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# Degeneration of Settler Colonialism in Contemporary Cinematic Depictions of the U.S. West: Introduction

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**Abstract:** The settler’s situation is underpinned by the fear of having been caught in a process of endless transition, hence the determination to define the parameters of collective sovereignty and to establish a satisfactory existential basis. The sense of uncertainty that underlies the settler’s situation accounts for the necessity of developing power structures that sustain the settler collective’s striving to complete its design, and this triggers a range of conflicts. Repeatedly addressing the eponymous region’s legacy of settler colonialism, film depictions of the American West re-inscribe oppression of racial minorities, sexual abuse, and class exploitation in order to validate the foundational settler-nation myth that consolidates hegemonic forms of racial, economic, cultural, and political power.

The rationale behind the enterprise of settler colonialism is, to an extent, utopian. As Lorenzo Veracini observes, “[s]ettlers [...] ‘remove’ to establish a better polity, either by setting up an ideal social body or by constituting an exemplary model of social organization” (Veracini 2010, 4). This utopian craving generates various tensions on the level of collective psychology in the face of actual difficulties and symbolic dilemmas. The settler’s situation is underpinned by the fear of having been caught in a process of endless transition, hence the determination to define the parameters of collective sovereignty and to establish a satisfactory existential basis. Veracini writes that “a settler society is always [...] a society ‘to come’ characterised by the *promise* rather than the practice of a truly ‘settled’ life” (Veracini 2010, 23; original emphasis). The inevitable sense of uncertainty that underlies the settler’s situation accounts for the necessity of developing what Veracini calls “representational regimes” (Veracini 2010, 29) that sustain the settler collective’s striving to complete its design. Representational regimes impose on people

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systems of values that are often dogmatic, and this helps alleviate the anxiety resulting from the continual negotiation of individual and collective settler identities. As Veracini explains it, “the line separating settler and indigenous must be approached but not crossed, and the same goes for neo-European imitation, where sameness should be emphasized, but difference is a necessary prerequisite of the absolute need to at once distinguish between settler self and indigenous and exogenous Others” (Veracini 2010, 23).

The presence of the Indigene, a key factor behind the formation of settler identities, is perceived in negative terms, which is why the settler’s relationship toward the indigenous Other is almost invariably marked by violence. In their introduction to a special issue of *Western American Literature* on “Settler Colonial Studies and Western American Culture,” Alex Trimble Young and Lorenzo Veracini advocate a redefinition and a reemployment of the concept of the frontier – “toward which western American literary studies has a long-seated antipathy” (4) – as an important category in the analysis of settler violence. They refer to the seminal scholarship on settler colonialism by Patrick Wolfe, who has demonstrated on the example of Australia that while “the concept of the frontier as a representation” can be “misleading or illusory,” this very representation produces undeniable “social effects” in a settler colonial environment (Wolfe 1999, 165). As Wolfe puts it, “[t]he reality accompanying the idea of the frontier is that of invasion,” and when a conceptual apparatus turns into “a performative representation” it facilitates the processes happening in the actual social realm (Wolfe 1999, 165).

Richard Slotkin’s work on the mythologizing of the American frontier frames this continual process of revalidating and re-performing violence as a regenerative one achieved through ongoing violence against the indigenous Other in the American West (Slotkin 1996) or against those posing ideological or physical threats to (white, male) American supremacy (Slotkin 1998). His analysis undergirds our contemporary understanding of a national narrative that advocates violence as necessary in defining, and redefining, the collective power and sovereignty of the nation vis-à-vis an Other. Current social conflicts are navigated through their merging with previous historical narratives in an ongoing process that endorses the violence of frontier mythology.

Functioning similarly as a palimpsest, the Western re-inscribes oppression of racial minorities, sexual abuse, and class exploitation in order to validate the foundational settler-nation myth that consolidates hegemonic forms of racial, economic, cultural, and political power. The genre’s flexibility provides space for self-reflection on this process, though never to its erasure or to a complete condemnation of the worldview that frames it. We glimpse the fragility of the national project through those spaces or overlays in the palimpsest. Many post-9/11

Westerns intentionally, albeit ambivalently, excavate these spaces for the psychological ramifications over time of this performative violence on settler populations and the national psyche. A growing number of contemporary filmmakers grapple allegorically with the dark legacy of settler colonialism by addressing themes such as family conflict, racial antagonism, religious fanaticism, economic crisis, and sexual violence as indicative of the regenerative/performative cycle. In so doing, they reconfigure Slotkin's process of regeneration through violence as a degenerative process.

The authors in this special issue explore a variety of genres that have been used in cinematic representations of the eponymous region that circumscribes and validates settler-nation violence: the Western, the historical film, the family drama, the road film, and others. Contemporary films set in different parts of this region often explicitly or implicitly ponder the legacy of the continental expansion and settlement, and this tendency can be discerned both in films that evoke historical contexts and in those which investigate the effects of the past on the issues of the present time. The symptoms of degeneration appear to be particularly salient in the case of communities wherein socially-desired interpersonal bonds have been traditionally perceived as very strong: single families or groups of families, villages or towns, religious communities.

As the anxiety of global terror becomes a daily norm, vehemently nationalistic rhetoric validates violence against immigrant Others, and xenophobia and racism are harnessed as acceptable aspects of public speech and action. From this, the question arises: Has the toll of regenerative violence for the sake of maintaining a national myth of settler-nation supremacy resulted in a degeneration of the national body to the point where our own dis-ease with indigene and immigrant Others manifests itself as disease?

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