

FROM OPPORTUNITY TO DESTITUTION: THE ROLE OF THE LAND IN
HOLLYWOOD'S DEPICTIONS OF OKLAHOMA

by

Colleen Elizabeth Thurston

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DEDICATION

To my family: Okies via the Trail of Tears, the Land Run, and the railroad.

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ABSTRACT

Much as John Ford's Westerns help to establish the myth of the wild and unconquered American West, a place that existed only in Hollywood and in the imaginations of generations of Americans nostalgic for perceived unburdened freedom in the form of manifest destiny, Oklahoma's on-screen landscapes cannot be separated from the stories they help tell. From cowboy and Indian Westerns, to desperate dust bowl narratives, to southern plains and country living, Hollywood tells only the stories of what Oklahoma can and does represent to the rest of the country – rife with stereotypes and realities alike. Cities are not prominent in Oklahoma films, with scenic country landscapes providing the stage for the action. Hollywood films set in Oklahoma are centered around the landscape, and many are unique in that their stories cannot be told in any other geographic location in the country. This is due in part to many of these mainstream films being adaptations of primary sources that explicitly state the setting as Oklahoma, and accounts for the development of the depiction of the landscape as a character in such films.

INTRODUCTION

The identity of the state of Oklahoma has been formed out of its people's relationship to the land - from the displacement of American Indians from their ancestral homelands to what was established as Indian Territory following the Indian Removal Act of 1830, to the Land Rushes of 1889 and 1893, to Statehood in 1907 made possible by the Dawes and Curtis Acts of the late 19th century that further diminished the size of Indian land into personal allotments, to the oil boom of the early 1900s, to the Dust Bowl during the Great Depression. These relationships that took place in a rapidly transforming social, political and environmental climate within less than a half a century's time all are embodiments of the larger American ideals of manifest destiny and of a need to control the land.

It is of no surprise that these landmark historical events should find their way onto Hollywood's silver screen, in both nostalgic depictions of the Western film's man versus the untamed wilderness trope, as a celebration of conquering and exploiting the land, its inhabitants, and its resources, but also in more subtle socio-environmental critiques of the effects of the same exploitation.

Hollywood films set in Oklahoma can be divided into three categories, which follow the chronology of the Sooner State's history: the first encompassing the pre-statehood period of Indian Territory, the Land Rushes, and the settlement of

Oklahoma territory; a time when the land was the realization of the Western frontier, ready to be cured of its savagery by white settlers, ripe for opportunity, and which sets the stage for the exploitation to come in the ensuing oil years. The films depicting this period that are discussed in this paper include the Coen Brothers' *True Grit*, Fred Zinneman's interpretation of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*, and Wesley Ruggles' 1931 classic, *Cimarron*.

The second category deals with the post-statehood oil-boom and cattle ranching days that firmly establish Oklahoma as a place that has been "civilized" by settlers who have profited off the land taken from the Indians and given to them and by oil men, and who quickly begin to invest in and develop Oklahoma's industries as well as fund arts and culture endeavors, bringing cities like Tulsa to the forefront of American wealth, class, and social scenes. As *Cimarron* spans a forty year period beginning with the Land Run of 1889 until 1929, the year the Great Depression began, this film is used to illustrate the prosperity that the land provides, while foreshadowing the severe economic and environmental tragedy to come. Stuart Heisler's 1949 film *Tulsa* echoes these themes of boom leading to bust and will also be discussed within.

The oil boom was quickly followed by the devastation of the Great Depression, which was memorialized in John Ford's adaptation of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. As the economy plummeted, perhaps the

population the hardest hit (or at least immortalized as so in literature, film, and other media) was that of the Southern Plains, where Okies were struck by the dust bowl. One of, if not the worst man-made ecological disasters in history, was created by the very settlers who benefitted from extreme exploitation of the land in the decades prior. At this period in history, Okies fled the state in droves, to seek a new land of opportunity and to escape the land that was no longer able to provide for them, and was literally killing them. This timeframe represents the third expression of how Oklahoma has been portrayed onscreen, a portrayal which continues to the modern day. It could be argued that the state and its people have not yet overcome such an environmental tragedy, or at least that the rest of the nation still views the place not as a resource-rich land of opportunity, but as a dusty, barren, life-threatening terrain from which to flee.

Gone are the on-screen depictions of booming cultural cities and land-rich settlers under clear blue skies, singing about the promise of a new state full of opportunity; in modern films what is here to stay is the clear message that in Oklahoma, the land serves only to harm. *Twister* (1996) exemplifies this clearly: a disaster film in which the landscape and its weather are cast as villains - out to stalk and kill humans who dare to venture out on the open prairie. *August: Osage County* (2013), the most recent Oklahoma film to come out of Hollywood takes a different approach - the land itself is not killing the characters, but the setting creates a sense of despair: Oklahoma is an unwelcoming and depressing place. This is illustrated by

a dysfunctional family on the plains, a place from which the viewer wishes to escape in order to leave the emotional turmoil behind. The title of the film suggests that it is in fact this place that has provided the opportunity for such depression, and leaves the impression that Osage County is a lost place, one to be left behind for greener pastures, as present day on-screen Oklahoma has become the opposite of the land of opportunity it once was.

Before Hollywood came to use Oklahoma as a metaphor for both prosperity and despair, and before there even was a Hollywood, the twin territories (Oklahoma and Indian) were instrumental in providing a setting in which the classic Western genre could develop and thrive. This time period of onscreen Oklahoma emerged alongside the establishment of film as a viable entertainment form, and was an active element of propagating the myth of what would become Hollywood's west.

PRE-STATEHOOD OKLAHOMA: THE WESTERN

"When I told people I was going to Tulsa to make a movie, their response was 'Oh, you're doing a Western?'"

– "Weird" Al Yankovic, 1989.

