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Abstract: This article reads *Django Unchained* as a maroon narrative. It argues that the film's spatial poetics critique the American symbolic landscapes of the West and the South as well as their cinematic representation. The analysis examines the depiction of the black body and the blending of Western and Southern spaces in an American business master narrative. In this setup, Tarantino's self-made black cowboy figure is not heroic but remains a cipher in both epistemologies. Django acts as a ghost who haunts the plantation and the frontier in a series of masquerades, thus pointing to the pitfalls of cinema history and national myth-making.

Keywords: symbolic spaces, Western, popular culture, plantation, maroon

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Plantation Spaces and the Black Body: Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* as Maroon Narrative

Stefanie Schäfer

Released in late 2012, Quentin Tarantino's new film has received a lot of attention and criticism, most prominently directed at its alleged creative uses of history and its misdirected politics of race revenge (see e.g. Reed, Stevens). What has remained largely unnoticed, however, are the topics of genre and cinematographic history that characterize Tarantino's oeuvre. As Eyal Peretz has argued about *Inglorious Basterds* (2009), Tarantino's previous film and the first part of what could become a race revenge trilogy, his films are "marked as belonging to *cinema* rather than to a supposedly representational, natural reality" (65, emphasis in original).¹

The present article aims to address aspects of cinema history, meta-referential frameworks, and genre commentaries that point to the representation of black characters in the white popular culture imaginary. I focus on his fusion of two American symbolic landscapes, the West and the plantation of the Old South, to examine the conspicuous absence of blackness in the first and the limited role of the black slave in the latter. I argue that by creating a black larger-than-life protagonist, Tarantino exposes and transcends the limitations of white cultural epistemologies. With *Django*, he writes an anachronistic black hero, who, in the antebellum setup of the film, anticipates the Shaft-figure of blaxploitation, and reminds the contemporary audience of 1970s popular cinema.² The gist of my analysis, however, views this cinema history time warp as a side effect of a tantamount signifier, the black figure as maroon who haunts the culture industry and white American mythologies.

As I will show in the following, Tarantino uses spatial and narrative poetics to unpack the myths of the South and the West. He pits the plantation against the open range with its frontier narrative of

individualism and self-assertion, evoking both symbolic spaces of the South and the West as interlinked by the “cash for flesh business” of slavery (00:16:48).³ The plantation as the controversial ‘home’ of the plantation regime functions as “ideological and psychological trope through which intersecting histories of the New World are told and retold” (Russ 3). According to Edward Kamau Brathwaite, it works as a confining space for white thinking, designating a limited space both “physical and metaphysical” (“The African Presence” 79).⁴ The plantation represents a spatial order in which the black body is a commodity. Into the built landscape of the plantation, Tarantino inserts a black cowboy and an unseemly romance story with a happy ending. Yet, Django’s story is not so much a slave narrative, as I will show, as a maroon narrative, with the genre’s typical focus on deception, masking for liberation, binarism and ambivalence, and transculturation, for one single purpose: survival (James 14-16; Brathwaite, “The African Presence” 89).

Before discussing the spatial poetics of the plantation in the movie, I provide a short synopsis of the plot. *Django Unchained* chronicles the steps of Django, a slave who is freed by a German bounty hunter, Dr. King Schultz, in return for information regarding the whereabouts of criminals Schultz tries to hunt down. Schultz trains Django in bounty hunting, teaches him to read and write and takes him along in various disguises: Django poses as a valet and a black cowboy and later impersonates a black slaver to buy his wife Hildi out of bondage. They travel to two plantations, first to track down the Brittle brothers and bring them to justice, and later to Candieland where Hildi currently works for Calvin Candie, a diabolic white master with a passion for Mandingo fighting and an even more evil black butler, Steven, who turns out to be Django’s nemesis. Schultz and Django maintain a friendly business relationship, but after Schultz’ death, Django becomes a lonesome hero, winning his wife *and* her freedom certificate back from Candie, and finally blowing up the Big House of Candieland plantation. In good individualist and Western story manner, Django becomes the “fastest gun in the South” (02:42:27) and “that one nigger in 10,000” (02:39:58).

