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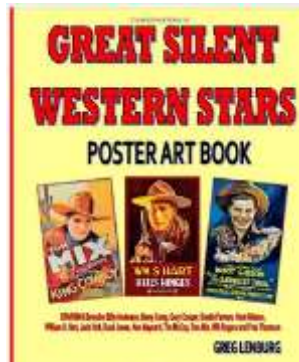
Wednesday, June 1, 2016

The Western's "Forgotten People" by Chon A. Noriega

The ongoing battle to influence media and the motion picture industry to project a more positive attitude about Latinos (especially for Mexicans and Mexican Americans) still lingers on. For that matter, any headway that was made several decades past is appearing to be going backwards. Yet, many dedicated (Latino) advocates in the industry and within our Hallowed Halls of Ivy are still in the trenches (with the quill in hand rather than a six-shooter) and are having a great impact on the masses. Chon Noriega, Director of UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC) ranks among one of our most distinguished national leaders in that effort. We are proud and honored to present his article concerning this subject matter, which appeared in *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 34:1 Spring 2009. Reprinted with permission. (Photos and links provided by Joe Ortiz)



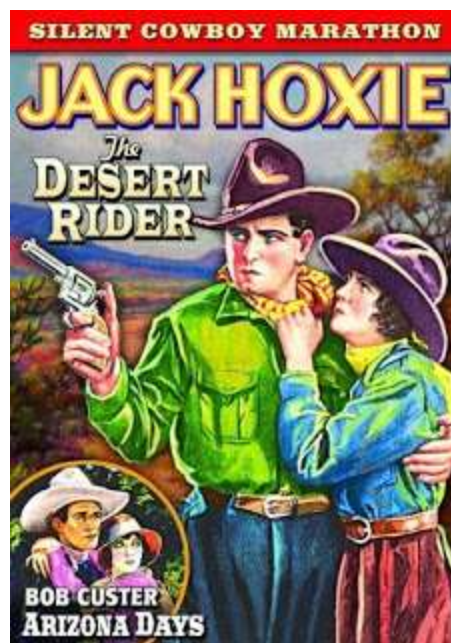
The phrase "Forgotten People" in my title refers to George I. Sánchez's 1940 book, *The Forgotten People: A Study of New Mexicans*, in which he concludes, "In the march of imperialism a people were forgotten, cast aside as the byproduct of territorial aggrandizement." If anything, my commentary looks back to the period that produced Sánchez and the Mexican American generation, with their simultaneous emphasis on "first-class citizenship" and on Mexican cultural resistance, affirmation, and maintenance within the United States. I do so in part because I feel the need to return to the terms of their engagement with U.S. culture and politics.



I want to examine a “moment” in U.S. cinema as it relates to the discourse on Mexican American citizenship: the silent Western, as it developed from about 1908 to the mid-1920s. Needless to say, there has been an ongoing popular and critical fascination with the Western, although the focus often remains on European American artists and writers “looking West,” even in those books or exhibitions that undertake an act of historical revisionism. Whether they praise or attack the “West,” these texts nonetheless reaffirm it as a privileged way of looking. When Chicano and Indian perspectives are included, as in *The West of the Imagination* (Goetzmann and Goetzmann 1986), they often appear in an addendum or a penultimate chapter, which implies that these perspectives are a recent phenomenon that does not complicate the linear genealogy of the “West.” In other words, these texts are willing to concede the present to multiculturalism or diversity so long as the past remains a singular vision of a purer time, when men were men, women were women, and both were “white.”



There is another approach that would start with the “greaser” subgenre, which can be framed between D. W. Griffith’s *The Greaser’s Gauntlet* (1908) and Larry Semon’s *Guns and Greasers* (1918). In these films the [greaser](#) character is central to the narrative, which deals either with the Mexican Revolution or with race relations in the Southwest. For a number of reasons, subsequent Westerns are rarely about greasers, but the greaser character—no matter how minor—continues to play a significant role in framing the narrative.



