices” (Shohat & Stam 214). They function as multi-vocal approaches that seek to heighten cultural difference, while simultaneously annihilating socially generated inequalities. A spectator will approach a film informed by their own personal and cultural capacity of knowledge. They become equipped with what Shohat and Stam call “a sense of the real,” which originates in their own experience of whether or not they can “accept, question, or even subvert a film’s representations” (Ibid 182). The superimposed Western iconography of expansive desert vistas and open mountain ranges are the typical signifiers of a Western perspective of history that has traditionally operated to the detriment of African and Mexican cultures. *Posse* and *Mexico* subvert this tradition through the establishment of a unique voice that emphasizes the importance of oratory and culturally influenced music. Jesse’s father’s message of

“education as freedom,” and El’s final declaration of “*libertad*” are the culturally restricted “naïve” knowledges that Foucault calls for as way of “pluralizing the field of discourse” (Best & Kellner 46), and the films destroy the counterfeit historical identities created for them by the totalizing narrative of the dominant, cultivating an environment where marginalized voices can be heard at their fullest volume and resonance.

In her essay “Artistic Integrity: Race and Accountability,” prominent cultural critic and theorist bell hooks argues for the importance of “a new aesthetics of looking” (hooks 72) that is specific to members of marginalized groups. For hooks, the development and sustainment of a unique, decolonized perspective from which underrepresented artists and audiences can produce and consume images, is an essential strategic starting point toward a resistance of racist cinematic representations. It remains vital then, for culturally disenfranchised groups to organize and cultivate critical and personal works of expression, as a means of disempowering the dominant discourses functioning in cinema. This is precisely how *Posse* and *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* carry out their counter-discourses, and while no one particular film can disassemble the years of racism and imperialist imagery inscribed into the Western genre, each film has indeed taken a positive step forward towards this goal.

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Endnotes

¹ Co-edited by Gregg Rickman.

² See Keller's (41) essay for a more thorough exploration of the postmodern implications of Strode's casting.

³ The Day of the Dead.

⁴ A traditional Jalisco cowboy suit.

⁵ Offering.

⁶ Colloquial Spanish name for skeleton.

⁷ Popular narrative song of Mexico.

⁸ Tunes.

⁹ One of the more famous mariachi ballads, written by Ernesto Lecuona in 1927.

¹⁰ Large Mexican guitar.