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## Prime real estate: landscape, geography, and cultural anxieties in three western melodramas

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**PRIME REAL ESTATE:  
LANDSCAPE, GEOGRAPHY, AND CULTURAL ANXIETIES  
IN THREE WESTERN MELODRAMAS**

By

Zachary Beare

Accepted in Partial Completion  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Moheb A. Ghali, Dean of the Graduate School

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## **MASTER'S THESIS**

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Zachary Beare  
Mary 13, 2010

**PRIME REAL ESTATE:  
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IN THREE WESTERN MELODRAMAS**

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of  
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

By  
Zachary Beare  
May 2010

### Abstract

This essay examines the critical and narratological significance of landscape and geography in three American western films—John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956), Paul Thomas Anderson’s *There Will Be Blood* (2007), and Clint Eastwood’s *Gran Torino* (2008). Drawing on ecocritical, feminist, and Marxist theory in addition to film and genre theory, this essay insists on seeing the multiple denotative and connotative meanings on ‘landscape’ in American cultural production. The essay examines landscape as an artistic tradition of composed and framed natural beauty, as physical place and inhabited systems, and as fraught geopolitical space. This essay argues that an analysis of landscape in these films exposes the intricate relationships between land use, state formation, American capitalism, racial and ethnic difference, national identity, and gender identity. This project highlights the ways that social, cultural, and philosophical attitudes about race, gender, and national identity are attitudes that are constructed and formed in relation to physical spaces and geographic conditions, and this project emphasizes the dialogic nature of the relationships between sociophilosophical attitudes and physical realities. The essay argues that such an examination is of special importance now at a historical moment when anxieties and discussions about land, border and national security, and environmental impact are heavily mediated and theorized in a range of critical discourse communities.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the members of my thesis committee—Kaveh Askari, Laura Laffrado, and Lysa Rivera—who have shared their time, energy, and expertise throughout the writing of this project. My work has been strengthened by their helpful feedback and continued support. I am especially indebted to Kaveh, who graciously agreed to chair the committee and who has provided close readings and detailed commentary on drafts of this thesis. Kaveh’s insightful questions, thoughtful comments, and our lengthy discussions have complicated and strengthened the ideas in this thesis and inspired larger inquiry questions that I hope to explore in the future.

It is also important to note that I first became interested in the critical issues examined in this thesis, especially the relationships between gender, the personal body, and the body politic, while taking Pam Hardman’s senior seminar on “Reading the Body,” and I have since been lucky enough to examine these critical issues in Lysa Rivera’s course on “Chicana/o Cinema,” Kristin Mahoney’s course on “Decadents and New Women,” Laura Laffrado’s class on “Captivity and Slave Narratives,” and Allison Giffen’s course on “Race in Early American Literature.” My work in these classes and the incredible commentary provided by these professors have surely shaped the ideas in the thesis.

This project would not have been possible were it not for my wonderfully supportive fellow graduate students here at Western Washington University, and this project is indebted to intellectually rich conversations with every member of my cohort. I am especially grateful to Joy Barber, Caitlin Carle, Brandi Kincaid, and Chelsea Wessels who have not only provided incredible critical and intellectual contributions to this project, but have also provided their invaluable emotional support and friendship.

Finally, this project is dedicated to my parents who have provided substantial emotional and financial support throughout my undergraduate and graduate studies. My academic work will always be indebted to them.

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## Introduction

“I was just very interested in the American frontier and the growth of capitalism - those enormous fortunes that were being made, more often than not, on the blood of poor people, black people, Indian people. They were the ones who paid very dearly for those great fortunes.”

-Peter Matthiessen

“What a Western is, is a picture frame, and you can put any kind of picture you want in there. With Westerns you have the landscape is important, and it's empty, and only you populate it. When you populate it, you can tell any kind story that Shakespeare told, you can tell in a Western.”

-Lawrence Kasdan

In her introduction to *The Landscape of the Hollywood Western*, Deborah Carmichael laments the fact that “the importance of the landscape itself, the idyllic or treacherous environment negotiated in [American western] films, often receives supporting-role status” (1). In this introduction, Carmichael examines the way that the landscape is often seen as secondary to the narrative and is too often constructed as a supplement rather than a key feature of these films. The word ‘landscape’ is, itself, incredibly loaded because the term both points to an artistic tradition of composed and framed natural beauty at the same time that it refers to physical place, inhabited geographic systems, and fraught geopolitical space. This failure to come to terms with the significances of landscape and geographic realities within the tradition of American western films that Carmichael outlines is unfortunate because as she argues, “without the land, American national mythmaking would not exist” (1). Carmichael highlights the way that landscape serves as a narratological vehicle, a tool that allows for constructions of American metanarratives which shape the ways viewers see their cultural history. Carmichael continues, arguing that “American western movies resonate with ecological and environmental concerns still unresolved today, as well as stories of personal and national identity formed within a relationship with nature” (4). It is the way that

landscape—as an artistic tradition and as charged geopolitical space—inform and illustrate “stories of personal and national identity” that is of interest to me here. Beyond analyzing the “setting” of American Western films, though, this project, seeks to examine ways in which personal, cultural, and national anxieties become imprinted on (and manifested within the characters’ relationships with) the landscapes and physical geographies that provide what might more typically be seen as the backdrop for the films’ surface narratives. It is my contention that an examination of landscape and geography in the genre of the American western film reveals the intricately connected relationships between anxieties about race, gender, social order, national identity, and distribution of resources. Such a project sees landscape and geography not merely as backdrops for diegetic action, but rather as representations of fraught physical spaces and fought over resources. These physical spaces and resources are almost always depicted as structures that can be put to use (or that can be represented as being ineffectively or improperly used). It is my goal that this project highlights the way that social, cultural, and philosophical attitudes about race, gender, and national identity are attitudes that are constructed and formed in relation to physical spaces and geographic conditions. I hope that this project emphasizes the dialogic nature of the relationships between sociophilosophical attitudes and physical realities.

The methodology for such an undertaking is necessarily multifold, and in this project I draw from a range of critical and theoretical perspectives including recent film theory and criticism on landscape, the western genre, melodrama, and filmic technique; ecocritical and ecofeminist readings of landscape, human/land interactions, the gendering of landscape, and land and nationalism; psychoanalytic work on landscape, suppression, repression, latency,

and melodrama; Marxist theory, especially that related to the land as a source of production, women as laborers, and Marx's theory of the alienation of labor; and theory and criticism on race, miscegenation, gender, masculinity, and generic conventions in film and popular culture.

The three films I examine in this short study, John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood* (2007), and Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* (2008), are set in different physical locations (northwest Texas, southern California, and Detroit, respectively) and engage a range of narrative topics and dramatic themes, all three films foreground male characters in negotiation with their physical environments. Each of the three chapters focuses on one of these films and the ways in which the male figures within its narrative work through cultural anxieties about race, gender, social and economic position, and national identity as they negotiate and navigate their physical environment and come to the terms with the landscape and physical geography which surrounds them. Chapter 1 examines the way the narrative of John Ford's *The Searchers* constructs both the western landscape and the character of Debbie Edwards as spaces polluted by the Comanche Indians in the film, the native population which is set in opposition to Debbie's homesteading family. The chapter examines how the characters of Ethan Edwards and Martin Pawley navigate the harsh terrain looking for and deciding whether Debbie and the land are worth their effort and can be saved. The chapter is specifically interested in the significance of land usage, population, and white female (im)purity in the narrative and the ways that these issues are connected to the success of white settlements in the American west and American imperial expansion. Chapter 2 continues the discussion of the importance of women and the land to

the success of American imperialistic and capitalistic enterprises. This chapter interrogates the almost complete erasure of women in Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood*. The chapter examines how in the face of this erasure of women, the land in Anderson's film becomes metaphorically coded as feminine. This chapter explores how, despite the lack of women in the film, the film's entire narrative is contingent on feminine sources (both women and the metaphorically-coded land), sources often erased and ignored in narratives about the American west and the birth of big industry American capitalism. Chapter 3 examines Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* (2008) as a film which draws heavily on tropes of the American western but not actually set in the American west. This chapter is especially interested in the ways the character of Walt Kowalski (Eastwood) finds himself navigating an American geography that he no longer understands, an environment that he sees as no longer metonymically linked the mythic America he idealizes. The chapter examines how Walt's inability to navigate this environment coincides with other experiences of loss and a moment in which he feels the need to reassert his masculinity. This chapter is specifically interested in the ways that Walt's reassertion of masculinity is directly tied to his protection of physical space and the ways that Eastwood's narrative in many ways rescripts the urban location of his film as a new type of violent frontier, a location that served as the background for the films that made Eastwood's career.

The choice to weight this project heavily on two recent films is deliberate, for I hope to illustrate the ways that American culture is experiencing a renewed sense of anxiety about land use, environmental impact, physical space, resources, and the possibility of intrusion, especially in the wake of ever increasing scientific discourse on climate change and the

environmental consequences of a consumer-driven society and post-9/11 discourse on terrorism and national security. These anxieties and fears reveal themselves in the emotionally and politically charged discourse surrounding environmental policy, border security, immigration, healthcare, and the United States's ongoing military operations, and I think that that these anxieties are highlighted and acted out in a significant number of popular films including the three in this study and also in similar films like Joel and Ethan Coen's *No Country for Old Men* (2007) and in films of the related genre of science fiction like J.J. Abrams's *Star Trek* (2009), Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009), James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), and John Hillcoat's *The Road* (2009).

## Chapter 1:

### “It’s This Country!”: The Use (Value) of Appropriate(d) Landscapes and Gendered Bodies in John Ford’s *The Searchers*

“Some day this country's gonna be a fine, good place to be. Maybe it needs our bones in the ground before that time can come.”

-Mrs. Jorgensen in *The Searchers*

**Martin:** But I gotta go, Laurie, I gotta fetch her home.

**Laurie Jorgensen:** Fetch what home? The leavings a Comanche buck sold time and again to the highest bidder, with savage brats of her own?

-*The Searchers*

As I have written in the introduction, this critical project is weighted heavily on two recent films and the way that landscape and geography function within their diegeses, especially in light of a renewed cultural anxiety about physical space and resources that I argue is occurring in the United States. Still, I think it is important to see the ways that representations of landscape and geography have historically been charged with larger cultural anxieties. In order to do this, I wanted to examine a film that appeared in the heyday of the Hollywood western, and I feel there is no better way to do this than with an examination of *The Searchers*, a film focused on anxieties about gendered behavior, race, and land by John Ford, the Hollywood director perhaps most associated with landscape composition.