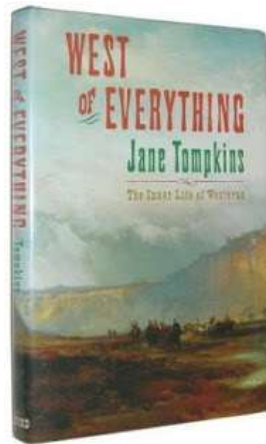
These films, for the most part one- and two-reel fictional narratives, represent an obvious (if underappreciated) subgenre of the Western. Perhaps the overt racism of these films leads scholars to dismiss them out of hand. For example, in its historical overview, *The BFI Companion to the Western* (Buscombe 1988) identifies thirty-seven films between 1908 and 1916 with *Mexican* as the first word in the title, clearly a sign that the total number of films that focus on Mexican and Mexican American characters is much larger. But the significance of these texts is reduced to the “unflattering terms” of their character designation and representation, with the title of Griffith’s *Greaser’s Gauntlet* cited as a self-explanatory example.



Part of the problem seems to be that the scholarship on the Western takes the genre’s archetypes at face value, with the “individual” situated both against and between “society” and “nature.” These three points are mapped onto the genre’s essential characters: the cowboy (individual), the heroine (society), and the Indian (nature). Thus, *The BFI Companion to the Western* includes separate four-page encyclopedia entries for “Cowboy,” “Indians/Native Americans,” and “Women,” but not a single entry for “Mexicans” or “Mexican Americans,” let alone “Greasers.” There is even a four-page entry for “Blacks.” Rather than just count beans (or beaners), I want to stress something even more important: it is not a matter of inclusion or exclusion per se, but of the discursive categories through which one must look for the Mexican American in the scholarship on the Western.



In other words, à la Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), I am arguing that fictional narratives cannot escape the prevailing social contradictions of their time and place, but will instead attempt to displace them onto a symbolic register and thereby resolve them. Mexican Americans become Mexicans and Mexicans become Mexico and Mexico becomes Landscape. In a discursive strategy central to Manifest Destiny itself, Mexicans and Mexican Americans are elided through an emphasis on geopolitical space. What I want to emphasize about the Western is that academic scholarship reproduces the very same terms of this displacement. In other words, in *The BFI Companion to the Western*, there are four-page entries on “Mexico” and “Landscape,” while the scant two-paragraph entry on ["Manifest Destiny"](#) suggests, like the concept itself, that expansion was a matter of land acquisition and not also population displacement, economic subjugation, and political disfranchisement.



At an even greater extreme, Jane Tompkins, in her introduction to *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (1992, 7–9), undertakes a tortuous and “tearful” rationalization of her failure to consider the representation of “Indians” in her book. In an expedient return to Lukacian realism, she argues that her oversight is, in fact, justified since there are no “real” or “fully realized” Indian characters in the Western. Ironically, this also turns out to be her point about the characters that she does look at: the cowboy and the heroine. In fact, the genre becomes defined by its willful inability to construct “real” or “fully realized” characters. But in any case, despite her acknowledged oversights, Tompkins remains altogether oblivious to the “Mexicans” who populate the Western and who make two brief appearances in her book. In this manner, Tompkins makes a forceful argument for the centrality of gender (and women) within the Western by ignoring the complicating presence of race altogether. So, too, does Lee Clark Mitchell in *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (1996), where he argues that the Western “engages immediately pressing issues” while it has also “fretted over the construction of masculinity.”

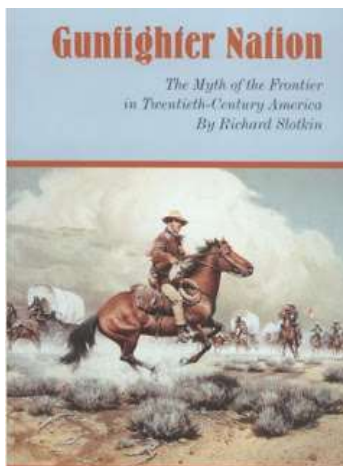


In no instance, however, do these issues include Mexico, Mexicans, or Mexican Americans, so that Mitchell's fretting over masculinity essentially equates the "lone man packing a gun" with the nation. Both the man and the nation are presumed to be white in a genre with "purity of form" that stands as "America's most distinctive narrative" (3, 264).

