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Themes of Whiteness in *Bulletproof Monk*, *Kill Bill*, and *The Last Samurai*

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In 2003, Hollywood released three major films in which a White protagonist “mastering” an Asian martial art was part of the narrative: *Kill Bill*, *The Last Samurai*, and *Bulletproof Monk*. In each film, the protagonist’s ethnicity is questioned as an inhibition but found to be irrelevant. It is the position of the present study that these films are beneficially understood through a theoretical framework of strategic rhetoric of whiteness expressed in four common themes: The supraethnic viability of whiteness, the necessary defeat of Asians, the disallowance of anti-White sentiment, and the presence of at least one helpful and/or generous Asian cohort. The themes’ presence in the films, as well as their implications, both local and global, are examined in detail.

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Whiteness and the American martial arts films

The martial arts film originated in Asia and first gained widespread popularity in America in the 1970s with the rise to stardom of Bruce Lee. During the 1980s, martial arts returned to American theaters but with a significant shift in the ethnic makeup of the martial arts star. In Bruce Lee’s absence, White men such as Chuck Norris, Jean Claude Van Damme, and Steven Seagal gained fame as “martial arts” actors. The shift in the ethnicity is a significant change that demands investigation because in 2003, *Kill Bill*, *The Last Samurai*, and *Bulletproof Monk* again made a White person “mastering” Asian martial arts a narrative theme in mainstream American film. It is the position of the present study that these films are beneficially understood through a theoretical framework of strategic rhetoric of whiteness. Themes of whiteness inform and affect the narrative structure of these films, allowing for perpetuation of specific ideological constructs of whiteness that include ethnic superiority and recurrent, stringent assignment of roles and functions based on ethnicity.

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Theoretical framework: Strategic rhetoric of whiteness

The present study utilizes a modified form of Nakayama and Krizek’s (1999) strategic rhetoric framework, extending its application beyond individual discourse to film. A strategic rhetoric framework is used to expose those strategies that define and preserve the centrality of whiteness in American martial arts films. In addition, because a theory of strategic rhetoric allows for deconstruction of “the locus from which Other differences are calculated and organized” (p. 95), its applicability to those whiteness themes that function more representationally than rhetorically is also significant.

The adoption of this framework is grounded in the necessity of highlighting the strategic nature of the function of the whiteness themes in the films. Their deployment defines and preserves the centrality of whiteness through dialogue, narrative, and characterizations. That these strategies are frequently deployed in both literal and figurative ways underlines the necessity of their exposure. The whiteness themes in the films under analysis rationalize and validate the cultural appropriations in the films and secure the center for the White protagonist. These themes establish and defend who and what Whites can be, what others can and cannot do and/or be, and what kind of feeling and action by others is allowed or disallowed in reference to Whites.

Previous studies have examined whiteness in film (Dyer, 1992; Foster, 2003; Vera & Gordon, 2003) in terms of characterization and representation, whereas others (Hall, 1995; Rhodes, 1993; Shohat & Stam, 2000) have examined the role of racist ideologies in media. In addition, Whites’ cultural appropriation of Native American cultural practices and artifacts has been examined thoroughly (Deloria, 1998; Huhndorf, 2001; Root, 1996; Ziff & Rao, 1998). The present study lays out several notable similarities between these characterizations and appropriations and the filmic depictions of Whites mastering Asian martial arts. The present study also shows how whiteness is strategically deployed, specifically through intercultural activities in film, through themes common to all three films.

Frankenberg (1993) considers whiteness to be three interrelated phenomena. First, whiteness is “a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a ‘standpoint,’ a place from which White people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, ‘whiteness’ refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed” (p. 1). One such underinterrogated cultural practice can be alternately identified as intercultural activity or cultural appropriation, wherein a White person seeks to emulate or imitate the actions and/or beliefs of someone ethnoculturally different from themselves. Intercultural behaviors in which a White person crosses ethnocultural boundaries in an attempt to enrich his or her “human” experience are frequently grounded in an attitude, which displays a significant degree of entitlement. Often, the White person behaves “as if the desired objects or images already belong to [him/her] … the source of all the fascination can have no say in the terms of the exchange. If we think we already own something, why would we ask anybody’s permission to take it?” (Root, 1996, p. 72).
This attitude of entitlement is displayed in whiteness in significant ways. Whereas it no doubt springs from a position of structural advantage, it also shows how the unquestioned invisibility of whiteness rationalizes the adoption or appropriation of Others’ cultural activities as an expression of a universal, human impulse or right. From a critical perspective, however, this universalistic approach “writes out the history, politics, struggles, and the conditions that produced these specific cultural practices. Recontextualized practices, uninterrogated, can give the illusion of crossing cultural boundaries and globalizing experiences through public consumption of borrowed decontextualized cultural practices” (Drzewiecka & Wong, 1999, p. 206).

The appropriation of the term “human” is a strategic rhetoric of whiteness. Through its use, Whites’ behavior becomes “natural,” and hence harder, if not impossible, to criticize. By “conceptualizing ‘white’ as natural, rather than cultural … whiteness eludes any recognition of power relations embedded in this category” (Nakayama & Krizek, 1999, p. 99). This standpoint is especially troublesome because “the essential human being tends in any period to bear a striking resemblance to the dominant group of that time and place” (Davies, 1997, p. 59). The ability to appropriate cultural forms, therefore, comes not from any human or natural right but from the power and privilege that membership in the dominant segment of society endows. For these reasons, the present study defines cultural appropriation as “not only the taking up of something and making it one’s own but also the ability to do so” (Root, 1996, p. 70).