Released at the pinnacle of Ford’s career, *The Searchers* was met with intense commercial success and almost universal critical acclaim. In his May 31, 1956 *New York Times* review of the film, Bosley Crowther called the film “a rip-snorting Western” and argued that the film is “as brashly entertaining as they come.” Similarly positive reviews were published in *Newsweek*, *Time*, *The New Yorker*, and in the more academically-minded *Sight and Sound*<sup>1</sup>. Positive response to the film has not waned since its release, and *The*

*Searchers* has become a film that is often cited by filmmakers and film scholars as a favorite. The film's status as a piece of American cultural legacy has become well established. The Library of Congress selected the film for their National Film Registry<sup>2</sup> and in 2008, *The Searchers* was named the top western of all time by the American Film Institute<sup>3</sup> Likely because of the critical success and cultural significance of the film, *The Searchers* has also garnered a significant amount of critical scholarship. The majority of scholarship published on *The Searchers* focuses on issues of miscegenation, intercultural relations, and on the film's complex gender and sexual dynamics. With the wealth of scholarship that has been written on *The Searchers*, it seems strange that little has been written about the role of landscape and its artistic and geopolitical significance in the film, especially since the incredibly striking Monument Valley is brought into such clear focus in the film through Ford's almost sole reliance on the wide angle lens and his insistence on maintaining deep focus. The way that the cinematography allows the viewer to experience the landscape seems to call out for a critical reading of its function and its greater relationship to the narrative and the narrative's themes.

Though not a topic discussed in the majority of criticism on *The Searchers*, the function of landscape in the genre of the western has recently become a topic of interest to scholars, especially with the rise of the interdisciplinary field of ecocriticism. In this chapter, I would like to interrogate the relationship between the depiction of landscape and the construction and evolution of the character of Debbie Edwards. I propose that the very discourse of the film, the narrative, in addition to formal features like mise-en-scène, lighting, and point of view, all work to construct both the landscape and Debbie as spaces

which are “polluted” by the presence of the native figures in the film. I argue this construction is directly related to American imperialist attitudes regarding land usage and proper gendered behavior for women, and imperialist attitudes that helped facilitate and justify American western expansion.

It is important to acknowledge that my argument for linking Debbie as a feminine figure to the landscape is situated within a critical tradition of seeing the ways in which texts construct landscapes as feminine. This metaphoric gendering of landscape found in American colonialist discourse is perhaps most carefully considered by Annette Kolodny in *The Lay of the Land*. Kolodny argues that “America’s oldest and most cherished fantasy [is that of] a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine—that is, not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification” (4). By scripting the land as female, Kolodny argues that the American colonists were (and perhaps still are) able to see the land as either nurturing and/or ready to be dominated/used. Kolodny theorizes that by gendering the land, by seeing it as either mothering or virginal, the discourse of American colonization and imperialism was able to lessen the threat of the unknown, of the uncharted wilderness, and instead construct it as something that could be exploited.

With this trend in American discourse to gender the land as feminine, it seems logical, or at least understandable, that the same sorts of anxieties about the corruption and/or violation of women in American society are echoed in American colonialist fears about the corruption and/or violation of physical landscapes. American colonialist fears about the rape of women and female (im)purity manifest themselves in colonialist fears of Indians

penetrating, “polluting,” and/or corrupting white settlements and settlers. Such fears and concerns are certainly found in *The Searchers*. In his introduction to *The Searchers: Essays and Reflections on John Ford’s Classic Film*, Arthur M. Eckstein discusses the ways in which these fears and anxieties function as plot motivations in the film. Eckstein argues that the “obsession with white ‘purity’ is one of the great forces driving Ethan along his destructive path” (7). Here, Eckstein points to the ways in which Ethan’s anxieties about Debbie’s cultural and sexual purity work to drive the drama of the film’s narrative. Similarly, outside of the filmic narrative, the viewer’s desire for the restoration of Debbie, for her reinduction into the society of the white settlement reflects a cultural emphasis that is placed on ideas of cultural purity and intactness. Thus a desire for an ending where the female captive is restored and again made part of the dominant culture, the culture which is typically constructed as “good” and “right,” has been fostered throughout the literary history of the captivity narrative, and it has continually been rearticulated by the conventions of Hollywood cinema.

What is interesting about *The Searchers* is the ways in which these ideas about cultural purity and restoration become so tied to the landscape and the environment of the diegetic world in the film, the ways that these cultural anxieties are manifested in the borderlands setting of the film. If, as Carmichael suggests, “Landscape and environment [are] used in Westerns [to] hold the possibility of redefining cultural boundaries and reinforcing them,” then in *The Searchers*, one finds both of these functions: the viewer is allowed to see the physical effect on the landscape when Debbie is kidnapped and put into a position which challenges the cultural and gender expectations of colonialist patriarchy, and the viewer is

allowed to see the effect on landscape when cultural expectations of colonialist patriarchy are articulated and reinforced with her retrieval and her reinstatement in the homestead. The landscape of *The Searchers* is specifically utilized by the filmmakers and becomes symbolically loaded in a way that provides the viewer with information about the ways in which the characters are subscribing to or departing from cultural expectations. In this way, I argue that a careful reading of the landscape can reveal and become an interesting and telling reading of the film.

The opening scene of *The Searchers* provides the viewer's first interaction with the western landscape, and it is important to note that this initial encounter with the landscape is oriented from the perspective of a white settler, from inside the homestead. After the opening credits, the film begins with a black screen and the words "Texas 1868" to provide the viewer with expositional information. As this contextual information fades away, the viewer is left with a black screen, and then the diegetic world comes into light with Martha Edwards opening the door to her home, allowing light and the landscape to come into view at the same time that this task turns her body into a silhouette. The camera sits and looks out on the landscape from inside the house. The door itself provides an internal frame which confines a prospective of the landscape and roots it inside of a white settlement. From this perspective, Martha's silhouette marks the intense desert landscape. Her silhouetted dress and slender frame becomes an abstraction, a representation of the feminine, which becomes conflated with the framed image of the natural world outside. Though point of view becomes complicated in Ford's film and is rarely tied to specific characters, it is, in a sense, always rooted in this initial perspective, of being from a white, and theoretically male, point of view

which looks out and sees Martha's silhouette merged with the landscape, a merger that collapses the distinction between figure and ground and that establishes a parallel between the feminine and nature that will continue throughout the film. This opening shot cements the metonymic connection between female figures and landscape, establishing the same dynamic seen throughout much of American colonialist discourse. Because this image is where the film begins and is constructed in the same way that the film ends, this image, and this connection between women and land, is central to the discourse of the film, especially to how the viewer will see both women and landscape in the film.

The treatment and depiction of the land in *The Searchers* is interesting to examine because it is scripted in such contradictory ways. The land is at times anthropomorphized and given agency, and at other times, it is completely stripped of its agency and seen as a completely passive entity, one which is easily traversed, that can be read, and used by both the white figures in the film and by native figures. The latter script for the land is much more in line with the type of depiction of landscape that Kolodny uncovers in the subtext of much of American cultural discourse. The utility of the land, its potential to be a "maternal 'garden,' receiving and nurturing human children"—to foster, aid, and protect the white settlers—can be seen in the sequence when the initial search party first encounters and is surrounded by the Comanche tribe (Kolodny 5). After burying the members of the Edwards family massacred by the Indians, Ethan, Martin, Reverend Captain Samuel Clayton, and others head out into the wilderness to try to find Debbie and Lucy. After several failed attempts to sneak up on the Comanches, the search party finds itself surrounded by the Comanches. In this scene, the white search party is able to avoid attack from the Comanches

by crossing a river. They are able to use the land to their advantage in this scene, to exploit it for protection. Neither the characters nor the cinematic apparatus explains why the Comanches would not simply cross the river to get to them. Instead, the river, as a part of the landscape, serves as a protective presence which is able to shield, comfort, and allow the white men to arm themselves and prepare to battle with the Comanche party.

Even in this scene, though, the landscape seems to be on the one hand hospitable to the white men and on the other hand dangerous and infiltrated by the presence of the Comanches, a suggestion created by the camera and the use of cutting in the scene. The camera position in this sequence is interesting in the way that it forces the viewer to identify with the white searchers and distances the viewer from the Indians. The camera provides long, wide angle shots of the Comanches, and this cinematographic choice turns the Indians into silhouettes and incorporates them into the landscape. The image cuts back and forth between close shots of the white search party and the long, wide shots of the Indians. The use of close ups in the scene forces the viewer to feel connected with the white party and because of this, the viewer is forced to feel attacked by the distant and mysterious Indian figures. Also, because the Comanches are silhouetted and blurred into the landscape, the viewer and the search party are constructed as being attacked not only by the Indians, but also by the land. The terrain surrounds the searchers at the same times that the natives do with their position on the hills of the two sides of the valley, the valley where the searchers are. Because of this dynamic, it seems as if the hills themselves are coming down to attack the white men. This trend continues throughout the film: when the land *is* given some sort of

agency, some sort of power, it is when the land is discussed or present *in relation to* the Native American presence.

This relationship between the land and the Indians in the discourse of the film has been noted by Richard Hutson, the only critic to publish an article specifically written to provide a serious examination of the function of landscape in *The Searchers*. In “Sermons in Stone: Monument Valley in the Searchers,” Hutson writes that “none of the settlers seems able to distinguish the Indians from the harsh landscape” (104). It is as if the land and Indians are the same, or, perhaps more specifically, it is as if the Indians and the *harshness of the land* are the same problem, a problem which the white settlers are to fix. The rhetoric of the film seems that suggest it is not that the land itself is innately bad or dangerous; it is that the presence of the Indians makes it harsh, inhospitable, and dangerous. This conflation of the harshness of the landscape and the Indians comes out most clearly when Ethan apologizes to the Jorgensens for the death of their son who was killed while on the search mission with Ethan and Martin. Mr. Jorgensen’s response that “It’s this country! It’s this country killed my boy!” indicates a troubled and awkward relationship between the settlers and the landscape and is especially telling of the settlers’ conceptions of the relationship between the landscape and the Native American population. The fact that the landscape can be substituted for the Comanche in Mr. Jorgensen’s comment suggests that there is a problem with the landscape, and the fact that it is being discussed in relation to his son’s death by Indians suggests that the Indians are directly tied to the problem with the landscape, a pairing that comes up throughout the film.

Hutson's analysis of *The Searchers* is unique in the way that it examines the rhetorical and narratological function of the landscape (Monument Valley, specifically) in the film. Hutson suggests that "the valley comments on the human activities and narratives that take place within its mise-en-scène, offering some kind of access to...the human drama" (95). Here, Hutson points to the roles that the landscape plays and suggests that the landscape of the film provides metatextual information. Hutson's suggestion here counters much of the critical treatment of the landscape by many other critics who tend to focus on the awe-inspiring beauty of Monument Valley and the rest of the mise-en-scène, rather than its critically analyzing its rhetorical potential. For example, in his introduction, Arthur M. Eckstein highlights the incredibly visual nature of the film, pointing out the use of color and Ford's reliance on the wide angle lens. Eckstein insists that the "visual beauty [of the film] is undermined by a terribly grim and dark story" (2). Eckstein fails to acknowledge the way that the visual nature of the film changes to reflect the events of the narrative, providing metacommentary on the events of the narrative. In *The Searchers*, the mise-en-scène often provides a rich text that allows the viewer to understand and/or construct the drama throughout the film, and this relationship between the narrative and the mise-en-scène has been drastically underanalyzed in the majority of the criticism written on the film.

