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Ivan Sen's Transnational Post-Westerns: *Mystery Road* (2012) and *Goldstone* (2016)

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses Neil Campbell's definition of post-Westerns as films 'coming after and going beyond the traditional Western whilst engaging with and commenting on its deeply haunting assumptions and values' (*Post-Westerns*, 2013) in order to expand it to a transnational, post-colonial context and focus on two films made by Australian director Ivan Sen (*Mystery Road* (2013) and *Goldstone* (2016)) that can be considered Australian post-Westerns. These two films make references not only to American Westerns, but also to the less known genre of Australian Westerns or 'bushranger films', and they use, on the one hand, an aboriginal protagonist as reminder of the 'black tracker' typical of Australian Westerns, and on the other, the Australian outback to question the country's identity and foundational myths. By establishing a complex dialogue both with American Westerns and their Australian counterpart, Ivan Sen articulates a discourse which refutes the country's foundational myth as a *terra nullius*, and proposes a new sense of national identity that is inclusive of the Indigenous experience. By rescuing the role of the 'black tracker' of traditional Australian Westerns, reappropriating and updating it into the character of Jay Swan as mixed-heritage 'man in the middle' and cultural mediator, Sen inscribes these films into a contemporary corpus of films (the transnational post-Western) that is redefining national identities and contemporary masculinities in countries that have experienced the influence of American Westerns.

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KEYWORDS

Post-Western; Australian; Western; Ivan Sen; Mystery Road; Goldstone; black tracker; transnational

As Virginia Wright Wexman reminds us, Westerns have been delineating the myth of national origin in the United States since the silent era of cinema (131). America's foundation myth and exceptionalism have been articulated through a film genre based on a space which has become loaded with political and textual meaning in the national imagination: the American West. While Westerns have been declining in mainstream cinema in the last few decades, a new type of films has appeared that has inherited some of the features of the genre and imbued them with a new critical perspective: the post-Western. This paper uses Neil Campbell's definition of post-Westerns in order to expand it to a transnational, post-colonial context and to analyse two Australian films as post-Q6 Westerns in Campbell's sense of the term: Ivan Sen's *Mystery Road* (2012) and *Goldstone* (2016).

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The American Western

Q7 The first Western film is usually considered *The Great Train Robbery* (Porter, 1903), but this short silent film was made after a significant literary tradition that had begun with the 'captivity stories' of the 18th century and was continued by James Fenimore Cooper in his 'Leatherstocking Tales' (1823–1841). Whereas the captivity narratives expressed the fascination and fear that the white settlers felt for the Natives, Cooper created the prototype of the American popular hero: Natty Bumpo, an individualistic frontiersman with personal ethics who finds himself between civilisation and wilderness and is at ease with nature and with Indians (Slotkin 1992, 16). This literary tradition was continued by the popular 'dime novels' of the nineteenth century, which simplified Cooper's themes and created a number of stereotypes (like the evil Indian) which would stick with the genre for a long time. Most dime novels were hackwork, with lots of action, very weak plots and poorly developed characters, but Owen Wister gave back dignity to the genre with *The Virginian* (1902). Influenced by writers like Mark Twain, Bret Harte and Stephen Crane, Wister had some actual experience of the West, which allowed him to write more realistic novels and to create the first cowboy hero, 'stoic, righteous, and quick-witted' (Nelson 2015, 333). The first film Westerns combined these literary sources with the popular spectacle of *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show* and with a visual tradition that reflected the fascination with the West felt by photographers and painters like Thomas Moran, Thomas Cole, R.A. Blakelock and Frederick Remington.

Even though the Western has been considered 'the American film par excellence' (Bazin 2015), it actually took the genre some decades to become the American cultural icon we now know. During the first decades of Hollywood cinema, most Westerns were low-budget films designed to fill the second half of a cinema's double bill and were starred by 'B actors' like William Boyd (Hopalong Cassidy), Gene Autry ('The Singing Cowboy') and Roy Rogers. It was only after the success of films like John Ford's *Stagecoach* in 1939 that the Western stories found their best means of expression in the Hollywood studio system. During the next two decades the Western became the most popular American genre: approximately one quarter of the films made in Hollywood during the 1940s and 1950s were Westerns, and something similar happened in other popular media, like comics or television. Film directors like John Ford (*Fort Apache*, 1949, *Rio Grande*, 1950, *The Searchers* 1956, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, 1962), Howard Hawks (*Red River*, 1948, *Rio Bravo*, 1959), George Stevens *(Shane* 1953), Fred Zinneman (*High Noon, 1952)*, Anthony Mann (*Winchester 73*, 1950) or Nicholas Ray (*Johnny Guitar*, 1953) created 'classic' Westerns making use of the potential of the Western landscapes and the image of iconic actors like John Wayne and James Stewart as a tool more powerful than words.