Blowing up the Big House: Plantation Space in *Django Unchained*

On their bounty hunting journey in the South, Django and Schultz visit two plantations that are typical representations and thus signifiers of the plantation regime: Big Daddy Bennett’s plantation in Tennessee – which is really Evergreen Plantation in Edgard, Luisiana, a historical landmark and tourist attraction – and Candieland, Mississippi, a set which was built for the movie. Both plantations feature a white Big House in neoclassical

architecture, sitting at the crest of a hill. The Big House is shown as the master's home, seat of the plantation 'government' and center of power.⁵ When they arrive at Big Daddy's house, the social and racial hierarchies of the plantation are reiterated meticulously: the visitors ride along a path that leads directly to the Big House and ends there, at the foot of the sweeping double staircase. The path was added to the set of Evergreen plantation, and whereas the historical Big House does not seem to be sitting on an elevation, Tarantino uses the camera angle to create this impression and to establish the encounter between a very masterly Bennett high up on the stairs and the visitors arriving on horseback. In their first conversation, Schultz and Django lean back in their saddles to look at Bennett, who occupies the middle of the frame, talking down to them. The social status of the visitors, however, is still shown as superior to that of some female household slaves, who stand at the foot of the steps, at eye level only with the guests' horses (fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Arrival at Bennett's plantation (00:28:35)

The scenario of arrival is replayed later in the plot, when Schultz and Django, now in the disguise of Mandingo traders, enter Candieland plantation through a big gate, in tow of white owner Calvin Candie in his landau carriage. The travel party includes not only Candie and his henchmen, but also a group of Mandingo fighters afoot. On their long transit through Southern grasslands, woods, and swamps, Candie's entourage resembles a royal court *en route*, travelling among extradiegetic music of medieval sound and instrumentation. This hint towards European feudal culture is echoed in Candie's general taste for all things French, a device which is used to ridicule Candie on the one hand, and on

the other, to emphasize the perversities of slavery and white Southern masculinities.⁶

In *Django Unchained*, the South is thus shown not so much as antebellum congregation of states with similar interests, but rather as patchwork landscape sprinkled with little plantation kingdoms through which Django and Schultz travel on their quest. The plantations in the movie reiterate what landscape and architecture historian Dell Upton has called an “articulated processional landscape” (30), in which visitors pass through the outer pastures to get to the Big House, and are then invited into the heart of the plantation to experience the famous Southern hospitality (and to do business with the masters).⁷ Access to the plantation thus follows a strict protocol, depending on the visitor’s status: Big Daddy Bennett invites only Dr. Schultz inside his mansion, whereas Django is shown around the grounds. At Candieland, Django in his guise as black Mandingo trader and slaver is invited alongside Schultz to enjoy an honorary dinner which culminates in the famous white cake, regardless or in spite of the riotous turn of events.

Tarantino’s plantation is a feudal court with a strict etiquette. The Big House serves as palace and symbol of white male supremacy, as the center where all roads of the plantation landscape lead. The masters style themselves as regal figures. When Django shoots the overseers, Big Daddy Bennett arrives with kith and kin for retaliation. In this scene, Bennett is positioned in a tableau vivant, as *pater familias* of a mixed-race family that is quite ready to strike back at any attacker of their social order.



Fig. 2: Big Daddy and his mixed-race plantation family (00:39:38)

Likewise, on Bennett's plantation, the slaves are shown as stereotypically happy. No one is shocked by the violent whipping of a young slave girl for breaking eggs, and when Django approaches to save the girl and bring the overseer to justice, he crosses through lush greenery with oblivious slave women on swings. At Bennett's plantation, the plantation family is perfectly in order, which has to be revolting to a contemporary cinema audience.

In his discussion of plantation landscape, Upton contrasts the white processional, and we might add feudal, space with the slaves' experience. As servants, the slaves did not adhere to the social constrictions and were instead required to pass back and forth quietly while waiting on the dinner table or on their master. Upton argues that their status "alter[ed] and even [...] undercut the intended effects of the processional landscape" (133). Where the white master's point of view of the plantation reads the place through movement and connection, to the slaves the plantation is static, composed by landmarks: "the sense of a larger articulated network was missing" (135). These contrastive perceptions of plantation space resurface in *Django Unchained* when, after passing the social barriers as a visitor, Django and Schultz stand outside the Big House talking to Big Daddy, while in the background, groups of slave women stroll around the plantation grounds, crisscrossing the trodden (white) paths the visitors just traveled down. When Django is given a tour of the grounds by a young slave and inquires about the whereabouts of the overseer, the girl sends him to the stable by pointing the direction: "You go to that tree, and keep going thattaway" (34:50). As Django walks off, we see the tree in the backdrop of the frame, with the Big House towards the left and some empty chairs for leisure in the foreground arranged in a quadrangle where the grass has been cleared away. From the slave's perspective, the white landscape markers of the Big House and the picnic area remain invisible, and she urges Django to cross the trodden (white) paths and walk through the pasture instead.⁸



Fig. 3: White landscape markers (00:34:52)

