Ink and digital on paper: 11 × 8.2 inches (27.94 × 20.84 cm).
©2012 Ajuan Mance.
Looking Sharp

performance, genre, and questioning history in Django Unchained

Terri Francis

So Stackolee left, he went walking down the New Haven track.
A train come along and flattened him on his back.
He went up in the air and when he fell
Stackolee landed right down in hell.
He said Devil, Devil, put your fork up on the shelf
Cause I’m gonna run this devilish place myself.
There came a rumbling on the earth and a tumbling on the ground,
That bad son-of-a-gun, Stackolee, was turning hell around.

—LYRICS EXCERPTED FROM THE FOLK BALLAD “STACKOLEE”

Patina: What you do for your master?
Django: Didn’t you hear him tell you I ain’t no slave?
Patina: So you really free?
Django: Yes. I’s free.
Patina: You mean you want to dress that like that?

—Django Unchained

Django Unchained is just a movie—a mass entertainment product like hundreds of others that entered the marketplace in 2012—but it is also much more. This movie became a forum, an occasion for critical reflection upon black representation in U.S. film, the history of slavery, and beyond. As such, Quentin Tarantino’s flick, both as a discourse itself and an object of discourse, opens up the question of performance, genre and history in the movies and presents an occasion for historians and film specialists to point interested audiences toward sources of factual truth and testimony.

Although DIY historiography is challenging, the Library of Congress has made portraits, written excerpts, and audio interviews with former slaves available to the public on its American Memory website Voices from the Days of Slavery. Not that they are pure and unmediated, but the Works Progress Administration portraits and interviews, taken between 1936 and 1938, do offer a legitimate opportunity to listen to the actual
voices of former slaves and to see real people instead of cinematic constructs that could be progressive or might not be. And of course there are the published narratives of Frederick Douglass, Solomon Northrup, Mary Prince, and so many more.

Yet in popular culture, fiction is regularly taken for fact. So much of our history is mis-told and untold that any movie which even hints at “history” receives a certain gravitas, an assumed educational imperative no matter how constructed it is; the appearance of seriousness, the prestige of certain actors, and the appeal of high production values create and sustain believability. But how can slavery be represented?

Django Unchained casts our present-day conflicted relationships to history, particularly to slavery, into stark relief, revealing a hazily understood, tentatively broached, terrifying cesspool of nightmarish scenes mitigated in this multi-genre film by humor, action, and sentimentality; such strategies hide and expose all of our shared shame, guilt, and overall fear of the past—and our intimation that the ramifications of slavery resonate still today.

Django Unchained is a spaghetti Western (an Italian-made 1960s sub-genre of the Western) set roughly during slavery times but mixed with elements of Blaxploitation. It is not a documentary and may not even be interested in facts, and any historical references in it are rendered at least ambiguous by the influence of performance, genre, and cinematography that structure its interpretations. The genre expectations that audiences bring to a Tarantino picture, a spaghetti Western, and a Blaxploitation film all rolled into one dominate Django Unchained: over-the-top violence, edgy or raunchy humor, and expressive and color-rich sets and costumes within a brutal world full of deceitful, self-interested, and heavily armed figures. Costuming, performance, and art direction are crucial sites of expression and characterization in these types of films and it is difficult to discern what is parody and what is not. For instance, Jamie Foxx’s African American body signifies African American history and so lends authenticity to the film. However, given that Foxx is the stage name of Eric Marlon Bishop, stand-up comedian, singer-songwriter, and actor, his presence brings interconnected fictions and irony to the project. That Foxx performs and interprets a character makes his image unfixed to any singular meaning; it is a metaphor, not proof.

The figure of Django is reminiscent of though distinct from the well-known portrait of Gordon, escaped Mississippi slave and Union soldier. Widely circulated in the Abolitionist cause, the layered photograph
centers on Gordon’s whip-scarred back. He is seated in a chair with his back to the camera and his pose conveys at once the slave’s vulnerability and slavery’s brutality as well as Gordon’s own dignity and endurance. In *Django Unchained*, Jamie Foxx-as-Django’s back is likewise scarred, perhaps in homage to the historical figure. Both the *carte de visite* of Gordon and the fictional shot of Django resonate in their respective genres, but Foxx’s body lends his character a weightier physical presence relative to Gordon’s surely undernourished frame. Where the still photograph of a seated Gordon evidences his victimization and that of other slaves, Django’s moving image conveys a sense of restrained strength and inspires anticipation of what this man-of-action will do next.