A number of critics have tried to account for this popularity and linked it to the genre's social function: critics like Will Wright or John Cawelti highlighted the opposition between wilderness and civilisation displayed by the genre and linked it to Frederick Jackson Turner's 'frontier thesis' about the taming of the frontier as the defining event in America's national character. These critics used a structural paradigm to define the different types of plots present in the genre (the 'classical plot', the 'vengeance variation', the 'transition theme', and the 'professional plot', as defined by Wright 1975) and to explain how Westerns extended the contrast between civilisation and wilderness to other

dichotomies, like order/anarchy, America/Europe, garden/desert, town/wilderness, individual/community or cowboy versus Indians. In these conflicts the hero does not represent either side, but is instead a 'man in the middle' (Cawelti 1999), isolated between civilisation and wilderness, representing the best values of each side 'and thereby reconciling them in the American imaginary' (Nelson 2015, 337). Thus, Westerns dealt with the myth of national origin and re-enacted 'America's foundation ritual' (Schatz 1981, 46), providing the US with the myths that the country lacked, and therefore fulfiling a role similar to medieval epics in Europe. Other scholars have also underlined the 'regeneration through violence' implied in the conquest of the West (Slotkin 1992), as well as the troubling representation of women, masculinity (Tompkins 1992, Mitchell 1996), racial prejudice, and 'genocide' (Black 2020, 2) present in the genre, particularly in this 'classic' phase.

As the 1940s gave way to the 1950s and 1960s, Westerns gradually became more complex and pessimistic, as well as more sympathetic to Indian culture, as shown, for example, by John Ford's later films like *The Searchers* (1956), *The Man who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) or *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964). Beginning in the late 1960s, the Western experienced a tremendous decline, as can be seen not only in the decrease in production and popularity, but also in the negative critical response. Critics have associated this wane to the changes in American society, and related it to the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement. As Richard Maltby has written, Westerns became less relevant and 'ceased to function as a vehicle for American culture to tell itself the stories it need[ed] to hear' (Maltby 2003, 100). The 'revisionist' Westerns made in the late 60s and 70s (like Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* from 1969, or Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* from 1971) tried to explore the contradictions in the taming of the lawless frontier and relate it to contemporary conflicts like the 'new frontiers' in Southeast Asia, but the genre's popular decline was not stopped. Even though this 'evolutionary' view of the Western (from beginnings to 'classic' phase to 'revisionist' Westerns) has become quite standard and it probably corresponds to the majority of the films belonging to the genre's canon, it has also been criticised by scholars like Matthew Carter, who points out that 'classic' Westerns like *Shane* or even *Stagecoach* are already very complex in the description of the main hero's personality and the impossibility of 'civilized' society to accept him, whereas more contemporary films like *Unforgiven* (Clint Eastwood 1992) are more traditional and conservative than some films of the 'classic' era (Carter 2015).

Even though the production of Westerns has never stopped, and one can find interesting Westerns in the 1990s (Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves*, 1990, or the already mentioned *Unforgiven*) and in the 21st century (Ed Harris's *Appaloosa*, 2007; the Coen Brothers' *True Grit*, 2010; Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*, 2012; Tommy Lee Jones's *The Homesman*, 2014), the genre has never gone back to the peaks of popularity it enjoyed during the 1940s and 1950s, and, as Andrew Patrick Nelson has phrased it, the Western 'has changed from a popular genre into a *prestige* genre' (2015, 341), loved and taught by academics, and chosen by famous actors and directors to leave their mark in film history, but not as popular as before. In fact, some or the most interesting Western-related films made in the 21st century should fall not in the 'revisionist Western' category, but in the 'post-Western' category, which we will explore in the following section.

The post-Western and transnational post-Westerns

The term 'post-Western' was first applied to cinema by Philip French in the 1970s (1973), and has been employed by a variety of critics since then to refer to very different books and films. Scholars such as Slotkin (1992), Cawelti (1999), Kollin (2007), Comer (2011), or Campbell (2013) have applied it successfully to the field of Western Studies, although they do not always agree on its features or on the films or books that could be included in the category. Neil Campbell's recent monograph (*Post-Westerns*, 2013, building on his previous shorter pieces) is the most ambitious and thorough contribution towards the definition and application of the category: he uses the term for films produced after World War II which are 'coming after and going beyond the traditional Western [genre] while engaging with and commenting on its deeply haunting assumptions and values" (2013, 31). Campbell compares his use of the prefix *post* to the way it is used in words like postcolonialism, poststructuralism, or postmodernism, that is to say, when it is used both in a chronological sense and in the sense of opposing the antecedent, deconstructing it, or trying to go beyond it. Thus, post-Westerns establish a critical dialogue with the form, structure, and underlying assumptions of the Western genre: 'post-Westerns constantly and deliberately remind us of the persistent presence of the Western genre, its traces and traditions within the unravelling of new, challenging forms and settings' (2013, 309). In this sense, post-Westerns articulate their discourse from a strong ethical position, a critical stance that leads their creators and audiences 'to think differently and better' (2013, 28) about the racial and gender assumptions of the genre. Finally, it is important to note that Campbell does not follow an 'evolutionary' approach in his definition of the post-Western, and therefore, although most of the examples he provides are recent (*Lone Star* [1996], *Down in the Valley* [2005], *No Country for Old Men* [2007]), he also uses the term for films from the 1950s and 1960s (*The Lusty Men* [1952], *Bad Day at Black Rock* [1955], *The Misfits* [1961]).

