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Contested Border Crossings in Shifting Political Landscapes: Anti-Invasion Discourses and Human Trafficking Representations in US Film and Politics

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Drawing upon hypermasculine, gun-wielding characteristics associated with the political right and its military industrial complex, this study critiques cinematic representations of the criminal enemy Other in changing political landscapes. Focusing in particular on the filmic representation of Mexicans in recently released US blockbuster film, *Rambo: Last Blood* (2019), we critique how the current political climate marked by alt-right, ethno-nationalist constructs in the era of Trump has given rise to anti-immigration discourses that reinforce racialised fears and the belief that nationalists are the rightful heirs to white privilege. Through original literary work on the five-film *Rambo* franchise, we trace the characterisation of John Rambo from Vietnam veteran anti-hero, via Reagan-era champion, to Trump-era anti-hero killing the Other as he invades the US southern border. This most-recent *Rambo* film evokes the frontier mythology and a fear of the foreign Other encroaching upon the homeland. We critique anti-Mexican and anti-immigration discourses of both Trump and *Last Blood*, and Rambo's role necessitating empowering heteronormative masculinity and the American male prominence of the saviour figure. We illustrate topoi underlying these constructs and critique political and cultural influences and audience reception reflecting shifting political interests and fears, most notably immigration and human/sex trafficking.

Keywords: anti-immigration rhetoric of Donald Trump, filmic representations of Mexico, sex trafficking, *Rambo*, racism

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1) Introduction

"[T]he US–Mexico border has been invented and re-invented by the camera, which has selected certain clichés and developed its own topoi" (Dell'agnese 2005: 205). The demonisation of those on the southern side of that border by Donald Trump, the divisive symbolism of his border wall and his use of terms such as "invasion", "murderers", "rapists", and "bad hombres"[1] have incited and bolstered racism, nationalism and securitisation discourses.[2] Such discourses are reflected in media narratives which, as Susan Mains notes, have increasing capacity to "fuel sentiments such as fear and terror, particularly in relation to how and who can travel across and between social and physical borders" (Mains 2004: 253). Such contested spaces are constructed, literally and textually, to constrain the Other on the outside, whilst keeping he or she visible to perpetuate anxiety. As such, Mains argues, cinema "provides a context for producing and interrogating discourses of nationalism, nativism, and fear" (Mains 2004: 253).

Recent work by scholars including that of Kristine Vanden Berghe (2019), Claudia Hachenberger (2019), Oswaldo Zavala (2018), interrogates narcocultural discourses and traces the cultural imaginary surrounding cross-border – particularly Mexican – trafficking. For instance, in her study, 'The US–Mexico Border in American Movies: A Political Geography Perspective', Dell'agnese (2005) analyses how the US film industry has imagined the cross-border experience and the meaning of the border as an expression of geopolitical discourse. She notes that in various cinematic inventions and re-inventions, the border has been constituted as a racialised and gendered space that is fraught with masculine and feminine stereotypes and criminalisation. Building on the notion of gendered border space, we argue that contemporary nationalist and nativist political argumentation is embedded in some popular filmic texts, reifying masculine border stereotypes into a form of toxic masculinity.

[1] See Zavala (2018), in particular, the section "Deportaciones, Xenofobia y los "*Bad* Hombres"".
[2] See Graham et al. (2019), Heuman / González (2018), Inwood (2019) and Pastor (2017).

Whilst mainstream films have centered on cross-border drug trafficking since the mid-20th century,[3] only recently have they addressed human trafficking at the US–Mexico border. The most recent of these, *Rambo: Last Blood* (Grunberg 2019), is the focus of this study. While Rambo's character has historically elicited hyper-masculine and militaristic stereotypes, this most recent film in the popular franchise presents a character exemplifying behaviors and characteristics associated with a toxic masculinity rooted in rage-based violence as a product of patriarchy.[4] Rambo's character further reflects a toxic masculine rage rooted in assumptions of white male victimisation due to increases in immigration, feminisms, and multicultural concerns highlighted by the political right.[5] *Rambo: Last Blood*'s fear-based discourses of Mexican sex trafficking cartels align admirably with the anti-Mexican rhetoric of Trump and other right and alt-right politicians and pundits.

2) Contextualising Rambo as Anglo-American Saviour

To analyse the filmic representations of Mexican identity in *Rambo: Last Blood* (Grunberg 2019), we argue the most recent characterisation of the iconic American cinematic anti-hero, John James Rambo, is that of an anti-hero saviour of Anglo-American cultural values at the US-Mexico border. We are informed by Mary Christianakis' and Richard Mora's work on the discursive "construction of the U.S.-Mexico border as a boundary meant to deter and constrain undesirables[, thus,] contribut[ing] to the 'securitization discourse' that frames the border security as imperative" (Mora / Christianakis 2015: 87). Our own analyses of racialised immigration 'invasion' fears that play a central role in securitisation discourse,[6] amplified by the rhetoric of Trump, will also be employed to critique *Last Blood.* We build on our recent work on anti-hero hypermasculinity, violence and militaristic gun narratives that validate aggressive action against perceived threats of the Other.[7]

As a literary and cinematic trope, the anti-hero is often associated with the uniquely American western genre.[8] Serving as a liminal character, he[9] often assumes traditionally heroic roles and actions whilst his personality and aesthetics are primarily aligned with that of villain or, at least, vigilante. The goal of personal freedom is translated into his choices to speak and

[3] See Elena Dell'agnese's (2005: 213ff.) discussion of films ranging from *Borderline* (Seiter 1950) to Steven Soderbergh in *Traffic* (2000), and Zavela's scholarship (2008; 2014; 2018) on narcocultural discourses / *narcocultura* as the cultural imaginary surrounding the Mexican and cross-border drug trade, including his analysis of *narcocultura* which first emerged in the 1970s through *narcocorridos* (drug ballads).
[4] See Haider (2016).
[5] See Johnson (2017)
[6] See Newsom / Lengel (2019).
[7] See Newsom / Lengel / Yeung (in press).
[8] See Poulos (2012) and Soberon (2017).
[9] Given the preponderance of anti-heroes are male, we use pronouns he, his and him throughout this study.

act out regardless of societal, political and legal norms. He, thus, operates outside accepted institutional systems and constructs of law and order which, he perceives, betrayed him in the past and will not serve him at present or in the future.