Foxx’s fame makes Django seem extra-special among the anonymous others and enhances the viewer’s identification with him, particularly in moments when he appears to represent aspects of slavery in general. In the film’s title sequence, a chained Django slowly walks across the screen in a line with other male slaves. They all bear the marks from recent and past beatings on their backs but, despite Django’s wounds being partially obscured in darkness, his scars are actually highlighted and distinguished by three key factors: (1) the contrast between Foxx’s dark brown skin and the lighter beige rocks in the background, (2) the way his sweat reflects the light and (3) his position in the center of the frame as he walks unsteadily with the weight of his restraints. Later in the film after Dr. King Schultz (Christoph Waltz) has bought Django, the slave throws off his blanket, seen in slow motion further enhanced with added sound effects. Once again, Django reveals the extent of his scars as he stretches both arms apart and slightly over his head with fists closed. Such cinematography combined with Foxx’s performance magnifies our awareness of Django’s scars and reminds the contemporary audience of slavery’s scourge. The reaction shot of Schultz’s face when he gasps at the sight of Django’s scarred back captures his outrage and sympathy while it infers the audience’s own responses. At the same time the slow motion shot emphasizes Foxx-as-Django’s musculature. Foxx’s own body translates Gordon and Django’s scarring into tattoos—a personal body-graffiti they might have willfully taken on to mark them selves as fearless. Whereas Gordon’s scars overwhelm his back, Django’s body appears bigger than his scars and wounds. His back is cut and scarred to show what he has suffered, is willing to suffer, and has conquered. The scars reference historical reality but through Foxx’s performance they acquire varied and even contradictory meanings.

*Django Unchained*’s ancillary characters, especially the nameless slaves, look at Django a lot and at length, their gazes drawing our attention to and sparking our admiration of our not-quite-free badman’s sense of self-fashioning and self-regard. First Django transitions from a
1001 Black Men #503, Bar on Webster St., February 24, 2013.
8.5 × 12 inches (21.59 × 30.48 cm). ©2013 Ajuan Mance.
slave to a not-quite freedman bounty hunter playing the part of a valet. In the following scene Schultz allows Django to select new clothes for his new role.

    Schultz: And now Django you may choose your character’s costume.
    Django: You’s gonna let me pick out my own clothes?
    Schultz: But of course.

Enter Django in a super-cobalt blue suit of 18th-century style, coat with a collar, knee-length breeches, white dress shirt with ruffles, stockings, and shoes with buckles. Rhythmic drumming and music reminiscent of Blaxploitation here add absurdity and swagger to Django’s transformation—but it cannot be dismissed as a joke because of the serious way Django carries himself, with confident posture on his own two feet and, as we see in the next shot, on the horse too. As the song says, “ride on King ride, you get your man.” Foxx does not break character. Django does not break character; his strut is set. The accompanying non-diegetic music narrates Django’s moment, praising and enhancing his style and yet it seems to be heard by Django, timed to his gestures and feelings. Non-diegetic music, such as mood music, is represented as coming from outside the film’s fictional world, so it is not in the diegesis, and is not heard or experienced by the characters. But in Django’s case his theme song does seem to emanate from his deeply saturated super-cobalt blue suit.

Django’s ability to slip into costume in a broad sense that includes clothing, story, voice and gesture mirrors Foxx’s own immersion in the character he portrays. At the same time we doubtless see Foxx in Django as the entertainer makes his character stoic; somewhat playful, but not naïve. Meanwhile Django lent Foxx a bravado and baadasssssness he didn’t quite have as much before. Promoting Django Unchained, Foxx’s off-screen persona combined silliness, sensuality, and wit, as displayed for instance in his “How Black is That?” monologue and vocal performance on Saturday Night Live. Here Foxx reflects Django’s intelligence, coolness, and sex appeal through irony and even parody. Foxx’s capacity to effectively mix highbrow and lowbrow elements was central to all he brought to and received from playing Django. In the film, Django’s performance of the valet serves as a symbol of the self-possessed way he figures his freedom in this film through style and being
seen. Nevertheless it is also a comment upon the inherent limitations of any freedom he would acquire in this society. Style is liberating but he seems to suspect it is not enough. Foxx makes Django stoic but more thoughtful and performative than the average action hero.