Although the category seems to be gaining currency not only in the field of Western Studies but also in Film Studies, it has also been contested by critics like Lee Clark Mitchell, Matthew Carter, or Andrew Patrick Nelson, who prefer to use terms like 'late Westerns' (Mitchell 2018), 'contemporary Westerns' (Nelson 2013), or simply 'Westerns' (Carter 2015) for films like *No Country for Old Men*, and resent the posthumous connotations of the prefix *post*, which might suggest a premature burial of a genre that continues to produce interesting films, as we have shown before. However, I believe that the category can be useful, particularly as we distance ourselves from the traditional Western chronotope (the West of the USA at the time of conquest), as in the films object of study in this article. One example provided by television might help us to define the limits of the category in contrast with 'revisionist' Westerns. HBO's television series *Deadwood* (2004–2006), while probably the best series to deal with the West, would not be a post-Western but a 'revisionist' Western, one that (like many other Westerns belonging to this category) makes an effort to separate myth from history and show the reality (social, economic, racial, sexual) behind the myth and its misleading representations. FX's *Justified* (2010–2015), however, taking place in contemporary Kentucky, is certainly not a real Western, but it establishes a dialogue with the classic form in its very title and from the first episode. The idea of 'justified' killings applied by the protagonist and the notion of justice based on traditional Western codes

('he pulled first'), as well as the protagonist's Stetson hat and the *Tombstone* poster he encounters at the US Marshal's office in Lexington, Kentucky, are all obvious hints that signal it as a post-Western and make the audience wonder about the validity of the myth in contemporary America.[1]

Most of the examples provided by Campbell and other critics for post-Westerns are American, as shown before; however, it is a well-known fact that although Westerns started out as a national, and even regional genre, they soon became a transnational phenomenon, which was received and interpreted differently in diverse national contexts. Peter J. Bloom, for example, has studied the reception of American Westerns in colonial Algeria and suggested that they were often 'interpreted against the grain of civil authority', and 'appropriated beyond the film's narrative intention' by the native audiences (2001, 205). But Westerns were not only received transnationally, they were also *produced* in very different countries, even if they used the same temporal and spatial field of reference. The most significant example is probably that of 'spaghetti westerns', particularly those directed by Sergio Leone, which infused new blood into the genre in the 1960s and 1970s, but Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper have provided a plethora of examples of 'international Westerns' from almost every corner of the world (2014).

Once Westerns started declining in mainstream cinema, post-Westerns took over and appeared throughout the globe, applying the assumptions and values of the Western to specific national environments. A very interesting aspect of post-Western films produced outside the United States is that they adapt American values to other regional and national locations and thus not only question the features of the original genre but also scrutinise their own regional and national identities and conflicts. A good example is Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (*Bir Zamanlar Anadolu'da*, 2011), a Turkish film which echoes Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968) not only in the title, but also in its formal approach to *mise-en-scène*, rhythm, and the use of the Anatolian barren landscapes as reminiscent of the American West. With these references in mind, the audiences can easily establish analogies and contrast between cinematic spaces, national identities, and generic codes: if Westerns re-enact America's foundation ritual, this film questions the foundation myth of modern Turkey, the creation of a secular republic by Atatürk after the demise of the Ottoman Empire, and the subsequent process of westernisation of this predominantly rural and Islamic part of the country.

Although Miller and Van Riper use the term 'international Westerns' for films like this, I have argued elsewhere that films like *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* should be considered post-Westerns, not Westerns, and that they are part of a larger group of post-Westerns produced in different parts of the world that should be called *transnational*, rather than *international*. Previous studies about transnational post-Westerns in Ireland, Spain and France (González 2016, 2019) have found that they share the following features:

- clear references to the Western genre that take the spectator into a space of dialogue and reflection with the values of the genre in a different spatial and temporary context;
- the choice of a particular landscape and region in that new environment, which usually resembles the American West and thus becomes a kind of 'third space' (Bhabha 2004) propitious for hybridity and interaction;

- the use of that space with a critical political intention: to probe into the national identity, foundational myths, and contemporary contradictions of the 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991) of the country where these films are set and produced;
- the analysis of the difficulties of integration of racial, ethnic or social minorities, the 'contemporary Others' equivalent to Native Americans in Westerns;
- the exploration of the contradictions derived from the application of traditional models of masculinity (paradigmatic of the original genre) to contemporary national situations;
- and, finally, the study of the contrast between death and regeneration: the use of the conventions of a 'dead' genre to explore the regenerative possibilities of a particular landscape and context.