From the late 1970s through the 1980s, a military anti-hero characterisation developed out of the gunslinger-cowboy archetype as a response to US American discomfort with its involvement in the Second Indochina War.[10] Phillips and Strobl describe this American anti-hero characterisation as a "hyper-masculine former military man who believed himself wronged by the system, he became a lone wolf on-the-run and used violence in the hope of clearing his name and holding his alleged 'wrong-doers' accountable" (Phillips / Strobl 2015: 121).[11] Cinematic anti/heroes, after being persecuted within the system, display a hyper-masculine personification refusing victimisation and transcending norms and restrictions that would otherwise reinforce his emasculation. Such is the case with Rambo, who, after being victimised by police brutality, takes his revenge on the police and entire town of Hope and, in the subsequent films, protects his fellow US Americans abroad. Finally, he stops the infiltration and invasion of the US and, ultimately, American women's bodies.

Rambo's evolution moves between antagonist and protagonist in the nearly four-decade filmic franchise, bridging heroic and villainous characteristics often associated with contemporary anti-heroes.[12] To trace Rambo's character from the book *First Blood* (Morrell 1972), through the iconic hyper-masculine action hero played by Sylvester Stallone, we analyse Rambo's anti-hero/hero transformation as it is aligned with shifting US politics, and obfuscationist and revisionist US military history and alliances. Morrell's book and the first film that bears its name (Kotcheff 1982) are eloquent and evocative indictments of war or, at least, one specific unpopular war, and the refusal of many in the US to attempt to understand the devastating impact of Vietnam on those who survived it. Both the book and film open with Rambo appearing as a long-haired, anti-establishment drifter. The filmic narrative reveals an optimistic young man backgrounded by an unusually sunny, mountainous US Pacific

[10] Also widely known as the Vietnam War or Vietnam Conflict and, in Vietnam, *Kháng chiến chống Mỹ cứu nước* [Resistance War against the American Empire to Save the Nation].

[11] Philips and Strobl constructed this definition to talk about a real-life 2013 mass murderer in Los Angeles and that murderer's manifesto. Note the similarity to the introductory voiceover to *The A-Team* television series about a group of military anti-heroes: "In 1972, a crack commando unit was sent to prison by a military court for a crime they didn't commit. These men promptly escaped from a maximum security stockade to the Los Angeles underground. Today, still wanted by the government they survive as soldiers of fortune" (Lupo / Cannell 1983). Similarly, early movie posters for *First Blood* highlight John Rambo's past in Vietnam, illustrating Stallone's character holding a military-style machine gun and boasting the tagline, "This time he's fighting for his life". *Rambo* and *The A-Team* were two of the most prominent post-Vietnam military anti-hero popular culture artifacts of the 1980s, and both featured anti-heroes traumatised by betrayal of the system and on the run from the law.

[12] See Kellner (1995), Warner (1992) and Washington (2019). For recent work on representation of the (anti-)hero in Spanish and Latin American cinema, see Davis (2020).

Northwest, an idyllic cabin by a glittering lake. Rambo seeks to reconnect with the last surviving soldier in his battalion, only to discover that he has died from carcinogenic effects of Agent Orange. His calm and smiling demeanour quickly and forever fading, Rambo departs, likely reflecting on how his only remaining friend was killed by his own nation's military industrial complex. Likely mistaken for a hippy draft dodger heading to Canada, Rambo is arrested by the Hope, Washington sheriff and Korean War veteran, Will Teasle (Brian Dennehy), and subsequently subjected to unwarranted police brutality that triggers Rambo's past prisoner of war trauma.

Rambo is his own particular category of anti-hero, reminiscent of those featured in mid-twentieth century film noir, what Staiger termed the "fallen-man" (Staiger 2008: 73ff.). Rambo's descent into fallen-man status begins with his highly-decorated war veteran standing, to his and other Vietnam veterans' beleaguered return home, and to Rambo's arrest in the first few minutes of *First Blood*. Given "[t]here's nothing more dangerous in this world than a humiliated man" (Buecker in Romero 2017), humiliation by both police and war protestors is the fuel that slides Rambo further into anti-hero status. He begins working outside hegemonic norms to re-create himself and focus his anger at his country for turning on Vietnam veterans after they returned home and the multiple socio-economic and political structures that repressed him.

At the time of its release, *First Blood's* representation of the military anti-hero reflected a nascent form of aggressive masculinity in US society. The topoi underlying this gender construct, media patterns, and cultural influences that construct the contemporary anti-hero have been increasingly salient since.[13] He is also associated with contemporary mass shootings and militaristic behaviors.