At first sight, the plantations of the film illustrate stereotypes of plantation life, with happy slaves in a rural paradise, the mixed-race family run by noble masters, Southern hospitality, and an interest in European culture. When looking at the way this space is depicted, however, the image becomes more nuanced, and the question of who sees and who perceives is foregrounded. Tarantino uses exaggeration to portray the plantation as a place of exploitation that is doomed to fail. He pits the white processional landscape against the site of black labor to portray what Elizabeth Russ has called the “plantation paradoxes” (6-10): the plantation ingrains capitalism and feudalism, it is the heart of paradise and the machine of the plantation economy, the house in the middle of a tamed landscape, and finally, Candie’s decadent and diabolic character pinpoints the eroticization of land and culture at his service.⁹

In *Django Unchained*, the plantation is a decadent, and with Edouard Glissant, a closed place that cannot evolve because it is built on slavery (qtd. in Russ 4).¹⁰ The Southern plantation in the film hinges on nostalgia for lost glory, an idyllic place that will eventually be eroded, as the contemporary audience knows, by the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Civil Rights movement to become a scar in American history. However, Tarantino takes historical liberties by having a black cowboy put a quite violent, premature ending to the plantation regime there and then, in the antebellum South of 1858. The protagonist interrupts Bennett’s edenic garden by killing the overseers, and he beheads the mixed-race family by shooting Big Daddy himself in the very act of calling to life the Ku-Klux-Klan (another one of Tarantino’s creative anachronisms).¹¹ Candieland and its owner experience an even more

destructive fate: In the grand finale, Django dresses up in the white master's clothes and blows up the Big House.

The landscape of the plantation in *Django Unchained* serves as symbol for a contested American cultural and popular historiography, in which the Old South is mourned and the black legacy largely ignored. Tarantino evokes the plantation in all its splendor and paradox to explode it as a cliché. As the next chapter will show, his symbolic language includes another signifier, the scarred black body.

Scars on the Black Body

From its very onset, the camera eye inserts the scarred black body into the visual repertoire of the story and highlights its symbolic status. In the opening scene, before the title credits appear, we see a petrified desert landscape, an explicit reference to the original Spaghetti Western *Django*, and just as the landscape has been scathed by the elements, so have the backs of Django and his co-travelling slaves been marked by the whip of slavery, which is amplified by the whipping sounds included in the opening score. Django is thus shown first and foremost as a slave, an anonymous body led through the inhospitable desert by white oppressors. A little later, after he has been bought and freed by Schultz, Django throws off his cape, and as the cloth falls toward the ground in slow motion, the camera zooms in on his scarred muscular back, creating an iconic moment which anticipates Django's 'unchaining' and his freedom journey that will be told in the movie. Much as Django does, his co-travelers, also freed by Schultz and pointed in the direction of the liberating north, throw off their capes and stride towards a better future. The scarred black body renders the essential physical state of the freed slave, before a long line of disguises in which he assumes different roles with different social statuses, and becomes a black chameleon throughout the movie, as I will argue in the last chapter.

The marks of white ownership are also engraved upon the body of Django's wife Hildi, who bears a branding on her cheek and scars on her back from previous whippings. In Candieland, butler Steven urges his master to expose Hildi's back to the dinner guests, hoping to provoke Django to abandon his mask as black slaver. Candie and Steven rip apart Hildi's Victorian maid's uniform to parade her scarred back. This is captured in a close-up shot that features the black and white hands asserting their ownership over both, the body *and* the wounds (fig. 4).



Fig. 4: Hildi's back (01:49:53)

Earlier, upon arrival at Candieland, Hildi had been confined in the hotbox as a punishment for trying to escape, an eerie presence in the otherwise empty groomed garden surrounding the Big House. When the box is thrown open, her naked body is shown in a bird's-eye shot, and while the water splashes down on her, the shock of the liquid and sunlight is staged by the camera zooming in and blurring the embryonic human shape in the metal confinement.

The black body also serves as a means for entertaining the whites, most obviously in Candie's offer to Schultz to have his way with Hildi. Mandingo fighting looms large in Candie's universe, and we see him for the first time at the Cleopatra Club in Greenville, indulged in an in-door private fight in which his fighter kills another one owned by a Mexican cattle baron played by the actor who starred as the original Django, Franco Nero.¹² The black 'comfort women' standing by equally replay stereotypes, including a Topsy character who loses her marbles in shock at the violence, and a sensuous black femme fatale in golden garb. The imagery of pleasures asked from black people is continued in the decorum of the Cleopatra club and inside Candie's mansion. At the former, a black plaster figure offering a cornucopia with exotic goods conspicuously looms in the background. As the only decorative object in the gloomy Caesar room, the cornucopia-bearer is seen from various angles throughout the scene and can hardly be missed (fig. 5).



Fig. 5: The cornucopia-bearer at the Cleopatra Club (01:08:52)

The Cleopatra Club's name is reiterated, albeit with wrong referent, by an oversized Egyptian Nefertiti bust in the entrance area. At the mansion, Candie is enthroned in front of a marble statue that shows Roman wrestlers who could also be Mandingo fighters. And last but not least, the entrance to the grand salon at Candieland is embellished by black figurines holding cotton plants, which are literally the last men standing after the bloodshed.