In fact, rather than "undermining" the "terribly grim and dark story," as Eckstein reports, the visual nature of the film is actively involved in *revealing* the events of the film and establishing the film's grim themes. This is especially true in the way that the visual depiction of nature changes so dramatically when the Indians appear on screen. One of the more dramatic examples of this is the appearance of the sky when the Comanche's appear in

the film. In their general discussion of the visual nature of the film, several critics comment on the incredible color of the cloudless blue sky found throughout Ford's film. These intensely blue skies become filled with clouds in all of the scenes that involve the Indians, though. Plus, even if noticed, most viewers would likely understand this phenomenon to be just an inconvenient accident of filming on location. The regularity with which this happens and Ford's auteur status seem to suggest otherwise, though. The sky is so strikingly blue throughout most of the film, but in all of the early appearances of the natives, clouds are suddenly in the sky, and these sequences are also almost always shot at a time of day when the sun is lower in the sky, causing the image to be darker. While clouds in the desert could be read in a positive light, as suggesting the water that is essential to life in such a space, the way the clouds impact the lighting in the shot composition is visually-encoded as negative. These changes in the natural *mise-en-scène* again seem to suggest the ways in which the native figures in the film function as a polluting entity, one which actually affects the land.

A clear example of the seemingly supernatural impact that the Indians in the film have on the land and on the *mise-en-scène* is during the sequence leading up to the raid on the Edwards homestead. After the camera follows the party of men who go out searching for the missing cows, the viewer and the men in the search party discover they have been purposefully lead away from their homesteads and that the Indians likely did this so that they could more easily raid the settlement. Many of the men rush back to their homes, but Ethan stays to rest and feed his horse. As Ethan unsaddles his horse, he looks off into space, and the image fades to black and when the image fades black in, the viewer is back at the Edward's homestead where an eerie orange glow colors the landscape and house. Aaron Edwards stares

out from his porch, seemingly disturbed by the sound of the coyotes in the distance. Looking from Aaron's point of view, the viewer looks out on the landscape, which now appears much darker, and much more ominous and dangerous than it had before. Because of the lighting, the massive buttes appear completely black and the orange haze seems to fill the air surrounding the homestead. This orange haze becomes even more pronounced with Aaron enters the home and the light filters in through the windows and open door. The unnatural color seems to foreshadow some sort of invasive presence, to suggest that there is something out there. Though surely designed to signify the light of dusk, the intensely orange haze is alarming for the viewer. The Edwards family continues looking out with notable alarm and quickly begins closing up the house, and they quickly send Debbie out to hide. The events foreshadowed by the eerie *mise-en-scène* do, of course, come to pass, as this is the night that Scar and his band of Comanches attack the Edwards homestead, kill Martha, Aaron and Ben, and capture Lucy and Debbie, providing the impetus for the film's central plot.

Because of the ways that the Indians in the film seem to have a direct impact on the nature of the physical space, the film begins to establish that the western landscape which provides the setting of the film would be a fine place to live if it wasn't for a "pollution" of the space by the Indians in the film. Their presence, which encroaches on the white settlement's use of the landscape is what is constructed as the problem by the film. In the discourse of the film, the Indians are what turn the landscape into a killer, the native "pollution" is what is used to personify the land, to give it its problematic and dangerous agency. This subtle metaphoric pollution suggested by lighting changes and *mise-en-scène* elements like the sky and the clouds becomes much more explicit and pronounced when

Ethan and Marty return to find the Edwards home in ruins, Martha, Aaron, and Ben dead, and Debbie and Lucy gone. The music in the sequence crescendos and climaxes when Marty crests the hill and sees what has become of his home. The intensely (and likely unrealistically) dark smoke billows from the sad scene, suggesting the destructive, and obviously devastating impact of their presence.

The way that the film constructs and demonstrates the Indian influence on the land is done in a way that is parallel to how the film portrays the Indian influence on Debbie. Much as lighting and mise-en-scène are used to show how the natives are polluting the land, the filmmakers also use similar cinematographic choices to show the “corruption” of Debbie. When Debbie first encounters Scar as she is hiding in the family grave yard, Ford uses lighting to exaggerate Scar's shadow. His shadow envelopes and literally darkens her skin and the land and space around her. This use of lighting in this scene both provides a tool to foreshadow the racialization of her as a character later in the film, and again this lighting indicates to the viewer that her physical space is somehow being polluted or corrupted. After this scene, the viewer does not see Debbie again until almost another hour into the film. When she does reappear, she is unrecognizable. In “Linear Patterns and Ethnic Encounters,” Joan Dagle argues that when Debbie reappears she is “constructed as the ‘assimilated’ body; she looks Indian, speaks Comanche, and tells Marty that ‘These are my people. Go’” (125). Though Dagle’s assertion that she “looks Indian” may be somewhat of a stretch, there are numerous signifiers which identify her as being so. Debbie’s darker skin, the jewelry she is wearing, and her long braided hair all function to allow the viewer to identify her in such a way. The darkness of her skin when she is reintroduced as a grown woman forces the viewer

to recall the image of Debbie as a child enveloped and darkened by the shadow of Scar. In the discourse of Ford's film, Debbie's clothes and her skin color become evidence of the fact that she has been "polluted" by her native captors. The assertion that "These are my people" is the ultimate suggestion of this. It signals that Debbie's entire sense of cultural identity has been changed.

Gaylyn Studlar examines the meaning of this scene and the representation of Debbie in it in her essay "What Would Martha Want?: Captivity, Purity, and Feminine Values in *The Searchers*." Studlar argues that "in her successful accommodation to Comanche life, Debbie challenges the common definition of purity in relation to white womanhood" and that "Debbie's cultural and sexual accommodation may be an affront to the white community" (190). Studlar continues, arguing that Debbie's "actions...relegate her to the status of a whore and a racial traitor who has willingly fraternized with the savage enemy" (190). Studlar's suggestion that Debbie, in assimilating, has become a "racial traitor" is an interesting one, and it is an argument that Studlar does not examine in depth<sup>4</sup>. This assertion brings up two important questions that must be asked: to what cause is Debbie a traitor and what are the consequences of this betrayal?

These important questions are ones that Eckstein considers, perhaps unwittingly, in his introduction when he considers the film in relation to its date of release. Eckstein proposes that "one might also canvass the idea that there is a relationship between *The Searchers* and [the] American trauma and concern of the 1950s: the growing fear of 'brainwashing' of Americans by the enemies of American society" (9-10). Related to this 1950s fear of brainwashing, there is surely a similar fear of brainwashing depicted in the

film, except rather than the fear of communism, the fear depicted in the film is a fear that Debbie could be brainwashed by the Indians that are holding her captive. The “polluting” presence of the Indians in the film has the potential to brainwash Debbie, to provide her with an alternative cultural point of view (especially towards the landscape and the white settlers’ position within the landscape), and this “brainwashing” influence of the Indians could provide Debbie with an alternative gender script. To signify the potential danger of such events, the film constructs the negative effects of such brainwashing when Ethan and Marty encounter the women that the cavalry have rescued, found, or bartered from the natives during raids and other encounters. These women are depicted as insane and unable to function in the white world, and, in fact, Ethan asserts that “They ain’t white anymore. They’re Comanche.” This suggestion that these women have been completely corrupted and brainwashed surely reveals something about Ethan’s fears about the status of Debbie and the ways in which living with the Comanche have affected her. When Debbie is found, though, she has not been driven insane; if she has been “brainwashed,” she has been impacted in a different way.

Still, I think that Eckstein’s suggestion of a fear of brainwashing is an important one to consider in looking at the film’s narrative. During a fight with Marty near the end of the film, Ethan asserts that “living with Comanche ain’t being alive.” Considering Debbie in relation to the land, this assertion seems similar to the idea popular throughout the discourse of American colonization that the land use by native figures isn’t appropriate, real, or significant. For Ethan, Debbie’s life with the Comanche lacks value in much the same way that settlers of the American West see the Indian’s interactions with the land as lacking value.

Such rhetoric creates a sense that the natives are not really using the land, and if they are using it, they are not using it appropriately because they do not understand it. Such an attitude implies that the colonizers/settlers have a greater knowledge of the appropriate way to use the land.

Embedded in Ethan's fears about the brainwashing and corruption of Debbie are American imperialist conceptions of productivity and appropriate *use* of both land and women. The discourse of the film seems to suggest that neither Debbie nor the land is being used correctly when managed by the natives. The white figures in the film see the Indians as polluting, invading, and improperly using the land, and the "corruption" of Debbie can be seen as preventing her from acting as a literal and figurative laborer (a cultivator of the land and as a mother of white children) which would help cement white settlement in the West.

Such a reading of Ford's film necessitates an examination of the role of women in the enterprise of the colonization of the American West<sup>5</sup>. Situating this enterprise of colonization within a capitalist framework is perhaps helpful. In "How the West Wasn't Won: The Repression of Capitalism in John Ford's Westerns," Peter Lehman suggests that "For Ford the West is won by families who care not for money but for the land, and by the cavalry that selflessly fights to protect those settlers on the land. The families and the cavalry are all noble and without greed" (150). As I will discuss later, such a dynamic will be reversed in *There Will Be Blood*. Of course, Lehman points out that such a conception and construction of the settlement of the West suppresses the role of the capitalistic drive. Because of this problem that Lehman points out, it is essential to examine the ways in which women and the family unit can be used to work as agents in systems of production and to satisfy the needs

of patriarchal capitalism. For this reason, I argue that it is important to consider the character of Debbie as a *potential* mother and the implications of such an identity. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues in “Feminism and Critical Theory,” “the possession of a tangible place of production in the womb situates the woman as an agent in any theory of production” (122). Here, Spivak notes the productive potential of women. The productive value has very real implications in terms of the project of colonization in the American West. Women serve several essential roles in the service of this project; they help cultivate the land, they work to maintain the homes which make up the settlements, and they are foundational to the colonialist project because they are essential for the peopling of the settlements. Debbie has the potential to be involved in the settlement of the West by following her prescribed gender script of wife and mother. Any deviation from these scripts has the potential to slow or even harm the colonizing project which is subtextual in the film’s narrative.

It is perhaps this reason that Ethan’s assumption that Debbie has had sexual contact with Scar (and has even potentially mothered his child) is so upsetting for Ethan and for the majority of the white settlers, for it suggests that Debbie has been used to increase the Indian population, to rearticulate their presence. In her sexual (and conceivably romantic) encounters with Scar, Debbie becomes an active agent in preventing the white settlers’ effective use of and populating of the land. Perhaps this is the reason, as Studlar points out, that “Ford never allows [the viewer] to see any affective qualities that he normally associates with happy domesticity. Through this absence, the concept of family and home associated with Martha Edwards trumps Debbie’s familial—and sexual—ties to the Comanche” (191). Instead of providing access to Debbie’s familiar life with the Comanche, in *The Searchers*,

Ford associates Indian familiar life with violence. In Scar's tipi, Debbie is connected to the scalps of Scar's victims, and Marty's interaction with his Indian "wife" Look is a repulsive few minutes of domestic abuse and ends with her tragic death. Ford does not provide access to a productive and/or positive depiction of Indian familiar life. Instead, as both Lehman and Studlar suggest, he romanticizes the familial life of the settlers, of people like the Edwards family.