The post-Vietnam military anti-hero developed as both a critique of the war itself and of the military-industrial complex responsible for that anti-hero's creation. This characterisation would dramatically evolve through a Reagan-era Cold-War military archetype and eventually into a post-9/11 military anti-hero,[14] reflective less of a critique of the military and political forces that constructed him, and instead focusing on a need to defend those same systems and

[13] See Newsom / Lengel / Yeung (in press) for our historical analysis of the anti-hero archetype, rising above social norms and restrictions and taking necessary action to promote the rights and welfare of individuals about whom he cares, whilst reclaiming a mythic American past. This archetype evokes, conflates and reconstructs notable historical figures such as James Butler 'Wild Bill' Hickok and Jesse James into American folk legends.

[14] Post-9/11 anti-heroes are standard as are those of the post-Vietnam variety. The in-between film anti-heroes are almost comic-book characters rather than realistic ones and fight much more existential threats (e.g., the rise of Batman film success, *Wolverine* and the *X-Men*, wherein villains become mega-wealthy, as in *Wall Street* or *American Psycho* characterisations, or Terminator-style aliens/monsters/robots.

ideals against the threat of a rising Islamist and non-American, terrorist machine. Commenting on the reception of the various films in the Rambo franchise, David Morrell, author of the original novel *First Blood* (1972), notes that Rambo has "always been a litmus test for people's personal politics. People see what they want to see" (Morell in Sacks 2019).

Shifting geopolitical contexts over four decades, and the US role in it, can be traced through Rambo's overall story arc. Whereas *First Blood* highlighted the trauma of being a prisoner of war and post-trauma of Vietnam War veterans returning to their homeland, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (Cosmatos 1985) appears to celebrate war or, at least, serve as a consolation for the Vietnam War; "processing of that trauma through the presentation of an exuberant return to an active, potent, successfully interventionist America" (Hutchings 2013: 56). Thus, it is no surprise that, given *First Blood Part II*'s release at the height of the Reagan era, the USA celebrated Rambo.

The premise of *Part II* appears to align well with Reagan-era individualistic egoism: Rambo's former direct report, Colonel Samuel Trautman (Richard Crenna), offers him the chance to be released from prison (where he ended up at the conclusion of the first film) if he returns to Vietnam to search for US prisoners of war (POWs) at the camp from which Rambo escaped in 1971. Trautman promises Rambo a US Presidential pardon if the mission succeeds. Rambo asks, "Do we get to win this time?" Trautman responds, "It's up to you this time". The answer is no, however, not due to Rambo's lack of hyper-masculine warrior expertise. Rather, it is the fault of a government bureaucrat, Marshall Murdock (Charles Napier), who thwarts the mission to protect the US government from the public relations nightmare that will ultimately occur if the public learns of POWs still captive in Vietnam more than a decade after the US exited the failed war effort. Any *Part II's* political nuance is lost on much of the US audience,[15] including Reagan, who saw the film, concluded Rambo was Republican and this all-American warrior would be welcome to assist in the next global conflict.

In 'The Reagan Hero: Rambo', Jeffords takes an embodied rhetorical approach to Rambo's body as metaphor for American militaristic protectionism, able to "defend its country/its town/its values against outsiders" (Jeffords 2004: 142). The identity of these outsiders, too, is a litmus test, with enemy Others shifting over the four decades of the franchise. The types and numbers of those outsiders have reflected not only militaristic geopolitical shifts, but also

[15] Very little attention in the film's reviews was paid to Rambo's anger and grief for the POWs still in Vietnam. For instance, when Colonel Trautman tries to persuade Rambo to rejoin the US Special Forces, luring him in with the promise of another Medal of Honor for his actions, Rambo, fighting back tears and rage, responds saying the soldiers he rescued deserve that Medal far more. Further, Rambo said he only wants the same thing as the rescued soldiers – for their country to love them as much as its soldiers love their country.

increasing fear mongering of the right, which created and responded to a perceived need for an increasingly active and potent America. This could be reflected in the rising body counts of the Rambo franchise from Part II onward, but also expanding excesses of Hollywood action spectacles: The *First Blood* body count was one, unintentional death. In the second film in the series, *Rambo: First Blood Part II,* Rambo killed 74 people and, at the time of its release, *Rambo III* (MacDonald 1988) was the most violent film ever made with 132 deaths overall, 78 kills by Rambo.[16] Each subsequent film after *First Blood* increased its visual focus on Rambo's body, extreme close ups of his arms, back and torso, all illustrative of a "physically potent incarnation of US exceptionalism" (Hutchings 2013: 59).

The potent exceptionalist joins forces with the Afghanistan Mujadhadin in *Rambo III,* an alliance that exemplifies the most interesting geopolitical shift in the franchise and illustrates that US exceptionalism can encompass both military might and the erasure of awkward previous alliances. Unsurprisingly, the original dedication at the close of *Rambo III* – "…to the brave Mujahideen fighters of Afghanistan" – was changed after September 2001 "…to the gallant people of Afghanistan" to help erase the US memory of its own training and funding of the Mujahideen, which was presumed to be linked with Al Qaeda. Other changes also diminished political nuances. For instance, in the fourth film, *John Rambo* (Stallone 2008), as he is being talked into saving captured missionaries bringing medical aid to the oppressed Karen ethnic minority in Burma, Rambo makes a surprisingly astute assessment of geopolitical conflict: "Old men start wars. Young men fight them. Everyone in the middle gets killed. And nobody tells the truth". Stallone left that philosophy of war on the cutting room floor. What remained were more typical Hollywood lines like "When you're pushed, killin's as easy as breathing".

