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Bad Hombres at the Border

Masculinity and Mexico
in *Rambo: Last Blood*

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*The US has become a dumping ground for everybody else's prob-
lems. . . . When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their
best . . . They're sending people that have lots of problems, and
they're bringing those problems with us [sic]. They're bringing
drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume,
are good people.*

DONALD TRUMP (LAUNCH OF PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN, 2015)

While launching his campaign for the US presidency in June 2015, Donald
Trump shocked the world with a xenophobic speech that reserved a
significant amount of rhetorical bile for the United States's neighbor to
the south, Mexico. Trump indulged in common stereotypes of Mexicans
as dangerous criminals, and of Mexico as a lawless, chaotic, and violent
place. Infamously, he promised to build a "Great Wall" between the two
countries to guard against apparently uncontrolled immigration from the
south. In so doing, "he consciously crafted a US-Mexico border imaginary to
generate fear through a blending of national security concerns, xenophobia

toward Mexicans, criminalization of immigration, and an idea of the US-Mexico border as porous" (Fleuriet and Castellano 2020, 890). Trump would continue this theme throughout his presidency. To deter people from attempting to cross the border, his administration adopted a widely condemned policy of separating migrant children from their parents. A central facet of his strategy in the 2018 midterm elections was to stoke fear of migrants moving across the Mexican border through continued reference to a "migrant caravan" making its way through South America toward the United States. It has become received wisdom that Trump rode to power on a wave of disenchantment with neoliberal globalization that had driven down wages, outsourced jobs, and hollowed out communities. Anger at the failure to make any substantive reforms to this settlement after the collapse of the economy in 2008 was apparently further fuel for his popular appeal, as he opposed international free trade agreements and promised to bring back lost manufacturing jobs. However, evidence suggests that it was his articulation of white racial fears and resentment that was the true driver of his electoral success, with his infamous slogan "Make America Great Again" signaling to voters that he "would turn back the clock to a time when white people enjoyed a dominant position in American society" (Abramowitz 2018, 124). His language on "birtherism," indulgence of white supremacists, attacks on Muslims and Mexicans, and false claims of voter fraud in African American communities "directly targeted white racial and ethnic fears" (140).

Adam Abramowitz's argument that Trump's rhetoric around economics mattered considerably less to his supporters than his incendiary language about race is further evidenced by what Trump achieved in his four years in office. He did little to change the economic status quo. His main legislative accomplishment was a sizeable tax cut that mostly benefited the very wealthy. Therefore, his rhetoric about Mexico, and South America generally, is a fairly textbook example of scapegoating, a transparent attempt to appeal to the prejudices and grievances of his supporters by blaming a racialized other for the inequities of neoliberal, globalized capitalism. As Wendy Brown argues, "almost all agree that neoliberal intensification of inequality within the Global North was a tinderbox and that mass migration from South to North was a match to the fire" (2019, 10). Throughout his presidency, Trump fanned the flames for political purposes, relying on the tendency to treat the US-Mexico border not so much as "a geopolitical location in the United States than a concept that embeds a metaphor for insecurity and lawlessness" (Fleuriet and Castellano 2020, 882). Trump's rhetoric in this area found a receptive audience, with white voters increasingly resentful at the changing demographics of the United States and the increasing social, economic, and political power of people of color since the 1960s (Abramowitz 2018, 128–9).

Trump's incendiary, cartoonish language about Mexico and Mexicans—conceptualizing them as "bad *hombres*" during the third presidential

debate with Hillary Clinton in October 2016—was consistent with the characterization of the country and its people in US popular culture. Jack Beckham argues that when it comes to the US-Mexico border, "American cinema has, for years, worked its magic to manipulate popular opinion, machinating to fortify racial stereotypes, prejudice, jingoism, and hegemonic control—especially during times of political change" (2005, 130–1). Speaking of the border films of the early twenty-first century like *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee 2005), *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (Tommy Lee Jones 2005), and *No Country for Old Men* (Ethan and Joel Coen 2008), Camilla Fojas (2011, 98) notes that the border film "trace[s] policy mood swings and shape[s] cultural agenda," expressing US fears that economic globalization, political intervention, and transnational migration of people and goods will inevitably lead to greater cultural integration and, perhaps, degradation. Cinema also sought to "reduce the vagueness of the border region" by placing the United States and Mexico into a "binary opposition that places Anglo and American values in a hierarchical position to (stereotypical) Latino and Mexican values" (Beckham 2005, 131).