The fact that Ethan can forgive Debbie and that she can be redeemed and brought back into the white settlement is revealing of the settlers' attitudes towards the land, though. Both of these "bodies" are constructed as something contaminated and problematic—something touched by native figures—but both of these are constructed as something that can be captured, contained, and (re)civilized. Debbie, like the land, just needs to be separated from the native presence, and in returning to the homestead, she can fulfill the duties of her established gender role, duties which are designed to help establish and maintain the white presence in the west and to help establish a force to push the Indians of the American West away. In the film, Debbie and the landscape are both too valuable to leave behind. Despite their faults, their corruption, their harshness, they are both needed to support and maintain the dominant culture.

Though seemingly a small aspect of the narrative, the white settlers' treatment and attitude towards the landscape in the film are directly tied to Ethan's and the other settlers' attitudes toward Debbie. Both are ambivalent relationships marked by uncertainty and anxiety, and both end in the same way, with the two bodies once again in the service of the white American colonizing power. Perhaps one of the most important advantages of looking

at the connection between the landscape and Debbie in the film is that it forces one to look at the way that the settlement of the American West and the exploitation of its resources were directly tied to the women who helped settle the space. Too often disseminated in cultural discourse is the idea that the private domestic sphere has no impact on the greater public, national, and global spheres. An examination of Debbie and landscape in *The Searchers* reveals an intricate relationship between the spheres, and it exposes the ways patriarchal capitalism is reliant on both women and the natural environment, two sources of production too often glossed over and dismissed.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See *Newsweek*, May 21<sup>st</sup>, 1956, 116; *Time*, June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1956, 58; *The New Yorker*, June 9<sup>th</sup>, 1956, 34; and *Sight and Sound*, (Autumn 1956): 94-95. For one of the few negative reviews of the film, see Ronald Holloway's Mar. 14, 1956 review in *Variety*, in which Holloway suggests that the film is "Overlong and repetitious at 119 minutes" and that "there are subtleties in the basically simple story that are not adequately explained."

<sup>2</sup>See the Library of Congress list of films deemed "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant" at <http://www.loc.gov/film/titles.html>

<sup>3</sup> AFI's List of top westerns can be found at <http://www.afi.com/10top10/western.html>

<sup>4</sup> I do not mean to suggest that Studlar's very interesting essay is innately flawed. She provides a fascinating discussion of the way that Martha functions in terms of the film's greater message and examines the ways in which Ford utilizes "feminized" Christian values.

<sup>5</sup> Though not quoted in this essay, Gaylyn Studlar's "Sacred Duties, Poetic Passions: John Ford and the Issue of Femininity in the Western" speaks extensively on the subject of the role of women and feminine values (especially the ways in which feminine values become tied to Christianity and family-centered domesticity) to the Hollywood western and the ways in which these values are essential to the settlements found in these films and to the actual settlement of the west. See:

Studlar, Galyn. "Sacred Duties, Poetic Passions: John Ford and the Issue of Femininity in the Western." *John Ford Made Westerns: Filming The Legend in the Sound Era*. Ed. Gayln Studlar and Matthew Bernstein. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2001. 43-74

## Chapter 2:

### There Will Be (Wo)Men: Capitalism, Phallic Imagery

#### and the (Sup)(Re)pression of the Feminine in *There Will Be Blood*

“The laborer is related to the product of his labor as a strange, foreign object.”

-Karl Marx, “The Alienation of Labor”

“The khôra seems to be alien to the order of the 'paradigm,' that intelligible and immutable model. And yet, 'invisible' and without sensible form, it participates in the intelligible in a very troublesome and indeed aporetic way.”

-Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*

It is a difficult jump to make from Ford's *The Searchers* to Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood* (2007) not only because of the fifty one years between their releases, but also because their narratives are constructed in very different ways. Whereas Ford's film is reliant on female characters to provide the motivation for the drama of his narrative, Anderson's film is almost completely devoid of women, and the film has been marketed and discussed as a film about men. Still, the films are linked by their visual qualities and by the ways they landscape and physical space in order to tell stories of national identity and capitalistic enterprises. I argue that an analysis of landscape (and its gendered encoding) in both films reveals both the central role that women and feminine sources of production (like landscape) serve in American western films and that these sources are frequently dismissed, ignored, suppressed, and repressed, as will be seen in my analysis of Anderson's film.

*There Will Be Blood*, a loose adaptation of Upton Sinclair's *Oil!*, tells the story of Daniel Plainview, an opportunistic self-proclaimed “oil man” desperately seeking wealth during the Southern Californian oil boom at the dawn of the twentieth century. It would be difficult, and perhaps even problematic, to write an analysis of *There Will Be Blood* without

situating the film within discourse on modes of production, specifically discourse on American capitalism. Almost all of the scant criticism that has been written on the film works to examine the film's relationship to discourse on capitalism on some level. In "Digging In," Maurice Yacowar describes the film as "a gothic horror of ambition" (95) and an "allegory of American capitalism" (97). As the title suggests, the film points out the horrors and the violent and competitive nature of turn-of-the-century capitalism. In this way, Anderson's film continues Upton Sinclair's critique of the capitalist enterprise in his adaptation of the novel, though Anderson eliminates much of the sympathetic attitude towards socialism and unionization found in Sinclair's text. In this essay, though, I would like to argue that Anderson's film should also be situated within discourse on landscape (especially landscape as fraught geopolitical space and as inhabited systems), gender, representations of the feminine, and discourse on the feminine modes of production. I argue that Anderson follows in a tradition of discourse on modes of production that looks at the capitalist enterprise (and the capitalist enterprise in the American new west, specifically) as an almost completely masculine enterprise, suppressing the productive power of feminine figures and erasing the narratives of feminine experiences in such systems. Such suppression seems to suggest that narratives about capitalism can be thought of as narratives about male experience. It is this suppression of feminine productive power and the significance of that suppression that I wish to interrogate in this essay. *There Will Be Blood* is an interesting text to examine because the suppression of feminine sources of production occurs on multiple levels: such suppression is found in Anderson's extradiegetic construction of the film as an artifact, and this suppression is also present within the diegetic space of Anderson's film. In the face of this suppression

and erasure of women and feminine sources of production, this essay also seeks to examine the latent presence of women and feminine sources of production in the film.

My argument that there is a tendency to fail to come to terms with the feminine experience in critical discourse is not unique or new. Feminist theorists have worked hard to point out gaps in theoretical thinking and at times to fill in such gaps and supplement incomplete readings by adding a feminine perspective or to uncover the role of the feminine in existing critical texts, and as with my examination of *The Searchers*, it is helpful to turn to Spivak. In “Feminism and Critical Theory,” Spivak examines the way that Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Jacques Derrida address (or often fail to address) feminine figures in their work. Discussing the Marxist theory of production, Spivak argues that the “situation of the woman’s product, the child...is incomplete [within Marx’s theory of production]” and that “the possession of a tangible place of production in the womb situates the woman as an agent in any theory of production” (122). Here, Spivak notes Marx’s failure to situate and examine the productive potential of women and the way that women have the ability to act as agents of production within systems of production. Spivak’s suggestion of agency is key in this quotation. By speaking of the agency that women have as laborers in modes of production, Spivak indicates the power of the laborer and the power of feminine sources of production. Spivak is careful with her words in her response to Marx. Spivak does not argue that Marx’s theory of production is somehow wrong but rather that Marx’s theory is “incomplete” “because one fundamental human relationship to a product and labor is not taken into account” (122). Spivak complicates Marx’s theory by exposing and highlighting a unique relationship between product and labor that Marx does not acknowledge. In this

“unique relationship,” the feminine figure produces a product which becomes part of a labor force. There is a merging of product and laborer at this moment. However, as Spivak explains, this unique relationship is not taken into account. Articulation of this relationship is missing from Marx’s work on systems of production and her essay seeks to supplement his reading, rather than to dismiss it.

Spivak doesn’t speculate as to why Marx fails to take this “unique relationship” into account, but I think that Marx himself may reveal how this suppression of the feminine occurs in discourse on modes of production (including his own work on the subject) and why such a relationship isn’t examined in depth in the majority of Marxist discourse. In “The Alienation of Labor,” Marx argues that “the laborer becomes a cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates” (401). Marx goes on to say that “[t]he realization of labor appears in political economy as the ‘making unreal,’ or loss of reality of the laborer” (401). For Marx, there is almost a forgetting of the laborer as the product becomes the focus of the system of production. Marx himself seems to fall victim to this tendency in his forgetting of the feminine figure as a laborer, as a central element in the system of production. This tendency toward “making unreal” the laborer is perhaps so insidious that it is even missed by critics such as Marx himself. Though feminine figures labor and produce offspring—products that become future laborers—the significance of these feminine figures is almost forgotten because of the fact that the feminine figures are laborers. These laborers are not the product that is fetishized, and thus, are made unreal; they are forgotten. In this way, Marx’s theory of the alienation of labor explains why Marx fails to situate women as an agent in systems of production.

The multiple significations of the word “labor” are also telling here and throughout Marxist discourse that is presented in English. Though, as Spivak has pointed out, Marx fails to situate feminine productive potential, the use of the word “labor” in the English translations of his text continually calls the feminine to mind for readers on some level. The word “labor,” because it also serves a signifier of the process of birthing, is a constant reminder of the involvement of a feminine presence in systems of production. At the same time that Marx fails to grapple with the role of the feminine in his discussion of labor, it is always present in the language of Marxist discourse that is translated into the English language. Because of this linguistic connection between “labor” and the feminine, the productive quality of feminine figures is a latent idea that runs throughout the discourse. As Spivak argues, though, the complex and unique relationship between female productive power and the labor force as a product of that productive power is not *specifically* addressed in Marx’s theory of production in any manifest way, a fault that she seeks to remedy in her essay.