Strategic rhetoric of whiteness used in the films under analysis helps to defend and perpetuate the conflation of White with human to rationalize and camouflage cultural appropriation as a normal, harmless, natural behavior, and to promote a kind of supraethnic viability for Whites that is not equally represented for Others. As will be shown, the actions of the White protagonists in the films are not benign instances of intercultural exchange; they are quite significantly one-sided in nature. Because film is a globally distributed form of mass communication, the whiteness themes, and the rhetorical strategies used to rationalize them, will have a broader impact than the rhetoric of whiteness deployed by individuals. The effect of the themes on the indigenous audience must also be contrasted with the global implications of the themes’ presentations; these are discussed later in the study. At present, it is imperative to note that through strategic deployment of whiteness themes, the films provide the White audience with filmic reinforcement of underinterrogated assumptions of whiteness.

In addition, the films provide popular-culture reference points to which the audience may point as “proof” of the acceptability of activities like cultural appropriation. Through such strategic rhetorical deployment, whiteness themes are woven into the fabric of so-called common sense and, uncritically, beyond reproach, negotiation, or argument in the social realm. Because of this, the “construction of the discursive space of whiteness has material effects on the entire social structure and our places in relation to it” (Nakayama & Krizek, 1999, p. 103).
Data selection

*Bulletproof Monk*, *Kill Bill*, and *The Last Samurai* were chosen for the present analysis because they met several interrelated criteria. All three films were released in 2003, and all feature a White protagonist’s acquisition of Asian martial arts skill as part of the narrative thrust of the film. In addition, all three films were released to at least 2,900 screens in the United States, making them major releases. They are also the only major Hollywood releases of 2003 in which White acquisition and display of martial arts is a plot focus. As a consequence, the recurrence of the whiteness themes in these films is even more significant as no alternatives are presented.

Themes of whiteness

The present analysis is organized around four recurrent themes of whiteness found in the three films that encompass the following ideas: (a) Whiteness is not preventative of Asian martial arts mastery and indeed seemingly predilects one toward it. This theme is made explicit in the films; each character faces ethnically based doubt, dismissal, or rejection of their martial arts aspirations, and yet each achieves exemplary skill. (b) The ethnicity of the Asian opponent is, conversely, necessary to establishing White mastery; the “Asian-ness” of the skill and the defeated practitioner are integral components of the inscription of White superiority. The proof of the White character’s viability as a master of an Asian martial art is inscribed by his or her defeating an Asian practitioner. (c) The films all share assignment of dichotomous roles of hostility or helpfulness for Asian characters. Asians who are defiant are often portrayed as morally flawed and hence deserving of their defeat or death; hostility against Whites is not allowed. Any antipathy stemming from a perceived intrusion by the White character is either dismantled by the White practitioner through victory and/or death or abandoned by the Asian character, thus nullifying it. (d) In contrast, other Asians will make plain their willingness to assist, educate, and encourage the White character. This is often manifested in the proffering of knowledge, techniques, or objects such as weapons that confer great power and capability on the White practitioner. In each section of the analysis, some of the immediate implications of the themes are addressed; the broader implications are addressed later.

Theme 1: the supraethnic viability of whiteness

For White martial artists in American film, ethnicity is not preventative of mastery; there is nothing ethnically salient or even incongruous about a White person learning and mastering Asian martial arts, often with great speed. In *Bulletproof Monk* (2003), a new protector for a Tibetan scroll conveying ultimate power must be found. The Monk, having left the Temple of Sublime Truth with the Scroll some 60 years earlier, is now in search of a replacement. Although a group of Tibetan monks are “promising,” none are the equal of the White protagonist Kar, who has learned martial arts...
through imitation of the kung fu films he shows in a rundown movie theater. When his ethnicity is questioned as a preventative dynamic, the Monk sagely intones that “prophecies must apply to everyone or they mean nothing.” This statement establishes and defends Kar’s viability; that it is mouthed by a non-White ostensibly adds to its veracity.

In the film, the Monk begins as Kar’s teacher. By film’s end, the roles are reversed; Kar, the former student, has led the Monk “to the path I should have chosen.” This rapid ascension to mastery is displayed in Kar’s learning to levitate in just hours. “After all,” observes Kar’s Japanese employer, “that kid’s got potential.” His potential, however, has been formed through direct imitation of martial arts films, the equivalent of learning to box by watching Rocky films. In one scene he is shown practicing his kung fu by recreating the movements of the onscreen martial artists behind him. This mimetic construct is making a statement about either the audience’s ability to suspend disbelief or the assimilability of Asian martial arts; it is more likely the second than the first. This perspective is supported by dialogue in which the Monk, after watching Kar defeat several people, expresses admiration for his skill and asks where he received his training. Kar tells him that he studies at the Golden Palace. The Monk, not knowing that The Golden Palace is in fact the movie theater, is impressed, asking wide-eyed if Kar has trained with the “venerable fighting monks of Jing Go.” Thus, the martial arts master looking for a replacement is shown to be quite naive, as if Kar’s skill is such that he might well have trained in Asia, or as if the Monk was unable to tell the difference between legitimate martial arts training and aping of filmic representation.

