

**Just Passing Through:
Race, (Outer)Space, and Invasive Whiteness in Robert Rodriguez's *Roadracers***

Their bodies were now hosts harboring an alien form of life; a cosmic form,
which to survive must take over every human man!

Invasion of the Bodysnatchers (1956)

[T]he white man infects the black man with extremely toxic foreign bodies.

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p.19

Robert Rodriguez's *Roadracers* (1994) is at once a contemporary reimagining of the 1950s exploitation film and a study in the use of conventions of the science fiction genre with non-science fiction films. However, Rodriguez reverses certain conventions of the exploitation film and incorporates only certain, deliberately-chosen techniques from the science fiction genre in order to suggest a new reading of the real-world analogues of the "villains" in both of the alluded-to genres. By incorporating Sarah Ahmed's theory of "affective economies"—as well as the postcolonial theories of identity and emancipation offered by Frantz Fanon—into a close reading of the film, I intend to demonstrate how *Roadracer's* reversal and subsequent critique of traditional portrayals of race and difference in 1950s exploitation and science fiction films is used in conjunction with techniques from the science fiction genre in order to develop a new understanding of the cultural anxieties typically reflected in those genres. Rather than make the traditional claim—that the villains of exploitation and science films represent whichever foreign or otherwise unknown "Other" that served as the object of fear at the time of a given film's production—Rodriguez aims to portray an idealized White world (i.e. 1950s white upper-middle-class suburbia) and its occupants as the true "invasive," "dangerous," or "horrific" Other. I will also attempt, through an analysis of Rodriguez's routine and in-depth focus on hair (and particularly on the distinction/disjunction between white and nonwhite hair), to explore the challenges to identity and agency that are posed to nonwhite body living under colonial rule.

Rodriguez's reversal of and ultimate departure from the traditions of science fiction and 1950s exploitation films also highlights the use and function of emancipatory agency in *Roadracers*, which not only explains but also necessitates Dude's actions within the world of and throughout the film as well as Robert Rodriguez's own stylistic choices and actions as a filmmaker.

In her paper "Affective Economies," Sarah Ahmed posits that emotions are a mechanism through which bodies (or groups of bodies) are differentiated from one another. Emotions are not associated with bodies, she argues, but rather move between bodies, and it is this movement which delineates the differences between "us" and "them". These emotional economies function through the *lack of fixedness* of emotions to certain characteristics.¹ In other words, emotions are not property—if I say that "I am happy," or "describe a film as 'being sad,'" I do not claim that I, or the film, have an exclusive right of ownership over that emotion. Emotions do not *reside in* an object or subject, Ahmed argues, which is why we can never trace an emotion to a singular object or subject, and why our associations of a particular emotion to a given body changes over time (both in the sense that the emotion we feel toward the body changes, and in the sense that the body toward which we feel an emotion changes):

The impossibility of reducing hate to a particular body allows hate to circulate in an economic sense, working to differentiate some others from other others, a differentiation that is never "over," as it awaits for others who have not yet arrived.³

These characteristics to which emotions are not fixed—these "signs"—denote not an "association with" a given group, but instead indicate some sort of "difference from" another

¹ Sarah Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 123.

² *Ibid.* 119.

³ *Ibid.* 123.

group. The signs thus have a degree of “stickiness” which allows them to “slide” and attach to different bodies, objects, or groups of such. Fear and hate, Ahmed argues, are both emotional economies. Fear and hate move between certain signs (e.g. black, Latino, Muslim, immigrant) and this “movement depends on past histories of association,” (e.g. “Negro, animal, bad, mean, ugly,” or “terrorist and Islam”).⁴ These emotions themselves are not stuck to any body in particular, but can stick to and “slide across *signs*” which are then attachable to bodies.⁵ In other words, it isn’t that *this person is fearsome*, but rather that *X, Y, and Z are qualities associated with fear, and this person might have those qualities*. Ahmed quotes Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* to partially characterize the fear economy:

...the nigger is shivering because he is cold, the little [white] boy is trembling because he is afraid of the nigger, the [...] little boy is trembling because he thinks that the nigger is quivering with rage.⁶

Because the black man is historically associated with words like “animal, bad, mean, ugly,” and the emotion of fear “sticks” to those words, the black man’s “shiver” is misidentified by the white boy as rage, so the white boy is afraid of the black man.⁷ This fear “allow[s] the white body to be constructed as apart from the black body,” but it is the black man’s apart-ness that makes him feared.⁸

It is precisely this affective fear economy which characterizes the themes of 1950s exploitation films and the science fiction genre, both of which had a significant influence on

⁴ *Ibid.* 127, 132.