The blending of real-life black bodies and black figurine decorum highlights the commodity status of blacks in the plantation regime. They are exoticized and used for entertainment purposes or pleasure games, and their scars are paraded as paragons of white supremacy, an affirmation of the system engraved in the skin. The black body is part and parcel of slavery's legacy, its scars symbolic of the trauma inflicted onto African Americans and onto the national history alike. It epitomizes the American political and cultural economies of the "cash for flesh business" Schultz talks about in the beginning. Into this universe of white power, Django wedges his own black body. The black protagonist hence interrupts the business of the plantation and turns it inside out.

Present 'like a bomb': The Black Cowboy as Maroon

"[It is its] potential for explosion and ramification that has made blackness such a radical if subterranean feature of plantation political culture; for the African 'phenomenon' continuously present, like a bomb, in the New World [...] triggers itself into visibility at each moment of crisis in the hemisphere [...]." (Brathwaite, "The African Presence" 78)

As escaped slave who builds his own community, the maroon looms outside the plantation, beyond its institutional and cultural reach, a constant threat to the plantation 'insides' in which order is built into the landscape. The different perceptions of the plantation landscape

established in the previous chapter complement Tarantino's genre commentary and spatial politics. To unravel the cultural marronage of the black cowboy, I will first analyze how Tarantino boils down the Western genre to some essentials and then revamps it in a pop culture pastiche.

Django Unchained establishes a black cowboy in the Western genre, which has been traditionally white and symbolic of American national history. Tarantino uses a Western narrative structure with a professional plot in which young Django learns his trade as a bounty hunter and gunslinger from his mentor King Schultz, who conveniently dies so his sidekick can reach complete glory as "the fastest gun on the South" (02:42:27). The Spaghetti Western *Django*, with its dusty nihilist legacy from Italian neorealism, serves as a pop culture backdrop to the story. Like his namesake, the black Django fights for his love interest, but unlike him, he manages to save her and ride off into a happy ending. Tarantino imposes a classical Western ending on the Spaghetti Western; what is more, he also uses the color symbolism of the Stetsons in an inverted order: Django, the good guy, wears a black hat, Bennett a white one, and the European Schultz is a grey hybrid between black and white, good and bad, a stand-in for the colonizing powers that initiated the slave trade and now echo faintly in Candie's francophilia. The most relevant aspect of Tarantino's signature pop culture pastiche for my argument lies in the politics of blending two American symbolic spaces in one self-made (business) man narrative.

Tarantino systematically inserts the South into the Western genre and puts the plantation on the map of the frontier West. Towards the middle part of the movie, in an important plot development, Schultz strikes a deal with Django: In return for Django's help with bounty hunting, Schultz promises to go South with him and help free his wife Hildi. In what follows, the passing of time is encapsulated in some iconic scenes which show the riders gearing up; Django gets a saddle marked with his initial, and the two ride out onto the open range to spend the winter in the wilderness. During this time, instead of catching rabbits and deer for survival, they hunt down criminals to make money off the law. At the end of their sojourn, a short narrative text announces the change of setting from the (unspecified) Western scenery to Mississippi. In this pivotal, almost one-minute installment, we first see Django and Schultz in a long-distance shot, riding through the frame of undisturbed nature, with a mountain view in the background. They are small figures embedded in a sublime landscape, co-existing with wild animals. In the next shot, Greenville slave market is established with a disorienting bird's-eye view of slaves trotting in a circular movement through brown mud. These human figures are hardly discernible and resemble cogs in a machine, in perpetual, yet senseless motion. Into this static frame roll the big letters of

the slave-state, Mississippi, as if to sweep away all feel-good notions of freedom for the sake of the nation's true foundation: the cash for flesh business of slavery (00:58:20-00:59:10).

In this interlinking of the West and the South, Tarantino shows the abyss of their simultaneous co-existence. He pulls away the veil of the romanticized frontier, a cultural vignette of American self-inscription, to reveal the ugly face of Southern slavery, in which frontier villains find a safe haven as overseers, like the Brittle brothers. In the transition scene that links the West and the South, the overhead view of the mud-struggling slaves circles further down to show individuals, and Django and Schultz ride into the frame, looking down at the slaves who are bound and tripping, some with muzzles and irons around their necks. Django, who wore the same kind of muzzle in the past, stares at a slave woman who has difficulty believing her own vision of a black man on horseback. Their interlocking, incredulous gazes illustrate that, as a black cowboy, Django is utterly displaced in this setting.