The speed, efficacy, and unorthodox yet highly efficient means by which Whites learn martial arts is a recurring motif in Western film. In The Matrix (1999), the White character Neo is imbued with exemplary martial arts skill in seconds through the use of computers. Yet, the film makes a perfunctory nod to the skill’s cultural origin by decorating the set where Neo’s new skills are first displayed in an Asian motif. Thus, Neo’s whiteness does not keep him from gaining a skill that is aesthetically bound to its own ethnic origins; he can transcend the ethnic specificity that the skill cannot. Similarly, in The Fifth Element (1997), the “supreme,” “divine,” “most perfect” being in the universe, played by White actress Milla Jovovich, literally speed-reads her way to martial arts proficiency in the time it takes her to do a comical imitation of Bruce Lee.

In The Last Samurai (2003), Tom Cruise plays Nathan Algren, a White American in Japan captured by rebel samurai. In 6 months, he masters the art of the samurai sword such that bystanders acknowledge him as equal to his instructor Ujio, a man who has studied the skill his entire life. Later in the film, Algren uses his newfound swordsmanship to single-handedly defeat six Japanese men who try to kill him. Not only he has mastered a skill he literally just began to learn but he has become so adept as to dispatch with ease six people who have likely spent a lifetime studying the same art. In addition to mastering the katana, Algren assimilates quickly and seamlessly into his new culture. In the 6 months he is held captive, he learns to speak Japanese
and displays an intuitive grasp of at least one Japanese custom that he could not have known previously. Finding a *hakama*, *dogi*, and *obi* in his room, Algren is next seen fully and correctly dressed in them. This involves the tying of several very precise and complicated knots that are in no way self-evident. Algren somehow knows how to dress himself in the Japanese clothing without any assistance.

*Kill Bill* echoes the theme of a White protagonist’s mastery of an Asian martial art, both in narrative and casting. The titular antagonist of *Kill Bill* is played by David Carradine. He is best known to American audiences as the lead actor in the 1970s television drama *Kung Fu*, in which he portrayed Kwai Chang Caine, a biracial Shaolin monk. The series was originally conceived as a vehicle for then-rising star Bruce Lee, but his accented English and ethnicity were seen as prohibitive barriers to a role on prime-time television, even for a show about a Chinese immigrant. Carradine, who at that time had no training in Asian martial arts, was cast instead.

In *Kill Bill*, Carradine evokes this former character through the use of a flute similar to one he played in the TV series. The actual instrument in *Kill Bill* is one that Carradine played in *The Silent Flute* (1979), a film written by Bruce Lee before his death but filmed afterward, in which Carradine again replaced Lee. Tarantino explains the casting of Carradine as part of having been “so influenced by seventies kung fu films and to have, as far as I’m concerned, my three favorite stars of kung fu from three different countries. Gordon Liu representing Hong Kong. Sonny Chiba representing Japan. And David Carradine representing America” (Machiyama, 2003, para. 29). Tarantino’s perspective highlights the ability of visual media to construct and convey a sense of martial arts mastery by Whites; Carradine is the only actor-turned-martial artist of the three, acquiring his skill after being cast in a role for which it was a necessity. He benefits from his recognition as a martial arts practitioner by marketing a line of “martial arts workout” videos. To revisit an earlier allegory, this is the equivalent of Sylvester Stallone becoming a noted pugilist as well as “boxing fitness” entrepreneur.

*Kill Bill*’s protagonist, the Bride, is played by White actress Uma Thurman. The Bride is, in her own words, “more than proficient in the exquisite art of the samurai sword.” In Tokyo, she battles the head of the Japanese underworld, a Chinese American woman named O Ren, played by Lucy Liu. In a flashback, we are shown O Ren establishing her own ethnic bona fides; having just decapitated a man who questioned her ability (as an ethnic outsider) to rule the Japanese underworld, she declares, “The price you pay for bringing up either my Chinese or American heritage as a negative is—I collect your fucking head.” This very clear statement about the dangers of showing any antipathy to ethnic outsiders supports the theme of a White woman’s viability as an Asian martial arts master. This scene establishes very clearly that an exclusive difference is completely disallowed. When the Bride comes face to face with O Ren, she is taunted for the juxtaposition of her ethnicity and choice of weapon: “Silly Caucasian girl likes to play with Samurai swords.” Shortly thereafter, the flippant O Ren falls to the Bride’s sword.
The ability of Whites to master Asian martial arts is a recurring and expected part of American martial arts films. The foregone conclusion of the Western martial artist’s victory over the Asian demonstrates what Said (1994) calls a “flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand” (p. 7). This ascension to mastery should ostensibly write out the salience of ethnicity. It is, therefore, an interesting corollary that the Asian ethnicity of the vanquished is integral to the mastery of the White victor.

Theme 2: Asian ethnicity serves whiteness

The second whiteness theme grows out of the first. Although White ethnicity is no barrier to appropriation and mastery of Asian martial arts, the Asian ethnicity of the defeated practitioner is a salient and necessary element in establishing White mastery. The presence of White martial artists in martial arts films is not a new phenomenon. Bruce Lee fought White opponents in his films, but the ideological thrust of the films in general and the fights in particular are much more pro-Chinese/Asian than anti-White (Teo, 1999). The reverse cannot be said to be true of martial arts films produced in the United States; as will be shown, quite often the White hero defeats the Asian because he/she is Asian. What better way to illustrate mastery of an Asian martial art than to defeat or kill an Asian practitioner?