⁵ *Ibid.* 127, my emphasis.

⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto, 1986), 114.

⁷ Ahmed, 127.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 126-27.

Roadracers. The villain in both genres of films reflects cultural anxieties about the possibility of an alien Other—be it a geographical, racial, or an extraterrestrial one—invading our home and posing a threat to our existence. In the 1950s exploitation film, the villainous character is the “trickster,” who was typically played by (or, at the very least, portrayed as) a Latino man. In the science fiction genre—particularly in the 1950s when *Roadracers* is meant to take place—the villain is typically a literal alien invader. The characteristics and behaviors of the villains from both genres are identical: these “aliens,” however defined, will travel from faraway with the express intent to corrupt (and sometimes outright steal, or abduct) your daughters,⁹ destroy your towns, and “invade and steal your soul[s],”¹⁰ and so these foreigners are *bad*, they are *dangerous*. These perceived dangers are associated with those bodies that are themselves associated with signs like *bad* and *dangerous*, and so those bodies become the objects of fear. Crucially, and in keeping with the concept of an economy of fear, there is no single, specific alien Other about whom these anxieties and fears are and have always been felt—as Ahmed notes, “objects of fear become substituted for each other over time.”¹¹ Fear slides across signs, and those signs slide across different bodies, and “[t]his sliding becomes stuck only temporarily, in the very attachment of a sign to a body, whereby a sign sticks to a body by constituting it as the object of fear.” In the mid-20th century, these signs were associated with Communists. Today, they are associated with Central and South American drug dealers (or job thieves) and radical Islamic terrorists. However, in each case, the objects of fear are not those groups about whom the signs and anxieties are associated but rather those who *might belong* to those groups. In other words, it

⁹ Donald Lyons, “Cable Movies,” *Film Comment* 30 no. 5 (1994): 2.

¹⁰ Diane Sippl, “A Rapport of Screens: New Sites for Crosscultural Media,” *Cineaction* (1998): 68.

¹¹ Ahmed, 127.

is not just the radical Islamic terrorist who is fearsome, but also anyone who looks like them—that is to say, anyone who is Muslim, from the Middle East, brown, foreign. The terrorist could be anybody (indeed, any *body*) who meets those criteria, and so anybody (and any body) who meets those criteria is an object of fear. So too is the case in the science fiction film: the aliens could have invaded anybody (indeed, they could be inside *any body*) and so we must be suspicious of anybody who meets the criteria of the invader (however that criteria has been defined by the given film).

These films are a response to the fear felt by a culture (namely, a white, Western culture) about certain foreign others. In *Roadracers*, however, Rodriguez makes the case that the films in these genres consistently fail to recognize that it is the *object* of fear—the black man or the Muslim, for instance—who is most deeply and fundamentally affected by the emotion of fear, and that the perceived dangers threatened by the dangerous alien are less severe than the dangers and threats made *to* the object of fear. The black man, whose shiver is feared by the white child, “comes to feel the fear as his own, as threatening his existence,” because “the white child’s apparent fear does not lead to containment but an expansion,”—the boy’s reaction to feeling afraid is to “throw himself into his mother’s arms,” and thus to extend himself in and throughout space (the very same space, in fact, that was occupied by the black man)—and so “it is the black subject, the one who fears the ‘impact’ of the white child’s fear, who is crushed by that fear, by being sealed into a body that takes up less space.”¹² In *Roadracers*, Rodriguez attempts to demonstrate the effect of fear on the object of fear by reversing the races of the main characters from those of the traditional 50s exploitation film. Dude, the “trickster” character traditionally

¹² Ahmed, 126-127.

portrayed by (or at least depicted as) a Latino man, is played by David Arquette, a white man.¹³ The role of the “white princess”¹⁴ and the love interest of the trickster is portrayed by Salma Hayek, a Latina woman. One might also make a case for the portrayal of Nixer (Dude’s best friend) by a white actor as another instance of this racial “swapping”: Nixer—a character whose name could be read as a near-homophonous play on a racial slur¹⁵—is relatively passive throughout the film, and is often relegated to the role of “sage wisdom-giver,” thereby fulfilling the Magical Negro trope which, though not at home in these particular genres, is certainly one which would qualify for the type critical examination that Rodriguez offers. The main characters thus fulfill traditionally racialized roles in every way *but* race, and this contradiction allows for a mode of self-reflexive commentary about the film’s source genres and their treatment of the Other. Through this race-reversal, Rodriguez’s film requires that its audience approach its predominant themes from a new perspective—one which is not centered around the fear felt by the wealthy white colonist toward a given body, but around the deeper existential threat felt by the object of that fear.