3) Contextualising the Trafficker/Abductor Other

Being pushed to kill is particularly salient for the US American anti-hero as he protects "his own". This is a common narrative of mainstream US action films that highlight human trafficking, when enacted by the (foreign) man of color taking the white woman. Historically, representations of abduction have been present in film for more than a century, from *The Train Wreckers* (Porter 1905) to *King Kong* (Cooper / Schoedsack 1933) to *Dr. No* (Young 1962) to the 'new wave' of princess films, feature racialized masculinity and the seizure of the white damsel in distress. The fear of abduction, coupled with the rise in awareness of human

[16] Along with its body count excesses, with production costs totaling $63 million USD, *Rambo III* was, at the time, the most expensive movie ever made.

trafficking, has given rise to a several commercially successful action films,[17] notably Pierre Morel's *Taken* (2008).[18]

In their critique of heteronormative masculinity in *Taken* (2008), Szörényi and Penelope Eate argue, "In spite of their ostensible concern about the exploitation of women", films that represent human and, specifically, sex trafficking do so

> as an occasion for the redemption and rehabilitation of the beleaguered white American male, appropriating the problem of trafficking in the service of a US-led neo-imperialism bolstered by masculinism and xenophobia, and implicitly problematising women's independence and justifying the control of their movements and sexuality (Szörényi / Eate 2014: 608).[19]

Further, such trafficking-centered films, particularly those situated in the corporate Hollywood model, are created and produced to both "entertain and absolve" (Vance 2012: 200).[20] For example, in *Taken*, ex-CIA agent Bryan Mills (Liam Neeson), uses his "very special set of skills" to save his daughter Kim (Maggie Grace) from sex traffickers in Paris. *Taken* and *Last Blood* play upon the same fears; whilst the invader is a different enemy Other, in *Taken*, an Albanian trafficking cartel, illustrative of post-9/11 Islamophobic invasion fears, both *Taken* and *Last Blood* are centered around what Szörényi and Eate note is a "standard plot: American hero faces evil villains and in a series of chases, gun battles and showdowns, triumphs and proves the superiority of his masculinity" (Szörényi / Eate 2014: 611). Further, *Taken* and *First Blood* are deeply and troublingly gendered family narratives. Gender norms both enable and justify xenophobic approaches to the 'war on trafficking', and the ways that human and, particularly, sex trafficking narratives represent, in contradictory and unstable ways, the racially structured neo-imperialism that results. These tales of white US American men in crisis need to be understood as "assemblages" (Puar 2007: 32) where multiple and heterogeneous dimensions of gender and racialisation not only intersect, but also work together and proliferate across different contexts to produce a consistent and yet mobile politics of exclusion. Stories of family men in crisis, it emerges, have much to do with frames of war, and trafficking appears as a convenient site for the exposition of both. Thus, both Bryan Mills and John Rambo reclaim their position through superior US masculinity vis-à-vis racialised Others, whether it be Albanian or Mexican traffickers, in defense of US American women and children.[21]

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[17] An analysis of the numerous documentaries on human/sex trafficking is beyond the scope of this study.
[18] Coincidentally, another major release during the same year as *Taken* (2008) is the fourth of the Rambo franchise in which Rambo tries to save a white, Christian woman from Southeast Asian abductors.
[19] See, also, Baker (2014).
[20] See Andrijasevic (2007).
[21] See Szörényi / Eate (2014: 612) and *Trade* (Kreuzpaintner 2007), a German-American film centering on trafficking in Mexico which illustrates far more ambivalent representation of American men. Critics note it was a

4) Rambo as Political Litmus Test for an Increasingly Polarised, Barricaded USA

The present litmus test of Rambo's story arc in *Last Blood* (Grunberg 2019), the fifth film in the franchise, reflects current ethno-nationalist and anti-invasion discourses. Most notably, given Trump has focused his attention on "an invasion of our country with drugs, with human traffickers, with all types of criminals and gangs" (Trump in White House 2019), it is not surprising that, as Marquez notes, "Trump's border talking points sound like [a Hollywood film]" (Marquez 2019). Further, given the right's anti-immigration rhetorics and discursive focus on fear of invasion, it is certainly not surprising that reception of *Last Blood* is aligned along political factions, so much so that the alt-right press has actively commented on the 'overwrought' politically left readings and receptions of the film.

Rambo's fiercely independence and rugged strength is required for his, and his nation's survival, whether it be in a prisoner of war camp or at the borderlands. *Last Blood's* characterisation of Rambo reflects that of an ethno-nationalist anti-hero, focused on fighting back against the perceived oppression of white men the Trump era. He evokes fierce and aggressive independence associated with frontier mythology, preserving US America and its southern border. The setting of *Last Blood*, on a rural Bowie, Arizona horse ranch relatively close to the Mexican border, aligns with the American Western anti-hero trope and its frontier mythology. Whilst *Last Blood* reflects standards within the western film genre and how multiple historical narratives are interpreted and reinterpreted within the genre, it is driven by current socio-political and cultural narratives. Significantly the film highlights a new kind of manifest destiny that aligns with Trump's ideological and dread-mongering rhetorics: Rather than expand the USA, the goal is to protect and contain the existing space/borders.[22] Driving Trump's anti-immigration and MAGA discourses is fear – fear of loss of power, status, centrality and necessity. Kimmel, one of the earliest social critics of masculinity, argues American "manhood is less about the drive for domination and more about the fear of others dominating us" (Kimmel 1996: 6). This is particularly the case for non-elite white men who have experienced an "aggrieved entitlement" (Kimmel 2017) particularly since the global financial crisis and its resultant rising income inequality, union bashing and housing insecurity,

US box office flop, perhaps because it "presents a compromised, non-violent, non-triumphalist image of North American masculinity". It is also noteworthy that the character, Veronica, a blonde-haired Eastern-European woman, is repeatedly raped by her Mexican captors. Despite the narrative centering on a young Mexican woman, Adriana, it is Veronica's face gracing the cover of the film's US DVD release. Perhaps most intriguing is that the trafficking cartel leader frequently prays to the Virgin Mary, for redemption of his involvement in the sex trade (see Baker 2014).