*There Will Be Blood* continues a tradition of suppressing the feminine in discourse on capitalism. The viewer of the film sees an absence of relationships between feminine figures and labor forces enacted in Anderson’s *There Will Be Blood*, but as with Marx’s texts, there is a latent feminine presence that exists under the surface throughout Anderson’s film. There are only two speaking female characters in the entire film and neither of these figures is developed as a complex character in any sort of way. Their presence is incidental and these characters do not affect narrative trajectory. The absence of women in Anderson’s film is a conspicuous absence, and it is surely one that would have made the film a difficult sell to

producers, a conspicuous absence that would have economic consequences for Anderson. *There Will Be Blood* is very much a narrative about men, and these men are almost always isolated from feminine figures. In “Black Gold,” Nick James argues that “the lack of interest in women” found in *There Will Be Blood* situates the film as part of what he calls an “epic neo-1970s American cinema” (31). James identifies *No Country for Old Men* in a similar way. Such films tend to be hypermasculinized narratives involving action, violence, and do not rely heavily on female characters. In “‘How Big Is Your Steeple?’: An Interview with Paul Thomas Anderson,” Ben Walters asks Anderson why the film is such a male-focused narrative. Anderson answers, explaining that other than the “whores in the saloons” there were not women present near the oil fields (33). Anderson goes on to say that because there is such an intense narrative between the male figures that “you don’t need women” (33). Anderson’s words here are so striking and incredibly problematic here. Anderson’s oversimplification fails to acknowledge that the narrative is completely contingent on feminine sources. Whether or not there are women present within the diegetic space, it is important to acknowledge that the *reason* many of the men were working in these oil fields was to support families. In many ways, like with *The Searchers*, absent feminine presences create the motivation for Anderson’s film. It is also problematic to ignore the psychological impact that being apart from women who were romantic and sexual partners to these workers would have on the men working in the oil fields. Whether or not the figures are physically present, they are needed to help construct the psyches of the men within the film. Moreover, on the most fundamental level, mother figures are required in order to have the male figures that dominate the film’s narrative. In this interview, Anderson too hastily dismisses the

importance of women to his narrative, and his dismissal makes it all the more important to examine the way that Anderson's film fits into discourse on the feminine and capitalist narratives.

Though I argue that there is a latent feminine presence that exists within Anderson's film, one of the most striking features for the viewer is the physical absence of feminine and motherly figures in the film. In the narrative, there is only vague hinting about the protagonist, Daniel Plainview's, mother, and he does not articulate any sort of serious attachment to her. In a scene where Plainview is thinking about his past, he pulls out a picture of himself as a child. It is significant that the portrait he has is not a portrait of his mother or of his family, as is often found in similar scenes in other films. Instead, by showing a representation of Plainview alone, the viewer sees Plainview as a character without a past and without context. In doing this, the viewer's belief that Plainview originates from an unspecified source is allowed to continue. This scene creates the illusion of an isolation from the mother figure and in a way validates Anderson's mistaken assertion that women are "not needed." This scene also, perhaps unwittingly, works to reiterate the popular American meta-narratives of white male self reliance and individualism, two narratives both intimately related to the meta-narrative of capitalism. When Plainview looks back at his past, he doesn't see others who have helped make and shape him. Rather, he finds an earlier version of himself. In this way, Plainview is a "self-made man," a man without a definable source or origin.

Similarly, Plainview's son, H.W., has no real origin that is accessible to the viewer of the film. H.W. is an orphan, and the viewer is lead to assume that he is actually the son of

another man that Plainview worked with at an earlier point in his career. The viewer of the film is first introduced to H.W. as an infant being raised by his unnamed father, a man who dies while filling buckets of oil at the bottom an oil shaft when a piece of equipment accidentally falls down the shaft, crushing his skull. After the death of the boy's father, Plainview takes over his care, and the viewer is lead to believe that H.W. grew up in the camps around the oil derricks, though the viewer never sees this because of unaccounted for time gaps in the film time. Nothing is ever revealed about H.W.'s mother, and the viewer is provided with no explanation of how Plainview or the boy's actual father managed to care for and/or feed the child while drilling for oil in the hot sun in the middle of the California desert, a vocation that is not conducive to raising an infant. The realism of this part of the narrative is questionable, but the symbolic significance of a male child being raised by men is important. Here, again, the feminine source is suppressed and is never revealed to the viewer of the film. The film seems to suggest that once in the world, children no longer need a maternal source, and the viewer sees this in H.W.'s narrative. The message of H.W.'s narrative echoes Anderson's sentiment that "you don't need women." Again, there is a narrative of self-reliance and individualism. The gap between H.W.'s infancy and his preteen years is not provided for the audience either. This missing time furthers the idea that past and history have little importance within the capitalist system. H.W. grows up and works with Plainview in the oil business. His background is never revealed for the viewer. The original laborer which produced H.W. as a product is made "unreal" because of the time and the space that is put between her and H.W. It is as if H.W. never had a mother.

Despite this lack of feminine/motherly figures found in the narrative, Plainview speaks often about how he is a “family man,” and this sort of rhetoric is essential to his success in convincing land owners to let him drill for oil on their property. It is interesting that the representations of “family” within the diegetic space of Anderson’s film are depictions of family without maternal presences and without maternal/feminine intervention. Even though a rhetoric about family runs throughout the narrative, it seems that the only potential value for family seen in the film’s narrative is to bring economic benefit, to facilitate one being successful within the capitalist system. Though it initially appears that Plainview cares very deeply for his adopted son H.W., it quickly becomes apparent to the viewer that H.W.’s main purpose in the film is to be *used* as a sort of marketing gimmick that Plainview can employ to help guarantee a lease on land to drill on. In this way, H.W. becomes very much a useful commodity, a type of product that Plainview can put to use, and as Marx has argued, the fetishization of the product leads to a forgetting of the laborer that produced the product. In the speeches that Plainview gives to land owners, he always highlights the fact that he is a “family man” and that his business is a “family enterprise.” After making these claims, Plainview showcases H.W., pointing him out to the people he is trying to buy a lease from. In the capitalist system found in the film, the family unit and the metaphor of “family” become commodities, metaphors that can be marketed in order to guarantee profit. The product of family is one that is typically conceived of as being created by feminine sources, and in accordance with Marx’s theory of alienation, the feminine source as laborer is forgotten as the product becomes the emphasized and fetishized. When H.W. is injured in a drilling accident, his use value dissolves and Plainview sends him away; H.W. ceases to be a

marketable tool. It is vital to the film's narrative that Plainview not have a family that is more than a marketing tool. Were this to occur, it would danger Plainview's narrative of individualism and self-reliance, making it significantly more difficult to excel in the capitalist system that Anderson's film explores.

In the diegetic space of Anderson's film, there is an entire narrative about labor forces and the harsh reality of working in the oil fields at the beginning of the twentieth century, but, as I have argued, the source of the labor force in the film is never explored. The main characters and the workers in the film are without families: mothers, wives, and children are not even referred to. The characters (and the narrative itself) are without context; neither is situated because the film does not give the viewer any sense of an origin. The film is postmodern in its lack of exposition. The characters within the narrative are without history, without a source. The way the film opens cements this dynamic early on. After the title, the film opens with the sound of dissonant string instruments. This dissonant hum crescendos, and at the climax of the crescendo, there is a reverse fade which reveals a truly breathtaking long shot of bare desert hills in perfect focus. This stark image accompanied with the dissonant music is a rather disorienting way to begin the film. Anderson does not provide the viewer with any idea of where this setting is or the date that the events are taking place. As the music wanes, the image cuts to a man swinging his pick inside a dark, enclosed space, a space that appears to be a mineshaft. This is the viewer's first introduction to Daniel Plainview. A series of close-ups on Plainview show him sharpening his pick, sorting through rocks, picking at the walls of the mineshaft. There is a cut to a view of Plainview climbing out of the mineshaft towards a light, which is followed by a cut to a medium shot of

Plainview huddled next to a fire for warmth. The frequency of the cuts and the way that the editing places Plainview at a different location after every cut makes it difficult for the viewer to determine the amount of time that has passed and to establish any sort of progression. These gaps are disorienting. As Plainview sits huddled next to the fire, he is alone and the background behind him is out of focus. The lack of focus in his physical background accentuates the figurative lack of situation that is provided for the view. It is at this moment that the viewer is finally given some sort of context. A piece of paratextual material, the date, "1898," is given to the audience in the form of a subtitle. This is the only information the viewer has to situate what is occurring in the sequence. The location of the narrative is still not revealed to the viewer, and Plainview's name has not even been disclosed. This avoidance of information that is typically provided for the viewer in the exposition of a narrative is interesting and important. It works to further illustrate the separateness of Plainview and the other characters in the narrative. Their context are seemingly unimportant because the film is such a narrative about the present, likely because capitalism is such a narrative of the present. Anderson's reliance on external focalization throughout the entire film prevents the viewer from identifying with Plainview in any way. Very little suture occurs. The viewer does not see through Plainview's eyes; instead, the viewer watches him. Again, it prevents the viewer from locating any sort of origin, and it also furthers that narrative of self-reliance and an individualism that is divorced from the influence of others.

In his essay "Black Gold," Nick James examines how the viewer is first introduced to the character of Daniel Plainview. James argues that because the viewer first sees Plainview

in a location deep in the Earth picking at rocks looking for silver and then watches Plainview pull himself up out of the shaft that the viewer can see this sequence as Plainview “emerg[ing] from Hell” (31). James provides a close reading of the sequence and analyzes how the sparks that fly from Plainview’s ax and the long and arduous escape from the “pit” identifies this scene as an emergence from Hell sequence (31). This is surely an interesting reading, and it allows James to discuss the film’s somewhat “epic” and mythical trajectory. I read this first encounter with Plainview differently, though. I suggest that rather than seeing the mineshaft as hell, it can be seen as sort of a womb, a void space where life can come into being. Because the viewer first encounters Plainview in this mineshaft, it becomes Plainview’s origin, the artificial womb from which he emerges, the genesis of his and the film’s narrative. Rather than an arduous escape from Hell, as James sees this sequence, I read this sequence as a birthing scene. Though it is imperative to acknowledge that it is constructed as a birthing scene where Plainview is delivering himself, as a sort of auto-birthing scene, and indeed the film focuses on the difficulty that he faces as he climbs out of the mineshaft. This scene of selfbirthing works again to further remove the presence of the feminine and the maternal, emphasizing Plainview as not only a self-made man, but also a self-delivered man. Seeing Plainview huddled next to the fire in the fetal position wrapped in a blanket further identifies him as a newborn baby. The year 1898 becomes almost an announcement of a birth date as much as it is a method for situating the narrative for the viewer.

Though there are almost no female figures in the film, this mineshaft as womb is the first of several symbolically feminine sources that can be found throughout the film. In

“Feminism and Critical Theory,” Spivak identifies the womb as a “tangible place of production.” (122). The womb is literally the space where life is allowed to germinate, to come into existence. In *There Will Be Blood*, the mineshafts and earth that is drilled for oil both become metaphoric wombal objects, as well as literal sources of production. They are the sources of the products (the oil, silver, and other natural resources) that are exploited by the male characters in the film. And, as mentioned above, they are employed by Anderson to serve as the genesis for the Daniel Plainview. The feminine-metaphorical-coding of the earth that I am using here is certainly not new, and it is a gendering and a personification that is found in many Western and non-Western cultures. This gendering of the earth has existed for millennia and has relatively recently been picked up, reexamined, and employed by ecofeminist critics and artists over the past thirty years. In her essay “The Greening of Gaia,” Gloria Feman Orenstein examines the way that ecofeminist critics and ecofeminist artists have employed the metaphor of a feminine-gendered earth. Orenstein writes that such artists and critics have “invoked the symbol of The Great Mother, The Goddess, or Gaia in order to emphasize the interconnectedness of three levels of creation, all imaged as female outside of patriarchal civilization: cosmic creation, procreation, and artistic creation” (103). Though as critics and as Anderson himself points out *There Will Be Blood* is a masculine and male dominated narrative, the reliance on earth imagery in the film provides a feminine presence, and it is in representations of the earth in the film where the viewer sees all of these “levels of creation.” It is in the womb of the earth where the oil is allowed to germinate and come into being, it is from the earth that Plainview first emerges in the film, and the artistic success of Anderson’s film and the film’s narrative is predicated on the feminine typed earth in the

film. Much of the *There Will Be Blood*'s acclaim is based on the cinematography and the way that Anderson uses landscape and the physical spaces of the diegesis to provide an emotional resonance. In her book on landscape, gender, and art, *As Eve Said to the Serpent*, Rebecca Solnit writes that it is important to “recognize landscape not as scenery, but as the spaces and systems we inhabit, a system our own lives depend upon” (47). The livelihood of Anderson's film and the narrative it is based on are both dependent on the landscape, the feminine presence. The landscape allows the story to be told, it provides the space for the narrative, the motivation, the characters, and the source of the artistic success. All three of these levels of creation are connected and are central to the narrative.