Colonialism, which is motivated by fear of Others (in other words, of those who are not “alike” but are marked by signs of difference-from-us) by an overwhelmingly white and upper-class elite, is a physical manifestation of Ahmed’s claim that the objects of fear come to regard that fear as a threat to their existence. Colonialism, as a manifestation of fear, literally “restricts the bodies [the objects of fear] through the movement and expansion of others [those to whom the feelings of fear directed at the object belong].”¹⁶ The aim of colonialism—which is

¹³ Lyons, 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Similar to Bigger Thomas, the name of the (black) protagonist in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*.

¹⁶ Ahmed, 127.

inextricably linked with whiteness—is to invade the homes and the minds of the other in order to replace their language, their culture, and/or their religion with those of the colonizer. It is telling that, during the scene in which Dude, Donna, and Nixer watch *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* together in the movie theatre,¹⁷ this is one of the few excerpts of dialogue which Rodriguez has chosen to include:

Kaufmann: ...they'll absorb your minds, your memories,
and you're reborn into an untroubled world.

Bennell: Where everyone is the same?

Kaufmann: Exactly.

This interaction from *Bodysnatchers* demonstrates precisely what Rodriguez seems to want his audience to understand through his characters' race-reversal—that a “world... where everyone is the same” sounds more like the world belonging to 1950s white suburbia than like one belonging to any “alien” Other (an Other who has, of course, a menacingly ambiguous ethnic and racial background). The “sameness” to which *Bodysnatchers* calls to mind an extreme version of monotony and blandness which is antithetical to the diversity of a multiracial, multilingual,¹⁸ and oft-immigrated-to community and which is, in fact, far more appropriate as a descriptor of white suburban culture.¹⁹ The movie theatre scene further privileges the fear felt by the object of fear over that felt toward the object of fear by creating visual and narrative parallels between Dude and Donna on the one hand, and the two lead characters in *Bodysnatchers*, Dr. Bennell and Becky Driscoll, on the other. While on the run from the bodysnatchers, Becky falls asleep and is

¹⁷ Kevin McCarthy, the actor who starred in *Bodysnatchers*, is also in the theatre — he has, in a way, invaded the film.

¹⁸ Sippl, 69.

¹⁹ I could take up several pages waxing anecdotal about the blandness of a white, middle-class, suburban life, but for the sake of brevity I'll simply point out that, in 1950s suburban America, putting pickled vegetables in Jell-O was considered an exciting culinary innovation, and ketchup was regarded as spicy.

invaded—an event which is shown in the movie theatre while Donna is sleeping on Dude’s shoulder, causing Dude to glance suspiciously at Donna a number of times—and after learning of Becky’s invasion Dr. Bennell takes to the streets, screaming at passers-by:

Look, you fools, you're in danger! Can't you see? They're after you! They're after all of us! Our wives, our children, everyone! They're here already!

While this rhetoric is clearly similar to that of xenophobes and opponents of immigration,²⁰ it also—and perhaps more appropriately—reflects a fear of an invasion *by white colonizers*—a fear that is felt by, rather than towards, the victims of white colonialist demands of *sameness*.

This reading is supported further by the lighting, editing, and shot composition of the scene during which Donna (who is portrayed, as you will recall, by Salma Hayek, a Latina woman) argues with her (white, Christian, suburban, and upper-middle-class) parents prior to going out on a date with Dude. Donna’s parents hover behind her as she primps in the mirror, and they lament the fact that Dude is not similar enough to them and that he is therefore an unfit partner for Donna. For the majority of the scene, an over-the-shoulder shot shows Donna and her parents through their reflections in a mirror.



²⁰ This is still the case today — cf. Republican Presidential debates.