The earliest Oklahoma films are in fact some of the earliest films made after the advent of moving picture technology. In the 1890s, narrative was not always the primary driving force of the art of the film, instead it was the spectacle of the medium itself that garnered audiences' reactions (Kasson 109). One of the most popular entertainment venues of the time was the Wild West Show, such as that of "Buffalo" Bill Cody. These shows combined "the tropes and images of the American West into a convincing and popular entertainment form" which in turn "created the template early filmmakers could adapt and embellish." (Kasson 117). In the late 19th century, Buffalo Bill and performers from his popular Wild West Show partnered with Thomas Edison to be filmed with his kinetoscope technology, resulting in the emergence of the Western genre (117-118).

In 1904, Thomas Edison brought the filmmaking team from his New Jersey studio to Oklahoma territory to begin shooting Western-themed short films on the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch. The 101 Ranch was home to the same type of Wild West show that Buffalo Bill had popularized, and provided Edison with a frontier setting, livestock, and plenty of cowboys and Indians to act in such films as *A Brush Between*

Cowboys and Indians, Bucking Bronco, Driving Cattle to Pasture, Rounding Up and Branding Cattle, Western Stage Coach Hold Up, and Cowboys and Indians Fording a River in a Wagon (Wooley 8).

Several years later, William Selig followed Edison's example, and traveled to the 101 Ranch, where he "discovered" Tom Mix. A 101 ranch hand, Mix would soon become one of the most popular silent movie stars and well known Western actors. (Wooley 11).

These films were instrumental in creating a Western "cowboys and Indians on the plains" mythos, eliciting nostalgia for a time only recently past. They are idealized in their portrayal (and solidification) of the manifest destiny theme that became so common in Westerns, and Oklahoma at its transition from the last Indian land to the white man's land of the territory, and later state, was the perfect setting to demonstrate this colonization of the frontier.

In 1910, Buffalo Bill and his Oklahoma counterpart, Pawnee Bill, joined forces to form the The Buffalo Bill and Pawnee Bill Film Company, producing "Western subjects in addition to the ordinary dramatic pictures...[with] special attention given to spectacular productions" to be "filmed on the road with the Wild West Show, and on the Pawnee Bill Ranch in Oklahoma, and on Buffalo Bill's Ranch in Cody, Wyoming, " ("The Buffalo Bill and Pawnee Bill Company"). As a result of this collaboration, the Oklahoma film industry and Western genre expanded even more.

Nonetheless, in the 1910s and 20s, when the majority of American film production began to be centered in southern California, the Oklahoma productions waned (Wooley 16). The establishment of Western production in Hollywood, however, can be credited in part to the Okies of the 101 Ranch show. The performers had taken to wintering around the area of Pomona, California after completing the tour of their seasonal road shows. This provided the Southern California filmmakers and studios with an entire cast, complete with authentic wardrobes and props, for the production of Western films. So while Okies were still intrinsically involved in the exploding Hollywood industry, production was moving out of Oklahoma in favor of the more amenable climate of California (Wooley 14-16).

It was these early Oklahoma filming endeavors that were widely influential in establishing the Western as a lucrative genre, and immortalized Oklahoma onscreen as the wild frontier. This mythos would remain solidified both on and off screen until Oklahoma territory was granted statehood in 1907.

Perhaps the most iconic Western films set in pre-statehood Oklahoma are the iterations of *True Grit*. The 1969 John Wayne version is noticeably less true to Charles Portis' original text, a bestseller called "The Great Oklahoma Novel" (Dumont), whereas the Coen Brothers' 2010 iteration, far from being a remake of the '69 film, instead looks more to the source material for inspiration (Coen). Since the newer version stays truer to the original story and its narrative relies more

heavily on a place-specific setting, it is this version that is most relevant to the discussion of Oklahoma's land depictions.

The story, which follows young Mattie Ross from 1890s Arkansas into the untamed wilderness of Choctaw County in Indian Territory, exemplifies the conventions of a typical Hollywood Western. In order to categorize *True Grit* as such, it is necessary to first define the genre. Pilkington and Graham note that the fantasy aspect of Westerns is more important than the authenticity of the scene or the story, as Westerns "shamelessly exaggerated, distorted, and romanticized to the point that the reality of the old West was virtually obscured from view." They elaborate, however, that it is precisely this revisionist approach to storytelling entertainment that gives movie audiences exactly what they were looking for: "fantasy, escape, and a consoling interpretation of America's past" (3). Thus, "In the Western, the way it really was in the Old West is not nearly so important as the way twentieth century audiences think it was" (9).

In terms of the production of both the 1969 and 2010 *True Grit* adaptations, the films are inherently revisionist in *how* they were made. While the story takes place in the "surprising topography of Oklahoma", a setting that is as much a character of the story as Rooster Cogburn, Mattie Ross, or Tom Chaney and encompasses "open prairies...wooded limestone hills...brushy bottoms and icy streams" and most notably the Winding Stair Mountains (Jennings), neither film was produced in the area. The director of the first film, Henry Hathaway, visited

Oklahoma to scout locations before deciding to

shoot in the dramatic peaks of Colorado, and when Mr. Portis told him that the book 'wasn't really a Big Sky Western, he said, yes, he knew, but it didn't matter because all Western movies were fairy tales, more or less, and a spectacular landscape was expected.' Likewise, the Coens filmed their version in New Mexico. (Jennings)

Ethan Coen explains how the 2010 version is "one thing that's not faithful to the novel. The landscape is a total cheat, but we kind of thought people will think it's a Western, and some things you just can't mess with. People want that" (Haddon).

Coming from one of the most successful Hollywood filmmakers, this idea that as a Western the film could not be shot in Oklahoma as it would not meet the public's ideal of the genre conventions, demonstrates that Oklahoma is no longer seen as the "West" of the silver screen, in contrast to the Oklahoma Westerns of a century ago. Joel Coen elaborates:

The whole pictorial idea of the movie would have been much different in a place like Arkansas. The honest answer is it kind of becomes this mishmash of different considerations that go into where you're shooting and how you want to treat the landscape. They're a little hard to sort out after the fact, but it's everywhere from the practical to just what does the movie actually want to be about (Haddon).

