No Appreciation With Appropriation

The movie *Django Unchained*, directed by Quentin Tarantino, lives up to all the expectations of a Tarantino film. The plot follows Django, a vengeful slave recently freed from slavery, and Dr. King Schultz, his companion, on their journey to rescue Django’s wife from whom he was separated when she was sold to a sophisticated and cruel slave master, Calvin Candie. Being directed by Tarantino, the film depicts intense action scenes full of over exaggerated blood and gore, along with flashes of dry humor and comedy. A particular scene in the film exhibits Django, Schultz, and Candie gathered around the dining room table conversing about the possible sale of a mandingo—a fighting slave—and the prospect of a future sale including Hildi—Django’s wife. Suddenly, Stephen—Candy’s right hand slave, appears out of the kitchen after having a word with Hildi. Stephen then asks for Candy’s ear and requests him to meet him in the study to discuss further. As Candy enters the room, the mise-en-scéne of the scene depicts Stephen in formal dress, sitting upright with his legs crossed on a love sofa, while occasionally sipping from a glass containing an alcoholic beverage. As Candy sits down his posture is slouched over as he begins to listen to Stephen intently. Stephen then reveals to Candy his suspicions about Django and Schultz’s true intentions to con Hildi from his ownership. Candy, being upset and angry from being made a fool, returns to the dining room table accompanied by the skull of a former slave. He proceeds to saw apart the skull to show a
physical distinction between blacks and whites. At first glance, this film scene appears to show a
loyal slave in his attempt to warn his master of those who seek to take advantage of him, but
actually reveals a more complex relationship between slave and slave master. Using lenses from
Bell Hooks, author of “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance”, and Michael Omi, author of “In
Living Color: Race and American Culture”, one can better understand the dynamic aspects of
Stephen—slave— and Calvin’s—master— relationship and the consequences of that
relationship.

In Bell Hooks’ “Eating the Other” she claims white people “flirt” with the idea of having contact with the Other, in doing so, some come to appreciate the other’s culture, while others only seek to “affirm white power” (Hooks 36). The ones who wish “to reassert white domination” refuse the process of “racial integration” that would otherwise result in increased equality for the Other (Hooks 37). The ones who come to appreciate otherness “desire spaces where boundaries can be transgressed, where new and alternative relations can be formed” (Hooks 36). This realization can only come about absent the oppressor/oppressed relationship that only serves to hinder racial progress. This dynamic is the difference between cultural appropriation—exploitation of the Other—and cultural appreciation—recognition and commitment to increasing black freedom and equality. This lens is useful in providing a more in-depth understanding of the relationship between Stephen and Calvin.

Candy and Stephen’s relationship represents a master and sidekick dynamic. Candy allows Stephen to handle his affairs in his absence. This gives Stephen power over both slave and white worker, which challenges racial norms of the time. Candy doesn’t treat him like most slaves. He values his opinion and often abides by his opinions. This is evident when Candie
comes to believe Stephan’s claims about Django and Schultz’s true intentions. Despite this fact, in the end Stephen is still a slave that bows to Candy’s demands. Their relationship almost appears to transgress those racial boundaries, but fails to because Candy asserts his dominance over Stephen. This is evident when Candy saws open the skull of a former “valued” slave and reveals that black people are physically structured to be obedient and it is the role of white people to rule over blacks. This being right after Stephen uncovered a plot that could have damaged Candy. Furthermore, when Stephen was revealing the con to Candy, Stephen was in a power position. He was enjoying the luxuries most slaves otherwise could not. He was openly sipping from Candy’s alcohol reserves free of consequence. He was sitting in a position as if he was an authoritarian figure and his posture was upright, demonstrating a sense of power. Meanwhile, Candy’s posture was slouched and in a position without power. The scene portrays an almost guardian and dependent relationship with Stephen being Candy’s guardian giving him wisdom. This wisdom leads Stephen to uncover the plot to acquire Hildi without suspicion. Although their relationship comes to the brink of transgressing racial boundaries, it does not, because Candy refuses to relinquish his dominance. Candy refuses to transgress these boundaries where alternative relations can be formed. He continues to culturally appropriate—exploit—black souls.

The relationship between Candy and Stephen is just one example of a relationship based on white supremacy. Unfortunately, similar relationships are still present in today’s “progressive” society. Consequently, these sorts of relationships have detrimental impacts on the foreseeable future of inter-racial relationships. Michael Omi’s “In Living Color” provides some insight into those consequences. In his piece, Omi describes the impacts of relationships similar to the one
described in the latter paragraph between Candy and Stephen. Omi claims that the concept of a minority was created by white people to put a label on their differences (Omi 114). Historically, white people have come into conflict with what they did not understand. Omi mentions how, at the hands of white people: Native Americans experienced genocide, blacks were forced into slavery, Mexicans were conquered, and Asians were ostracized (Omi 114). This disturbing reality created a mindset that depicted minorities—people whom white people see as different from themselves—as a separate species based on their perceived inferiority (Omi 114). Therefore, white people “rationalized” minorities’ place in society. This was determined by those who felt that “otherness” results in a conception of “us” versus “them” (Omi 114). To this day this dynamic is still present. The use of the term “American” is perceived to describe whites, while other “Americans”, labeled as black, Mexican, and Asian/Oriental, are declined the title of “American” (Omi 114).

The ways in which Candy, as well as Stephen, refers to the slaves embodies this notion of white supremacy. Before leaving to talk with Stephen, Calvin says a few lines of dialogue that reinforces the perceived racial hierarchy. When talking to Django and Schultz, he refers to the kitchen help as “they”—this emphasizes Omi’s argument of “us” and “them”—he jokingly states, “talented as they are in the kitchen, from time to time, adult supervision is required.” His comment reveals the power Candy has entitled himself with over his black slaves, treating them as children he can freely boss around. This, yet again, exposes the perceived racial hierarchy. When returning to Django and Schultz after talking with Stephen, he adds, while sawing part of a skull, “In the skull of the African here, the area associated with submissiveness is larger than any other human or any other human subspecies on planet Earth.” His comments reveal another
demonstration of white superiority. His comments also seem to dehumanize Africans when he includes “or any other subhuman species”, almost as if he, because of their “otherness”, believes they do not belong in the same category as humans—white people. Because of Candy’s ideals, the relationship described between him and Stephen cannot and will not ever proceed to transgress the racial boundaries between them.

Relationships where the parties involved are not on common ground in regard to racial equality result in ongoing perceptions of “otherness”, that, when present, will not allow for the relationship to surpass the concept of “us” versus “them” and white superiority. This hinders any future desires to transgress racial boundaries. By interpreting Hooks’ and Omi’s lenses one can infer Candy and Stephen’s relationship to be the epitome of the combined interpretations of both arguments. Candy “flirts” with the idea of having Stephen as a friend or sidekick, but rejects it because he continues to exact his perceived superiority over Stephen. This results in a prejudiced attitude towards “minorities” that serves to dictate their place in society and in inter-racial relationships. The dynamic between these two concepts continues to plague the race relations of today. Sadly, a number of whites continue to view “otherness” as a repulsive quality and support aspects of segregation. Until, as a society, all races bring themselves to dismiss the superior/inferior relationship, there will be no hope of transgressing racial boundaries, and similarly, true racial equality.
Works Cited