However, when her father tells her that voicing these concerns is “what good parents do,” the shot changes to what appears to be a reverse-shot of Donna’s parents.



The shot then returns to the initial over-the-shoulder mirror shot while Donna tells her parents that Dude is a talented musician who is “going to make obscene amounts of money,” a prediction which seems to warrant her mother’s approval: “Well, if that happens,” she says, “you have our blessing.” This is because a lack of whiteness is a very “poor” quality indeed, and it is “poor” in both senses of the word: it means that you are “worse-than-desirable” and also that you “lack sufficient money.” As Fanon says, “[the] cause is effect: you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich.”²¹ For Donna’s mother, this non-whiteness’s “poor quality” can be overlooked—perhaps even overcome—if one is rich. However, Donna’s mother follows this approval with a caveat: if Dude does not eventually make “obscene amounts of money,” she wants Donna “to be prepared to find other options.” When she makes this request, the shot changes shifts yet again from the over-the-shoulder mirror shot of the three characters to one of Donna’s parents by themselves.

²¹ Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 5.



Although this appears at first glance to be another reverse-shot, the parents' positions on screen show that this is incorrect—in the earlier shot, Donna's father stood to the right of her mother; now, he stands to her left: the earlier of the two shots was not, as we originally assumed, a reverse-shot, but was in fact an over-the-shoulder shot toward the mirror, zoomed-in just enough to show only Donna's parents' reflections.

This unusual bit of visual trickery is used to create a sense of unease: the audience is made to feel that things are not quite as they seem. The image we see of Donna's parents is *almost* correct—it does look quite a lot like her parents—but it cannot possibly *actually* be them: only moments ago they were standing on opposite sides of one-another! How could they possibly have re-oriented themselves in space in the time it took to cut from one shot to the next? They cannot have done so—it is physically (or, at least, humanly) impossible. The result with which we are presented—this close-but-not-quite-correct version of Donna's parents—readily calls to mind the Freudian concept of the “Uncanny,” which Freud defines as “that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar.”²² This shot

²² Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 124.

is precisely the sort of “species of the frightening” to which Freud refers—it is an eerily similar depiction of something to which we have previously been close, but which is now presented to us as a contorted reflection of itself. The uncanny is frightening because of how close it comes to successfully deceiving us: it is almost, but not quite, the truth of the matter. This sensation of uncanniness demonstrates a quality of this shot sequence that is highly reminiscent of the framing and editing techniques used in the horror and science fiction genres. The “faux” reverse-shot contrasts with the “true” direct-shot in such a way that the parents become Uncanny doubles of themselves. The uncanniness of this visual move is punctuated moments later by another zoomed-in, over-the-shoulder shot of Donna’s parents’ reflections and a brief reaction shot of Donna (a closeup shot in which her face is surrounded by darkness).



The lighting in this sequence underscores Rodriguez’s intent to depict 1950s white suburbia as a form of the Uncanny. During the sequence, Donna and her parents are lit by a bright but soft light, which not only makes Donna’s brown skin seem a bit lighter, but which also creates the illusion that her parents’ white skin is glowing. Donna’s skin appears lighter when she is given the option (and expectation) of white suburban normalcy. When Donna’s mother tells her that she must “be prepared to find other options,” it is clear that her mother’s ideal option is a suburban,

middle-class, “normal,” and *white* life like theirs. It also generates a sense of anxiety about being “invaded” by whiteness and thus functions as a sort of “call to agency” (although, curiously, this call is heeded by Dude rather than by Donna). This call to agency is also a predominant theme in existential philosophy and, consequently, calls for a reading of the film as one which reflects themes of racial (or colonial) emancipation through self-empowered action.

In his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon—an Algerian psychoanalyst, philosopher, and postcolonial theorist—proposed a theory of “cultural decolonization” which includes “a stage of liberation in which emancipatory self-determination [becomes] an act of violence.”²³ Cultural decolonization in this sense might be considered an act of anti-invasion or anti-colonialism, and the notions of self-determination and liberation—both of which are rooted in the concepts of free will and agency—distinctly existential in nature. Fanon’s concept of violent emancipatory self-determination is a theme with which *Roadracers* engages directly and often, and it does so most significantly through its depiction of the use—and destruction—of a particular racial signifier: hair.