While the Coens affirm that both the film itself and the audience want *True Grit* to be a Western, Ethan says "I don't think we thought about it as a genre movie as much as you might think" (Haddon). On the other hand, Joel calls the style a "straightforward presentation" of the Western, "more pretty, more classical" (Carr). Critics widely heralded the Coen's work as a brilliant remake of a classic film, with no qualms as to

what genre it belongs to, stylistically and conventionally. The film's producer, Scott Rudin, said that "its formal, reverent, approach to the Western, a place where quests are undertaken and adventures are had, is on the screen everywhere you look" (Carr).

It is not only the narrative and stylistic conventions that define the film as a Western, but perhaps most importantly, it is the *place* in which the story unfolds that marks it as such. A place that, according to the Coens, needed to look a certain way to be accepted as a Western. Clint Eastwood explains that the popularity of the genre is that "their images reveal the beauties and challenges of the natural landscape" (Bandy 1). This landscape of the American West becomes a character within the Western diegesis, as an entity with and on which the protagonists must battle, in order to metaphorically tame, by colonizing, settling, and civilizing.

In this way the Western represents the challenges of manifest destiny. "[T]he story of the westerner is in many cases a story about a journey through landscape and reality toward the goal of self knowledge. And along the way there is almost always a need to struggle for survival and to fight against others. And what is the fight about? In most instances, it is about control of the land, land for the white man's community to tame, nurture and establish as homestead and town. It is about taking from the earth its riches, its gold and silver, its trees and beavers and buffalo - about making the land yield itself to human desire" (Bandy 4).

Pilkington and Graham expand on the idea that Frederick Jackson Turner

sets forth in his acclaimed 1893 essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” of the frontier being “the meeting point between savagery and civilization.”

They assert that

this terrain is precisely where many Western movies begin. They develop their tension, their meanings, from the interaction of two kingdoms of force - civilization and savagery...[this opposition] seems to underlie other formulations of thematic criticism, though the sets of opposing terms bear different headings: the garden versus the wilderness, East versus West. (7)

True Grit's story takes place pre-1889, when the land now known as Oklahoma was divided into Indian nations, and Mattie, along with Rooster, and LaBoeuf must navigate into Choctaw Country in pursuit of Tom Chaney, her father's murderer. Indian Territory represents the wildest of the Western frontier: occupied by the epitome of Western savagery - the Indian. This “Oklahoma” is also a place where criminals flee, where lawmen from outside the boundaries of Indian Territory are needed for any sense of law and order, and the guilty are often executed in near vigilante fashion. In *True Grit*, the law, in fact, is represented as past-his-prime, drunk, United States marshal, “Rooster” Cogburn, and a flamboyant Texas Ranger, LaBoeuf.

The characters' rough pursuit of the murderous Tom Chaney into the wild Choctaw Country of what is now southeastern Oklahoma is reflected in how the landscape of the *True Grit* territory is presented. Instead of the open, rolling plains ready to be conquered, settled, planted or ranched, and promising of future

prosperity, the wilds of Indian country are characterized by treacherous hills, pine trees closing in on the characters throughout their trek, and only occasionally broken up by a lone wooden farmhouse. The sky is grey and unpromising, the land is untamed, and brings with it warnings of what a lack of civilization will do: early on Mattie and Rooster come across a man hanged from a tree.

As the untamed Indian Territory is dangerous and unpredictable, Rooster attempts to deter Mattie from her insistence to accompany him into the wilderness:

Rooster: We won't be stopping at boarding houses where there's warm beds and hot grub on the table. I'll be traveling fast, eating light. What little sleeping is done will take place on the ground”.

Mattie: Well, I have slept out at night before. Papa took me and little Frank coon hunting last summer on the Petit Jean. We were in the woods all night. We sat around a big fire and Yarnell told ghost stories. We had a good time.

Rooster: Coon hunting? This ain't no coon hunt.

Mattie: It is the same idea as a coon hunt.

In a way, Mattie is right, they are hunting a man, savage and untamed much as an animal, in the wild. However, their quest would be far from the “good time” had around the fire with Papa and little Frank and Yarnell. The wilderness provides obstacle after obstacle, from the river she struggles to cross on horseback when first entering the Territory, to the pit of snakes in which she falls and where she nearly loses her life. It is not the bandit Chaney who threatens Mattie and her gang

throughout the narrative, but the harsh, savage terrain, of which the Indians and the wild men are only a part.

Another aspect of the revisionist approach of Hollywood's Western that is prominent in *True Grit* is the noticeable lack of Indians in Indian Territory. While the characters often mention Choctaw Country and are clearly heading into unsettled territory (offscreen and outside of the myth of the Western, the real Indians who settled this part of the country were agriculturalists and farmers) they are absent from the narrative. Indians are not occupants of the wilderness, they *are* the wilderness, and thus blend into the landscape, invisible unless acting as a plot device or obstacle for the Western protagonist. The only scene in *True Grit* that features a Native character is one in which Rooster kicks a young Indian boy off the porch of his house, representative of what was to come with Oklahoma statehood - the Indians would be kicked right out of their houses, by the invading white population.

THE LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

In contrast to the small number of films set in Indian Territory, of which the *True Grit* iterations are the most notable, quite a number were made celebrating the period leading up to Oklahoma Statehood. The dreary and depressing greys and browns of the untamed Choctaw Country within *True Grit* gave way to bright cheery landscapes evocative of the opportunity and promise of the newly settled frontier. The Oklahoma Land Rush of 1889 marked the transition of Indian Territory to Oklahoma Territory and signified the ideals of the American West: “free” land on which settlers could build homesteads to farm and establish lives that would cement their chance at the American dream. Films set in this period – 1889 to 1907 – clearly portray Oklahoma as the quintessential land of opportunity.