While fear of the other is no doubt a significant aspect of the border film, Mexico is often constructed as a proving ground for white masculinity too. As Janne Lahti argues (2016, 335–58), American films about the border are more often than not white, male fantasies of escape from a civilization in which they have become increasingly emasculated and marginalized as a consequence of the enormous social changes in postwar American society. As a subset of the Western genre, the border film renders "Mexico [as] a ruthless and violent dreamscape where self-made white male achievement and authority are still fathomable, but where the road to redemption is filled with dangers and corrupting temptations" (Lathi 2016, 340). It continues to offer a space for white men to "prove and recover their manliness," devoid of the restrictions on their behavior imposed by modern, urban life. The conventional border film may present Mexico as dangerous, and Mexicans as threatening, but it is also a world of adventure and excitement. A place to explore and exploit, inhabited by a people who inspire fear and fascination; "Mexico and Mexicans have always been blank slates for the projections of the U.S. psyche" (101).

However, Frank García (2018, 279) contends that American cinema of recent years has adopted an approach more critical of US policies toward the border, offering a substantive challenge to the tendency to portray Mexicans as drug dealers and gang members who pose a threat to the United States, its culture, and its citizens. For example, García argues that *Frontera* (Michael Berry 2014) critiques the vigilante militias who target migrants at the border as engaging in recreational violence akin to a videogame, using point-of-view shots to implicate the viewer in their actions (290) (however, García contends that the film ultimately reinforces the Trumpian calls to hypermilitarize the border in the name of national security). This shift is

consistent with the broader generic changes in the Western. Since the 1970s, as the genre has become increasingly marginal in mainstream feature film production, it has taken an increasingly skeptical attitude toward the concepts of American exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny. Associated with this is the genre's recent tendency to challenge the worldview of the cowboy whose "yearn[ing] for a timeless moral order" in which "strong, white men enforced a clear, unquestioned morality" is revealed to be, as in *No Country for Old Men*, impossible (101). These "revisionist" Westerns, or "post-Westerns," "become a vehicle to problematize the assumptions, explore the contradictions behind these ideals, and show the American nightmares of individualism, violence, inequality, poverty, degradation of the land, racism, or imperialistic foreign policies" (Gonzalez 2015, 56).

This chapter will demonstrate how the fifth installment in the *Rambo* series, *Last Blood* (Adrian Grunberg 2019), largely ignores the Western genre's recent revisionist approaches to the politics of race and gender, American exceptionalism, Manifest Destiny, and attitudes toward Mexico in favor of a reactionary reinforcement of Trumpian rhetoric. It achieves this by reviving the cultural imaginary of the classical Western, which tends to construct the United States as a pastoral idyll in need of staunch defense against dangerous others. In *Last Blood*, Mexico is presented as a hellish, criminal underworld, and Mexicans become the Native Americans of the Old West: bloodthirsty savages with no redeeming qualities who prey on innocent young women. The film performs the same kind of radical simplification of issues relating to the border as Trump, leaning on weatherworn stereotypes about the other that have animated American popular cinema for decades. In its mistrust of official law enforcement authorities on both sides of the border and proscription of an individualistic, vigilante approach to the Mexican criminal underworld presented in the film, *Last Blood* can be viewed as adopting the conventions of the Western as "perhaps the ultimate venue for the display of male power in conflict with both the wilderness and the bad guy" (Saxton and Cole 2012, 105). Rambo's dismissal of the possibility the police on either side of the border will do anything to rescue his niece is reminiscent of Ghassan Hage's claim that vigilantes take matters into their own hands when "they feel that their governmental national belonging is threatened or in decline" (2000, 69). This has echoes of Trumpian rhetoric, and this chapter will demonstrate the strategies *Last Blood* employs to reinforce Trump's tacit endorsement of violence against the nation's "enemies" in order to maintain white male hegemony.