A number of cultural theorists²⁴ posit that hair, rather than skin color, is the physical feature that is most indicative of one’s race. In *Roadracers*, this belief is adopted, and thus has an integral role in the film’s assessment of nonwhite identity and agency, particularly when under threat of colonial invasion. In the film, white hair is destroyed on several occasions, while Latinx hair is imbued with power in equal measure. One of the first scenes in the film involves the destruction of white hair: Dude tosses a cigarette out of his car during a confrontation with the

²³ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1968), 222. (As paraphrased in Sippl, 65.)

²⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*; Stuart Hall, *Race, the Floating Signifier*; Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*; et. al.

main antagonists in the film, and it lands in the perfectly coiffed curls that belong to Julie, the pretty blonde girlfriend of the main antagonist, who had made a racist comment to Donna only moments earlier. Her golden locks, the shining emblem of her pure and abundant whiteness, are set ablaze. The flames conjure up images of a halo or a golden crown: she is a beacon — a literal beacon — of whiteness, of angelic purity, and of colonial rule, now more than ever.



Later on, Donna confronts Julie and her friend in the bathroom of the roller rink. At this point, Julie's hair has been completely burned off and she must wear a wig to hide this absence. Donna's hair takes up most of the frame. She brushes it, tosses it from side to side (and into Julie's face), and makes a show of picking a few loose hairs off of her brush (it's fine if she loses a couple—she has plenty to work with). Her hair is so dominant in this scene that, at one point, it completely blocks our view of Julie and her friend so that they are only visible in the mirror—but this is not a problem, because it's Donna who we're meant to see.

Donna goes to great lengths to emphasize her hair's great lengths. In doing so, much to the dismay and frustration of her white mirror-mates, she also establishes that her non-white hair—her dark, thick, distinctly *non-white* hair—is powerful and beautiful and concretely *there*, and,

perhaps most important of all, it is a part of her—everything that Julie’s hair, and now her wig, have failed to be. Donna has power in her hands—or, rather, on her head—and uses it to actively refuse the suburban, homogeneous, white life being pushed on her.



As the film progresses, however, Donna begins to be invaded by whiteness. As this invasion becomes more complete, she eventually loses her agency. During the aforementioned “Uncanny mirroring” scene between Donna and her parents, Donna is told she needs to “think about what’s best for her future.” After this comment comes the reaction shot of Donna in which only her face is visible—her hair is shrouded in darkness, nowhere to be seen. Her hair’s fullness and darkness (that is to say: its non-blondness and therefore necessarily also its non-whiteness), which were used in the roller rink bathroom scene to draw attention to Donna’s embrace of her hair and her Latina-ness (and to the power inherent in both), are now being used to negate and deny any semblance of power. The darkness of her hair is now literally over-shadowed by the manufactured darkness of the shot (as well as by her relation and opposition to her parents and their light hair and “glowing” whiteness), so all earlier efforts made to embrace her agency and identity as a decidedly *not white* woman are not only undone, they are rendered into nonbeing.

This shot marks a turning point in Donna—her invasion has begun and slowly begins to manifest itself. It is also noteworthy, particularly with regards to lighting for this shot sequence, that the “invasion” begins with the *removal* of Donna’s identity (a “scrubbing away” or cleansing of that which makes her darker, and therefore “dirtier,” and therefore not-white) through an exaggeration of the darkness of her identity through shadows rather than through (or, at least, prior to) any effort to use light to make her hair, and other facets of her appearance, lighter and more like her mother’s. Perhaps this is because simply masking the darkness by manufacturing lightness on top of it would not be a suitable means through which the aliens might invade Donna. Masks, of course, are placed *in front* of the face, and so the very concept of a mask precludes any permanent or meaningful change in a person’s identity—the aim of a mask is to obscure, not to permanently alter, an appearance. That the mask rests *in front* of the face necessitates that there is also a *behind*—something which is being hidden but which still lies beneath the (easily removable) surface of the mask. But, critically, the alien invaders do not seek to rest upon the invaded: the invader seeks to colonize, to infect; the invader seeks, in other words, to invade. Perhaps real, lasting change does not require putting on a mask but instead requires a carving away or cleaning of the “dark spots,” and a renewal by “filling in” those parts which were “cleared out”.