Fred Zinneman's *Oklahoma!* (1955), based on the Rodgers and Hammerstein play, is set in 1906, a time when the characters' feelings of hope for the opportunities that statehood would bring is evident through the story. “Oklahoma,” represents “plenty of air and plenty of room” for a “brand new farmer with a brand new wife, gonna be living in a brand new state”. “The musical is a Utopian form in the imperative tense, delivering an exuberant message at the top of its voice,” during “the period where the pioneering spirit has to be domesticated and the wilderness must become civilization” (Sinyard 105-106).

The film was shot in a new technology, Todd-AO, resulting in hyper-vibrant

colors of “genu-wine cornfields and open plains, red barns, yellow farmhouses and the blue sky full of fleecy clouds” (Crowther). In stark contrast to the muted tones of *True Grit*, the colors of the landscape serve to underscore the bright prosperity available to the settlers as they farm the land. The land no longer is an obstacle as it has been tamed, plowed, and planted with the rows and rows of corn from which the main character, Curly emerges in the opening scene, proclaiming “Oh What Beautiful Morning!”

Oklahoma! in its setting, title, and story, represents the exuberance and reward of taming the frontier, celebrating the Americanness of westward expansion and land acquisition. An ode to the Land of Opportunity, created at a pinnacle time of patriotism, the Broadway show came out during World War II: “Suddenly there was this gorgeous music, and this upbeat feeling about the world being a great place, and everyone took courage from it. So everyone had a great deal of affection for this particular musical” (Neve 18).

While not a Western, *Oklahoma!*, as much as *True Grit*, is also a revisionist story of the West. Like *True Grit*, the story is void of any American Indians, though the place names mentioned within the story are right in the middle of the Cherokee Nation. The songs’ lyrics cheerfully boast of the rewards of the land, from the “corn as high as an elephant’s eye”, to “sounds of the earth... like music”, the sweet smelling waving wheat, and the brand new state, which is “gonna treat you great! Gonna give you barley, carrots, and potatoes. Pasture for the cattle, spinach and

tomatoes... plenty of air and plenty of room, plenty of room to swing a rope, plenty of heart and plenty of hope!" Hope indeed, is the theme of *Oklahoma!*, which in no way alludes to the dust bowl soon to decimate those pastures, spinach and tomatoes by the wind sweeping down the plains, or the environmental destruction caused by oil exploitation. Absconded by the cheerfully bright landscape, Oklahoma is never represented as anything other than a land of milk and honey. Tornadoes and deadly winds that are contemporarily synonymous with Oklahoma's land are entirely absent, except during a scene depicting Laurie's nightmare. Upon awaking, however, Laurie is brought back into her idealistic landscape, one in which such destructive forces do not exist.

True to *Oklahoma!*'s revisionist style, while the film celebrates the land and its gifts of food, livestock, and pastures a'plenty, ironically "most of the film was shot in Arizona because Oklahoma, by the time of the film, was too industrialized and had too many oil wells to disguise" (Sinyard 107).

Cimarron (1931) is a significant film that both celebrates the prosperity of the new state while also addressing the questionable processes and mindsets that accompanied frontier expansionism. While *Cimarron* confronts the consequences of land exploitation, it is most interesting as it is revisionist in nature, not of American history, but rather revising and reshaping the myth and conventions inherent in the Western genre. *Cimarron* relies more on historical accuracy in its depictions of human interactions with the Oklahoma land than on Western nostalgia and

re-interpretations of history.

Traversing the period from Land Rush to Oil Boom, *Cimarron* offers the most comprehensive Hollywood history of Oklahoma's people in relation to its land.

The narrative of *Cimarron* revolves around one man, Yancy and his wife Sabra, two Oklahoma pioneers who represent the prosperity available to anyone willing to work hard to establish a civilized settlement in the former Indian Territory.

The film opens with an expansive shot of thousands of would-be settlers rushing into Oklahoma Territory at the 1889 Land Run, conquering the land by horse, wagon, bicycle, and foot. Yancy declares such an event as the building of an empire, that there's "never been anything like it since creation! [and] that took six days. This was done in one!" This empire building theme continues throughout the film, as Yancy and other white settlers conquer the plains, building the city of Osage, establishing "civilization" from a country full of "Indians, rattlesnakes, gun-toters, and desperados."

Headlines from the newspaper Yancy finds tell the story of development and good fortune in the new territory; at the heart of each is what new wealth the territory has to offer: the opening of the Cherokee Strip, the granting of statehood, and the discovery of oil. Each headline accompanies scenes of Osage transforming from wild west town with shootings in the main street, to a quaint community of flower lined sidewalks and white picket fenced houses, to a bustling metropolis of

street cars and high rises. While the message clearly emphasizes that it is the white settlement that has transformed the “raw prairie”, *Cimarron*, like *Tulsa* after it, both warns against resource exploitation and addresses the issue of Indian assimilation.

Far from a “Western myth and a frontier-glorifying epic” (Smyth 37), *Cimarron* is unique in that it is an Oklahoma film that conveys the history of the state from a pluralist perspective. Instead of depicting the settlement of the “last” frontier as an inevitability to be celebrated, it uses the characters to present the problematic consequences of this colonization. For example, Sabra represents the racially antiquated white society, who view Indians as savages who have wasted their land, and thus deserve to have it taken from them. While she continually refers to them in disparaging terms, her own husband is part Cherokee and a vocal proponent of Indian rights. Yancy makes history by publishing an article presenting the Land Rushes as outright thievery of Indian and, in spite of his enthusiastic “empire building” on said land.

Unlike most Westerns, American Indians within *Cimarron*’s narrative are not analogous to the untamed frontier. Indians instead serve as a point of conflict and contention, a test of the main characters’ morality, not as an obstacle to be eradicated, but at some times as an unfortunate inconvenience, other times as well developed and respected characters.