[22] See Crockford (2018).

all of which exacerbate "social and cultural anxieties confronting middle-class, white males in western societies" (Pierson 2019: 337).[23]

Since the close of the fourth film, simply titled *Rambo* (2008), Rambo has lived a quiet life on his late father's ranch he co-manages with Maria Beltran (Adriana Barraza) and her granddaughter, Gabriela (Yvette Monreal). Against Rambo's and Maria's advice, Gabriela travels to Mexico to find her estranged father and is subsequently drugged and abducted by a group of human traffickers. Rambo crosses the border to save Gabriela, is severely beaten and is nursed to recovery by Carmen Delgado (Paz Vega), who is investigating the trafficking cartel, led by brothers Victor (Óscar Jaenada) and Hugo Martínez (Sergio Peris-Mencheta) who murdered her sister.

Last Blood's central narrative on saving an abducted young woman and exerting revenge against the foreign Other who abducts her into a human/sex trafficking ring is aligned with the rise in white, ethno-supremacist hypermasculinity and narratives surrounding border security and anti-immigration and invasion discourses, post-9/11 Islamophobia, anti-feminism, and anti-LGBTQ.[24] Analysing popular cultural representations of human trafficking and, specifically, "the service of a US-led neo-imperialism bolstered by masculinism and xenophobia", Anna Szörényi and Penelope Eate argue human trafficking and, in particular sex trafficking, suggest an aspect of "the 'crisis' of white middle-class masculinity, one that clearly relates this to post 9–11 anxieties"(Szörényi / Eate 2014: 609). Szörényi and Eate note "trafficking narratives are also sites where contemporary anxieties about the role of the USA in global politics are worked at and reconfigured" (Szörényi / Eate 2014: 608f.).[25]

The trafficking narrative highlighted in *Last Blood* echoes the perceived slipping away of US American power and its links with masculinised entitlement, dominance and control.[26] The representations of the traffickers in the film is consistent with the nativist arguments and "bad hombres" labels espoused by Trump during his 2016 presidential campaign (Robertson 2018).[27] Trump's insistence that "tremendous crime" comes across the Mexican border, paired with the combination of US-based violent forms of toxic masculinity directly contrasted with *machismo* and its association with Mexican cartel culture[28] reinforces the belief on the political right in the existence of attacks on white US culture and masculinity. The resulting conflict of violent,

[23] See Newsom / Lengel / Yeung (in press) for our discussion of the lack of understanding of socio-economic class, hegemonic whiteness and patriarchy by Trump's working-class white supporters.
[24] See Maruska (2009).
[25] See also Bickford (2018).
[26] For work on American exceptionalism in the age of Trump, see Johansen (2017).
[27] See Robertson (2018).
[28] See Ponce-Cordero (2017).

hyper-masculine characteristics serve as "an uncritical distraction from the underlying conditions of the emergence of trafficking-related violence in Mexico" (Baginski 2019: R36f.).[29]

In *Los Cárteles No Existen: Narcotráfico y Cultura en México* (2018), Oswaldo Zavala critiques the representations of violence at the US-Mexico border and the "state of narco-narratives as commercially successful myths" (Verduzco 2017: 80). In his work on Mexican narco-narratives Zavala asserts, "the lives of infamous men and their legends […] replace our scarce knowledge of real traffickers" (Zavala 2014: 345) critical approaches to narco-narratives – perhaps currently the most popular form of representation of death in cultural productions – share "the absence of a critical assessment of the narrations' relationship to their real referents" (Zavala 2014: 341). Kristine Vanden Berghe, too, argues for critical assessment. In *Narcos y Sicarios en la Ciudad Letrada* she notes the lack of critique of the dominant representations of heteronormative patriarchy of narco-narratives.[30] Whilst Zavala and Vanden Berghe focus on the literary mythos of drug trafficking, Lydia Cacho critiques the inadequate cinematic representations of human/sex trafficking in Mexico. Connecting these types of trafficking is relevant in that there are numerous studies indicating human trafficking is often controlled by those involved in drug trafficking.[31] In her analysis of the film *Las elegidas* (Pablos 2015) Cacho argues:

> La historia está llena de clichés, es tramposa, plagada de lugares comunes de quienes no se atreven a adentrarse en historias complejas […] Estos creadores no se atreven a explorar su propia mirada frente al sexismo para complejizar su obra y tal vez por eso terminan flotando en la superficie, allí mismo dejan a sus audiencias y lectores, llenos de rabia y sin entender o conocer nada nuevo. El peligro del cine de denuncia fallido es que cae en la apología de aquello que pretende denunciar. Una lástima (Cacho 2016).[32]

Robust interrogations of what Cacho has named "la psicología profunda del machismo" (Cacho 2016) in human trafficking, and in both Mexican and US cinema, are crucial. US-based toxic masculinity, which is constructed both with similar characteristics to the *machismo* associated with Mexican trafficking, is framed in direct conflict with *machismo*. US toxic masculinity or "strongman masculinity" emerges as alt-right political pushback against multicultural, feminist and immigration reform movements and espoused by nationalistic and nativist regimes to invoke an "imaginary of an authentic nation under threat" (Gökarıksel / Neubert / Smith 2019: abstract). This form of toxic masculinity, also labeled "fragile masculinity", is associated with

[29] See also Astorga (1995; 2007) and Barrueto (2014).
[30] See Vanden Berghe (2019).
[31] See Merläinen / Vos (2015) and Shelley (2012).
[32] For a critical analysis of *machismo* in film, see Simon-Lopez (2012).

mass shooters in the US who position themselves as victims of contemporary multiculturalism and feminism.[33] Thus, whilst the US hyper-masculine cinematic character might cross the border to free victimised women and girls, he does so by reinforcing their victim-status and dependency on rescue by a mythic strongman type of heroism.