By featuring an aged Sylvester Stallone as John Rambo, the film also belongs very much to the "geriaction" subgenre, which seeks to restore a violent, authoritarian model of masculinity that is increasingly marginal due to social, political, and economic change (Frame 2021). This is not a particularly new development: Mark Gallagher (2006, 45) argues that

"action films provide fantasies of heroic omnipotence and escape from, or transcendence of, cultural pressures," particularly a changing social and economic landscape in which male identity is no longer defined by physicality to the same extent. As Donnar notes (2016, 247), "Stallone's films . . . represent the vanguard of the cultural counter to perceived threats to white male hegemony following post-1960s cultural shifts and 1970s economic instability." However, these changes have been intensified in the post-recession era by an ageing "baby boomer" generation of white men who have seen power and authority beginning to slip from their grasp, and have looked to reassert their centrality in an environment changing socially, politically, and technologically. Indeed, it is important to note that in the eleven years between *Rambo* and *Last Blood*, Stallone established as writer and director another successful action franchise in *The Expendables* (2010–14). This series, featuring Stallone as the leader of a group of elite mercenaries, many of whom have been resurrected from the annals of 1980s action cinema, reaffirmed the star's persona as identified with marginalized, blue-collar white masculinities, engaging with the impact of economic and cultural change on this group. As Donnar suggests, "Stallone's characters are routinely downtrodden and written-off, beaten and abandoned, and bear an insistently reiterated 'outsider' or 'underdog' status" (250). Stallone's post-recession comeback, not only featuring in *The Expendables* but also resurrecting Rocky Balboa in the *Creed* (Ryan Coogler 2015; Steven Caple, Jr. 2018) films (among other roles in action cinema), demonstrates a desire to "resist . . . redundancy, age, and expiration" (256). Therefore, not only does *Last Blood* speak Trump's language when it comes to the US-Mexico border, it also appeals to the perception on the part of many of his supporters that, as older white men, their dominant positions in society are under threat due to social reform, globalization, and deindustrialization, offering an image of resistance to this apparently inevitable obsolescence.

The *Rambo* series (1982–2019) has functioned as a barometer of US domestic and foreign policies for its nearly forty-year history. In his earlier incarnations, John Rambo was understood as "the literal embodiment of American interventionism" (Tasker 1993, 92). Rambo himself is most predominantly identified with Reaganite policies: returning from Vietnam with post-traumatic stress disorder and discarded by the society that created him in *First Blood* (Ted Kotcheff 1982), Rambo becomes an avenging angel, journeying back to Vietnam to rescue the mythical US prisoners of war in *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (George P. Cosmatos 1985) that so animated right-wing discourse during this period. Indeed, the *Rambo* series performed important cultural work for the Reagan administration throughout the 1980s, which sought to reinvigorate US militarism and masculinity perceived to have gone soft, rehabilitate the Vietnam veteran in the eyes of the public, and, concomitantly, revise the nation's first major military defeat as a noble, rather than a shameful, one. As Rambo infamously said to

Colonel Trautmann (Richard Crenna) when he is about to return to Vietnam in *Part II*, "Do we get to win this time?" (the perception that it was mostly governmental ineptitude that denied the United States victory in Vietnam plays a significant role in the *Rambo* series). The series played a vital part in establishing the United States's Vietnam veterans as "innocent victims who are finally, almost reluctantly, claiming their proper status as both giants and equals in the geopolitical world" (Muse 1993, 92). In the cultural imaginary, Rambo is often understood as "a slugglishly violent nationalistic macho," and the embodiment of the United States's willingness to ride into battle overseas to impose its will upon the world (Tasker 1993, 97). As Susan Jeffords argues (1994, 42), the *Rambo* series in its first three installments is about "the battle for democracy around the world. And the only body who can wage this battle for the beleaguered West . . . is the hardened American body."

However, as Gina Marchetti notes (2014, 221), the *Rambo* series "embod[ies] the contradictions of the times," questioning the US government in *First Blood*, offering a revisionist take on the war in Vietnam in *Part II*, fighting the Cold War in Afghanistan in *Rambo III* (Peter MacDonald 1988), before attempting to make Burma safe for Christianity in *Rambo* (Sylvester Stallone 2008) Marchetti argues that the series is considerably more ambivalent about US foreign policy than its reputation suggests, evincing a profound mistrust of the US authorities, critiquing the treatment of Vietnam veterans, and, in Rambo, offering us "an ambiguous figure—off the grid, a loner, a Native American, unassimilated, perpetually angry, and not easily placed within America's political party structure" (224). Like the Western hero whose violence means he cannot ever be incorporated fully into civilized society, Rambo struggles in the first four films to find a stable place for himself in the land of his birth.