The ecofeminist sensibility towards landscape as a source of creation and the literal conception of the womb as the physical origin of labor that Spivak discusses in “Feminism and Critical Theory” are related to the more abstract concept of *khôra*<sup>1</sup>. The concept of *khôra* is typically linked to Plato's *Timaeus*, but has since been reexamined by many theorists, notably by Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and Julia Kristeva. The link between landscape/earth and *khôra* is especially apparent because, as Derrida informs the reader in his essay on “*Khôra*” in *On the Name*, the word “*khôra*” is often translated as “‘place,’ ‘location,’ ‘region,’ [or] ‘country’” (93). The locational and geographic component of *khôra* is interesting here. It is a place where being comes into existence. Through its nature, it gives a place for something. Derrida writes that *khôra* is “more situating than situated” (92). The concept of *khôra* is often difficult to conceptualize because it is associated with lack, with absence, rather than presence, but as Derrida points out in this quotation, it is functional—it “situates.” Plato, too, speaks about *khôra* in terms of its functionality. In *Timaeus*, Plato

refers to khôra as “the receptacle” of Being and also as describes it as a “nurse” (67). Later, when discussing khôra, Plato suggests using “the metaphor of birth and compare[s] the receptacle to the mother” (69). In these descriptions, the gendering of khôra and the link between khôra and the physical space of the “womb” is apparent. Both are places of production, locations where something comes into existence. Khôra is a slippery term, though, because khôra is the location before the location. Khôra is almost always thought of as an absence, an open and empty space where Being comes into existence. Because khôra is absence, is nothingness, it is the ultimate Other. Khôra’s nonbeing is essential for being to exist. It is for this reason that Anderson’s assertion that “you don’t need women” for the narrative he created is so absurd. Anything, any representation necessitates a feminine-typed source. The physical space of the narrative, the source of the characters, the location of the oil commodity that serves as motivation, even the film that Anderson’s narrative is imprinted on<sup>2</sup>—all of these sources are that are essential to Anderson’s project have khôric qualities<sup>3</sup> and can be gendered as feminine. Khôra is almost always identified with the feminine, and Derrida even uses feminine pronouns in order to discuss the concept. The gendered notion of khôra and the conception of khôra as lack are convenient because they tie in so well with the concept of lack in psychoanalytic theory, especially with discussions on the desire for a suppression of lack. As is detailed in much psychoanalytic discourse, the concept of lack is often anxiety-provoking, and both Freud and Lacan have discussed lack and the feminine in relations to the fear of castration. Rather than a *suppression* of feminine figures in *There Will Be Blood* that Anderson speaks of in his interview, perhaps there is a *repression* of these figures in order to compensate for the fear of castration.

As much psychoanalytic theory has argued, feminine figures can create a sense of anxiety and remind masculine figures of a fear of castration. In order to compensate for the fear of castration created by feminine sources of production found in the film, various phallic apparatuses are created and employed by Anderson and Sinclair in their constructions of the narratives and by the male characters within their diegeses. It is important to note that these phallic apparatuses, these representations of phallic power are incredible volatile, and there are multiple accidents, explosions, and injuries related to these phallic apparatuses. Still, these phallic apparatuses work to erase or hide the various feminine sources of production, and they cement and highlight the incredibly masculine ethos of the film. The film is very preoccupied with the metaphor of penetration. Throughout the film, there is drilling for oil, creating pipelines, and expanding railroad service—all of these activities shown as being done by men using phallic devices (oil derricks, pipes, railroad spikes, trains, etc). In his essay “The Signification of the Phallus,” Jacques Lacan describes the phallus as a “privileged signifier” and describes how the phallus is a signifier of both power and desire, both of which are central themes in Anderson’s film (692). Gayle Rubin synthesizes Lacan’s very dense essay on the signification of phallus in “The Traffic in Women.” Rubin explains that “The phallus is...a distinctive feature differentiating ‘castrated’ and ‘noncastrated.’ The presence or absence of the phallus carries the differences between two sexual statuses, ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (191). Here, the oppositions between presence and absence, *khôra* and being, man and woman are brought sharply into focus. Rubin further explains that “[s]ince these are not equal, the phallus also carries a meaning of dominance of men over women, and may be inferred that ‘penis envy’ is a recognition thereof” (191). In a male-dominated narrative like

*There Will Be Blood*, though, is the theory of penis envy even a relevant paradigm? Rather than depictions of penis envy, it seems apparent that there is a sort of “womb envy” latent in the film’s narrative. Spivak discusses Freud’s notion of penis envy in her essay on feminism and critical theory. Spivak argues that the notion of “womb-envy” must also be made available to critics (124). She discusses how “there is a nonconfrontation of the womb as a workshop” and how the reaction to the womb as a workshop is often to “produce a surrogate penis,” to produce a phallus (124). The viewer sees this happen explicitly in *There Will Be Blood*. In order to deal with the fact that the earth as a womb is the site of productive potential, the characters in the narrative (and the writers of the narrative) construct the derricks as surrogate phalluses in order reassert the view that productivity comes from a male-typed sources. The symbolic significance of the oil derricks in the *There Will Be Blood* is especially interesting. As the characters in the film construct these large phallic objects, an illusion that the oil comes from these phallic objects is also created. The scenes of drilling for oil almost always involve close-ups of the derricks. In these sequences, the viewer watches the drill bits repeatedly thrusting in and out of the well shaft. The musical score is also telling in these sequences. These sequences typically always contain a crescendo of the music that increases in speed and intensity, climaxing with the explosive upward spray of oil. There is a parallel between the construction of these sequences and the male sexual experience. It becomes as if the oil is only brought into existence because of their drilling. Really, though, the oil comes from the earth, a body that, as noted above, is often typed as feminine in both literature and critical discourse. The oil comes from a receptacle, a wombal body, but this source is ignored. Again, in this instance the productive potential of feminine sources is

forgotten. The laborer is made unreal because the product is so emphasized and it is more closely connected to the phallic oil derricks. The incredible attention given to the male characters, their struggles, and the phallic devices they create allows the masculine figures to receive credit.

It is curious that the male response to “womb envy” in the film is in fact the same as the female reaction to penis envy that is theorized in psychoanalytic theory. Both involve the construction of a “surrogate penis,” a phallus. Perhaps this is because, as Lacan argues, the phallus is a “privileged signifier” that is evocative of power and desire. The way that feminine figures create a surrogate phallus in order to gain power and control and combat “penis envy” has been studied and written about by numerous critics. The way that men respond to “womb envy” in the same way has not been examined, though. Were such a response to be analyzed critically, theorists would have to come to terms with the incredible power feminine figures have as agents of production. Rather than dealing with such an idea that seems counterintuitive, given the volume of literature written about the lack of power of feminine figures, discourse tends to ignore and/or repress discussions of these feminine sources. Still, as is seen in Spivak’s reading of Marx and in my reading of Anderson’s film, they are always there.

The excessive amount of phallic imagery and the male dominated cast of Anderson’s film perhaps is revealing of Anderson’s misogyny and certainly highlights the lack of women and the film’s masculine ethos. These aspects of the film also, perhaps unintentionally, reveal the repression of feminine sources of production that occurs in the film. As the feminine form is repressed, her creative potential is allowed to be ignored. In this way, the film continues in

the tradition of discourse that ignores the fact that feminine sources are essential to the capitalistic and industrial processes. However, these sources are always working in these systems on some level. The creative potential of the feminine figure facilitates the creation of the workforce in the capitalist system, and as I have argued, the earth becomes a sort of feminine space, a womb where resources essential to industrialization are kept. Though the feminine form is often ignored and repressed in discourse about capitalism and industrialization, it is a central element that is always found latent in these systems.

*There Will Be Blood* has been lauded by critics for its examination of the capitalist enterprise. The Leftist sentiment in Anderson's critique of capitalist ideology at work in the United States at the turn of the century is obvious. The film certainly isn't designed to allow viewers to condone, identify with, or celebrate the characters within the film's masculinist narrative about the capitalist enterprise of oil drilling in California. Still, the film becomes problematic in the way that it types the capitalist ideology as being masculine and in the way that there is a conscious suppression and unconscious repression of feminine figures on the parts of Anderson and the characters within his narrative. What is curious about this film and about other texts is the fact that despite an intentional surface absence of feminine figures, there is always a symbolic and linguistic reminder of that presence. Readers can uncover this underlying presence in Marx's writing and viewers can locate it latent in Anderson's film. Despite this subtextual presence, the surface absence of feminine figures in the film and throughout discourse critiquing capitalism is problematic because it erases the potential agency that women and feminine sources of production have the dependency that systems of production have on feminine sources, a topic that deserves further discussion.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> There are numerous spellings of “khôra.” Julia Kristeva, for example, uses the “chora” spelling. I will use the “khôra” spelling because that is the spelling that Derrida uses in *On the Name*, and I am using his conceptualization of the term

<sup>2</sup> Film can be seen as a khôric space because it is the ‘place’ where the image is printed on. Several theorists have used the metaphor of a blank sheet of paper to illustrate the concept of khôra. Its lack of content allows for a situating of the words that will appear on it. The medium of film works in such the same way.

<sup>3</sup> Though this essay focuses on landscape in film as a visual phenomenon (which is laden with sociopolitical significance) and does not examine the auditory dimensions of the filmic medium, it is important to note that the extradiegetic soundtrack to the film can also be read as a latent feminine source within *There Will Be Blood*. Kaja Silverman has examined sound in cinema in relation to Kristeva’s conception of chora (see endnote 1) in her study of the female voice in psychoanalysis and cinema *The Acoustic Mirror* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988). Silverman interrogates Kristeva’s theorization of chora and maternal voice as a “blanket of sound” and a “sonorous envelope” and examines the ways these conceptualizations have become tropes in both critical discourses of psychoanalytic feminism and film theory (72). Silverman connects these conceptions of maternal voice to a discussion of sound in cinema. Certainly the film soundtrack is a sort of blanket of sound that envelopes the narrative, announcing the production of the narrative and its constructedness. In this way, Jonny Greenwood’s brilliant soundtrack for *There Will Be Blood* can be seen as choric in much the same way that I argue the landscape, the physical setting of the film is khôric; both are situating mechanisms, structures that contain and hold the narrative of the film and the commodities that provide the film’s drama.