The cinematic, social and political construction of US hypermasculinity can be extended to broader securitisation discourses. Trump's frequent fear mongering, to justify the need for militarisation and his border wall, illustrates fear of encroachment of the Other, into the homeland and into US American women and girls' bodies. Because of the encroaching Other, fear and anger from an imagined weak, invadable nation is illuminated in shifting politico-economic landscapes. Similarly, Szörényi and Eate argue it is not surprising that films concerning trafficking "centre on images of beleaguered heterosexual white men, non-coincidentally identified as having careers in policing, whose identity, initially in crisis, is redeemed through the rescue of the respective child–women of the films" (Szörényi / Eate 2014: 611). The authors note these films' narratives, "like the US sanctioned narrative of trafficking, justify the violence and imperialism of these representatives of the US state. They also show how this violence and imperialism are inextricably linked with heteronormative models of the nuclear family, and with anxieties over US privilege and imperialist aggression" (Szörényi / Eate 2014: 611).

5) Cross-Border Reception of Last Blood

Reception of *Last Blood* by Latinx critics are critical of the anti-invasion sentiment of the narrative. Aguilar, for example, writes, "At the end of this atrociously mediocre production, you can almost hear a concerned racist saying, 'And that's why I would never let me daughter go to Mexico' or 'That's why we need the wall!' Let's hope they let this last blood bleed out till the last drop so that we don't get another nonsensical transfusion" (Aguilar in Remezcla Estaff 2019). Similarly, Betancourt (2019) critiques the "glaringly obvious racist optics (those Mexicans across the border are all bad)" (Betancourt in Remezcla Estaff 2019). Aguilar writes,

> One of Hollywood's favorite practices is to demonize Mexico (and Latin America in general) as a grotesquely lawless setting where hope has no place. This, in turn, dehumanizes anyone who lives there or comes from there. In Adrian Grunberg's *Rambo: Last Blood*, a new and unrequested installment in the mercenary saga, that depraved tradition tailored for the MAGA crowd is upheld (Aguilar in Remezcla Estaff 2019).

[33] See Myketiak (2016).

One key element highlighted by Latinx critics is the narrative that "hordes" are crossing the US-Mexico border, which is a key point in Trump's argument for a border wall. This is particularly noted in how the film highlights "the implication that Latinos in the United States should be terrified of Mexicans south of the border" (Birnam in Remezcla Estaff 2019). Within the narrative of the film, and within the narratives of Trumpian border wall calls, the border must be a place where invaders can cross easily and at-will. This is not the case for most Latinx border-crossers. Aguilar explains:

> Rambo ridiculously returns to the United States accompanied by a corpse in the passenger seat without going through customs or being chased by border patrol, yet my aunts have to wrap mole, queso, and rompope in clothing to sneak them in their luggage when they come visit. Later, heightening the absurdity, or perhaps to infer that Mexicans are actually invading, a horde of criminals riding in black SUVs arrives at Rambo's ranch. Again, whoever told these writers it was so simple to cross the border lied to them (Aguilar in Remezcla Estaff 2019).

Aguilar's critique is echoed by multiple Latinx voices, many of whom also argue that the film showcases over-the-top, racist Mexican sex trader depictions. Puig notes the film is "[r]acist in addition to being offensive in its sadism" and connects the racism to the El Paso mass murders:[34]

> This absurd gore-fest is exactly the movie we don't need in these times of racist hatred and excessive gun violence – especially in the wake of last month's mass shooting in El Paso targeting Mexicans, and the inhumane treatment of immigrants held at the U.S. border (Puig in Remezcla Estaff 2019).

Birnam further examines how the racism carries over into the film's cinematographic techniques, "Mexico is portrayed as a barren wasteland of traffickers and rapists, with the 'it is hell over there' message appearing even through the cinematographer's hues – dark and scary in Sonora, bright and sunny in Arizona" (Birnam in Remezcla Estaff 2019).

Critics in the USA focus more on the hyperpolitical imagery provided by the film and how that is marketed to a political right audience while masked as an action film. Some critics focus on the deconstruction of Rambo's character throughout the film franchise, with particular emphasis on how the film "betrays the character" by "morphing into a flag-waving, gun-toting symbol for angry Americans desperate to see the 'bad guys' from other countries suffer" (Barfield 2019). Still others see it for what it is – Hollywood violence for entertainment purposes:

[34] This refers to the 3rd August 2019 shooting at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas. The shooter, espousing racist and anti-immigration beliefs in his manifesto, murdered 22 and injured 24 shoppers, nearly all of whom are Latino/Latina. See Arango / Bogel-Burroughs / Benner (2019), Esquivel et al. (2019) and Hasan (2019).

> 'Rambo: Last Blood' Is A Rollicking Good Time Of Hyper-Violent Xenophobic Revenge Fantasies[title] […] It's all a setup for *Last Blood* to live out every assault rifle owner's worst fears and most insane fantasies about Mexico. The only way it could be more transparent is if Stallone had growled "I. Am. The Wall!" in his best *Judge Dredd* voice. (Mancini 2019).