In contrast to *Tulsa*, in which assimilation is the undercurrent agenda (discussed in more length in the following chapter), *Cimarron* shows how whites in

Oklahoma also assimilate with Indians. Sabra, openly racist throughout most of the film, transforms into a compassionate matriarch who accepts her Osage daughter-in-law, Ruby Big Elk, and mixed-blood grandchildren, proudly as family. While Sabra's metamorphosis is undoubtedly positive, assimilation of the Indians into white society is presented in what Smyth calls a "conflicted visual place", and he questions if they are indeed better off:

Since oil was discovered on their land, they have become some of the state's wealthiest inhabitants. They drive around Osage in Packards and Rolls-Royces, and the women wear tribal blankets and jewelry over their Paris gowns. Are they assimilated U.S. Citizens, or a self-determining Osage Nation? (58)

Long before Indigenous Americans were recognized in the media as more than stereotypes, as both U.S. citizens and self-determined sovereign peoples who display various degrees of traditionalism at any time, *Cimarron* presented them as such. With these complex representations of Indians, *Cimarron* gives them ownership of their own identity and a "voice in creating the historical record" (58)

It should be noted, however, that it is the discovery of oil on Osage land that transforms this view of mute "dirty, filthy, Indians" to wealthy, eloquent, socially acceptable Oklahoma citizens, and it is Yancy's position as newspaper editor that enables him to act as their savior from savagery. In reaction to a scheme to steal land leases from the Osage land owners, he prints an article, exposing the plot to once "again victimize the duped and wretched Americans, the Osage Indians. Their treaties broken, their land stolen..."

While Yancy intends to “save” the Indians, Sabra, aghast, attempts to dissuade him from publishing the incendiary piece: “You can’t slur the government, it’s treason!” Yancy’s response, “it’s history!” mirrors *Cimarron*’s rhetoric: while civilizing the last frontier and its people may have been necessary and inevitable, it was accomplished through deceit, deception, and theft, but as that is the truth of history, that is how it should be told.

This scene also emphasizes that history is written from the perspective of the victor, creating a contrast with the traditional Western that typically omits the point of view of the Indian and does not question the necessity of taming the land. But as Yancy prints the voice of the underrepresented, *Cimarron* shows the flip side of colonialist expansionism, and its effect on the land and its original inhabitants: “*Cimarron*...led its popular audience away from the cultural comfort of myths and into a complicated and hitherto uncharted historical territory” (Smyth 58).

Smyth argues that the discourse of the American Western relies on frontier nostalgia, myth, and does not question American history:

As with all myths, the Western is said to lack any self-reflexive relationship with its subject matter; it passively mirrors national myths rather than deliberately confronting and contesting these discourses. Yet *Cimarron*’s engagement with the text of traditional history fractures this insular genre world (51).

While *Cimarron* is inarguably a classic Western, noted especially in its use of man versus wilderness tropes, it relies heavily on historical story, and though it sentimentalizes American expansionism and Oklahoma history, it has been heralded

as an “authoritative historical document” (Smyth 57): “rather than memorializing America’s myths, *Cimarron* confronts them” (Smyth 54).

LAND AND RESOURCE EXPLOITATION: OIL BOOM TO DUST BOWL

Tulsa (1949) begins where *Cimarron* left off, at the peak of the Oklahoma oil boom of the 1920s. Almost immediately following the two land rushes of the late 19th century, oil was discovered in Oklahoma, reinforcing the ideal of Oklahoma as the land of opportunity. Not only could it provide its new settlers with land, but also with the riches of black gold. However, the conflict inherent in these two films deals with both cultural and environmental consequences: "These oil-frontier movies equate land acquisition with a sense of progress as a way to tame the frontier, no matter what the consequences for native cultures or the land itself" (Murray 108). *Tulsa* is unique in that it serves as "more a cautionary tale than a straightforward tribute to the era's petroleum-industry pioneers," in spite of the filmmakers' intentions to stimulate the oil industry and to celebrate the American free enterprise system (Morrow 107).

It is an oilfield accident that kills the protagonist in *Cimarron*, foreshadowing the dangers of over-extraction on the land. Similarly, in *Tulsa*, an important character meets his death at the hands of the oil industry. Early in the film, Lansing, an Oklahoma rancher, is killed after an explosion causes an oil derrick to fall on him. These accidents serve to warn of the danger of exploiting the land, and as a reminder that all seemingly good things come with a price.

While *Tulsa* was made during the economically stable post- World War II era,

the state of Oklahoma following the Depression was not experiencing the same prosperity of the 1920s. Thus, the nostalgia for the ecstasy and excitement of the oil boom days is obvious in *Tulsa*, but the not-too-subtle hints at the environmental destruction to come with the Dust Bowl are evident throughout the film.

As in *Cimarron*, *Tulsa*'s narrative outwardly focuses on the theme of progress versus the status quo, wherein the latter depicts the oil men as progressives, opportunists who seek wealth from what is below the land, with disregard for any potential environmental consequences. In contrast, *Tulsa*'s cattle ranchers serve as stewards of the land - raising cattle depends on environmental sustainability and as it is the land itself that provides sustenance for the cows, and therefore must be protected.

Inasmuch as *Tulsa* deals with ranchers and oilmen as representative as the status quo versus progress, the narrative returns to the common Western theme of man versus nature, or civilization versus savagery, depicted in the film as the struggle to assimilate American Indians even more into the "white man's ways." In the 1920s, as portrayed in *Tulsa*, the Indians residing in this region of Oklahoma were already living side by side with the white population, and faring well as demonstrated by Jim Redbird, the protagonist (Cherokee Lansing)'s Cherokee Indian friend and neighbor. Intermarriage was not uncommon, and was not necessarily detrimental or determinative of a person's societal acceptance or success: Cherokee herself asserts one-quarter Indian blood.

However, as Cherokee is played by white actress Susan Hayward, lives in white society and exhibits no outward expressions of Indian culture or tradition, it is implied that Indian blood is acceptable as long as cultural assimilation occurs. This assimilation is a theme throughout *Tulsa*, thinly veiled not as assimilated Indian or mixed-blood pitted against the traditionalist full blood, but instead as progressive white (and mixed blood, in Cherokee's case) oilmen (and women) versus the traditional rancher. The traditional rancher being none other than Jim Redbird, a full blood Cherokee.