In the present study, martial arts is operationalized as an Asian cultural artifact, one which has a global presence and yet a distinct cultural origin. If martial arts mastery is operationalized as a “ceremonial object” of another culture, the authenticity and value of the object “is precisely dependent on its having been removed from its formerly meaningful social context …. The point of owning a ceremonial object seems to be to display ownership or, more precisely, to display the ability to possess something of value to someone else” (Root, 1996, p. 81). The White imitator’s display of the appropriated mastery both to and through the Asian practitioner nullifies the Asian’s relationship to (and possession of) the mastery. Therefore, a necessary element of the re-presentation is that the display is directed to the now-defeated Asian.

In American martial arts films, the ethnic dichotomy of the skill and the person seeking to master it is a salient aspect of the narrative; it is as though the acquisition of the Asian skill by the White character is amplified by its having been created or possessed by the Asian. The recurrence of this particular narrative device indicates not only that it is likely expected by the White audience but that filmmakers are aware of, and pander to, this expectation. For the White audience, the juxtaposition of a White person in an Asian cultural setting is perhaps not incongruous as much as it is exhilarating, especially because the White character will quickly dominate the situation through superlative performance of the Other’s cultural practices.

When Nathan Algren steps out of Taka’s home dressed in her late husband’s samurai armor, it is intended as a dramatic moment and not a comic one. Algren has become a samurai; he is not only dressed as one but dressed in the armor of a samurai.
he himself killed. He is therefore “good enough” to “be” a samurai. Because Algren’s skill with the katana is learned from a Japanese man, his rapid ascension to being able to fight his former antagonist to a draw is seen as that much more valuable. He is just as capable in the Japanese skill as the Japanese man. This mastery is reinforced by Algren’s dispatch of six Japanese attackers using his samurai skills; had he killed six Westerners, the impact would not carry the same meaning. This scene shows the audience that he performs the Japanese skill better than the six Japanese men he kills.

The same theme is present in Kill Bill; the Bride, wearing an outfit that copies that of Bruce Lee in Game of Death, faces a dismissive O Ren, who taunts her: “Silly Caucasian girl likes to play with Samurai swords.” This statement is made in English, even though the Bride has been shown to speak Japanese. At midpoint in their duel, O Ren, realizing the Bride’s mastery of the samurai sword, acknowledges the Bride as her equal and consequent superior, this time in Japanese: “For mocking you earlier, I apologize.” O Ren’s Japanese apology functions as a concession of the White practitioner’s superior ability and cultural facility with things Asian. The Bride’s single-handed, wholesale slaughter of O Ren and her Japanese gang, which is presented in a manner such that the audience never questions, much less doubts the outcome, supports the observation that “the desire to appropriate and to usurp meaning from another cultural tradition is not just a romanticized nostalgia for supposedly dead cultures but also can be a way of marking death and conquest and doing so on the bodies and communities of living people” (Root, 1996, p. 96).

The Last Samurai and Kill Bill feature a White protagonist whose exemplary skill in Asian martial arts is proved through the defeat of Asians in Asia. It is a foregone conclusion that the White person will be seen defeating the inferior Asian when both are using an Asian skill. The one-sided nature of these portrayals in American martial arts films tells the audience that Whites “can imitate the Orient without the opposite being true” (Said, 1994, p. 160). A repetitive framework of superiority in which the White person achieves and/or comes to possess skill, mastery, and recognition (as well as mastery over and the acquiescence of Others) displays a colonialist attitude that reinforces Western hegemony by “producing the East discursively as the West’s inferior Other, a manoeuvre which strengthens—indeed, even partially constructs—the West’s self-image as a superior civilization” (Moore-Gilbert, 1997, p. 39). Narrative constructions that make recurrent, implicit assignments of superiority and inferiority along ethnic lines are examples of how White superiority is inscribed, reinforced, and perpetuated through film. The ability of the White practitioner to defeat Asians, using an Asian skill, in Asia, propagates the theme of a ubiquitous, even inevitable White supremacy of global proportions.

A critical perspective of White acquisition of martial arts skill in film makes plain how “the appropriation of cultural forms enacts a colonial attitude that values the objects of a culture while dismissing the artists and the cultures that have created them. In fact, it is the denigration and destruction of the culture that supports the sense of entitlement necessary for appropriation” (Sorrells, 2002, p. 21). This is
especially problematic given the anticolonialist attributes of so many martial arts films (Teo, 1999).

*Bulletproof Monk*’s White protagonist reveals to the Monk that he has adopted a Cantonese name. When the Monk seeks to correct his pronunciation of it, Kar rebuffs him, saying that it is his name and he can pronounce it “any way I want.” This may also be because he is virtually unable to speak any Cantonese whatsoever, a point made clear later in the film. The White character’s indifference to the pronunciation of his name, something crucial in the Cantonese dialect, is an example of “imitation in the interest of acquisition. As such it need not have entailed any grasp of the cultural reality of the other, only a willingness to make contact and effect some kind of exchange” (Greenblatt, 1991, p. 99). Kar wanted a Cantonese name, so he took one. However, he did so without any interest in or concern for the linguistic or cultural viability of that name, two crucial aspects of the action, and failed on both counts. Cantonese was interesting enough for him to appropriate, but not good enough for him to submit to in any way, such as correct pronunciation. His actions are reflective of his desires, not the object thereof.