Last Blood's reduction of the complexities of the US-Mexico border to a series of binary oppositions in some respects therefore represents a departure for the series, which had initially evinced some ambivalence about the United States's exercise of power overseas and had particular concerns about its treatment of veterans. Moreover, Rambo's complex heritage (he is of Native American, German, and Italian extraction, and, of course, Stallone is Italian-American) is largely effaced in favor of a straightforward construction of "us" and "them." There are "good" Mexicans in the film (the "good people" to whom Trump referred), but they are limited to Rambo's niece, Gabriela (Yvette Monreal); her grandmother, Maria (Adriana Barraza); and investigative journalist, Carmen Delgado (Paz Vega), who rescues Rambo and helps him find the cartel. These "good" Mexicans are dwarfed by the overwhelming numbers of brutish men who prey on women and perpetrate horrifying acts of violence. Indeed, Gabriela's obvious assimilation into the rituals of US adolescence going from high school to college, refusal of the sexual advances of her boyfriend, and her visible discomfort and fear upon

return to Mexico suggest the film views her as a "good immigrant," whose Americanized, virginal innocence is in need of preservation and protection. This is consistent with both the contemporary vigilante film, in which recovery and demonstration of ageing masculine prowess are played out in the battle to protect or avenge young women, and right-wing discourse about immigration that constructs men of color as a sexual threat.

Having rescued the Christian missionaries from the bloodthirsty junta in Myanmar, Rambo returns to his family's ranch in rural Arizona at the conclusion of the fourth film. *Last Blood* opens with Rambo living out a pleasant existence here riding horses, living with Gabriela and Maria. Rambo remains traumatized by his experiences in Vietnam, constructing an interconnected series of tunnels beneath the ranch as a space for sleeping, forging metal, and quiet contemplation. Four decades of experience have convinced Rambo that the world is hellishly violent and savage. When Gabriela expresses a desire to travel to Mexico to confront her father who abandoned her and her mother, Rambo responds bluntly, "Why would you want to do that?" In keeping with US cinema's tendency to simplify the complex issues that underpin US-Mexico border migration, Rambo's worldview is Manichean. He warns Gabriela that "There's nothing good out there," and, of her father, that he knows "how black a man's heart can be," and that he is "not a good man." Both Rambo and her grandmother tell Gabriela that Mexico is "a dangerous place." *Last Blood* arrives at the conclusion that America's post–Second World War interventionism, in which it has acted as guarantor of global security within the international system, has been a failure: the rest of the world is beyond redemption. The film evinces an isolationist mindset consistent with Trumpian rhetoric, particularly as it pertains to Mexico. Far from being a product of US-led globalization and neocolonial exploitation, the Mexico of *Last Blood* is simply a bad place full of bad people. Such a view is consistent with the contemporary vigilante film since the success of *Taken* (Pierre Morel 2008), in which the aging hero must protect the young, vulnerable, and innocent— particularly women and children—from forces of evil that exist beyond the borders of the United States. In so doing, he will then be able to reassert his previously unchallenged position of rescuer, protector, and defender of the nation. The US-Mexico border proves the ideal stage for *Last Blood* to enact the anxieties about masculinity, national potency, and security that were so central to Trump's political success. To borrow another Trumpian turn of phrase, *Last Blood* reinforces Trump's suggestion that vast swathes of the globe beyond US borders are "shithole" countries, and only the heroic individual male can protect the United States from the threats they pose.

The film renders visual Rambo's worldview. It begins with a wide-angle shot of Rambo's sun-kissed Arizona homestead, offering a nostalgic evocation of the frontier landscape. Medals and weapons from Rambo's experiences as a soldier adorn the walls of his underground workshop and