Tulsa begins with narration that describes how

Oklahoma means Red Man's Land. Less than 50 years ago, all this was Indian Territory. Here the Osages, the Cherokees, the Creeks, the Choctaws, the Seminoles, the Chickasaws, even some Pawnees, raced their horses over the prairies, fished the streams, grew their crops, and raised their cattle. And all the time the oil was underneath the ground. Well, it had to come out.

Thus, gone is the way of the Indian, and now is the time for oil.

This paternalistic pressure to further assimilate the already assimilated Indian is perhaps most notable in two scenes:

When oilman Bruce Tanner offers Cherokee \$20,000 for the oil leases she has obtained, she refuses, stating that "you oil men come into our country, pollute the streams, ruin the land, kill our cattle...yes and our men too." Tanner responds "You're being childish, you're acting like your Cherokee grandparents who shot arrows at the first locomotive...this is oil country, the wealth is under the ground,

not on top of it.” Jim Redbird then breaks into the conversation and corrects Tanner as to the ways of life of the “Five Civilized Tribes” as southern agriculturalists who had libraries, printing presses, colleges, and who “think oil has been bad for this country.”

Redbird represents the Indian, civilized as he may be, but still “stuck” in the old ways of failing to utilize the resources under the soil for financial profit. And traditional in the ways his people were traditional: as ranchers and agriculturalists. Cherokee, as a mixed blood, somewhere in between tradition and progress, decides to renounce her ranching tradition and along with it any ties she might have retained to her Indian heritage. When Redbird agrees to fund Cherokee’s oil exploration endeavor, Pinky, Cherokee’s cousin and the narrator, leaves the room exclaiming “and another redskin bit the dust.” Outwardly, he appears to be referring to Redbird’s acceptance of the white man’s economic venture, but perhaps this statement could also apply to Cherokee - having now fully assimilated herself.

The second scene of note that deals with assimilation as a manifestation of taming the frontier and leaving behind a traditional agricultural lifestyle in favor of the wealth of land exploitation occurs when the geologist, Brady determines that there is more than likely oil on Jim’s ranch as well. At Cherokee’s proclamation that this news is “wonderful!”, a sullen Jim responds “Is it?” Brady, paternalistically, retorts: “Jim, oil and cattle can get along together, why not let us show you how?” The shot of the three characters looking out over a pasture then cross fades into the

same scene, a year later, when the landscape is now dotted with oil rigs. If only Jim accepts the white man's oil, he can be as economically prosperous and perhaps even as socially accepted as Cherokee and others less Indian than he.

This plan to completely assimilate the Indian backfires, as the film ends with Jim Redbird performing the "savage" act which destroys the environment, returning to the idea that the Indians, while traditionally seen as stewards of the land, do not in fact know what is best for the people who occupy it, it is instead the white society that carries this knowledge. With Redbird's destruction of fields by setting an oil polluted stream on fire, he ironically chooses to destroy the very land that supports his cattle. Thus, it is the Indian - "of all people" (Crowther) who is metaphorically punished for his failure to fully assimilate, and with this, *Tulsa* shows that the traditions of the Indian have gone the way of the cattle industry, and the buffalo before it - trampled by the white man's "progress" of further taming the frontier.

As previously discussed, the Oklahoma Western deals with the conflicts involved in this taming of the wild frontier, along with its native peoples. However, in "The Rush for Land, the Rush for Oil, the Rush for Progress," Murray and Heumann argue that yet another conflict is present within these "oil-frontier" films, that of the environmental message and the spectacle within the film. The spectacle in the land rush narrative of *Cimarron* comes from the opening shot of the 1889 land opening of Oklahoma territory, "rushed" by settlers on horseback, in wagons, and even via bicycle. In *Tulsa*, however, the spectacle is the shots of oil gushers and fires,

notable scenes which earned it an Academy Award nomination for Best Special Effects.

While these two films can be read as “eco-disaster” films, the “environmental consequences may be blurred by the exhibition on display” (110), and thus are notable and remembered for their portrayal of the relationship between settlers and American Indians and the land of Oklahoma, not of their environmental commentary and warnings of natural resource exploitation. Murray and Heumann write:

Such environmental dislocations are the price of both progressive and populist forms of progress...They reach monumental levels in filmic representations of the opening of Oklahoma and Indian Territories, where oil provides the riches on which empires are built. From explicit depictions of the land rush itself to historical and contemporary visions of one of the results of the land rush, a booming oil industry that is both lauded and critiqued, these films illustrate the dire consequences of these policies. (109)

Another narrative of environmental dislocation, differing from *Cimarron* and *Tulsa* in that the dislocation happens as a result of ecological disaster, not as a cause of it, is John Ford’s epic *The Grapes of Wrath*. Arguably the most widely known account of the dust bowl’s devastating effects on rural middle America, *The Grapes of Wrath* follows the Joad family who must flee Oklahoma to search for a new land of opportunity in California. As the epicenter of the Dust Bowl, Oklahoma became known as a barren landscape from which its inhabitants must escape. The landscape literally attacking the destitute Okies is the catalyst for the fictional story of the

Joads.

Gone are the sweeping technicolor landscapes of *Tulsa* and *Oklahoma!* representing opportunity and prosperity, this story of desperation, destitution and depression is instead fittingly filmed in black and white.

The Grapes of Wrath utilizes many of its opening scenes to establish that the Okies' identity is intertwined with the land: Muley Graves declares that "that's what makes it our'n. Being born on it, and workin' on it...and dyin' on it!" while Grandpa refuses to go to California: "This is my country and I belong here! Yes sir. This is my dirt. It's no good, but it's mine." His sentiments of belonging are reinforced as he does die, shortly after leaving Oklahoma.