The plantation thus clashes with the Western symbolism arrayed in landscape shots and, more importantly, in the narrative strategy of the movie, a deliberate genre mix, as Tarantino indicates:

[i]t's two separate stories I've always wanted to tell. One, I've always wanted to tell a Western story. Two, I've always wanted to re-create cinematically that world of the antebellum South, of America under slavery, and just what a different place it was—an unfathomable place. To create an environment and again, not just have a historical story play out [...] but actually make it a genre story. Make it an exciting adventure story. ("Tarantino Unchained")

The narrative replays the Western romance plot in making Django into an aspiring gunslinger and lonesome hero who busts all doors to get to his love interest.¹³ Yet, Tarantino's story touches a conspicuous absence, in the Western genre, of the antebellum South and of slavery, as well as of black heroes or characters in leading roles.¹⁴ Filmic representations of the South have traditionally featured black stereotypes rather than central characters. In *Django Unchained*, the Topsy or Aunt Jemima stereotype percolate in the uses of the black body as decorum, for entertainment and consumption purposes in the plantation regime. Candie's servant Stephen, who exposes Django's masquerade, figures as a diabolical Uncle Tom figure who is shown as even more racist than his white master.¹⁵ Consequently, the depiction of black stereotypical characters, the plantation set design, the portrayal of the black body, and the usage of the double genre framework of the Old South and the Western all comment critically on the presentation of blackness in white (popular) culture and imagination. The typical Western hero as black cowboy takes the meta-

generic commentary one step further: Django turns the conspicuous absence of blackness into a haunting scenario. His emulation of the black businessman, the black bounty hunter, and the anachronistic antebellum freeman all flow into the figure of the maroon, a faceless threat who undercuts the plantation regime and the white culture industry's epistemology alike.

Marronage forms a historical paradigm of resistance that has also become a topos in critical theory as the 'outside' to the plantation universe. Brathwaite links maroons to the survival type of African literature in the Caribbean. To the dismissal of "the over 'emotional' negritude [of the maroon]," he retorts that this black pride "was and is not only a function of marronage, it was and is even more certainly the consequence of opposition to the plantation" ("The African Presence 89).¹⁶ Richard Price's¹⁷ anthropological work on maroon societies around the world argues in a similar vein that, while maroon communities were usually located on the fringes of the plantation and thus challenged the spatial order, they made slavery visible and embarrassing. Maroons attacked and threatened the plantation, whose owners in some cases were forced make legal treaties with the attackers to be left alone, an odd process of recognition and acknowledgement of the community of escaped slaves. The maroon thus functions as a spatial signifier in the setup of the plantation regime. In terms of space, the maroon not only intrudes, he also hails from remote and inhospitable places, such as the famous Dismal Swamp in Virginia, and his guerilla tactics and expert knowledge about the territory defy white battle styles. As a consequence, maroon warriors were ascribed magical powers and perceived as larger than life in narratives of white commentators, a myth which was fuelled also by their cooperation with other cultural Others, such as Native Americans or outlaw pirates (Price 10, 14). In Brathwaite's words, the white man's magic knows no cure for this ailing that explodes from inside the plantation and becomes a threat from without:

In every case, the insubordinates appeared and flared against the odds; surprising, unexpected; fed from deep resonating sources of black energy; *mabrak*, which Unprospero [the white plantation master] found his magic knew too little of. And this source of energy, rooted in the maroon hills and gullies [...] had always been part of the whole plantation experience and reality [...]" ("Caliban" 55)

Yet, as Brathwaite argues, the maroon does not represent 'pure Africa'; he is already creolized, longing to 'align himself with his submerged/maroon ancestral heritage" (44). Accordingly, Price argues that it is by virtue of adaptation that maroon communities survived.¹⁸

In nineteenth century American literature, maroon narratives such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (published in 1856, two years before the setting of *Django Unchained*), introduce a threatening image of black slaves, beyond the eponymous friendly giant Uncle Tom.¹⁹ As Richard Tyne Cowan shows, the maroon narrative "is one of space; it begins not in the swamp but on the plantation proper and in the way in which planter and slave inhabited and perceived plantation spaces" (9).

In *Django Unchained*, the slave is freed and does not have to maroon, but I would argue that Django's status throughout the story is imbued with maroon symbolism, most prominently because of his enigmatic status. In the cultural imaginary of the antebellum South, the black freeman is an impossibility, an anachronism which is laid out very broadly by the confusion of the characters both white and black. When Schultz introduces Django to Big Daddy Bennett as his valet, a freeman, and asks that he not be treated like a slave, Bennett faces a challenge (00:30:38-00:31:47). He directs his slave girl not to "treat him like any of the niggers around here, because he ain't LIKE any of the other niggers around here" (00:31:14). When he repeats Schultz's term and tells her, in a schoolteacher voice, that Django is a "freeman," everyone looks clueless. Bennett finally resolves the status problem by telling her not to treat him "like white folks" but to think of him like the fatherless boy who works at the lumber yard. The racial identity and slave status of the lumber yard boy remains unspecified, but it is clear that he occupies some strange middling rank that does not exist within the realm of Bennett's plantation.