I want to suggest another approach to the Western, one in which the usual focus on space—the West—is understood as an instance of state formation rather than of individual and social formation within discourses of freedom, property, rights, and marriage. In other words, I want to introduce citizenship as the genre's central dilemma. It is a dilemma that manifests itself as a question about geopolitical space and not about the misleading dichotomy of "individual and society" versus "landscape and town"—which is itself placed in opposition to an external threat.



Foregrounding geopolitical space does more than place national boundaries within a historical perspective wherein we acknowledge that the Southwest used to be the northern half of Mexico—although, in the scheme of things, that's not a bad place to end up. Rather, it understands the time-and-space of the "Hollywood" Western as the textual displacement of another history: the hundred-year struggle between two cultural systems over the definition and use of the same territories. This included issues of language and translation, communal versus individualistic *legal* definitions of land ownership, and political representation—all of which, by the way, continue to be sites of struggle. Between 1830 and 1930—what Southwest historiography identifies as the Border Conflict period, and what Américo Paredes (1958) calls the Corrido or Border Ballad Century—European Americans consolidated economic and political control over the conquered Southwest territories. In the foundational fictions that secured these new territories to the "imagined community" of the nation-state, the greaser emerged as what Blaine Lamb (1975) calls the "convenient villain" of the discourse on the Southwest, featured in newspaper coverage, dime novels, popular songs, theater, historical treatises, official discourse, and, later, silent films.



If we follow this line of argument, we end up with a much different view of the Western than that promoted in the “seminal” critical works of Andre Bazin (1955), Robert Warshaw (1954), Jim Kitses (1969), Will Wright (1975), and John Cawelti (1971)—all written before 1975. It is a view more in line with Richard Slotkin’s perspective in *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (1992) and a brief but suggestive section on the Western as paradigm in Ella Shohat and Robert Stam’s *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (1994). In different ways, both books identify the Western with an imperial imaginary, although for Slotkin the “Mexico Western” becomes almost entirely allegorical, unable to speak back to U.S.-Mexico relations, Mexican migration, or the emergence of a racialized labor market in the U.S. Southwest.



What is of immediate concern, however, is that genre criticism tends to be based on classic sound cinema. That means that the Western is defined as a historical genre—that is to say, as a genre that deals with the past, whether it does so in realist, archetypal, or symbolic terms. By the 1930s, when the conversion to sound was nearly complete and the major studios were consolidating their power, the “West” was a part of the American past. In looking to the silent Western, however, we find more than the disparate elements that will later cohere into a classic sound narrative. By 1922, when *Big Stakes* was produced, the silent feature-length Western had become a complex and—at times—self-reflexive genre. But there remains one crucial difference between the silent and the sound Western, one that has nothing to do with sound technology or narrative development. Whereas the sound Western functions, for the

most part, as a historical genre, the silent Western dealt with contemporary events and settings. To my knowledge this distinction has never been made, and yet the reason for it is quite simple: silent cinema emerges within the latter third of the Border Conflict era.



In other words, if we define the Western genre according to its time frame, then it must be based on all Westerns, not just those produced in the last eighty years. And when we do that, we end up with a historiographic—rather than a thematic—period for the “West,” one that brings Mexico and Mexican Americans into the picture. If we look at the development of the Western from the silent period, we see that the genre actually emerges in two distinct forms, depending on whether its depiction of “Mexicans” is based in the past or the present.



An early subgenre of the silent Western focused on “the grandee of the Spanish haciendas.” Here the emphasis is on romantic figures of “old” California, New Mexico, and Texas. The literary basis is Helen Hunt Jackson’s highly popular novel *Ramona* (1884), which can be taken as a “foundational fiction” for the U.S. Southwest, similar in scope and objective to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 classic *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Noriega 1996). But while Jackson’s novel is careful to denote its characters’ Mexican origins, the film adaptations—four between 1910 and 1936—mark a crucial shift in which the characters were rewritten as “Spanish.” In this manner, films from *Ramona* (1910) to *Duel in the Sun* (1946), which center on the intermarriage of a Spanish creole and an Indian, can be said to “deconstruct” the historical

Mexican and Mexican American subject, bifurcating a mestizo or mixed-race identity into its constituent parts. This shift occurred in the wake of actions by the U.S. Court of Land Claims, which, between 1891 and 1904, dispossessed Mexican Americans from the majority of the land holdings nominally guaranteed them by the [Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo](#).