sleeping quarters, before we cut to him demonstrating his skills on horseback, donning a white Stetson, denim jacket, and trousers. The camera revels in the spectacle of Rambo gently commanding the horse, gliding toward and around him before cutting to a top-down angle. Shortly thereafter, Rambo sits down to breakfast prepared by Maria. The kitchen has the welcoming, rustic quality of the Western homestead and, as Rambo later rides horses with Gabriela, it is clear the film intends to present a tranquil image of the US frontier, one that provides comfort and reassurance to the still-traumatized Rambo who endures vivid flashbacks to his Vietnam days while performing maintenance of his tunnel habitat. The archive footage of the carnage of war has an immediate, shocking quality, a stark contrast to the placid, rural domesticity of the opening scenes. Rambo consistently reminds us he is only able to keep "a lid" on his violent past, and it seems the warm stability of his ranch life (along with his medication) is essential to this effort. Though not abandoning Rambo's status as a victim of the nation's misdeeds in Vietnam, the film here confirms his reinstatement into US national mythology, revering his service and positioning him as the frontier hero. This is a further example of *Last Blood*'s resistance to the politics of the contemporary Western and border film, which tends to present (as in the case of *No Country for Old Men*) the Vietnam veteran as an outlaw in order to "elicit . . . public fears about the misuse and redeployment of military knowledge into criminal practice" (Fojas 2011, 101). The film invites us to admire, rather than fear, Rambo, the camera gliding over photographs of the young Rambo in military uniform, before arriving at an image of him with Gabriela and her grandmother on the occasion of Gabriela's high school graduation. While the previous films in the series appear to ask the question, "is there a place for the muscular hero in America?" here that question seems to have been answered in the affirmative (Tasker 1993, 98). Whereas previously, "as with the classic western hero, Rambo's violence [kept] him out of polite society," here he is positioned very much as father and protector, with a place to call his own and people who care for him (Marchetti 2014, 223). In so doing, *Last Blood* appears determined to reinforce the "thematic myth" of the Western: bringing civilization to the wilderness, with the strong white male "standing tall in the saddle," defending his home and his loved ones from everything outside that might pose a threat to it (Benshoff and Griffin 2009, 105).

By stark contrast, Mexico is presented as densely populated, dirty, and decrepit. Though the town at which Gabriela arrives remains unidentified, the proximity of Rambo's ranch in Bowie, Arizona, means it could be understood as the city of Juarez, a place with a reputation for violent crime and the home of Mexican *vaquero* (cowboy) culture. These perceptions are reinforced immediately. Gangs of men loiter on street corners drinking, leering at Gabriela as she arrives at her friend's dwelling, which is rundown and sparsely furnished. After her father cruelly rejects her (providing radical

contrast to Rambo's caring and overprotective paternal masculinity), Gabriela goes to a nightclub, where she is drugged and ultimately sold into sex slavery. The Mexican nightclub forms a further stark contrast with Rambo's ranch: it is neon-lit and loud, with the strobe lighting and rapid cutting assaulting the senses. A further obvious contrast is drawn between Rambo and the lascivious *vaquero* who approaches Gabriela at the bar. In keeping with the simplistic mythos of the classic Western, he dons a black hat to connote his villainy and, in conjunction with his open shirt and gold chains, is constructed quite clearly as a sexual threat, shown gazing at Gabriela's body. Rapidly intercut with shots of him leering at Gabriela are brief images of intoxicated clubbers and strobe lighting, adding to the disorientating, threatening feeling of the sequence. Pills dissolve in Gabriela's drink, we cut to black, and then immediately to a long shot of Rambo's ranch at dawn. From neon to sepia, from sensory overload to calm and quiet, from urban to rural, the film makes plain the stark contrast between Mexico and the United States.

This polarization is further reinforced when Rambo travels to Mexico on his own to find Gabriela. He is obviously out of his comfort zone in urban Mexico, finding himself navigating a labyrinthine network of dark alleyways and narrow stairwells in a dingy neighborhood in search of Gabriela's captors. He is easily caught and beaten to a bloody pulp. In its rendering of Mexico as a seedy, criminal underworld, and a place where only bad things happen, *Last Blood* is consistent with the Western genre's tendency to indulge in binary oppositions between wilderness and civilization. However, in its construction of this stark contrast between the United States and Mexico, the film departs from recent developments in the Western genre that have sought to complicate the simplistic oppositions of its classical incarnations in favor of a more critical perspective on the United States. Consistent with its position within the reactionary geriaction genre, however, *Last Blood* seeks to restore, rather than critique, a violent, racist, individualistic ethos as an essential component of the United States's ability to defend itself against barbarous others. In keeping with its portrayal in earlier films set in the borderlands from *Touch of Evil* (Orson Welles 1958) to *Traffic* (Steven Soderbergh 2000), "the borderland is . . . a zone whose uniqueness lies in the economics of crime and vice" (Dell'agnese 2005, 217).