The Australian Western

Unlike in Ireland, France or Spain, the idea of Westerns has been around in Australia for a long time, but the status of '"Australian Westerns" … has often been a difficult one' (Cooke 2014, 3). In fact, in its formative years, the Australian Western-like genre was completely independent of its American counterpart, since between 1904 and 1913 nineteen 'bushranger films' were made in Australia. These films were shot in outdoor settings that highlight the peculiarities of the Australian landscape, and they feature irreverent antiheroes who have become stereotypes of the Australian character. Even though there might have been some slight American influence, these films were made independently, evidently as a result of a common historical and geographical background. In fact, Peter Limbrick has postulated an umbrella mega-genre or 'mode' that he calls a 'settler colonial mode of cinema' that includes both genres and 'that turns to certain narrative and representational strategies as part of a larger cultural project of grounding white settler cultures within colonized landscapes' (2007, 69). In other words, both US Westerns and Australian bushranger films were 'a settler colonial response to the experience of colonizing and settling as "home" an environment inhabited by aboriginal peoples' (2007, 70) with the resulting necessary negotiation of tensions and contradictions and the construction of racial and gendered identities. These processes of settler colonisation have brought about in different post-colonial contexts the development of similar narrative themes (settler families working the land, male outlaws, white/indigenous relations) and the creation of similar modes of representation, like extreme long shots of landscape, or the visual contrast between empty landscape and lone individuals on horseback or settled farms (2007, 73).[2]

Most of the bushranger films dealt with the real exploits of Australian rural bandits, in particular with the story of Ned Kelly, an Australian folk hero that has become a sort of irreverent national icon. Although the stories celebrating the life and adventures of this type of 'social bandits' have been popular in many other countries (Hobsbawm 1959), there seems to be a reason why they were particularly successful in Australia. The country's convict past created a predilection to favour the oppressed, and, as a matter of fact, Australian national myths are built around the celebration of underdogs like Ned Kelly and other bushrangers, and glorious defeats like Gallipoli or the Eureka Stockade. As Zimmermann expresses it, Australian society 'used to be glued together by some sort of honour amongst crooks, fighting imperial rules and the Empire with its law enforcers

that wrongly imprisoned many convict pioneers of the early colonial days' (2012, 135); Ned Kelly, in fact, has come to be seen as a freedom fighter and a forerunner of the independence of Australia, and the country's 'imagined community' seems to be built around these male rebels and their disrespectful attitude towards Puritanical rulers.

However, bushranger films were banned after 1913 by the ruling élites, who considered that they represented Australian history and the national character in a negative light, a fact that prevented the full development and consolidation of an independent Australian 'settler colonial' Western-like genre. Bushranger films only came back in the 1970s with remakes of the original Ned Kelly story that has always stayed popular with Australians. A result of this ban was American domination of Australian cinema screens: 95% of the films shown in Australia in 1927 were produced in the USA. The void in Australian cinema left by bushranger films was then filled by the expanding genre of the American Western, which influenced the look, tropes and iconography of the Australian 'kangaroo' or 'meat-pie' Westerns that followed, a hybrid genre which combined Australian settings and characters with American iconography and themes. Cooke has pointed out how, because of this American domination and the lack of 'a mature or Classic phase' such as the one taking place in the US Western production in the 40s and 50s, Australian Westerns missed the chance to articulate an independent discourse about Australian identity: 'despite having made many Westerns, Australia never developed "the Western" as such, as a complex mechanism of national identity' (2014, 7). He has contrasted the 'regeneration through violence' that takes place in American Westerns to the 'Australian reticence in justifying violent acts' described by Lewis, and concluded that '[l]acking a mature phase … Westerns in Australia were never implemented as a process to work through the violence in Australia's history' (2014, 11).

In fact, we have to wait until the 'revisionist' phase of Australian Westerns in the 21st century to find an articulated discourse about Australian history and culture. Two recent films in particular stand out as examples of this revision: *The Tracker* (2002) and *The Proposition* (2005). *The Proposition* is set in 1880s colonial Australia and tells the story of the violent confrontation between a gang of bushrangers and the British police forces with no heroic undertones. As in all the films mentioned so far, the role of the American West is taken by Australia's outback, often identified as synonymous with the country itself; however, instead of presenting the outback as a site of national birth and cohesive identity (as in the American context we have seen before), *The Proposition* 'reflects on the frontier as a space to discuss the notion of displacement and its legacies of conflict and alienation into the present', 'not as a site of the white man's hegemony but rather as a site of masculine anxiety and stress' (Hamilton 2015, 136–137).

As different critics have pointed out, the main difference between the US West and its Australian counterpart is that the outback has never really been settled by the white invaders, and the Aboriginal people have never signed a treaty or surrendered to the settlers. As a result, 'the desert interior remains, even for the modern Australian Psyche, a curious heart of darkness' (Self 2006). Hamilton has related this feature to Australian cinema in general, pointing out that if 'an integral component of the Western is the relationship between humanity, land and identity, it must be acknowledged that similar links run through Australian cinema as a whole, not just in Australian Westerns' (2015, 133); she has cited major Australian hits like *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), *Mad Max* (1979), and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) as cases in point where

Q12 'the landscape is … conceptualized as a character or shaper of character, both national and personal … in a way that mimics the role of American frontier landscape in US cinema' (2015, 133). Ross Gibson has expanded this idea and argued that in Australian cinema 'the land has been represented as both alien *and* central to Australian identity – central in its very otherness' (quoted in Cooke 2014, 12). Both in cinema and in literature, the Australian eerie landscape seems to be dangerous, uncanny, and to hide nameless threats or unresolvable mysteries, in a tradition generally referred to as 'Australian Gothic' (Turcotte 1998).