Invasion is not a passive activity. Much like economies of fear and of other emotions, invasion “*does something*; it reestablishes distance between bodies whose difference is read off the surface, as a reading that produces the surface.”²⁵ Objects of fear are regarded as fearful because fear sticks to certain signs, and slides between signs, which in turn stick to certain bodies (e.g. fear sticks to *terrorist* which slides into “*fundamentalism, Islam, Arab, repressive,*

²⁵ Ahmed, 126.

primitive,” and thus sticks to Muslims, refugees, and immigrants from the Middle East.²⁶), but the bodies to which those signs stick—the bodies which become the objects of fear—are characterized by their difference from the bodies that are creating the economy of fear. This is a manufactured difference: “the slide between figures *constructs* a relation of resemblance between the figures: what makes them alike may be their ‘unlikeness’ from ‘us.’”²⁷ Colonial invasion functions in a similar way. When Donna begins her transformation—when she is “invaded”—it is the result of the highlighted, and literally high-lighted, difference between her white parents’ appearances and her own, rather than because of any effort to manufacture or suggest a feeling of similarity between them. With the image of her white parents, whose skin seems to exude light, juxtaposed against her dark hair, which seems to absorb all light, Donna’s parents do not say “look how wonderful things would be if you were more like us.” To the contrary, the sharply contrasted images seem to say “look how happy we are being who we are, and look how different you are from us.” The Uncanny Mirror scene also draws on the oft-employed characterization of colonialism as paternalistic: “it’s what good parents do,” and “think about what’s best for your future,” are two lines that Donna’s parents deliver at the moment when her hair—that is, the source of her agency and identity as a non-white, Latina woman—is rendered invisible. Perhaps “what good parents do,” then, is remind their children of precisely how dark they are: so dark, in fact, that we can’t see them—so dark that they are not just difficult to see, but *impossible* to see, and therefore effectively *not there*: in their darkness they are invisible and are consequently absent, which means that they lack a material presence; they literally do not

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 118. My emphasis.

matter. Perhaps “what good parents do” is also to remind them that the thing that is “best for [their] future” is a life spent trying to be a little more (in the) light.

By the end of the film, Donna’s invasion seems complete: she is shown joyfully dancing along to the same band that, at the beginning of the film, she professed to hate; a band which, incidentally, has also been invaded by white suburbia—they are playing tame love songs rather than their rebellious rock and roll and their wardrobe has been literally whitewashed. During the final interaction between Dude and Donna, Donna utters the five words which characterize the paternalist tone of colonization: “I want to help you.” Dude, who has “never really thought of [himself] as a problem,” refuses this offer and drives away.

Dude and his hair also play a role in Rodriguez’s treatment of hair as a mechanism for agency, though the hair’s storyline is the opposite of Donna’s. Dude—the “trickster” character who is traditionally either played by a Latino man or else portrayed as Latino by a white actor—is played by David Arquette, a white actor, who does not put on “brownface” or otherwise play Dude as a Latino character. Throughout the first half of the film, Dude’s rebelliousness nature lacks agency in the traditional sense: it is centered around his *passive* refusal to conform to the standards of middle-class whiteness which are trying to invade (or colonize) him.²⁸ However, because Rodriguez cast a white man to play a Latino character, it might be argued that Dude is a *white-passing* Latino character. There is an apparent contradiction here, and it is a curious one: by all accounts, passing as white is an active attempt to adopt whiteness, and is therefore entirely antithetical to Dude’s passive refusal to conform to “whiteness” and its standards. Dude’s rebellious nature comes from a lack of caring and a lack of active participation in his world—

²⁸ For instance, the first destruction of white identity — when Dude sets Julie’s blonde hair on fire with a lit cigarette — is a seemingly unintentional action. Dude does not so much as look at Julie, let alone take clear aim at her hair, before he throws his cigarette. Setting her hair on fire was, at least ostensibly, an accident.

from his status as an Other who does not care about the threat of invasion—but making an effort to pass as white indicates that you care enough about your status as an Other that you want to change how you are perceived. Dude’s efforts to pass as white therefore imply the presence of precisely that which his passive rebellion negates. This contradiction was not, however, unintentional: it seeks to further emphasize the role that hair plays in accounting for both nonwhite identity under colonialism and its resultant contradictions.

Dude’s “transition” to agency, like Donna’s, occurs in a scene focusing on his hair. Throughout the film, Dude consistently, perhaps reflexively, slicks and combs his hair back. Like Donna’s constant fiddling with her full and dark head of hair, this is a racial signifier: the act of “slicking back” is traditionally an effort to “tame” ethnic, non-white hair.²⁹ In the roller rink bathroom, Dude uses copious amounts of pomade to completely saturate his hair.