Cut to Django in the middle-background of the frame riding a horse. Catching and holding the gaze of all who turn to look, Django upon his horse appears to glide above the fields of cotton that surround him. The super-cobalt blue suit and his position on a horse with head held high cuts him apart from the brown and gray landscape populated by men and women bent over their labor. Django’s position atop a horse in the super-cobalt blue suit emphasizes his apartness from the plantation, the other slaves, and even from Schultz. One almost forgets that Schultz still owns Django until their agreement is fulfilled.

Foxx-as-Django cuts a figure. He is a freedman-captive good-badman. He moves across diverse terrains, timescapes, and ethical boundaries on horseback in search of his captive wife Hildi. As a figure both within and above his cinematic milieu, Foxx-as-Django performs a sharp swagger that cuts through this multi-genre mash-up’s chatty skein of one-liners. Art historian Richard Powell writes in Cutting a Figure that to be sharp is to be “ostentatiously stylish.” He continues to explain that a sharp person is “someone who evinces a keen sense of style. Like knives and other sharp objects, many fashionable people have a precise and exacting edge, a sense of how to look, of how, figuratively speaking to ‘stand out’ and be a ‘cut above’ the dull and commonplace.” This is why, in the film’s closing sequence, Django puts on sunglasses at night—why he anachronistically has sunglasses at all!—to watch the dynamite blow up Massa’s house, and why he takes an extra few minutes to prance around on his horse before riding off into the moonlight with Hildi. He actually delays the point of the whole movie—his reunion with Hildi—to show off. He isn’t free until he is free in style.

Django calls to my mind, not factual history at all, but myths and folk songs about legendary outlaws such as that of Stagger Lee cited in the epigraph to this essay. The nineteenth century song tells the story of one Texan Lee Shelton who was imprisoned (and later released) for killing his friend Billy Lyons, possibly over a Stetson hat. Shelton’s nickname varies from Stagger Lee to Stackolee and many more and multiple versions of the song exist. Once this event and its protagonist entered into folklore it took on a life of its own. In the same way, American mavericks

---

As a figure both within and above his cinematic milieu, Foxx-as-Django performs a sharp swagger that cuts through this multi-genre mash-up’s chatty skein of one-liners.
and renegades populate the U.S. imagination and their composite caricature offers a template for tough manhood in places outside the U.S. where, for instance, Hollywood’s cowboy films were shown. Django is thus a field of metaphor full of allusions to histories of signifying on badmen in song and in cinema, as in Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song (1971) and The Harder They Come (1973), for example.

Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song is an independent film by Melvin Van Peebles in which an apolitical performer in a sex show, played by Van Peebles, defends a militant youth against police brutality. He then escapes to Mexico, depicted in a “have-you-seen-him montage” but not before committing his own violent acts against the women that cross his path. In Jamaican independent film The Harder They Come, co-writers Perry Henzell and Trevor Rhone adapt the 1940s news story and cultural phenomenon centered on Rhygin (Vincent “Ivanhoe” Martin), a murderer and thief who eluded the police for weeks before he was finally shot and killed. Henzell’s film is the story of Ivan Martin, a singer turned outlaw when economic injustice in the music industry disillusioned him. Van Peebles and Henzell’s films are both non-Blaxploitation 1970s action films, which draw upon the spaghetti Western’s use of irony and shrewd business dealings and the genre’s overall fascination with volatility in the social order, in ways that prefigure Django Unchained.
The many generic correspondences among *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, *The Harder They Come*, and *Django Unchained* include the expressive deployment of costume, use of theme song, and disjointed travels across time and space. In *The Harder They Come*, Ivan rejects the plain work clothes he is expected to wear in favor of a bold yellow hat and other outré selections. Similar to the Western’s protagonists the leads in both *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* and *Django Unchained* wear ochre, black, or gray work clothes. When chained Django wears dark and tattered clothing then chooses a clean blue suit for this semi-Eman- cipation before returning to dark but sharp and well-tailored clothing when he enters into a business arrangement with Schultz. Likewise, dark brown and black clothing mark Sweetback’s renegade reformation. These three freedmen-badmen on the run—Sweetback, Ivan, and Django—would have much to talk about if they spoke. Taciturn and terse communication is among their most recognizable shared hallmarks, however. They all cross lines between dandyism and ruggedness, hustler and revolutionary, criminal and folk hero: the construction of their performance is central to their characterization and each film shows its lead character putting on his persona, selecting each item and deciding how to enact himself in the world. Django could well be the “badasss nigger come back to collect some dues,” promised in the closing moments of *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*.