Both bushrangers and Aborigines become essential features of the outback and Q13 '*capitalize* on its danger, requiring of it that it maintain its capacity to hide the unknown, to shelter that which refuses to succumb to the law of white settlement' (Cooke 2014, 12). As Cooke has noted, 'in Australian cinema, someone riding off into the sunset – especially into the desert, and especially a whitefella – is probably going to die' (2014, 13). This is actually what happens at the end of *The Tracker*, the second revisionist film mentioned before, which focuses on the role as guide in a foreign land played by Aboriginal characters in Australian Westerns. As different critics have pointed out, the second most distinct element of Australian Westerns is its relationship with and depiction of Aborigines, a group that was conspicuously absent in the bushranger films and who appeared in most of the 'kangaroo Westerns' as almost part of the landscape or the fauna. This perspective started to change in the 1970s in films like *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978, starring Aboriginal actor Tommy Lewis), *Walkabout* (1971) and *Mad Dog Morgan* (1976). In this last film David Gulpilil played the role of 'black tracker' that made him 'the cinematic face of proud Aboriginality' (Starrs 2007, 6) and that he picks up thirty years later in *The Tracker*. Following the example of American revisionist Westerns, this film reframes the Australian Western story from an Indigenous point of view, subverting traditional Western representations of violence by replacing violent scenes with paintings made with earth from a wilderness sanctuary, and privileging Indigenous justice and the representation of the outback as quintessentially Aboriginal and impossible to apprehend by the white settlers.[3]

Ivan Sen's Post-Westerns: *Mystery Road* (2012) and *Goldstone* (2016)

In parallel with the evolution of the American Western, it could be expected that Australia would produce post-Westerns, and this seems to have been the case, as Campbell himself has pointed out.[4] As mentioned before, it is my contention that Ivan Sen's *Mystery Road* (2013) and *Goldstone* (2016) are transnational post-Westerns in the sense that I have described so far, and that they deal with Australian national identity displaying a complex form of cultural and stylistic hybridity. Sen is an Aboriginal director that is part of the 'Blak Wave', a group of filmmakers that has 'emerged as the most distinctive and transformative feature of Australian national cinema in the 21st century' (Collins, Landman, and Bye 2019, 6) and has become an important counter-hegemonic project which is working to create 'a sense of Australian national identity that is decentred, flexible, and inclusive of Indigenous cultures' (Ginsburg quoted in Rutherford 2019, 85). Ivan Sen's filmography is probably the most interesting example of this reassessment of national identity, from his early shorts and documentaries in the 1990s to feature films like *Beneath Clouds* (2002) and *Toomelah* (2011) or the more recent

Mystery Road (2012) and *Goldstone* (2016). These last two in particular (as well as a TV series also called *Mystery Road* with two seasons so far [2018 and 2020] produced by Sen but directed by other Aboriginal directors) have been a conscious effort by Sen both to articulate a discourse about national identity and to reach a wider audience beyond the traditionally restricted arthouse circuit of Aboriginal cinema. A crucial element in this effort was the introduction of 'genre' elements that could make the films recognisable by national and international audiences, but precisely 'which genre' he is using has not been particularly obvious (Kirkpatrick 2016, 144), since, for example, the press kit distributed for *Mystery Road* described it both as a 'Murder Mystery thriller' and as a 'Cowboy Western film' (Kirkpatrick 2016, 144), and *Goldstone* has been labelled 'mystery-thriller', 'modern western-crime epic' and 'Outback noir' (Mills 2018, 81).

Both films tell the story of gender-and-race-related murders (Aboriginal girls in *Mystery Road*, a Chinese prostitute in *Goldstone*), and both follow the typical structure of mystery thrillers, with a crime revealing an intricate net of corruption that the investigator needs to unveil. The detective in charge, played by Aboriginal actor Aaron Pedersen, is Jay Swan, an inexperienced policeman going back to his hometown in the former film, and a more veteran but disillusioned detective in a remote mining town in the latter. Following the schema previously developed for transnational post-Westerns, we can easily find the outward references to the American genre in both films: not only does the Western Queensland landscape remind the viewer of the American West (the South West in particular, with its red, arid deserts and mesas),[5] but, particularly in *Mystery Road*, the 'laconic lone hero' typical of Westerns (Rutherford 2015, 315) is noticeably dressed for the part: cowboy hat, shirt and boots, gun hanging from his belt, an unmistakable Western swagger, and an old Winchester waiting in the car that has replaced the horses he grew up with.[6] The Western references are downplayed in *Goldstone*: gone are the hat and swagger, since, probably because of his daughter's death, Swan has become a cynical drunk apparently unable to fulfill his duties; but, as expected, he will come back to his former self and recover his hat, marksmanship and Western-hero attributes during the Western-like final shoot-out in the desert (also present in *Mystery Road*). Swan is also, like traditional Western heroes, a 'man in the middle' between two opposing forces, as he himself verbalises at a point in the first movie ('caught up in the middle', 'I've been there all my life'); in this case, the opposing forces are the white policemen and the Indigenous criminals and victims, who look at him with similar suspicion. All these Western references take the audience into the 'space of reflection [and] critical dialogue with the form and content [of the Western], [the] assumptions and histories' typical of the post-Western (Campbell 2013, 31).