Another, more extreme analysis argues *Last Blood* twists historical facts and contemporary data about immigration concerns and manifests destiny into a twister ideology and resultant aggressive behavior that echoes alt-right ideologies regarding the anticipation of extinction and need to bolster their own population.[35] Savlov explains, "the alt-right will surely have a rollicking good time watching this iteration of the cunning, ruthless vet make mincemeat out of 40 or so Mexican sex-and-drug traffickers" (Savlov 2019). Barfield echoes this concern, stating the film "ditches any semblance of story and unabashedly pushes an intolerant xenophobic political agenda, that'll allow justification for bigoted, hateful feelings because Sylvester Stallone says it's ok" (Barfield 2019). A focused reading of the film with regard to alt-right ideology implies that Mexican "invaders" are part of a global conspiracy toward 'white genocide' of 'white replacement'.[36] Disturbingly, this interpretation illustrates a link between how the anti-hero characterisation of John Rambo in the most recent film can be read as heroic behavior by those in the alt-right, particularly as it directly echoes the language in the manifestos of the New Zealand and El Paso shooters.[37]

This interpretation situates the role of the military anti-hero as one taking 'necessary' action in alt-right narratives. Whilst not exclusively[38] focusing on the perceived threat of the Other encroaching upon the pure homeland, alt-right individuals and groups have avowed the anti-hero identity through actions and discourses that illuminate ethno-nationalist reclaiming of notions of 'progress' and 'equality', rejecting current progressive multicultural, immigration, and wealth-distribution arguments as counter-productive to actual progress. The right and the alt-right produces its own heroic figures, most of whom fit well within this anti-hero framework. The resulting metaphor of the disenfranchised anti-hero suggests that systemic empowerment is confined to specific masculine performances. Further, alt-right narratives promote a perceived displacement of the white, cisgender breadwinner man paralleled with an increase in feminist, LGBTQ, multicultural, and immigration-based visibility. The perceived disempowerment of men has been highlighted in both alt-right and mainstream media. Alt-right

[35] See Barfield (2019), Le (2017); and Schager (2019).
[36] See Schager (2019).
[37] See Frazin (2019), Newsom / Lengel (2019) and Schwartzburg (2019).
[38] We have also critiqued the 'incel' movement's anti-heroes, most notably the mass murderer in Santa Barbara, California. See Newsom / Lengel / Yeung (in press).

discourses, echoing the perceived displacement of men with Trumpian proclamations such as "[i]t is 'a very scary time for young men in America' […] [but] women are doing great" (Trump in Diamond 2018), highlight how these misogynist constructs are becoming mainstream ideals.[39]

Trump's "very scary time" for young (and not so young, white) men in America, due to their perceived displacement, is exacerbated by the mediated, filmic and widely reported successes of men and women whose identity is situated in multicultural and multi-gendered categories. This "scary time" evokes US American male fears of perceived cultural erasure and impotence of white masculinity and, thus, calls for an (anti)hero ready to defend American rights and freedoms. Here, the imagery of the western remains dominant in the reclaiming of manifest destiny and individual freedom. Further, as Schager argues, *Last Blood* is fitting "for a soldier who can't stop reliving past American failures in order to come out on top the second time around, Rambo gets his very own Alamo to win in *Last Blood* – against, notably, the very types of Mexican 'monsters' that our present commander-in-chief warns are intent on overrunning (and overtaking) our nation" (Schager 2019).[40]

Given the perception of the white man 'under siege' has restricted masculinity to a fixed position, we see more nuanced understandings of how Rambo has situated over time as the political landscape in the USA has shifted along the left-right spectrum. Rambo as trope highlights destabilising restrictions within the systemic architectures of power while simultaneously promoting the hegemonic aspects of the trope within intersecting dominant cultural, economic and political systems.

Rambo's alignment with the right, perceived or actual, has continued been used to bolster American militaristic protectionism and critique its failures. For example, in the wake of the events of 11 September 2001, Gawish Abdel Karim, a chauffeur for an Asian embassy in Cairo, told an Agence France Presse reporter Americans now "find themselves in a science fiction scenario – this time Rambo's not there to save the White House" (in Berenger 2007: 227). In this context, the Rambo trope espouses survivalist rhetoric evolving from historical and radicalised narratives championed by nationalists and white supremacists. This rhetoric employs hyper-masculinities, violence and militaristic gun narratives to validate aggressive

[39] Trump's own misogynist voice, coupled with his actions defending himself and other (mostly white) men from sexual harassment and assault charges is supported, at least in part, by many conservative voters and audiences that allow his fame and position to justify a "boys will be boys" attitude, thus normalizing this behavior. The values espoused serve as justification among the far-right for a masculine authority figure to, as stated by French in the extreme-right news site, *National Review*, "set things right" because we "no longer raise boys to be men" (French 2015).

[40] See also Behnken (2015) and Domínguez Ruvalcaba (2007).

action against perceived threats. These are the narratives that ground anti-terrorist militarism, and reinforce racialised fears and beliefs that nationalists are the rightful heirs to their power. This is evidenced by President Bush's reception of a 2002 *Der Spiegel* satirical cover for a feature article lamenting the pop superhero models that apparently inspired Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld's "war on terror". [41]

> Apparently indifferent to or wholly ignorant about the articles' excoriating content, Bush was amused by his muscular Rambo rendition, and ordered thirty poster-sized enlargements for his White House staff […]. Did Bush grin in recollecting that *Rambo: First Blood Part II* was marketed with the slogan 'No man, no war, no law can stop him'? (Lawrence / Jewett 2017: 25).[42]

Given the favourable reception from Bush to the *Der Spiegel* cover, and the successive supporters of the right since then, it is unsurprising that, in 2019, in the pro-Trump[43] online media source, *The Federalist*, Saltis criticised the "overwhelming proportion" of negativity and "hyperventilating from professional reviewers" as "decidedly political" (Saltis 2019):

> Going by these headlines, the casual reader could be forgiven for expecting the newest Rambo to be chock-full of xenophobic rants against Mexican immigration into the United States. Unfortunately for overwrought critics, this turns out to be about as far from the truth as the Charlottesville lie.[44] One could argue that the film actually creates sympathy for Mexicans who wish to flee what are often hellish conditions in the more dangerous regions of their home country (Saltis 2019).