The actions and attitudes of these White protagonists are important because filmic fictions “inevitably bring into play real-life assumptions not only about space and time but also about social and cultural relationships” (Shohat & Stam, 2000, p. 146) and therefore have real-life consequences for both Whites and the rest of the world. Recurring, static assignment of the ethnicity of victor and vanquished in the American martial arts film illustrates how the “confiscation of another people’s cultural artifacts is a way of marking and remarking the defeat of the enemy and is always closely linked to the repetition of the moment of conquest, a repetition that can occur in how the world comes to be represented aesthetically” (Root, 1996, p. 188). Quite often, the only way for Asians to avoid defeat (and death) is to forego confrontation altogether in favor of supplication.

**Theme 3: hostility toward Whites is not allowed**

Asian defiance in American martial arts films is not allowed and is dissipated either willingly or forcefully. Asians in American martial arts films display one of two attitudes: helpful or defiant. Those Asians who are defiant or question the White person’s presence are defeated, killed, or overcome their “inappropriate” resentment and, realizing their “mistake,” befriend the White person. The dualistic characterization of Asians as either helpful or threatening (and therefore in need of reproach) has been utilized frequently in recent American films. Jet Li’s first American film, *Lethal Weapon 4* (1998), cast him as the antagonist, a dour, contemptuous man dressed in black, possessed of nearly invincible martial arts skill; he seems to be the very embodiment of what Said (1994) calls “the strangely threatening excesses of Oriental mysteries” (p. 56). It turns out that he is not quite so invincible; he is defeated and killed in the film’s climactic martial arts battle by Mel Gibson and Danny Glover.
The dominant attitude about intercultural behaviors like the acquisition of martial arts skill would have us believe that because Asian martial arts “belong” to everyone, there is no good or acceptable reason why a non-Asian person should not be able to study or master them. Neither is there any reason to accept that an Asian person might be unhappy about what he/she sees as cultural appropriation, and certainly no reason why the Asian person would have any right to be angry about it.

Opposition to what is seen as the innocuous indulgence of human impulse is often seen as a gross abrogation of the White person’s “right” (or entitlement) to sample difference. But difference is constructed here in a highly skewed fashion. Whereas difference is obviously enticing, interesting, and its consumption “enriching,” difference is also unable (or not allowed) to function preventatively: the Other is assigned an attractive difference but is not entitled to (or allowed) an exclusive difference, “while the marking of difference defines the ‘other’ in opposition to the normalized, dominant group, and tends towards exclusion and distinction, it also works to make difference attractive and alluring, reflecting the desires and projections of the dominant group … difference is marketed as exotic, and delicious for the consumption of the dominant culture” (Sorrells, 2002, p. 23).

_Bulletproof Monk_’s White protagonist Kar faces hostility quite literally at the hands of one of the aspiring monks who is obviously unhappy at the idea of a non-Tibetan protector. Their introductory handshake turns into a contest of will and strength that is broken only by the reappearance of the Monk. Later in the film, the hostile monk is discovered to be a traitor to the group and is killed. The location of both hostility to Kar and treachery to the group in the same character is significant in that it makes a moral statement about the character’s obviously unacceptable reticence toward Kar.

In _The Last Samurai_, Nathan Algren lives among the rebel samurai for 6 months. In this time, the newly widowed (by Algren) Taka goes from describing him as an odiferous intrusion to becoming enamored of him. The children he made fatherless come to see him as their new paternal figure. He becomes an accepted member of a community whose unifying dynamic is their resistance to and rejection of the proliferation of Westerners (like Algren) in Japan. When Algren first attempts to learn the samurai sword, he is rejected forcefully as an outsider. Once allowed to study the _katana_, his amazingly rapid (but thematically imminent) ascension to mastery is accompanied by the eventual (but thematically imminent) offer of acceptance and equality by his formerly unreceptive instructor Ujio and others. The White audience likely venerates what they see as Algren’s tenacity in seeking to learn and his achievement with the sword, not his almost pedantically stubborn will to intrude into a cultural space in which he is clearly not welcome.

_Kill Bill_’s White protagonist also moves through a world populated by Asians who are either helpful or hostile. The hostility, or in some cases the hostile person, does not endure. The Bride is sent to train with the monk Pai Mei, played by Chinese actor Gordon Lau Kar Fai. When Bill delivers the Bride to Pai Mei, he warns her that
the monk “hates Caucasians, despises Americans, and has nothing but contempt for women.” Even so, Pai Mei has accepted the Bride as a student; he has, in his old age of more than a century, become “lonely.”

Those Asians who do not accept the Bride are not treated so kindly. In Kill Bill, reinforcement of Asians’ inferiority, up to and including death, is usually prefaced by their calling into question or rejecting a White person’s superiority or status. An initially dismissive O Ren is taught a mortal lesson for her flippancy about Caucasians wielding samurai swords. A flashback shows us the death of Pai Mei, the martial arts master over a century old, possessed of seemingly infinite power. He is poisoned by Elle Driver, another White woman, because he had plucked out her eye as punishment for her insolence.