Indeed, Gabriela's capture by sex traffickers places *Last Blood* within the confines of the captivity narrative common in the Western genre. It is consistent with canonical, classical Westerns such as *The Searchers* (John Ford 1956) and also has a clear relationship with contemporary iterations of the vigilante geriaction film whereby the retired hero, often drawn from a law enforcement or military background, is pressed once more into service to rescue or avenge a loved one, usually a wife or daughter. However, Rambo fails to save Gabriela's life, and she dies of a drug overdose on the journey back to the United States. Her death is a crucial narrative development in terms of the film's view of the

world, as it takes a turn toward the nihilistic thereafter. As Gabriela struggles to stay awake, Rambo tells her that she was the reason he had recovered after returning from his overseas misadventures; that in her, he saw goodness and innocence that he thought did not exist, and that he had found a family he never thought he would have. This returns us to the simplistic worldview Rambo expresses to Gabriela when she admits her desire to visit Mexico to find her father: Gabriela's goodness and innocence must be defended against the "bad" people that threaten it. Her death destroys Rambo's fragile faith in these ideological shibboleths of home, family, and childhood innocence, and justifies his previous belief that the world is hell. It also liberates him from any social obligation, meaning he can indulge his desire for revenge. Rambo gives in fully to a nihilistic perspective which echoes that of Trump's base of white male supporters who, rather than accept their gradual marginalization in a multicultural society, turn "toward apocalypse" (Brown 2019, 180). Rambo has long been identified as a representative of the dispossessed elements of US society (Tasker 1993, 101), but this takes on added resonance when we consider the confluence of the neoliberal valorization of libertarian freedom with the "wounded, angry white maleness" (itself a by-product of neoliberal economic policies) that drove Trump's electoral success. Brown argues that for constituencies in society who feel their power and influence are waning, Trump's willingness to say and do whatever he wants is reassuring, that perhaps the show is not completely over for them either. I suggest that Rambo's violence performs a similar function: far from having a goal in mind, or looking to achieve an edifying conclusion because none is possible, Rambo simply wants those who have wronged him to "feel [his] rage, [his] hate." As Brown contends of Trump and his supporters, "This is humanity without a project other than revenge, without restraint by conscience, faith, or value and without belief in either human or divine purposes" (2019, 172).

That this revenge plays out through the ritual extermination of racialized others is unsurprising, as the corrosion of the neoliberal consensus following the 2008 financial crisis resulted not in a sustained engagement with the powerful groups that caused it, but a reversion to a strategy of scapegoating racial minorities consistent with previous economic crises. *Last Blood* gives in fully to this impulse. Immediately after Gabriela dies in the front seat of Rambo's truck, the film then cuts to him pulling up to the border with the United States, guarded by a tatty barbed wire fence and a couple of impotent signs warning potential migrants to "keep out." Rambo smashes through this inadequate barrier with his truck, leaving little room for interpretation as to who and what is to blame for Gabriela's death. In keeping with his rhetoric and policies toward Mexico as candidate and later president, *Last Blood* reinforces Trump's construction of a US-Mexico border imaginary "to generate fear through a blending of national security concerns, xenophobia toward Mexicans, criminalization of immigration, and an idea of the US-Mexico border as porous" (Fleuriet and Castellano 2020,

890). Rambo then transforms his once tranquil homestead into a series of elaborate traps. He lures the cartel to their deaths through an initial incursion back into Mexico to murder one of the brothers who leads the cartel, Victor (Oscar Jaenada), whom he kills by severing his head. This is a taste of things to come as the final third of the film is a catalog of bloodshed, with each member of the gang massacred in increasingly graphic and horrifying ways, before Rambo pins the other brother, Hugo (Sergio Peris-Mencheta), to the wall using a bow and arrow, and rips his heart out with his bare hands. Though fanciful in execution (Rambo appears to find it reasonably easy to slice through Hugo's ribcage in order to wrench the heart from his chest), this conclusion should be viewed rather as a reinforcement of the US myth of regeneration through violence, in which the Western hero "becomes avenger, exorcising and destroying utterly all demons," cleansing the wilderness by exterminating dark-skinned others (Slotkin 1971, 51). This spectacle, in which an ageing male hero outwits, defeats, and destroys a horde of racialized invaders, is further evidence of the film's white supremacist rhetoric.