This scene symbolizes the overall enigma of Django; as Tarantino maintains: "Django is an *exceptional* human being" ("*Tarantino Unchained*"; my emphasis). As a consequence, neither blacks nor whites know what to call him. He is granted access to the white world of Candieland and the inner sanctum of the master's dinner table only on the pretext of business. Candie is suspicious of him from the beginning, inquiring repeatedly about his interest and subjecting Django to various tests. When the travelling party finds Dartagnan, an escaped mandingo fighter, Schultz offers to buy the doomed creature off Candie's hands, but it is Django in his role as trader who objects to buying the 'worthless' fighter. Candie thus decides to make Dartagnan's punishment into a litmus test of Django's sincerity and keeps staring at his face while the fighter is ripped apart by dogs in the film's most gruesome scene. Django is also tested by the Mandingo fighters, whose disgust he keeps at bay by threatening them ("I'm worse than any of these white men here." 1:16:49). Thus, throughout the movie, Django maintains his masquerades.

Because we see him change his costumes and rise in social status with every role he takes on, the audience knows a little more than the utterly confused characters who meet him on the road. However, we see him navigate racial boundaries and roles, but there is no detectable inside development to the character.²⁰ The apprenticeship narrative contrasts cultural and racial realms: Django learns to read and shoot under Schultz's tutelage, and he also receives training in cultural myths when Schultz tells him a truncated version of the Siegfried myth. Django identifies with the Germanic hero and walks through the ring of fire for his Brünhilde/Hildi. What is more, Schultz teaches him the practice of mimicry, explaining to him what it means to put up an act, to masquerade as someone else, and "not to break character" (00:27:32). Django indulges in the masquerading in what Schultz calls a "Hang zum Dramatischen" (01:40:15; an "inclination towards the dramatic"; my translation). Django gets to pick his costume, and thus his first disguise as Schultz's European-style valet culminates in an outrageous bright blue culottes courtier outfit that leaves mouths gaping left and right. Django's expertise at putting up an act improves as he poses as a cowboy, but he eventually comes into his own when impersonating a black slaver. When the duo leaves the symbolic West to travel South, their relationship is inverted. Thanks to his knowledge, Django now towers over Schultz. Despite appearances, however, Django is *not* a hero of white making: both his teacher Schultz and his auteur Tarantino die. The latter has a cameo appearance towards the end as white slave trader with an Australian accent. Like the Big House of the white establishment, Tarantino-as-auteur gets blown up by Django in a brief scene that symbolically points to the self(!)-education of Django and his liberation from white supervision and control. Django survives by adapting Western culture and myths, and in a second step, he excels because of his slave experience and his ability to talk himself out of tricky situations.

Ultimately, all the puzzling over Django's character by whites and blacks alike points to the movie's tongue-in-cheek approach to history: Tarantino uses extradiegetic rap music, and has Django play cool by putting on sunglasses before blowing up Candieland. The unseemly coolness of the black cowboy, his sophisticated self-presentation ("my name is Django [...] the 'D' is silent", 01:08:13), and equestrian performance for Hildi, and other details make for comic relief and a layering of popular culture concepts, black masculine stereotypes and expectations that are exposed.

Django's performance thus gains a meta-narrative character, it points to its own artificiality and exaggeration. Contrary to Henry Louis Gates' reading of the film as a slave narrative,²¹ I would argue that the protagonist here functions as an empty signifier in a double sense: first,

Django is educated by the white man and eventually breaks away from tutelage, but does not undergo any development or self-reflection that is so central to the slave narrative. Instead, he uses his training *against* the whites. Second, not only does Django remain strangely inaccessible to the viewer, all those acts render the nondescript quality of his character all the more visible: it is the clothes that make the man, the valet, the black cowboy, the black slaver. The costumes are all so unseemly that no one has a name for this black man, not even the slaves he frees, who remain seated in their cage, and after the closing credits, are shown as paralyzed, looking at each other and asking, simply, “Who was that nigger?” (02:48:10). When he saves little Jody from whipping, she looks for her savior in the mirror, only to see a headless body in a fantasy valet uniform, a phantom (fig. 6).