### Chapter 3:

#### “Get Off My Lawn!”: Renewed Anxieties about Space, Masculinity, and National Identity in *Gran Torino*

“Oh, I’ve got one. A Mexican, a Jew, and a colored guy go into a bar. The bartender looks up and says, “Get the fuck out of here.”

-Walt Kowalski, *Gan Torino*

“You’re showing a guy from a different generation. Show the way he talks. The country has come a long way in race relations, but the pendulum swings so far back. Everyone wants to be so sensitive.”

-Clint Eastwood on *Gran Torino*

The previous two chapters focus on films that can easily be identified as westerns because of their setting and their visual and aesthetic styles. Both Ford and Anderson brilliantly use the desert landscape to tell their stories. While it could be argued that Clint Eastwood’s *Gran Torino* is not a Western, the film draws heavily on a variety of tropes most often found in the genre of the American western. *Gran Torino* is very much a film about a type of urban borderland which Eastwood represents in ways that are similar to the representations of the frontier borderland in more canonical westerns. Whether or not it is a western, it is most certainly a film about geography. As with the previous two chapters, I am interested in the ways in which physical space becomes symbolically significant and works to represent larger cultural unease about resources, gender, and race. As the title of this chapter suggests, though, more so than the previous two chapters which examine films about the *constructions* and *development* of an American mythos by looking at gender and land relations, in this chapter, I am especially interested in the way that Eastwood’s characters’ interactions with the physical space of his diegesis are connected to performances of white masculinity and

representations of a mythic American past that is constructed as *disappearing* and perhaps even *collapsing*, a collapse which the drama of the film attempts to halt.

Released in 2008, *Gran Torino* contains what Eastwood has revealed in multiple interviews to be his last performance as an actor in front of the camera. Despite the fact that Eastwood had been gradually transitioning from an onscreen presence to a figure behind the scenes of films since the late-1970s, his declaration in these interviews is interesting in the way that it reveals his changing attitude about his career and his thoughts about himself as a performer and as an incredibly important cultural figure that has had such a large presence in the American film industry. In an interview with *The Daily Telegraph*, Eastwood reflects on this decision, explaining that “You always want to quit while you are ahead... You don't want to be like a fighter who stays too long in the ring until you're not performing at your best.” Eastwood's comments about his decision highlight his awareness of his age and its connection to his career as a performer. He suggests that were he to stay in front of the camera longer he would not be able to perform to this best. Though I am often resistant to critical work which seeks to conflate filmmakers with characters within their constructed narratives, there are obvious parallels that can be made between Eastwood and the character of Walt Kowalski that he portrays in this film. Both are men that have been constructed as representative images of a type of American masculinity rooted in a specific type of relationship with physical space, and at the end of the film, both men step out of the limelight.

*Gran Torino* is in many ways about the changing landscape that Walt Kowalski lives in and about Walt's feelings of being out of touch with the world he is living in and the

people he sees populating it. This dynamic which establishes Walt as unhappy and out of touch with the world around him is developed immediately with the start of the film. The film opens with the funeral service for Walt's wife. After a high angle establishing shot of the interior of the church where the funeral is taking place, there is a cut and the viewer is able to see the various people sitting in the pews as the camera moves up the center aisle. As it reaches the front of the church, the camera begins to pan to left, focusing in on a photograph of Walt's wife in front of the coffin that contains her body. The camera continues to pan and tilts up and pushes in on Walt's face, revealing him looking out and scowling disappointedly at the people in attendance. Walt's eyes focus on something, and there is a cut to an over-the-shoulder shot revealing a group of teenagers (who will later be revealed to be Walt's grandchildren) walking up the aisle. The camera cuts again to a medium shot of Walt's face to establish a point of view shot, and then the scene progresses with cuts that alternate between Walt's point of view looking out at his grandchildren and medium shots of Walt's face which continue to reinforce the point of view and which reveal Walt's increasing annoyance at his grandchildren's performance at the funeral. He is especially annoyed at his granddaughter's exposed midriff and navel piercing and one of his grandson's lack of decorum when he repeats "spectacles, testicles, wallet, and watch" as he makes the sign of the cross before sliding into the pew, an act followed by laughter from the other children. Walt's look of disgust increases during this series of cuts between his point of view and the medium shot of his face, and his disgust is given an auditory dimension as he groans at the sight that he sees, a groan that almost becomes a sort of growl. This reaction of annoyance and disgust is not only seen by the viewer, it is also commented on by Walt's two grown sons

who voice their exasperation at their father's stern, unforgiving posturing. Walt's reaction to his grandchildren's behavior and the commentary his sons provide about his reaction highlight the fact that Walt is disconnected from the world he lives in and that he sees himself as being from an earlier time, a time that Walt would privilege and see as more respectful. Explaining how out of touch their father is, one of the sons shakes his head and asks his brother, "What do you expect? Dad's still living in the fifties." And, indeed, the film does a lot to locate Walt as someone from a different era of American history, as someone who is somehow temporally out of place. The *mise-en-scène* works to accomplish this in several ways. Throughout the film, Walt is repeatedly shown driving a 1950s Ford pickup truck, he mows his lawn with a reel mower, and the namesake of the film, Walt's Gran Torino, a car that he himself helped build (having put in the car's steering column) all work to inform the viewer that Walt is a character that should be associated with another time. The repeated references to Walt's former profession, that of a Ford employee, also works to remind the viewer of this fact. In the face of the decline of the American autoworker and very shaky ground that the American auto-industry exists on today, the repeated references to Walt's former career and the cars that symbolize it become incredibly loaded with cultural and political significance. In the film, then, Walt's Gran Torino becomes a fetishized object representing an earlier time, a successful American car industry, a different Detroit, and also an object very much representing a specific type of rugged American masculinity, a type of masculinity which Walt represents but which he does not see in any of the other male figures that surround him, and, indeed, he is repeatedly unhappy with the performances of masculinity he sees when he looks at his sons. And perhaps not surprisingly, Walt's

assessment of their masculinity is related to both the cars they drive and their employment. Whereas Walt spent his life on the line at the Ford plant, his son is a car dealer, someone not involved in the actual production of the automobile, someone who hasn't gotten his hands dirty. Not only that, his son drives a Toyota, a fact that physically upsets Walt and inspires another one of Walt's growlish groans. Such a groan is surely necessary because the Toyota logo and his son's job reflect huge shifts in the American workforce, masculine performance, and American industry. Eastwood's *Gran Torino* is in many ways a lamentation on these cultural shifts.

Because of its recent release, little critical material has been published on *Gran Torino*. Still, the little that has been produced has examined the element of loss in the film. Perhaps the most interesting and thorough examination of the film appears in Tania Modleski's article "Clint Eastwood and Male Weepies." Modleski's article works to situate the film within the genre of male melodrama and specifically within a subgenre of male melodrama which Modleski describes as "male weepies" which she describes as films about male loss. In her essay, Modleski makes use of Juliana Schiesari's theorization of melancholia which appears in *Gendering of Melancholia*, as "a term used to designate men's feelings of loss which become culturally privileged" (139). And indeed, Modleski argues that "full-blown male weepies arise at times when masculinity is in an especially acute crisis" (138). Modleski situates Eastwood's *Gran Torino* in such a location, one marked by both "feelings of loss which become culturally privileged" and "when masculinity is in an especially acute crisis." Modleski posits that "[*Gran Torino*] expresses a melancholy sense of America's economic decline, the defeat of its imperialist ventures, the waning of its influence

as a superpower, and the failure of traditional male warfare in the wake of 9/11” (138). I very much agree with Modleski’s assessment of the location of the appearance of Eastwood’s film, but in this chapter, I would like to point out that these “feelings of loss” and “expressions of melancholy” are all rooted in shifting relationships to place and space—they are feelings of loss experienced in the face of the dynamic and ever-changing nature of geography and physical space. The connection between the geographically-manifested sense of loss and its connection to a crisis of masculinity is the topic that I wish to examine here, and though broached in the scant criticism on the film, I feel that it is deserving of serious attention. Adrienne D. Davis is one of the few critics who approach this topic in her short review of the film. In her review, she argues that “this crisis of masculinity translates into a political one that threatens the values and viability of the community” (164). Davis’s careful uncovering of the crisis of masculinity in the film as one that is connected to a sense of community is important because community is a term with multiple connotations but that reflects both interpersonal interactions and also interactions with both landscape and geography. What is lost and lamented in *Gran Torino*, then, is a very specific type of geography, a mythic American landscape, one equally as mythic as the American west, an image that Eastwood brings with him to this film even though he is playing a former automotive plant man in the Midwest. What is lost is, in a sense, the metonymic connection between physical space (and objects in that physical space) and ideas of American nationalism and American masculinity.

*Gran Torino* becomes a film about Walt trying to negotiate this new landscape, this new physical place, a place that he no longer recognizes and has difficulty existing within

because he does not seem himself reflected in the people who populate it. Perhaps the most obvious way that this is established is because of the changing demographics of the neighborhood in which Walt lives. Much like Walt's unhappiness with his family members and his disconnection from the world around him is established early in the film, the shifting demography is also brought to the viewer's attention at the very start of the film. The images of Walt's wife's funeral are crosscut with images of a scene celebrating the birth of a Hmong child in the house next door to Walt's own house. Eastwood's decision to crosscut images representing the death of a white woman with images celebrating the birth of a Hmong child establishes both the fact that Walt's position as a man is changing with the death of his wife and also works to emphasize that as he is going through this transition in terms of his masculinity, his neighborhood is also experiencing a change in terms of demographics. This also works to continue the dynamic that I have described above which positions and constructs Walt as disconnected from his surroundings as somehow out of touch with the world within which he exists.

In addition to the changing demographics of the neighborhood and Walt's increasingly noticeable place as a minority figure set apart from the rest of the neighborhood, the film dedicates a lot of screen time to shots of the neighborhood which reveal the appearances of houses and their state of disrepair. Davis goes so far as to describe the appearance of the neighborhood that Eastwood constructs as a "dystopian Detroit" and points out that "[Walt's] formerly ethnically white working-class community has been hit hard by the loss of auto jobs and has deteriorated into a dingy, crime-ridden neighborhood." (165). Davis also focuses on the way that "Eastwood lends a decided racial cast to this dystopian

fear: black thugs sexually threatened Sue Lor [,Walt's neighbor,] and intimidate her hapless white male companion; a Latino gang threatens Thao [, Sue's bother,] and the Hmong gang that saves him then demands his allegiance" (165). By highlighting the dilapidation of the neighborhood's houses and physical structures as central components of the film's mise-en-scène and by connecting this dilapidation to changes in the racial demography of Walt's neighborhood, Davis begins to describe how these changes function as signifiers of the failure or evaporation of a *white* male American dream. This is especially significant given the setting of the film in Detroit, a former national symbol of the American automotive industry. Walt, then, is constructed as one of the last vestiges of a time before the dilapidation. He is almost more symbolic than constructed as a real character. A similar symbolic function is developed in the fetishization and absurd number of references to Walt's Gran Torino. The symbolically-loaded nature of the car explains why Thao's attempted theft of the automobile is so significant and why it is situated as the plot point that begins the relationship between Walt and Thao, the relationship between the two men that the entire drama of the film is built around.