The young monk’s treachery, Algren’s acceptance, O Ren’s death, and Pai Mei’s descent from gruff invincibility to poisoning victim function as examples of how exclusive difference “is domesticated and thereby made manageable. This is the primary operation of the process of appropriation, which seeks to absorb difference and make it part of the so-called larger culture. Difference is transformed into something that is no longer all that different and hence ceases to be dangerous” (Root, 1996, p. 160).

Theme 4: Asians helping Whites

Not all Asians in American martial arts films are defiant. Some are more than willing to assist, befriend, or teach the White practitioner. These characters are the personification of the fourth whiteness theme. Whereas defiant Asians are consistently brought to heel in the three films, those who act more amicably receive much different characterizations and narrative treatment. These Asians will welcome the White person and often confer on him or her a secret technique, hoarded knowledge, or an object not shared with other Asians. The helpful Asian is apparently a resonant theme with the White audience; the character is perhaps an expected part of the American martial arts film. An interesting contrast with Jet Li’s villain from Lethal Weapon 4 is Pat Morita’s helpful Mr. Miyagi in the Karate Kid films of the 1980s. It is also noteworthy that Jackie Chan, the first Asian since Bruce Lee to make a notable entry into the American film market, always presented a similarly nonthreatening, amusing face.

Asians who are helpful often prove their loyalty to (or acceptance of) the White person by providing them with valuable cultural artifacts, whether a technique or a weapon. Bulletproof Monk’s White protagonist uneasily falls under the very patient tutelage of the Monk; whereas he offers Kar what he calls “universal truth,” Kar calls it “fortune cookie philosophy.” Undeterred by this lack of interest and respect, the Monk persists, eventually imparting to Kar the skill of levitation and the invincibility and immortality the Scroll conveys on its protector.

In The Last Samurai, Nathan Algren is taught the use of the samurai sword, a cultural activity not previously made available to outsiders. Having become the confidant and friend of the rebel leader Katsumoto, Algren is given a sword that
Katsumoto has commissioned for him. Before the film’s climactic battle, the widow Taka asks if Algren will honor their family by wearing the armor her husband wore when Algren killed him.

In *Kill Bill*, the Bride travels to Okinawa, where she convinces swordsmit Hattori Hanzo, played by Sonny Chiba, to build her a sword; she needs “Japanese steel.” Hanzo, whom the film characterizes as the greatest swordsmit in the world, had been retired. He tells the Bride that the swords he has on display are not for sale. The Bride replies that she doesn’t expect to be sold a sword but to be given one because Hanzo is Bill’s former teacher, thus obliging him. Persuaded by this logic and mindful of this “obligation,” Hanzo swiftly and without argument abandons his retirement of nearly 3 decades in order to provide the White woman with her desired object. In so doing, he builds what he considers his “finest sword.” The Bride is given, not sold, Hanzo’s ultimate achievement. It is noteworthy that the Bride kills O Ren with this sword because O Ren covets it, never having been able to procure a Hanzo sword herself. Thus, the Bride possesses both superior Asian skill and a superior Asian tool available to the White person but not the Asian.

After an initial period of gruffness, Pai Mei teaches the Bride the 1-inch punch technique made famous by Bruce Lee, which she later uses to save her own life. He also teaches her the “five-point palm exploding heart technique,” the “deadliest blow in all of the martial arts,” a technique so powerful and so secretive that he had never, until he met the right (White) person, taught it to anyone. In narrative terms, however, the audience is likely not surprised when they find out that the White protagonist has learned the secret.

The reduction of Asians to figures of either servility or hostility in *Bulletproof Monk*, *Kill Bill*, and *The Last Samurai* is an example of how the “aestheticization of colonized peoples can always be differentially valorized, at times seen as fascinating and at other times seen as a sign of decadence or insubordination” (Root, 1996, p. 31). From a critical perspective, the inherent arrogance of the narratives lies in their willingness to foist upon the audience these intercultural conundras. But for the White audience, such contradictions may not even be visible because “White discourse implacably reduces the non-White subject to being a function of the White subject, not allowing him/her space or autonomy, permitting neither the recognition of similarities nor acceptance of differences except as a means of knowing the White self” (Dyer, 1997, p. 13). The essentialist thinking at work in the films, in which the Asian’s role is to amplify, reify, or validate that of the White person, reflects an acquisitive, colonialist mindset in which “the colonial subject functions only to consolidate the self of the colonizer” (Young, 1990, p. 162).

An extension of this kind of reduction exists in all three films, albeit subtly. Each of the films touches on something Root (1996) has called the salvage paradigm; in its original conception, it referred to Whites’ often self-appointed role as curator and protector of vanishing or dead traditions of Native American culture or spirituality. In the three films in the present analysis, a similar construction is present. In *Kill Bill*, the Bride becomes the owner of Hattori Hanzo’s crowning achievement as
a swordsman as well as the only living practitioner of the “five-point palm exploding heart technique,” both of which were created by Asians. In *Bulletproof Monk*, Kar and his White girlfriend become the new protectors of the Scroll, a Tibetan artifact. The title of *The Last Samurai* may ostensibly reference the rebel leader Katsumoto, but at film’s end Nathan Algren is the last and only survivor of the climactic battle. In the case of both *Bulletproof Monk* and *The Last Samurai*, the actions of the White characters render the titular character’s identity ambiguous at best.