Fig. 6: The faceless savior (00:36:12)

Instead of imbuing Django with the qualities of the freed slave and reading the film as a slave narrative, we have to take into account the meta-referential framework Tarantino taps into in his typical manner. In pairing the Western story with the plantation, Tarantino creates a hybrid mythical space in which the black body symbolizes the turmoil of the nation and its festering scars through time, the oppression of African Americans against all humanist national founding principles, for the sake of business, be it as Southern slave trader or as Western bounty hunter. In contrast to his ephemeral costumes, Django’s scarred back always remains present as a reminder of the future slavery has built. He dwells on the outside of the plantation system as a threat, a chameleon who changes his roles and disguises to outperform the whites every time. He wields guerilla warfare that builds on his knowledge of race relations under

slavery. In his penultimate change of dress, we see him stripped of all cowboy gear, riding bareback through a landscape strewn with burning ruins, and armed only with a gun. His frantic return to Candieland to free Hildi is shown in high speed. He resembles a revolutionary who sets the country on fire—or a barely armed maroon who has come to haunt the plantation. When Candie's family return from his funeral to the big house, Django appears like a ghost out of the dark on the top of the stairs, wearing Candie's burgundy outfit, ready to put an end to Candieland and to his black arch-enemy, the butler Steven who has been constructed as Calvin's best friend and a race traitor throughout the plot. Played by Samuel L. Jackson, who also appears in Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* as a contract killer, Steven represents the antidote to the docile Uncle Tom type who poses the biggest threat to Django's success throughout the plot.²² He also has the last words before the mansion explodes, yelling about the eternal persistence of the plantation as economic and symbolic order: "Them bounty hunters go looking for you [...] You can't destroy Candieland... we been here. Can't no nigger gunfighter kill all the white folks in the world! They gonna find your black ass" (02:40:59).

Thus, Django walks right into the inner sanctum of Candieland and displaces the white master, but he does not serve as a race avenger or savior figure. Django has no other interest than saving his wife (and potential future family) and taking revenge for her sufferings. As a maroon, his primary investment is his survival, outside and away from the plantation. In the movie, the space beyond the plantation is filled with a poor remnant of the American West that the film has previously uncovered as a myth. In Tarantino's Western, the law is only another business. To make a living, Django has to be an expert businessmen and dealmaker, and to adapt to the white power system in every possible way. To ensure his survival and his legacy, he needs to free his wife and blow up the Big House and the plantation regime along with it. The anachronism of this fantastical thought encompasses the ultimate defeat of the black cowboy as a potential hero figure. Not only are there no black cowboys in the genre of the Western at large; in Tarantino's revision, even the good guy is wearing a mask that only covers his personal interests in trading his wife back from white ownership. And yet: In the ending, Django rides off into the night, not the sunset. There, he will reside as the nightmare of the white cultural imagination, ready to come back and haunt the epistemology of popular culture.

Notes

- 1 See the interview with Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Tarantino, “Tarantino Unchained”), in which Tarantino talks about a trilogy with Christoph Waltz, who already won an academy award for his supporting act in *Inglorious Basterds* as Jew-Hunter Nazi Oberst Landa, and who was awarded another Oscar for his part as Dr. Schultz in 2013. If a third part is released, historical readings of *Django Unchained* will be less relevant than the tropes of race revenge and cinema history.
- 2 References to blaxploitation abound, such as in Hildi’s last name “von Schaff” (which of course included her in her white master’s family), to the grainy lens Tarantino uses for Django’s flashbacks, creating his protagonist’s memory as cinema memory at the same time. For a discussion of *Django Unchained* and blaxploitation cinema and cinema history, see the review by Pinkerton. On the problematic of audience identification with black characters that are conventionally Other in mainstream films, see Diawara.
- 3 The West and the South both hold a particular place in American cultural history and in the self-perception of the nation. Caroline Rosenthal defines symbolic spaces as “spaces in which a nation sees its myths, narratives, and beliefs most accurately represented and re-produced; spaces which have held a specific importance for a nation's self-conceptualization; spaces which have functioned as spatial meta-narratives and which – just like historiography – inform a nation's image of itself” (5).
- 4 Brathwaite writes about its effect on white writers, who “are not yet prepared to allow their art to erode the boundaries set up around their minds by the physical/metaphysical plantation” (“The African Presence” 79).
- 5 Dell Upton describes the plantation as a village with the Big House as town hall, a “commercial [...], educational [...], social [and] government center” (128).
- 6 Candie’s francophilia relates to absolutism and the French royal court rather than eighteenth-century humanism. He calls his Mandingo fighter Dartagnan, after the musketeer in Alexandre Dumas’ 1844 novel, and acts manor-born, if not regal, a behavior that is emphasized by the camera eye. His nostalgic inclination veers away from the historical moment of the US in the 1850s towards a feudal past in which the superiority of masters would not be questioned by abolitionists. However, Candie’s self-aggrandizement is exposed as (American) make-belief by the German polyglot Schultz: Candie neither understands French nor is he aware that his beloved author Dumas is of Haitian descent.