Thao breaks in to steal Walt's Gran Torino as part of a gang initiation, an act which in its own way is an exchange completely centered on issues of physical space, domain, and ability to traverse geographic border crossings. Thao's task is about penetrating a physical landscape boundary. He has to cross over Walt's fence and hedge and into his garage. Waking from sleep and hearing these actions, Walt, as male protector of the home, following the conventions of the type of masculinity that he subscribes to, grabs a predictably large rifle to go investigate. While confronting Thao in the garage, Walt trips, and accidentally fires his

gun. The psychoanalytic implications of this scene are perhaps obvious. While much of the film works to establish Walt's seemingly absurd strength and power for his age, the scene can be read as evidence of slippage, as evidence of his waning masculine power and strength. Walt's ineffectual masculinity in the scene, the misfiring of the gun, can be read as a phallic misfiring. Beyond the surface Freudian reading of the scene, though, Walt's literal and metaphoric slippage with his misfiring is related to an inability to navigate his current surroundings. He trips and stumbles in this scene. His inability to navigate the larger landscape and geography of the narrative can be seen in the microcosm that is this individual scene, and it is an inability that is given a bodily dimension in his tripping. Walt's inability to navigate the physical terrain of the scene is connected to his inability to maintain proper masculine behavior. The connection between his lack of bodily control and his desire to maintain social control becomes a repeated theme in the entire film. Walt's physical body has been weakened by age, and this is evidenced by his incredibly hoarse voice, his diminished strength (which the viewer sees when he and Thao move a freezer from Walt's basement) and in the blood he coughs up (evidencing the cancer that is undoubtedly taking Walt's life). The dilapidation of Walt's body can then be paralleled with the dilapidation of the buildings in his neighborhood and a deteriorating masculinity. Despite the way that the film parallels the deterioration of Walt's neighborhood with his increasingly failing body and last efforts to assert both his bodiliness and his masculinity, the film valorizes Walt's performance of a specific and temporarily-situated type of white masculinity. Even his Hmong neighbors seem impressed with his performance of masculinity and his neighbors hope he will be able to teach some of this form of masculinity to Thao.

Thao's punishment to work off his debt with Walt is in many ways an exercise in socialization. It is very much about imparting a specific form of masculinity. Davis examines the way that Walt and Thao's interactions with each other involve dissemination of the conventions of form of rugged American masculinity. Davis writes that the narrative of *Gran Torino* involves Walt "bestowing on the somewhat directionless the secrets of American masculinity: how to get a job and girls" (163). The secrets of American masculinity that Walt passes down are a *functional* masculinity, and indeed Davis picks up on this too, arguing that Walt "passes on to Thao the 'tools' of healthy American masculinity" (165, my emphasis). By highlighting the literal and metaphoric meaning of "tools," Davis emphasizes this functional masculinity that Walt imparts; it is a specific form of masculine performance, a performance grounded in the space of the community. Walt not only teaches Thao "how to become a man"; he does this by teaching Thao a very specific attitude toward physical objects and space. Walt's instruction involves teaching Thao how to perform specific tasks. He coaches Thao through the repair of several of the houses and how to wash and care for a car, to garden and take care of a lawn, how to work construction, and build and repair various appliances and household problems. In this way, the type of masculinity Walt teaches Thao is deeply rooted in relationship to geography and physical reality. The properly functioning masculinity that Walt teaches Thao is one in which the male figure protects and maintains physical spaces and physical objects.

In this way, Walt's repeated demand that individuals "get off of his lawn" is related to both Walt's desire to maintain and protect physical space and to maintain a specific type of masculinity, a type of masculinity that he then teaches Thao, and this type of masculinity is

concerned with interactions with landscape, environment, and geography. Walt's repeated demand from his porch is also related to the protection of white middle class signifiers of success (manicured and well kept lawn, shutters, gardens, and cars). All these interactions with physical objects in space and constructions and shaping of the physical environment function as evidence of wealth, stamina, and care—evidence of the American dream that Walt is, in many ways lamenting. This command that Walt issues at multiple points in the film also echoes the common line “get off my land” or “get off my property” that is a staple line in the American western genre. These lines are surely about protecting physical space, but they are also constructed as being concerned with the protection of resources and with ideas of stability, safety, and strength. The command is structured to remove threats from others and to establish the stability and dominance of existing structures. Francesca Tognetti examines the significance of Walt's continued defense of his property in her very short essay on the film. Tognetti argues that “Walt defends his property—his home, but maybe also his homeland—as it would be besieged by the others. He feels like a soldier, he refers to his neighbourhood as a warzone where two enemies...peer at each other from identity windows thinking the same thing: why do *they* come here? Why do *they* remain?” (379) Tognetti's suggestion that Walt's home serves as a sort of metonymy for a larger homeland, for America, is very important. In this way, Walt is defending both his personal space (in accordance with the specific type of masculinity he represents) and he is defending a mythic America. He is defending a settlement in the midst of a dangerous frontier. Tognetti continues, suggesting that “the symbolic white fence [surrounding Walt's lawn] represents an inviolable boundary dividing Walt's property from the enemies, the foreign and the

neighbours” (379). The fixation on land and geographic space found in Eastwood’s film is certainly the main reason that I chose to examine it in this study, and it is significant to note the way that the concern about land and the land’s metonymic connection to America, settlement, and security are worked out through violence and land disputes in much the same way that occurs in many of the canonized western films.

The anxiety about (and penetration of) established boundaries is experienced not only in terms of the physical space, but this anxiety is also *embodied* at very important moments of the film’s narrative. As I have discussed above, Walt’s masculinity in addition to his sense of community security are repeatedly threatened by violations of the physical body, especially Walt’s coughing up of blood. Perhaps the most significant violation of the personal body, though, occurs with the rape of Thao’s sister Sue. This moment in the plot, where a physical body has been violated, can very much be read as a sort of violation of physical space, too; the rape represents Walt’s inability to protect the geographic space of his community and the gangs’ ability to encroach on the borders and boundaries that Walt has been busy erecting. The way that bodily violations become conflated with physical geographic border violations has been the subject of a great deal of critical work in literary studies, sociology, and anthropology. Mary Douglas’s work on the relationship between bodily control and social control is perhaps most helpful and revealing for understanding the ways that Sue’s rape is representative of larger social and geographic border crossing. Douglas has famously theorized in her essay “Two Bodies” that “if there is no concern to preserve social boundaries, [one] would not expect to find concern with bodily boundaries” (79). In her work, Douglas deftly links anxieties about social control and border security to

concerns about bodily boundaries. The rape of Sue signals the conflation of the social and the bodily in *Gran Torino*. Sue's rape represents Walt's lack of control over the social order, his inability to maintain established protective borders in the community, and his inability to protect those that he realizes he loves. Walt's reaction to this trauma is to take it out on the physical space of his home. He punches through several kitchen cabinets and goes on a destructive rampage within his home. Perhaps these actions are designed to manifest the psychic disorder that he is feeling, to cause disorder to the physical spaces to make mirror the disordering of the more symbolic order of which he is a part.

This event, the rape of Sue, serves as the impetus for Walt to seek revenge on the Hmong gang that raped and beat her and that has been harassing Thao and his neighborhood. This event is also that force that sets into motion Walt's choices that lead to his eventual death. The way that Sue's rape serves is an impetus for Walt's actions which lead the film's narrative completion echoes that concerns for female sexual purity that serve as the driving force for the narrative of John Ford's film *The Searchers*. Ethan's task to reconcile his fears about Debbie's potential impurity and the harsh life of a land inhabited by both settlers and Indians in many ways mirrors Walt's narrative about a man avenging the sexual violation of woman in a new type of urban borderland. In both films, violation of the physical body becomes representative of larger social violations. The threat to the physical body is constructed as a threat to the social body, to the body politic. The two men work to attempt to preserve both of these structures, but it seems that at the end of their narratives, each loses one.

Neither Ethan nor Walt end up as heroes at the end of their narratives. Ethan is still disconnected from the family that he reunited—not really a part of the social order he was theoretically working to protect and preserve, and there is something dubious about the way the narrative ends that begs the question of whether the violence he perpetrated was justified. Walt, it could perhaps be argued, achieves a type of social integration at the end of the film, but he does so in his death, in the ultimate violation of his physical body. Such an ending may seem to critique the type of masculinity that Walt represented throughout the majority of the narrative, but his glamorized death challenges such a reading. By ending the film with Walt's death and by closing the film with Walt lying on the ground in a Christ-like position, there is both a resurrection and a valorization of the specific form of American masculinity and frontier justice that Walt represents.

Throughout *Gran Torino*, multiple moments appear as critiques and challenges to the hypermasculine and violent (and often racist) hero, and indeed there seems to be a level of progressiveness to Eastwood's ending the film in an act of martyrdom and his embrace of a multicultural community. Still, I would argue that these critiques and this too-easy message of multiculturalism function more to inflate the value of an already-existing type of white masculinity, deepening it perhaps, but hardly challenging it. The multicultural Others which body the diegesis of Eastwood's film are more tools to facilitate the development of the white male hero than anything else. As Modleski carefully and smartly points out in her essay, the success of Eastwood's film and Walt's narrative evolution is completely dependent on capitalizing on disempowered Others (in this case his Hmong) neighbors. Again drawing from Schiesari, Modleski points out that *Gran Torino* exists within a particular vein of

melodrama which “has historically been a culturally privileged form of ethos that elevates not only men’s sense of their own losses but also losses they appropriate from disempowered groups” (140). Modleski points to Eastwood’s other film *Million Dollar Baby* as an excellent example of this and explains how “losses suffered by the disempowered serve the white man with whom we [the viewer] come to sympathize most strongly” (140). In this way, Eastwood uses the changing geography of Detroit to his advantage. He ends up using Walt’s Hmong immigrant neighbors as narratological tools in order to tell the story and valorize the actions of a specific white male.

It is particularly interesting how Walt’s violent actions become valorized almost more so than critiqued by the end of the film. Modleski, too, points this out, arguing that though “Eastwood appears in [his recent films] to be interrogating some of [the] values on which his persona has depends...the very engagement with issues related to male heroism, violence, and revenge only serves further to exalt the persona” (143). The narrative of Eastwood’s film works to resurrect the type of hero that made Eastwood famous, and with it, Eastwood’s film works to resurrect an entire mythos of American masculinity, frontier life, and orientations toward physical space. Eastwood’s film becomes in a sense a narrative about a man’s desire to transcend space, which Eastwood perhaps does with Walt’s death, and a desire to reinstate an older cultural narrative in the physical world of the film’s diegesis, to reassert traditional images of Americana and masculinity which the viewer is left with at the end of the film with Thao driving Eastwood’s classic American automobile, an ending that leaves the viewer with a specific image of American masculinity, one rooted in interaction with space.

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