*The Harder They Come* and *Django Unchained* both take source material from seminal spaghetti Western *Django* (Sergio Corbucci, 1966) such as songs, scenery, actors, and, in the case of *The Harder They Come*, actual film clips. All three films rely on spectators’ expectations of the Western and the spaghetti Western—that there would be shoot-outs, memorable one-liners, horses (or motorcycles as a substitute), and that much of the bloody action would take place outdoors. And terror. The Western’s social world is full of violence, deceit and uncertainty, moreover, the dubbing and imitation that characterized the Italian adaptations parodied the Western’s earnestness and darkened its already somber themes. *Django Unchained* is a Western via this so-called lesser form. All three films feature in-between characters and perhaps for that reason they are essentially marginalized in a world where the lines between slave and free, rich and poor, good and bad are starkly drawn—but also absurdly drawn. Who tracks good and bad in a society defined by slavery? Thus the anti-hero is a lone figure surveying and navigating a hostile society according to his own rules, as illustrated by his running alone through urban wilderness (*Sweetback*), riding on a motorcycle down a highway (*Ivan*), and trotting on horseback (*Django*).
Django Unchained’s spaghetti Western iconography and the genre’s thrills were certainly among its main attractions. The trailer promised a freed slave baadassss hero that rode a horse for our own times, as indicated by the contemporary hip hop on the soundtrack. Throughout the narrative, the film reflexively references the novel sight of a black man on a horse both for characters in the film and for audiences in the theater. Indeed with the exception of black-cast Westerns, about which more in a moment, African Americans were largely absent from the Western and its subgenres. But that was one of its myths: the west was entirely white, or white people were in control and the only people out there who made sense. As is well documented, Westerns depicted Native Americans in narrow roles limited to clichés such as noble savage, ignoble savage or warrior, and exotic “squaw.” In Django Unchained, the American south “somewhere in Texas” is both western and southern, mocking the futility of historical certainty in fictional film. The major cultural divisions appear to be between slaves and masters, African Americans and whites, while Native Americans are largely obscured and the odd German and Australian internationalize cast of characters, perhaps ridiculing the parochialism of the standard Western.

Since the Western emerged in the 1910s it has always been an unstable mixture of U.S. historical myth and reality. On the one hand there was actual aggressive western expansion into Native Americans’ lands and the ensuing resistance. However, there were also nostalgic ahistorical songs and stories about the west, its symbols, figures, and the adventures that took place there, thus both fictional and non-fictional narratives informed the Western. Narration of the past involved interpretation of that past. The central theme of the genre is the conflict between order and lawlessness and it embodied racially coded interpretations about who brought order and who represented lawlessness. Such cultural battles manifested between characters, for instance as ranchers and railroad men battled for land, but also within a single character such as a cowboy who must choose between home and the frontier. Many Western heroes are in transition or in-between figures, mediating between the spectator’s perhaps more conservative sensibilities and the diegesis’ ambiguous themes, as well as between opposing forces in the story such as those between justice and revenge. The rugged, gritty, and dirty world of Westerns provided a stage where...
often extreme violence such as shootings, massacres, hangings, and other physical assaults were presented in a framework that made them seem acceptable because they were justified in the narrative—a fictional version of how the west was won/lost. But where the Western was respected, the spaghetti Western’s violent themes were seen as derivative and inferior on the one hand or subversive and burlesque on the other.

What *Django Unchained* borrows from the Western genres is style: performance and characterization, scenery, monochromatic color scheme of browns, brown-grays, and brown-greens—and gun violence. But it additionally gets from Blaxploitation its use of vivid primary colors, its emphasis on both physical and verbal dexterity (in a minimalist fashion), and its use of hyperbole in all of this. Such a lack of obvious sincerity makes the film difficult to place: is it making fun of slavery? Or is it restoring immediacy to a well-worn story? Is it connecting us to the past or commenting on our own times? Or is it meaningless collage?