However, the references here become hybrid, since they do not just allude to the American Western, but also to the Australian Western; two crucial locations in *Mystery Road* have names reminiscent of the troubled history between the white settlers and the Aboriginal population: Massacre Creek and Slaughter Hill. And Swan's character is a rewriting of the character of the 'black tracker' typical of so many Australian Westerns, as mentioned before. One of the white criminals in *Mystery Road* underlines this relationship when he asks him 'Are you a real copper or one of them black trackers who turns on his own type?' This role is reinforced in *Goldstone* by the appearance of the two actors that played the role of black tracker in most Australian Westerns: Tommy

Lewis and David Gulpilil (in his final film role). Sen himself has highlighted the connection:

> I've always been interested in the fringes of cultures, and especially drawn to the historical role of the 'Turncoat'. In Australia he was the Indigenous Black Tracker …, the internal pressures of such an occupation must have been hard to comprehend, at times possibly being the ultimate identity crisis. This struggle of cultural identity is something I personally dealt with while growing up in a small country town, and have continued to explore it through *Mystery Road*. (Verghis 2013)

As Nick Bugeja has pointed out, these two films reconceptualise and subvert the 'Aboriginal Tracker archetype' from bushranger films, aligning this figure more closely with his own people, and exposing white corruption and crimes against Indigenous Australians (2018, 40). In *Mystery Road* in particular, Swan knows the locals and is able to deal with them and carry out an investigation in the police-unfriendly housing projects much like the traditional trackers acted as guides and intermediaries in an alien land. Sen's films, and *Mystery Road* in particular (as pointed out by Rutherford), reframe the cultural trope of the Indigenous person caught between two cultures rendering that figure as an 'active bicultural negotiator' (2015, 312). In this sense, we can see Sen's films as hybrid in multiple senses: first of all, following the examples of other post-Westerns (like *Lone Star* or *No Country for Old Men*), they blend the Hollywood genres of the Western and detective/noir film by combining a detecting plot built around the solution of an enigma with Western references and scenes. But Sen's films are also hybrid in the sense that he makes references not only to American Westerns, but also to the Australian tradition of 'settler colonial' films, as we have mentioned. As a matter of fact, by trying to build bridges between 'global Hollywood genre cinema' and 'local, First Nation identity' (Mills 2018, 80), Sen is involved in a process of adaptation, indigenisation and reappropriation of genre filmmaking that promotes intercultural mediation between white and Indigenous Australians as well as a reconceptualisation of Australian identity in a post-*Mabo* period, as we will see later.

The reference to 'black trackers' becomes also important for the second and third features of transnational post-Westerns mentioned before, the landscape of choice and its political function. Swan knows the dangerous Australian land and can use it to his advantage in the final shoot-outs in both films: In *Mystery Road*, in fact, the shoot-out takes place in Slaughter Hill, the area near the mission where he grew up with his cowboy father.[7] And he also knows the public housing projects where Aborigines of different origins have been relocated, and which are now dominated by gambling, alcoholism, drugs, and prostitution. Kirkpatrick has emphasised how, in spite of the grid structure created by the authorities, 'the town is crisscrossed by dirt tracks that run through vacant ground, parklands, and people's yards' (2016, 146). Strangers need an Indigenous tracker to find their way in a land which has only apparently been domesticated: the dirt tracks 'represent an Aboriginal way of understanding place'[8] as well as functioning as a "visual metaphor for the plot, which is all about 'hidden' local knowledge of the drugs trade and prostitution" (Kirkpatrick 2016, 146). The audience gets privileged access to this hidden network of dirt tracks thanks to a "signature" formal technique, several 90º aerial shots that Sen uses again in *Goldstone*: on the one hand, these shots emphasise the loneliness of Swan's car moving about the Australian uncanny landscape, and on the other they are

used to uncover the Aboriginal presence and experience of the land. The uncanniness of the land is reinforced by the mysterious reference to "wild dogs" in both films: on several occasions different characters refer to wild dogs that seem to be related to (and even blamed for) the murders or disappearances. However, the films do not show us any examples of wild dogs, just regular dogs used by the white criminals. And, in fact, in *Goldstone*, it is the wild dogs' howling that leads Swan to see Gulpilil's character's ghost and to finally quit drinking and face up to the mining company. Although some reviewers have criticised the director for using it as a misleading 'red herring', I believe it makes more sense as an example of 'Australian Gothic' and as a metaphor for the Aboriginal connection to this eerie land.[9]