However, while he has defeated the cartel, it is difficult to say if this has revitalized or regenerated Rambo, or given him a new sense of purpose. The film concludes with Rambo, exhausted, wounded, and dejected, slumped on the rocking chair on the porch outside the homestead, facing once more a life of solitude and isolation. Rambo's voiceover narration, spoken in a gravelly drawl that bespeaks his physical decrepitude, informs us that "All the ones I've loved are now ghosts. But I will fight to keep their memory alive forever." This is unconvincing. Far from being a man regenerated by his violent actions, Rambo appears, consistent with the geriaction genre and Stallone's star persona, "used up" and largely redundant (Donnar 2016, 250). Having hinted at the possibility that he might have found a place for himself within civilized society at the beginning of the film, *Last Blood* concludes with the recognition that such inclusion within the body politic is, for someone as violent and antisocial as Rambo, impossible. He is, as he was in the first three *Rambo* films, "discarded" (Studlar and Desser 1988, 13). The comparison Studlar and Desser make between *First Blood: Part II* and *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (Mervyn LeRoy 1932) is potentially illuminating in this regard. At the end of *Part II*, Rambo has been abandoned by society in much the same way as James Allen (Paul Muni) is in Depression-era United States, left to fend for himself as one of the nation's "forgotten men." The situation in which *Chain Gang* was released, in the nadir between Herbert Hoover's election defeat and Franklin D. Roosevelt assuming office, speaks precisely to the economic outlook that drove Trump's victory, and the context in which *Last Blood* was produced. Trump himself invoked the "forgotten man" in his victory speech in November 2016, speaking to those supporters who themselves felt discarded and abandoned by a society that had left them behind. The bloody vengeance Rambo takes finds a clear analogy in the desire of many Trump supporters

to do something similar, "whether it is the rage of the economically left behinds or the rage of dethroned white masculinism" (Brown 2019, 177).

The conclusion of the film is consistent with the Western genre, where the cowboy is obligated to defend civilization, but can play no part in it due to his violent nature. *Last Blood* ends as *The Searchers* did, with no place for the hero at home despite his obvious commitment to its defense. As he surveys the destruction from his rocking chair, the wounded Rambo says in weary voiceover, "I tried to come home, but I never really arrived." He did not, because he could not. Though the previous installment had hinted at the possibility that Rambo could be welcomed back into the body politic of the United States, the conclusion of *Last Blood* is more consistent with the first three films (and the Western genre), "in which the hero's ambivalence toward civilization and the community's ambivalence toward the hero's violence precludes their reconciliation" (Studlar and Desser 1988, 14). The final shot, which pulls back from the wounded Rambo on the rocking chair to a wide-angle long shot of the Arizona landscape, recalls very much Ethan Edwards's (John Wayne) departure at the conclusion of *The Searchers* who, despite his heroism in rescuing Debbie (Natalie Wood) from the clutches of the Comanche, is left to wander the desert alone.

Not content with only this allusion to the classical Western, the montage of shots from previous installments in the series that overlay the initial end credits concludes with an image of *Last Blood*'s wounded Rambo on horseback, riding into the mountains. This is an explicit reference to *Shane* (George Stevens 1953), in which the eponymous hero, nursing a minor wound and having saved the town from the ruthless cattle baron, returns from whence he came. It aligns Rambo with the mystical, mythical power of Shane (Alan Ladd) and the frontier hero more generally, who stands in defense of civilization even if his place within it is tenuous at best. Rambo riding away into the mountains aligns his fate with Shane's—heroes with no place left for them in a changing world. Once more, Mexico has provided a proving ground for white masculinity, this time to demonstrate that the older, declining hero can still vanquish others. Indeed, Rambo's departure at the end of *Last Blood*, romanticizing the wounded warrior as he leaves on his white horse in slow motion, is reminiscent in some respects of the deification of Trump by many of his supporters: standing up for them against immigrants they perceive to be "stealing" their jobs and threatening their safety, establishment politicians that they perceive to be corrupt and self-serving, globalist economic forces and corporate multinationals that have outsourced their jobs and ransacked their communities, or liberal metropolitan elitists who sneer at their way of life (Hochschild 2016). However, rather than attempt to process the consequences of neoliberal globalization, *Last Blood* indulges in racial resentment and destructive nihilism as displacement activity, attempting to compensate for feelings of social marginalization and economic decline through an orgy of graphic violence.

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