**Implications**

The intercultural incongruities engendered by the whiteness themes are never directly addressed in the films; we are apparently expected to simply overlook or accept them. *The Last Samurai* makes Algren a martial arts prodigy who finds redemption among the Other. Yet, this culture is in immediate danger of eradication by Westernization, of which Algren is indelibly a part. Much like the protagonist of *Dances With Wolves* (1990), Algren finds healing and acceptance among a people unlike himself, a people threatened by those whom the White protagonist is not unlike. In both films, the White protagonist becomes sympathetic to his putative enemy’s orientation. Because the White audience see themselves reflected in the White protagonist, such narratives can allow for the audience’s writing out of complicity not only the protagonist (whose enemies come to accept him as a “good” White person) but even, by extension, themselves (Huhndorf, 2001). This ideological whitewash facilitates the audience’s willful ignorance of (and relationship to) history in favor of a sanitized filmic fiction that reinforces historic circumstances while appearing to subvert them. *The Last Samurai* is a work of fiction that seeks believability while proffering the inversion of historic realities.

It is understood that the audience is expected to suspend disbelief in *Kill Bill*, which features numerous scenes and events far beyond believability. The film takes place in what Tarantino calls an “alternate universe,” theoretically mitigating broad stretches in credibility. Intentional ironies aside, however, it is interesting to note the ascription of mastery inherent in the narrative. *Kill Bill*’s audience is shown by O Ren that questioning whiteness is a terminal mistake, is shown by Pai Mei that failure to acquiesce to and accept whiteness is also terminal, and is shown by the Bride that Whites can perform an Asian skill better than Asians can perform it themselves. In addition, we are shown by Hanzo and Pai Mei that Whites will be privy to all the secrets, techniques, and treasured weapons that “helpful” Asians were prescient enough not to squander on other Asians. Rather than any new hybridity, the only thing *Kill Bill* shows us is “the tendency for dominant culture (Hollywood, America, White supremacy) to co-opt the styles and implied needs of subcultures, deracinate them and then produce something spectacularly conceited” (White, 2003, para. 6).

It is difficult to discount the idea that Tarantino is unaware of these ethnically grounded dynamics; the dialogue referencing ethnicity makes it obvious that he is. Yet, at the same time, certain dialogic evidence exists to suggest that his understanding
is both limited and flawed. What is sillier about a Caucasian woman “playing” with a Japanese samurai sword than a Chinese American woman playing with one? Perhaps referring to Sonny Chiba, a Japanese actor and karate practitioner, as part of a triumvirate of kung fu, a Chinese art, and doing so in an interview with a Japanese journalist, is sillier. In failing to notice these contradictions, or even the difference between Chinese and Japanese, Tarantino may be guilty of constructing ethnic representations that “become allegorical; within hegemonic discourse every subaltern performer/role is seen as synecdochically summing up a vast but putatively homogenous community” (Shohat & Stam, 2000, p. 183).

In Bulletproof Monk, refugee Tibetan monks take shelter beneath an apartment occupied by ethnic Chinese. This is made clear by the visibility in several scenes of a shrine to Guan Yu, a Chinese hero. This juxtaposition is never addressed in the film; given current political realities, it is certainly noteworthy. In the film, Chow Yun Fat, who was born and raised in Hong Kong, plays a Tibetan. In geographic terms, this is the equivalent of seeing the Italian Roberto Benigni portray Viking leader Erik the Red. One is left to wonder why the second portrayal would seem preposterous but the first does not.

This kind of homogenizing tendency was also in evidence in the promotional campaign for The Last Samurai. For the film’s premiere, Warner Bros. Special Events released a casting call looking for “beautiful Asian women” who would “mingle ‘in character’ through the party, helping to create the ambience of ancient Japan, circa 1870’s” (Rave, 2003). According to the logic of the casting call, ethnicity defined by continental or hemispheric criteria is perfectly adequate to represent citizens of a specific nation that resides within that continent. In addition, the epochal characterization of Japan used here means that America’s reconstruction period is “ancient” history. This reductionistic, uncritical portrayal of Japan is reflective of what Said (1994) calls “a bad sort of eternality” (p. 208) in which Westerners reflexively construct anything Asian as a nationally undifferentiated, temporally remote East.

The attitude necessary to make this kind of request suggests that the author is either oblivious to or unconcerned with the language used and ideas conveyed. In addition, the author makes a rather large assumption about the availability or willingness of Asians, apparently considering the opportunity to possibly meet Tom Cruise reward enough for helping reinforce Orientalist stereotypes in a live setting. This attitude is also in evidence in Tarantino’s casting aspirations for Kill Bill; he claims that “If Bruce Lee was still alive, he’d be in it” (Machiyama, 2003, para. 29). It is of course more likely that were Bruce Lee alive today, he would be making his own films, like Jackie Chan, who, although he appeared in some of Bruce Lee’s films and inherited his Asian superstardom, did not appear in Kill Bill either. Considering that Lee (or Chan) would likely have been defeated or killed by the White protagonist, the absence is, from a critical perspective, not a great loss.