In this sense, the appearance of David Gulpilil (and his ghost) in *Goldstone* becomes revelatory: he plays the only Aboriginal leader who is not alienated by the mining company's policy of bribes, religious brain-washing and free supply of alcohol, and who therefore refuses to sign the agreement with the predatory gold-searching company. But he is also the guide who takes Swan into an initiation trip into his unknown Aboriginal roots, showing him a picture of his own father (part of the 'Stolen Generation' of children taken by Government agencies) as well as the hidden Indigenous paintings in a stunning sacred gorge. Not surprisingly, at the end of the film, Swan does not ride into the sunset, but goes back to the sacred site that represents his threatened and previously stolen roots.[10] The sacred gorge becomes, then, a good example of the 'third space' of hybridity suggested by Bhabha, a 'site of resistance' that sets up new structures of authority and generates new political initiatives (Bhabha 2004, 37). Thus Sen examines 'ancestral trauma' (Dolgopolov 2016, 13) and underlines how the identity of the Australian 'imagined community' is based on the denial of a history of 'slaughters', 'massacres', and kidnappings that continues today with a policy of racial discrimination, manipulation and predatory practices. In this way, both films engage in a dialogue about Australian national identity in a post-*Mabo* era when the 'national recognition of *terra nullius* as the nation's troubling, founding myth' has been contested in the Australian political and cultural arena (Collins and Davis 2004, 172). As I have analysed elsewhere in more detail (González 2019), one of the most interesting features of transnational post-Westerns is that they deal with national identity and the contradictions of the foundational myths of the countries where they have been produced, whether it is the myth of Republican integration of minorities in France, or the occidentalist/orientalist contradictory versions of Spanish identity and the Spanish foundational myths. In this sense, Collins and Davis pointed out that the 1992 *Mabo* Aboriginal Land Rights decision and the ensuing 'history wars' of the 1990s had an extraordinary cultural impact that brought to the surface of national consciousness a long, unacknowledged traumatic history that Australian cinema, as 'the cultural flagship of national identity' (Collins and Davis 2004, 7), has been dealing with since then, whether explicitly or more covertly. In this sense, the post-Western subgenre chosen by Sen is the perfect tool to articulate the discourse about Aboriginal discrimination and empowerment shown in the ending of *Goldstone*. As Luke Buckmaster has phrased it, 'Goldstone is a country, not a town, and its name is Australia' (2017).

We can therefore see how the political use of the landscape and reflection about Australian identity and foundational myths is intimately linked to the fourth feature of transnational post-Westerns mentioned before: the exposure of the discrimination

suffered by the 'contemporary Others'. *Mystery Road* shows us the difficult situation of Aborigines in the crime-infested housing projects. As Swan reminds his sergeant: 'for some people it already is a war zone', a zone described by Swan's white colleague Johnno (Hugo Weaving) in terms of extreme cruelty ('kittens in washing machines, babies in ovens') and a land-related metaphor ('getting out of control like those grass-fires'). Crime seems to be rampant among other reasons because of police lack of interest: Swan is the only detective assigned to the murder investigation, and the film highlights how this is related to the ethnicity both of the victim and the investigator. In fact, one of the criminals bluntly connects his threat to race: 'we shoot fellas who come here without an invite, especially those of the dark breed'. *Goldstone* extends this critique to the situation of another minority, the Chinese prostitutes brought by the company for their workers' solace, who lose their passports along with every right and even their own lives as soon as they land on the Australian continent. The film underlines the connection of the plot with an Australian history of racial discrimination against Asians by using some sepia-coloured pictures of a 19th century mining town where we can see pictures of destitute Chinese immigrants and Aboriginals side by side with those of affluent whites. While *Goldstone* extends its racial critique to include other minorities, it also incorporates a white protagonist, another reluctant policeman (played by Alex Russell) that works as an anchoring figure for white audiences who are taken on a journey 'into the nation's hidden corruptions and complexities' (Ward 2016).

The connection between Australia and Asia has been highlighted by Stephen Teo in *Eastern Westerns*, where he provides an Asian reading of the Western genre, and in particular of *Mystery Road*, that can help us to relate Swan's character to the redefinition of masculinities and possibility of rebirth that are also characteristic of transnational post-Westerns. Teo relates *Mystery Road* to *Jedda*, an Australian film from 1955 that he reads as a version of the Ramayana, and he connects Swan's 'transcendental sense' and vulnerability to the Asian notion of dharma as a moral imperative of action. In contrast to critics who describe Swan as an 'indigenous cowboy superman' (Dolgopolov 2013, 13), Teo states that he is 'a post-Western vulnerable cowboy in the Australian outback, who is also Aboriginal to boot' (2017, 208). In fact, it is true that Swan displays a very particular type of masculinity: Even though he is dressed as a cowboy, he is a sensitive, bicultural man who acts with 'incredible serenity that seems … based on transcendental sense of Aboriginal identity' (Teo 2017, 209), appears to be reluctant to use force and only loses his cool when his enemies threaten his daughter. As an example, he can be insulted by a suspicious landowner and simply hint indirectly at the man's good fortune ('your children will have a pretty good future then, won't they?'), letting the audience contrast his situation to that of the Aboriginal teens that the white man sees as a threat; and he can peacefully find his way around the Indigenous children when they tell him 'you copper, bro; we hate coppers, bro; we kill coppers, bro'. Although Swan says he is 'trying to make a difference in this town', *Mystery Road* stresses Swan's liminal situation and alienation when we see him eating alone away from his family and suffering insomnia. His vulnerability and damaged masculinity are further increased in *Goldstone*, where his drunken stupor is only alleviated by his connection to Gulpilil's character (Jimmy) and the rediscovery of his ancestral roots. It seems that the 'man in the middle' of traditional American and Australian Westerns, the black tracker's heir, ends up finding his true allegiance when confronted by the post-Western ghosts of his father and Jimmy. Just like

the sheriff in *No Country for Old Men* (2007), an American post-Western that Sen admitted was the biggest influence on *Mystery Road* (Poe 2013), Swan is also haunted by the spectres of the dead. As Jeff McMullen has pointed out, 'there are ghostly truths about the past and present laying just below the dust' (quoted in Verghis 2013), but whereas the old station's cemetery or the public housing projects offer no possibility of rebirth at the end of *Mystery Road*, the posthumous messages found in the 'third space' of the sacred gorge and the discovery of Swan's own roots in *Goldstone* seem to open regenerative possibilities for the Australian post-Western identity.