While they self identify as people of the land, Sobchak points out the the Joads' are defined "by their lack of land (and lack of photographic reference)". Aside from the opening establishing shot of Tom Joad walking along a road on the flat plains and a few wide shots of of dusty farms, *The Grapes of Wrath* is noticeably void of landscapes that set the scene for the tragic circumstances of the Dust Bowl. At the time of the film's release, critics, among them Pare Lorentz (director of *The Plow the Broke the Plains*) and Edwin Locke, lambast the film for its lack of landscape, in a film ostensibly about land. Locke:

[John Ford] has given us no feeling of the country or of the people's background. Where are the vast stretches of the dust bowl and the tiny houses as lonely as ships at sea? Where is the dust?...It is baffling to hear that a camera crew was sent to Oklahoma along Route 66; certainly but a few feet of the film was used.

Lorentz further criticizes:

...he needed only to have gone to the panhandle of Oklahoma and Texas and western Kansas and the Dakotas and eastern Colorado and said: "photograph this - here is where they came from." As he did not, then Director John Ford...at least might have started his picture with the Great Plains instead of with scenes that, even though they were from the book, did not give you a feeling of the land."

Quoted in (Sobchak 604).

It is ironic that such a director as John Ford, whose filmmaking style can be defined by his iconic use of Western landscapes, opted instead to shoot *The Grapes of Wrath* indoors and on studio lots. Says Sobchek: "if one looks at the film's imagery, it seems rather off the mark to read *The Grapes of Wrath* as a land tragedy" (603).

This "patently artificial" setting "communicate[s] the visual message that the world which the Joads inhabit is less than real and vital" (606). Sobchek further points out that the Joads are never seen working the land that they speak of (615), in a sense invalidating the traumatic dust bowl experience and diminishing the real life relationship to the land, to one of narrative allusion.

In his choice not to focus on the visual aspect of the landscape, John Ford has, in a sense, dispossessed himself from the land in the same way the Joads are forced from theirs, and as a result, prohibits the viewer from creating an empathetic relationship with the onscreen land, and its accompanying tragedy.

Like the Joads, many of the "Okies" of the Dust Bowl who fled west in droves, were tenant farmers. While Muley blames the "dusters" for "blowing everyone

away”, in reality, the dust storms were a result of a poor tenant system and its farmers decimating the soil due to inferior farming techniques and lack of conservation efforts (Conrad). This fact, absent from the narrative, paints the Joads and their fellow Okies as innocent victims of circumstance. Paradoxically, *Grapes of Wrath* has often been praised for its documentary realism style and considered as much of a historical account as Dorothea Lange’s iconic photos of displaced migrant workers (John R. Smith, 323). Sobchak argues instead that “the film’s value as a cultural artifact is based on its relation to myth, to its expression of a popular social vision” (598). This myth is based in the unrealistic depictions of the land and the Joads’ relationship to it.

The Grapes of Wrath is not then about the people’s relation to the land, but about their search to reconnect, and establish a relationship. It is a quest film, driven by roads: the literal road west, away from the tragedy of Oklahoma, and the figurative road leading back the Joads back to the land and a sense of belonging.

The post World War II period of economic stability allowed for more Americans to not only own automobiles, but also to undertake cross-country road trips. Murray and Heumann argue that it is this ability to traverse the country, experiencing “nature through the window of a car” that acts as the final taming of the wild frontier (129-130). Thus, as Oklahoma no longer provides opportunity with its land based resources (at least according to Hollywood, and so reflected in the American public’s mind), its primary purpose is as drive-through country - it’s on

the way to something else. If it is in fact portrayed on screen as the final destination or god forbid, the home, all that awaits its visitors and inhabitants is death, despair, and more destruction.

CONTEMPORARY OKLAHOMA: TWISTERS AND PLAINS

On-screen Oklahoma has not recovered since 1940's *The Grapes of Wrath*, in spite of the state's real life economic stability. Films made and set in the modern day still represent the land as the desolate prairie, full of dust, despondence, and deadly ecological features. In contrast to the land of opportunity in which the gorgeous landscape is sought out and represents unbridled freedom characterized by abundant grassland for cattle grazing, and oil-rich underneath the soil, Hollywood regards modern day Oklahoma as drive-through country, otherwise a wasteland.

In *August: Osage County* (2013), Hollywood's most recent depiction of Oklahoma, Julia Roberts' main character is returning to her childhood country home in the namesake Osage County of present day Eastern Oklahoma. The film begins with her character, Barbara, driving with her husband through the flat Oklahoma landscape, described in the script as "miles of unforgiving, summer-scorched prairie," (Letts) empty except for hay bales and the dust that covers the car's windows. Barbara proclaims her disdain for the land: "What were these people thinking, the jokers who settled this place? Who was the asshole that looked at all that flat, hot nothing, and then planted his flag? I mean, we fucked the Indians for this?" She then continues, correcting her husband who refers to "the creepy character of the midwest": "Oh please, the Midwest. This is the Plains: a state of mind, right? A spiritual affliction, like the Blues."

The rest of the film pans out to prove Barbara right: the dusty, depressed plains is the setting for a dysfunctional family's reunion following the death of their patriarch and filled with the abusive tirades of a pill-addicted mother. The title of the film implies that it is the place that has created the scenario, this spiritual affliction. At a tumultuous family dinner enshrouded by one of the matriarch Violet's scathing rants, she reinforces that it is life there, in Oklahoma, that has set the stage for a terrible existence, screaming at her daughter: "What do you know about life on these Plains? What do you know about hard times?"

That *August: Osage County's* narrative is so dependent on the setting in Oklahoma is not evident just in the title and dialogue, but also in the film's production: director John Wells insisted that the film be shot in its namesake place: "I thought it was important that we be there in Oklahoma...I thought it was important for both the cast and crew to see it, and to feel it, because Oklahoma doesn't look like anything else and the people there come from a place that's had to endure and come through some things" quoted in (Smith). While Wells recognizes the uniqueness of the place, he elaborates that as he himself is from Colorado, he "was very conscious about the misconception of what the middle of the country is like for people who live on both sides of the coast," (Smith) yet contradicts himself by representing the land as a "flat, hot, nothing," which is indeed the stereotype that seems to be prevalent about Oklahoma.