As noted earlier, another important sub genre is “the greaser of the contemporary Southwest.” Whether male or female, the greaser constituted a sexual threat to the European American home and public sphere. While figured in violent sexual terms, the greaser had tellingly economic origins. The term, in fact, originated in the mid-nineteenth century in reference to workers on the West Coast who loaded hides onto ships that were headed to New England tanneries. The workers, mostly Mexican Americans, would get so much tallow on themselves that they were called “greasers,” which—through the conflation of race and class—acquired a connotation of slipperiness or untrustworthiness. In costume and occupation, the silent-film greaser suggested an unskilled labor pool that posed social and sexual problems insofar as it remained, then as now, *in situ*.

During the brief period of the greaser film subgenre, the basic character types of greaser and grandee became a mediation point for cinematic and extracinemantic exigencies, which provided the “raw materials” and parameters for the narrative structure. These exigencies included:

1. A transformation in production methods, narrative form, and performance style. In general, as Janet Staiger and Charles Musser have noted, the increase in fiction film production (beginning in mid-1904) fostered an increase in the division of labor within a vertical, hierarchical organization. Between 1908 and 1912, performance style shifted from histrionic to verisimilar codes. As Roberta Pearson (1992) explains, histrionic refers to a “theatrical event” and is, therefore, reflexive; verisimilar refers to the “outside” world and is realist. The shift between these two codes coincides with the development of film narrative and becomes an important aspect of how the greaser subgenre “resolves” social contradictions.



2. The relocation of the film industry to Hollywood, which by 1915 accounted for an estimated 15,000 workers and over 60 percent of U.S. film production. Beginning in 1907, studios established director-units in the “real West.” These included the units of director-stars Bronco Billy Anderson of Essanay West in San Francisco (after various travels throughout the Southwest) and Romaine Fielding of Lubin Company West in Arizona and New Mexico.

3. The “closing” of the frontier in 1890, and the cultural construction of the “Great Southwest” through what has been called a discourse of “ethnic tourism” in which—as Sylvia Rodriguez (1990) argues—the idealization of Indian culture is coupled with the denigration of Mexican culture. This process is clearly at work in the twentieth-century textualizations of *Ramona*, which played no small part in the “ethnic tourism” of California.



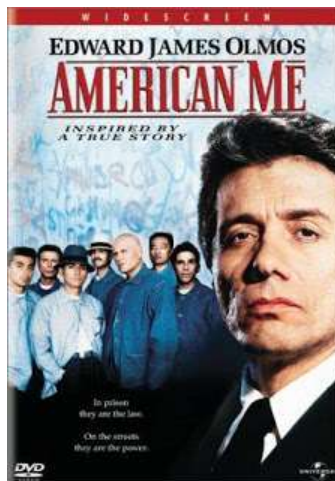
The grandee and greaser provided a rationale for land appropriation and economic exploitation, respectively, while both displaced issues of citizenship and political representation. The development of the Southwest, largely through an expansion of agriculture and mining, together with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and immigration laws aimed at central and southern Europeans restructured or “racialized” U.S. labor relations and the reserve labor pool. Mexican migration increased throughout the 1910s, with workers concentrating in the Midwest and Southwest. The political and economic instabilities of the Mexican Revolution further encouraged immigration.

What is of interest about the greaser subgenre is that it is both so overt about the social contradictions it raises *and*—in the words of Enrique Lamadrid (1992, 20)—“articulated in deliberately ‘profound’ psychological and symbolic terms” in its resolution of the contradictory forces shaping the Southwest: intensive economic development, political enfranchisement at the federal level through statehood, and the racialization of both labor and the electorate. Arizona and New Mexico did not become states until 1912 in large part because of their large Spanish-speaking populations.

Rather than see greaser films as an aberration to be explained away or temporalized through a reference to “nativism,” I am interested in how they seem to anticipate the more direct and “enlightened” treatment of Mexican American citizenship in the social problem films of the 1930s through 1950s (Noriega 1991). In other words, rather than focus on the racist stereotypes, I want to draw attention to the social contradiction that produced the stereotypes—namely, that of Mexican American citizenship—and examine how the stereotypes and narratives constructed symbolic resolutions.