*Django Unchained* draws upon a general rebellious yet fabulous gritty street attitude that could be seen and felt across the public sphere in music, film, and other performance in the 1970s. Django is verbally a typical Western character in that he is a man of few words, but he is visually a Blaxploitation figure in his use of color and style. With its contrasts between opulence and material splendor on the one hand and abject poverty on the other, between excessive liberty and slavery, *Django Unchained* captures our own post-civil rights post-colonial moment that involves a taste for excess in the midst of a state of scarcity.

Django’s swagger recalls a small coterie of mostly forgotten black Westerns and their heroes: Herb Jeffries’s films *Two-Gun Man from Harlem* (1938), and *Harlem Rides the Range* (1939), *The Bronze Buckaroo* (1939), Woody Strode in John Ford’s *Sergeant Rutledge* (1960) Sidney Poitier’s *Buck and the Preacher* (1972), and *Thomassine and Bushrod* (1974), starring Max Julien and Vonetta McGee and directed by Gordon Parks, Jr. who also directed *Super Fly* (1972). Such films reference the historical presence of African Americans in the west as documented by Tricia Martineau Wagner in *African American Women of the Old West* and *Black Cowboys of the Old West* as they underscore the role of what Powell calls “body-rhetoric” or how the body speaks; in other words, style in black cultural expression. These Westerns represent a kind of role play in which African American writers, actors, directors, and their audiences, cut across normative boundaries of black identification in Hollywood and in the real world to assert a post-civil rights masculinity based on both pleasure and power.

*Django Unchained* captures our own post-civil rights post-colonial moment that involves a taste for excess in the midst of a state of scarcity.
Historiography and entertainment films have a complicated relationship in that historians seek to document the past with evidence, while movies exploit the past, twisting or erasing factual truths in service to telling the story—and selling the story. Yet historians and entertainers both address collective memory, through myths, figures, or events. The movies—that is fictional feature films of various genres made for entertainment—are less history and more storytelling, with characters, point of view, mise-en-scene, and other cinematic elements being put to the service of the story’s own structure. Entertainment value is fine; it can make difficult subjects approachable and draw audiences to obscure material. Whether a mainstream fiction film can productively serve as an educational tool, however, must be weighed carefully. Historical films are a genre of fictional filmmaking.

In *Django Unchained* the past was vaguely situated as “1858, two years before the Civil War. Somewhere in Texas” then dispensed with historicity giving way to the “real” action. As a campy film that revels in its excess, the film is not historically grounded and provides little of strict educational value regarding slavery. *Django Unchained* references slavery but leaves it an unexplored semi-premise, an indeterminate ahistorical non-location. Thus it maintains, not intervening at all, upon our collective ignorance about slavery, where its taboos and stereotypes reside and fester. *Django Unchained* is not about slavery. The Civil War and slavery are both imprecise points of reference made early on but that go on to be underexplored yet exaggerated and exploited.

Tarantino is a showman, not unlike P. T. Barnum, and he values pulp, the logics of sensation, performance, and spectacle. For many, this type of work is difficult to stomach in these trying times. Tarantino tries the nerves. Appearing in the film through his fictional surrogate Schultz, the director metaphorically stumbles around in the dark, riding his coach into a scenario that initially looks like it could be an historical movie about slavery; he undermines that possibility when Schultz emerges from the night, revealed in a horse-drawn coach with an excessively fake and enormous single tooth ludicrously bobbing atop it. *Django Unchained* is almost—though not actually—about the utterly artificial nature of the movies and the virtual impossibility of conveying anything but a show.

By its nature, a fictional movie is far from a conveyer of verified artifacts or necessarily of any facts. Then again history itself is untidy with the often uncomfortable and complicated truth and thus it is not
easily arranged into balanced elements. Any movie, whether it is serious and sentimental or campy and absurd, refracts reality rather than truly representing it. Film subtly or overtly frames, shapes, and thus interprets that which the camera records on it because that is its nature; the movies are, in every sense, cut and framed.

Among the paradoxes of film and history is this: if the past is to mean anything it has to be told and imagined. Imagination and narrative, however, threaten the factual accuracy on which an ethical, rational, and compassionate historiography relies. The past moreover is in a constant state of flux with deteriorating archival materials, missing documents, and the broader social inequalities that can become inscribed in what gets passed down as history. The past is never over. Maybe *Django Unchained* unintentionally marks as it mirrors a stumbling and uncertain path through the rubble of the American not-so-past and our counterfeit attempts to represent the revolting and indescribable. ☛