If, as American martial arts films seem to convey, ethnicity does not (or should not) have any role in the crossing of cultural lines such that Whites can master
martial arts, then there are an infinite number of narrative possibilities about people from one culture or ethnicity learning or mastering the skills of another available to American filmmakers. It is interesting to note, therefore, that American filmic representations of intercultural behavior follow such a distinct, unidirectional formula of a White person mastering the art or skill of the non-White person. The inverse of White mastery has yet to be seen; there are no dramatic films in which non-Whites become masters of White cultural practices (and White practitioners) produced in the United States.

Imagine a noncomedic film in which Tony Leung Chiu Wai becomes the greatest hockey player in America 6 months after first picking up a stick, winning not only the Stanley Cup but the MVP award, or a film where Djimon Hounsou wins a classical music competition in Paris less than a year after deciding to play the cello. One is even left to wonder how Western audiences would have received Stephen Chow’s Shaolin Soccer had the climactic game featured Chow and his teammates defeating not another Asian team but England’s Manchester United. Narratives such as these strike many as implausible, or at least odd, not because they are impossible but because “imaginings of community by people of color are socially constrained by the politics of race that exclude non-Whites from crossing these boundaries but allow Whites to cross these boundaries into global imaginings” (Drzewiecka & Wong, 1999, p. 207). Indeed, Whites’ ability to imagine these kinds of boundary crossings is constrained as well.

These limitations and exclusions have contributed greatly to the exodus from Hollywood and return to Hong Kong of Asian actors like Jackie Chan (n.d.): “It’s all the same, cop from Hong Kong, cop from China. Jet Li, Chow-Yun Fat and I all face the same problem: our roles are limited … I don’t want to be seen as an action hero anymore” (2004). It must be noted that the White actors Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jean Claude van Damme, neither of whom spoke English well early in their career, were allowed to develop their language skills over several years and films. In addition, their ethnicity did not dictate the roles or characters they played.

The absence of the inverse characterization, of a non-White person mastering a White skill (and by extension Whites) is evidence of a clearly problematic presence in American film, but one easily understood through the strategic rhetoric of whiteness frame. The White audience is not accustomed to “being relativized; the world’s institutions and representations are tailored to the measure of their narcissism. Thus, a sudden relativization by a less flattering perspective is experienced as a shock, an outrage, giving rise to a hysterical discourse of besieged civility and reverse victimization” (Shohat & Stam, 2000, p. 359).

The White audience’s intercultural film tastes run not toward the relativization of their own culture but the repeated display of their own, and their own culture’s, superiority, both implicit and explicit. That Whites so often attempt to couch the events and motivations of these narratives in strategic rhetorical camouflage such as human or universal serves as evidence not of supracultural applicability but instead of the ways that “the dominant audience, whose ideological assumptions must be
respected if a film is to be successful, or even made at all, exerts a kind of indirect hegemony—‘Universal’ becomes a codeword for palatable to the Western spectator as the ‘spoiled child’ of the apparatus” (Shohat & Stam, 2001, p. 186). These kinds of assumptions are all too often unquestioned in “a white dominated culture, wherein the ‘universal’ has long been portrayed in terms of whiteness” (Watts & Orbe, 2002, P. 6).

Conclusions

American martial arts films provide examples of cultural appropriation undergirded by whiteness ideology rationalized through strategic rhetoric of whiteness. Acquisition of martial arts mastery by White protagonists may be seen as innocuous, entertaining, and enriching, but it constitutes a significant filmic form of cultural colonialism and appropriation that reinforce hegemonic ideas of racial and cultural superiority and inferiority, with consequences that reach far beyond the movie theater.

By constructing martial arts as cultural form available to all humans, whiteness ideology rationalizes the appropriation of a cultural phenomenon. This rationalization is reinforced through the strategic rhetoric of American martial arts films, in which Whites achieve martial arts mastery, which they display by repeatedly defeating Asians. It is especially troubling, in light of the original, indigenous function of the martial arts film as an outlet for nationalistic expression (Teo, 1999), that the ascension of the White martial artist to mastery is so deeply resonant with a colonialist framework. It is also a filmic manifestation of the ways “one culture is transformed by another for self-aggrandizement when they come into contact with one another …. What is absorbed and retained is what matches the needs of the receiving culture at a given time” (Chan & Ma, 2002, p. 4). Why are these kinds of trans-cultural appropriations so often couched in camouflaging terms of “humanness”? Perhaps in this postcolonial era, this kind of rationalization, something unnecessary for Tarzan or Lord Jim, must be offered as either a palliative or justification.

The expected, repeated, and reinforced superiority of the White person in another cultural context obviously resonates with the White audience; its recurrence as a narrative theme provides significant evidence to that effect. One obvious consideration for further study is to examine why the White audience wants or needs to have these kinds of ethnically focused conquering narratives. We might wonder why films like Bulletproof Monk, Kill Bill, The Last Samurai and others like Hidalgo resonate with a White audience. Why must White transcultural superiority be constantly reinscribed? Why doesn’t the White audience accept or support films in which the White character is the defeated protagonist, even when it is the logical or historically accurate outcome? Why doesn’t the White audience accept or support films in which White people figure minimally or not at all? Why must the White audience see itself reflected and/or represented onscreen in a dominant, victorious way? What is the effect of these films on their global and/or non-White audience?
Whereas these questions are beyond the scope of the present study, they are nonetheless ripe for further examination.

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