Scholars have already noted that these films often displace political anxieties onto sexual ones. Films set in the new states of Arizona and New Mexico during the Mexican Revolution often depict miscegenation as a violent threat: the forced marriage to the greaser in Tom Mix's *An Arizona Wooing* (1915), the abduction of the heroine in William S. Hart's *The Gunfighter* (1916), the faithless bride in Bronco Billy's *Mexican Wife* (1912). In these films, the threat of male rape or female seduction by "Mexicans" unites the internally split "American" community: shepherders and cattlemen (in *An Arizona Wooing*), cowboys and townspeople (in *The Gunfighter*), working-class men and women (in *Big Stakes*).



But what hasn't been noted is that a significant number of the greaser films find symbolic resolution in the intermarriage of an Anglo-American (the male) and a Mexican American (the female). Two things point to the symbolic rather than prescriptive nature of these marriages. First, in all but one instance, the couples remain childless. This continues to be the case, with the exceptions of *Giant* (1956) and contemporary Chicano gang films such as *Walk Proud* (1979), *American Me* (1992), and *Bound by Honor* (1993). Second, Anglo-Mexican miscegenation in the silent cinema appears to be limited to the period before 1920, when women could not vote. Thus, these marriages seem to refigure the unequal economic and political relations between Anglo-American and Mexican American within the symbolic terms of a (sterile) heterosexual relationship. This changes after 1920.



In *Big Stakes* (1922), a lovers' triangle between two "Castilians" in Mexico, Señorita and El Capitan, and the American border-crossing cowboy is resolved as a matter of "a woman's choice." And, for perhaps the first time in U.S. cinema, the Mexican woman chooses a Mexican man and lives to enjoy her choice! The cowboy returns, brokenhearted, to the United States, where he settles for Mary, the car-driving waitress, who has survived a kidnapping by a Southwestern-style Ku Klux Klan. The film contains a dual message: one directed to the "race question" about Mexicans (worked out here through a displacement onto class conflict—Castilian, Indian, and American), and the other directed to the enfranchised working-class American woman. The film, with its repeated allusions to the "new woman" of the 1920s, defines female choice and active public behavior as an aristocratic and nonwhite option: hence the use of the Southwestern-style Ku Klux Klan, in a stunning quotation from *Birth of a Nation* (1915), as a vigilante group in pursuit of sexual rather than racial threats. These two "messages" become interdependent after 1920, reappearing in full force in the social problem films about Mexican Americans that are produced in the first decade after World War II.



What I want to show by way of conclusion is how this all works. In the shift from histrionic to verisimilar performance styles, there is a period of overlap in which—for the greaser films, at least—there emerges a hierarchical division between the two styles and codes. Even after 1912, one can detect both codes in the same film, organized according to gender, race, and class. The lawless greaser and decadent grandee conform to the histrionic mode, while the righteous cowboy and productive landowner conform to the verisimilar mode. The effect is to place the two sets of characters into different realms: one psychological (anachronistic), the other historical (contemporary). What is unusual is that in the films before 1920 the "Mexican" or "Spanish" woman becomes the sanctioned border crosser, with her moral and sexual redemption marked by a shift in performance codes, a shift that is enacted in her body

as she switches her sexual interest from the licentious greaser or grandee to the restrained cowboy, miner, or farmer. But as I said earlier, this appears to stop after 1920—or, rather, it is mapped onto Anglo-American women, who then undergo a corresponding shift within the verisimilar code, from free to restrained body movements, from cars to homes.



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About Chon A. Noriega



Chon A. Noriega is Director of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC) and Professor of Cinema and Media Studies at UCLA. His publications include books on Latino art, media, and performance, and he is the editor of the award-winning *A Ver: Revisioning Art History* book series (CSRC Press). Noriega has curated and co-curated numerous Chicano art exhibitions, including *L.A. Xicano*, which comprised five exhibitions developed for the Getty Foundation's Pacific Standard Time initiative (2011-12). In partnership with the UCLA Film and Television Archive, he has recovered early Chicano works in independent films and video art, one of which is now on the National Registry of Film. He is currently working on a new exhibition titled *Home—So Different, So Appealing* opening at the Broad Contemporary Art Museum in 2017 and completing a book-length study of Puerto Rican multimedia artist Raphael Montañez Ortiz (b. 1934).



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