Conclusion

By establishing a complex dialogue both with American Westerns and their Australian counterpart, Ivan Sen articulates a discourse in *Mystery Road* and *Goldstone* which refutes the country's foundational myth as a *terra nullius*, and proposes a new sense of national identity that is inclusive of the Indigenous experience. By rescuing the role of the 'black tracker' of traditional Australian Westerns, reappropriating and updating it into the character of Jay Swan as mixed-heritage 'man in the middle' and cultural mediator, Sen inscribes these films into a contemporary subgenre (the transnational post-Western) that is redefining national identities and contemporary masculinities in countries that have experienced the influence of American Westerns. If hybridity is 'a site of resistance', 'a strategic reversal of the process of domination' that turns 'the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of the power' (Bhabha 2004, 37), the multiple processes of hybridisation that we have uncovered in *Mystery Road* and *Goldstone* (between Australia and America, between film noir and Western, between arthouse and genre cinema, and between black and white Australian cultures) seem to lie at the heart of their political and aesthetic proposal. As Kirkpatrick has pointed out, 'Sen has appropriated the genres within which he is working to Indigenous purposes, thereby transforming them into something hybridic and arguably new' (2016, 144), and my contention is that this 'something new' is precisely the Australian post-Western, whose features we have defined in this paper. Transnational post-Westerns, and specifically Sen's films, use subversively the Western genre framework as a Trojan horse, appropriating its formal and thematic features in order to hijack the Western's grand narrative and reconceptualise the identity of contemporary Australia.

Notes

1. For an analysis of the post-Western in American television, see González (2020).
2. James Chapman and Nicholas J. Cull have reached similar conclusions about the relationship between British Empire films and Westerns: 'The two genres share common ground – the narrative of expansion, the taming of the frontier, the clash between civilization and savagery – and both feature outdoor action and spectacle' (2009, 15).
3. Another film that can be considered a 'revisionist Australian Western' is *Sweet Country* (2017), directed by a member of the 'Blak Wave', Warwick Thornton. This film is set in the outback of the Northern Territory after WWI, and it tells a story of violence and racism against an Aboriginal family. Felicity Collins has written that it is 'an Australian iteration of the western' (2019, 31), and later pointed out that 'the forms of violence in which *Sweet Country* trades

resonate with history rather than myth, and the Australian audiences addressed by the film are deeply implicated in that violence rather than safely distanced from it' (2019, 33).

Q15 4. Campbell has written about *The Rover* (2014), a dystopian film directed by David Michôd that he describes as an 'Australian post-Western'. The film is set in a post-apocalyptic Australia, but it shares many of the 'traits of the Western': 'open spaces, dusty landscapes, isolated characters, struggling families, small settlements, camp fires, guns, shoot-outs, desperate searching, and violence' (2017, 50), but, like most post-Westerns, it 'upsets and reverses the very expectations it appears to establish' (2017, 52).
5. Sen has said that the mystery elements from the plot came with the Aboriginal detective character, but the Western elements came from the landscape in central Queensland: 'it really invited the whole Western genre into the film', and Pedersen has added that once there 'it got amplified' and became 'a bigger character than anybody else' (Kotek 2013).
6. It is important to note here that the references to the Western genre do not only make sense in order to attract an international audience (that would surely identify the references), but also to attract a diverse, black and white, Australian audience. We need to remember that, as Pedersen reminds us, 'this is cattle country', and 'in the outback people wear cowboy hats and cowboy boots' (Kotek 2013). The Australian cattle ranchers or 'stations' have always been manned by both white and Aboriginal 'stockmen' or cowboys, and therefore 'the materials of the transnational Western genre can speak to the complex experience of Aboriginal people in regional Australia' (Hurley 2015, 144).
7. Swan uses his dead father's old Winchester not only to shoot, but also to look through the rifle's telescopic sight and comprehend the dangers surrounding him. The long distance between the shooters (the bullets take one very long second to reach their destination, defying audience expectations) increases the eeriness of the landscape.
8. Sen has talked about the 'improvisation of the pathways from the people finding their own way, making their own tracks. They won't follow the road. You've got this free will, improvising its way through this rigid government-produced structure'. Pedersen has also related them to the 'Indigenous paintings' that 'were always a bird's eye view' and helped the natives to find their position. (O'Cuana 2016).
9. Swan acknowledges it at the end of *Goldstone*: 'I do know it was no bad thing'.
10. At the end of *Mystery Road* we find a similar return, in this case to the ex-wife and daughter living in the housing projects.

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