The film closes as Barbara parallels the Joads: driving away through the

landscape, escaping Oklahoma, and with it the misery it represents.

In contrast to nothingness of the *August: Osage County* plains, *Twister* (1996) portrays the geography of Oklahoma and its accompanying weather as deadly. It is this threat, not of lack, but of over-activity, that the characters seek to escape. The film pays homage to Oklahoma's history as an oil state, as oil derricks are often seen in the background landscape. As in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *August: Osage County*, dust is prevalent throughout the film: the characters, their cars, and equipment are consistently covered in it, demonstrating that Hollywood's Oklahoma has not broken free of the Dust Bowl.

The story of *Twister* occurs almost exclusively within the Oklahoma landscape, with only minimal indoor scenes. The characters, as meteorologists for a fictional research institution based on the real National Weather Center at the University of Oklahoma, spend the majority of the story running both from and to tornados, which in turn threaten their lives. This chase is evocative of the "oil frontier" narratives of *Cimarron* and *Tulsa*: the quest to somehow tame or manage a natural resource has now evolved into a quest to harness a destructive storm in the middle of Tornado Alley. The dramatic spectacle of the special effects in *Twister* recalls the spectacles present in the two previous movies, but unlike the two, does not provide conflict to an underlying environmental message, it instead is the sole driving force of the film.

Twister is a classic disaster story - tornados are uncontrollable and take the

lives of or injure several characters within the diegesis. However, it is interesting to note that it is not the tornado itself that nearly kills the main characters, Bill and Jo, toward the end of the film - but an exploding oil tanker tossed in their way by the *Twister*. Like earlier Oklahoma films, the allusion to oil as potentially fatal returns here.

As *August: Osage County* impresses escape from the Sooner State to get away from emotional destruction, *Twister* inspires the desire to avoid the dangerous land of Oklahoma as it seems as though its residents are faced with a good chance of death if they choose to stay.

While this paper focuses on Hollywood's depictions of Oklahoma, with the rise of local independent film productions, it is relevant to discuss how contemporary Oklahoma filmmakers have portrayed the landscape and place. As a plains state, the flat land, haystacks, and oil rigs are common geographic features, but hundreds of lakes, canyons, hills, and forests are nearly as plentiful yet not seen on-screen. As in the 1920s of *Tulsa*, the city is still a booming cultural center, recognized for its art deco architecture, museums, numerous parks and botanic gardens, art scene, and aviation and oil industries, but on-screen constructions tend towards the same depressing atmosphere of poverty and despondency.

Francis Ford Coppola shot both *The Outsiders* and *Rumble Fish* in Tulsa in the early 1980s, two stories that follow low-income, self identified "white trash" kids from the wrong side of the tracks. While accurate in its depictions of a certain

socio-economic class and neighborhood, it is these portrayals, along with the other filmic images of Oklahoma as a plains wasteland that seem to contemporarily influence even the local filmmakers' representation of their state.

Sterlin Harjo, best known for his Native American-centric narratives, jumped from his usual depictions of hard-off Indians in rural Oklahoma to one of hard-off Indians in Tulsa with 2015's *Mekko*. A story of homeless urban Indians, the film's tones of grays and browns, settings of impoverished neighborhoods, a nearly vacant downtown, and a river bank characterized by graffiti, trash and a homeless camp, *Mekko* gives the impression that Tulsa is nearly as run-down, destitute, and void of life as *The Grapes of Wrath*. Similarly, the upcoming *Let Me Make you a Martyr* paints Tulsa as a community of trailer parks, strip malls, and low budget motels, populated by unkempt junkies, incestual and abusive low lifes, and shot in the same de-saturated color palate. Marilyn Manson, who stars in the film, attributes observing "the level of poverty and, I guess, white trash element" upon his arrival in Tulsa to his easy adaptation to the character (Grow).

Harjo has garnered positive reviews for *Mekko* (Harvey, Linden), which has screened at the Toronto International Film Festival and premiered at Los Angeles Film Festival, while *Let Me Make you a Martyr* premieres at 2016's South by Southwest. This exposure, while advantageous for Oklahoma's film industry, only solidifies the state's on-screen reputation as a flat, colorless place of poverty and despair, one in which only those who cannot escape are destined to remain.

CONCLUSION

As Hollywood's representations of Oklahoma have ranged from a pre-statehood Land of Opportunity to a post-depression barren wasteland, it has been the characters' relationships to the land that drives each narrative. From settlers' taming the wilderness to Okies escaping the plains lest they be killed or doomed to live a life of poverty or emotional and/or environmental destruction, Oklahoma has provided an ideal setting for tragedy, prosperity, and the story of the everyman. These real life, land-based stories fictionalized by Hollywood serve to ensure that the environmental messages told through the history of Oklahoma are immortalized. These films continue to disseminate these messages, both subtle and explicit in nature, through America's collective consciousness, perpetuating the myths of Oklahoma and what the state has currently and previously represented to America.

As a transparent product of manifest destiny, Oklahoma's frontier has been tamed, but it remains a working class state. Its economy and lifestyles continue to revolve around archetypal land relationships of the cattle, oil, and agriculture industries. It is this human ecology coupled with the theme of displacement in the narrative films discussed here that collectively tells a cohesive natural history story of people in their environment, and represents the ecological consequences of westward expansion and colonialism.

True Grit, Oklahoma!, Cimarron, Tulsa, Grapes of Wrath, Twister and *August: Osage County* were all nominated for or won Academy Awards, signifying their widespread popularity and recognition. Intertwined with the history of the state itself, these are stories of survival and perseverance on the Oklahoma landscape, told from within both negative and positive narrative frames, which is perhaps what makes the stories themselves endure in the lexicon of American popular culture.

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