- ⁷ In his discussion of Mount Airy plantation in Richmond County, Va., Upton finds seven barriers visitors had to pass through in approaching the center and the plantation owner. Upton observes that the landscape allows the planter to pass through different status-affirming social groupings such as “planter-among-his-family-and slaves” or “planter-among-his-peers” (130-131).
- ⁸ On the orders imposed on plantation space and beyond by runaway slaves, see also Vlach, an exhibition catalogue which is accessible online from George Washington University at <http://www.gwu.edu/~folklife/bighouse/intro.html>. Rebecca Ginsburg argues that disenfranchised populations use their expert knowledge of landmarks hidden from the master’s view to their advantage.
- ⁹ Among the plantation paradoxes, Russ also includes the shifting meaning of North and South, of the house and landscape in an imaginary community, which are of less interest for the present argument.
- ¹⁰ Glissant confronts the closed place of the plantation with a creative open-word poetics that renegotiates the trope of the plantation.
- ¹¹ Next to the original *Django* from 1966, another intertextual reference is D. W. Griffiths 1915 silent movie *Birth of a Nation* which, for all its trailblazing in cinematographic technique, is highly controversial because of its heroic portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan as civilizing force. In *Django Unchained*, the hooded riders scene serves to ridicule the clan and their getup.
- ¹² Nero’s cameo appearance in Tarantino’s film references the conflicts fought out in the original 1966 *Django* between a marauding Southern Civil War regiment and some Mexican outlaws. Caught between the lines, Django prevails at first with the help of a modern machine gun, but later is killed by his allies over a gold-treasure. Corbucci’s *Django* articulates a critique of modern warfare, greed, and human character in social Darwinism which entails the downfall of civilization. In Tarantino’s film, Nero as Mexican ranchero represents the Ur-cowboy as well as another rendition of the feudal system beyond the Southern line.
- ¹³ Tarantino makes ample use of Western aesthetic with shots of shadow silhouettes against the sunset or outside light illuminating the inside, for instance when Django’s shape with cowboy hat looms over the confined Hildi.
- ¹⁴ While the postbellum South is the setting of a few Westerns, and some others feature black protagonists, the Western at large remains devoid of a black presence, which at best can be perceived to be looming on the outskirts of an idealized version of the American frontier and the settlement of the continent. The most famous stereotypical black character in a classical Western might be John Ford’s Pompey in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962). Westerns that feature a black protagonist are conventionally set in the postbellum South, such as Sidney Portier’s *Buck and the Preacher* (1972), in which a wagon master

and a faux preacher help freed slaves, or Martin Goldman's blaxploitation Western *The Legend of Nigger Charley* (1972), in which three runaway slaves turn bountyhunters in the Old West (see also Pinkerton). Donald Bogle's study of blacks in American Films yields a general overview of the familiar character types "like square boxes on a shelf" (4). Hoffmann writes about the turn to cultural Others in the revisionist Western. On the marginal role of black people in western historiography, see de Graaf.

- 15 On the commodification of the black body in white popular and material culture, Patricia Turner writes: "[...] at least since the seventeenth century – since contact between sub-Sahara Africans and Englishmen was regularized – the images of blacks have been distorted in mainstream popular culture [...]" (xv).
- 16 In his argument, Braithwaite bemoans that the maroon has found next to no representation as a figure of survival in novels in English, other than in Namba Roy's sentimental depiction in *The Black Albino* (1961) and in Wilson Harris' *The Secret Ladder* (1963).
- 17 The information of the following paragraph is extracted from Price's encompassing introduction.
- 18 From the eighteenth century onwards, maroon communities changed their style of government and leadership. Traditionally, community leaders had been selected for their Africanness and they had governed like kings. Later, leaders rose to power because of their cultural expertise in the white world: Maroons who functioned as a cultural go-between, who could ascertain survival through change and adaptation, were chosen over African-born nobility (Price 20-21).
- 19 Cowan discusses Beecher Stowe's 1856 *Dred* as sign of the times, "a more aggressive, even radical discourse [...] indicative of the climate in which such a panic [of slave revolt] could take hold, a climate in which the white planters' construction of their slaves' identities as harmless children was becoming untenable" (2).
- 20 The absence of character development has been perceived as lack, for instance by Anthony Lane, who asks in his review: "But is Tarantino truly engaged with those subjects? [...] Django seems to morph from a near-silent sufferer into an avenging angel, grinning in glory, without passing through the usual stages of personhood" (Lane).
- 21 Gates calls *Django Unchained* a "postmodern, slave narrative Western" (Tarantino, "Tarantino Unchained").
- 22 On Tarantino's use of black stereotypical characters, see Bogle 419.

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