He later uses his hair to grease the roller rink floors, which causes Teddy (the “bully” and one of the chief antagonists) and his cronies to slip and fall.

²⁹ Frederick Luis Aldama, “*Roadracers*” (class lecture, Amherst College, Amherst, MA, Sept. 23, 2015).



Pomade is used to “tame” ethnic hair, and is thus a tool meant for those who wish—or else are in some way forced—to pass as white. However, because the use of pomade creates a very specific look (i.e. greasy, “slicked back” hair), it is also clear whenever someone has used the “taming” product. In other words: the product meant to help nonwhite people “pass” as white is also a product that reminds us of their non-whiteness. It reminds us of the fact that, try as they might, nonwhite people cannot tame or hide the feature which is most indicative of their non-whiteness—their hair.

The scene at the roller rink is a transformative one for Dude and his relationship to his (nonwhite) identity, however. In this scene, Dude weaponizes his non-white hair as well as the substance intended to make it “comply” with white standards of identity. In other words, he uses the product that intends at once to take away his non-white identity and to remind him that he cannot be completely removed from it, and he embraces that contradiction. He uses this tool of the colonizer *against the colonizer* and it is this *action*, (something which lacks passivity by definition) that helps Dude achieve a new sense of agency. Dude no longer passively engages with the threat of white colonial invasion. He gains (or, rather, discovers) his agency and begins

to work actively toward a goal of emancipation. By the end of the film, Dude fully embodies the “stage of liberation in which emancipatory self-determination [becomes] an act of violence.” This is emphasized by the differences between the initial and final sequences of the film, which both involve a police car chase, watching the band, interactions with Donna and with Nixer, a road race with Teddy and his gang, the destruction of white hair, and a journey home. The first version of this sequence demonstrates Dude’s passivity—he is simply *there* and any acts of violence are not his intentional doing. The repetition of this sequence at the end of the film shows just how much Dude has changed—the events begin in more-or-less the same way, but they all end either in Dude’s direct acts of violence (e.g. with the band, the road race, the destruction of white hair, and the police car chase) or in his acts of emancipatory severance (e.g. with Donna and Nixer and his journey “home”). Cultural decolonization involves violent acts of emancipatory self-determination by the colonized; what is Dude’s active refusal to be “invaded” by white colonialism if not emancipatory self-determination?

Rodriguez’s efforts to upend and distort the techniques of the 1950s exploitation and science fiction films allowed him to develop a novel approach to cultural anxieties and economies of fear with regards to alien Others, in addition to allowing for an examination of the existential themes of cultural decolonization and identity under colonialism. However, these efforts also have a tangible impact on the “real” world—the one outside the 1950s white suburbia of the film. Perhaps most evident is the fact that the reversals of race (of the two lead characters) asks the the audience reconsider—and, ideally, criticize—the established tropes and ideologically-derived narratives of *both* genres. The film also has another deeper and less readily apparent, but nonetheless important, real-world impact: Robert Rodriguez, a Latino man working in a world (and in an industry) dominated by whiteness and white ideology, operates as his own

Uncanny Double of Dude. Rather than be “invaded” by this whiteness, and rather than make any effort to embrace the technologies of “passing” and of white identity, Rodriguez refuses to conform. His blending and subversion of genres, use of fantastical and nonconventional technical elements, and reversal of his character’s races allows him to refuse the dominant (and predominantly white) prescriptions of correctness which permeate the film industry. This refusal to conform—to be invaded by whiteness—enables Rodriguez’s own “emancipatory self-determination” as a filmmaker, and thus necessitates his use of these unusual techniques as a statement of his agency.

References

- Ahmed, Sarah. "Affective Economies." *Social Text* 22.2 (2004): 117-139. Web.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto, 1986. Print.
- - *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1968. Print.
- Hall, Stuart, featured. *Race: The Floating Signifier*. Dir. Sut Jally. Media Education Foundation, 1997. Film.
- Lyons, Donald. "Cable Movies." *Film Comment* 30.5 (1994): 2-7. Web.
- Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982. Print.
- Sipli, Diane. "A Rapport of Screens: New Sites for Crosscultural Media." *Cineaction* (1998): 65-72.