Saltis continued:

> Well, there it is. Just like everything else since 2016, it all has to come back to Trump. We're apparently so deep into our hyper-politicized era that a film showcasing an American

[41] Whilst he previously, quietly supported Republican politicians, and, according to Boulton, "frequently professed his support for Reagan's efforts at resurrecting America's exceptionalism" (Boulton 2009: 72), Sylvester Stallone turned from that party after Bush et al. invaded Iraq and Afghanistan under false pretenses. Previously, he seemed amused by Reagan's infatuation of him at the time of the second film, which still viewed Vietnam through, albeit slightly, a critical lens for the US government's betrayal of its armed forced in Vietnam. Finally, whilst Stallone appears to continue to be situated on the political right (although he argues otherwise) and not the most astute actor, we have been surprised to learn he has read all of Shakespeare and encouraged his children to do as well. Further, he took on a very challenging subject area in Burma, the brutally violent pushback of the pro-democracy movement by the ruling Than Shwe and the Tatmadaw. Shooting on location, Stallone and other members of the cast and crew received death threats for critiquing the oppressive rulers.

[42] Lawrence and Jewett note that the in the same *Der Spiegel* cartoon, Powell appeared as Batman, Rumsfeld as Conan the Barbarian, Cheney as the Terminator and Condoleezza Rice as Catwoman (See Lawrence / Jewett 2017: 25).

[43] See Linker who identifies *The Federalist* as "a leading disseminator of pro-Trump conspiracies". He writes, "[s]ome day, when the Trump administration is over and the true extent of its corruption has become part of the public record, the right-wing website *The Federalist* […] at the vanguard of a thoroughly Trumpified Republican Party […] will receive proper recognition for the significant and distinctive contribution they made to polluting the waters of American public life" (Linker 2018). See also Sheffield, who notes *The Federalist* "caters to a Christian right audience and was founded by Ben Domenech, a former Washington Post blogger who was fired by the paper for serial plagiarism" (Sheffield 2017).

[44] The source also exploited the opportunity to link the "overwrought" critics to their disbelief in the "Charlottesville lie". See Green (2017) for an analysis of the Unite the Right white nationalist rally at Charlottesville, North Carolina.

> action hero beating the tar out of a vicious Mexican cartel is now subject to libelous accusations of racism and xenophobia – ignoring that this action hero is also fighting on behalf of other Mexican characters. Shouldn't fighting sex trafficking be on our to-do lists regardless of our party affiliation? (Saltis 2019).

Whilst human trafficking should certainly be on the "to-do lists" of both the left and right, there is an abundance of scholarly work attesting that the political right is far more focussed on the moral considerations of the sexualised aspect of human trafficking than on the economic inequality conditions that lead millions of trafficked persons into enslavement.[45] For example, most recent legislation, FOSTA and SESTA, have been critiqued as creating more harm for sex workers than benefit for mitigating sex trafficking.[46]

Trump's border discourse and one of the take-aways from *Last Blood* is fear of the Other encroaching the boundaries of America and an increased isolationism – to keep the Other out of America, and to protect the pure white girl from crossing the US-Mexico border.[47] It underscores his oft-cited Trumpian announcement that Mexicans are all "rapists, murders, and bad hombres".

As we wrote this study, a curious meme appeared in the form of Trump's head photo-shopped onto the body of Rocky Balboa. Given the intersecting nature of Stallone's iconic characters – Rocky and Rambo – the meme is illustrative of the hyper-masculine American hero. Also, given the Rocky/Rambo identity construction, we see Trump's self-identification with the Stallone character(s) as an avowal of Trump's, albeit false, "anti-establishment" status. Miyamoto (2018) notes a particular element of the anti-hero that Trump and his followers have continually impressed upon the nation and the world: Media audiences admire anti-heroes "because they often have the courage to say what we all would like to say and do what we all would like to do in any given situation. They are void of the rules and regulations that society has created over the years, whether it's based on law and order or sociological expectations" (Miyamoto 2018).

Trump's essentialising rhetoric fuels the characterisation of Rambo in *Last Blood* as an anti-hero that reflects the hyper-masculine narrative constructs associated with progressive pushback and the frontier mythos associated with the gun-slinging cowboy of the Hollywood tradition. This characterisation further promotes the ideal of manifest destiny as interpreted within alt-right rhetoric and action. These behaviours and characterisations echo and are echoed by real-life aggressive killers, such as the El Paso murderer, against a perceived 'Hispanic

[45] See Lengel (2018).
[46] See Stern (2019).
[47] Due to Trump's wall, the abducted woman would likely have a far more difficult re-entry into the USA.

invasion' into the US from its border with Mexico. That killer's goals, like those of other alt-right killers,[48] illustrate a growing tendency for gun-wielding disenfranchised white men to destroy lives on the precept of an invasion[49] and reflect the aggressive ethno-nationalist rhetorics of Trump and other politically right leaders and media figures. The ethno-nationalist anti-hero is highlighted by the de-masculinisation of progressive politics and a resulting re-construction of hyper-masculinity on the political right, an increase in the relationship between white masculinity and gun-based survivalist narratives. These elements exist in literary, filmic and mediated characters, within narrative constructs of the alt-right, particularly those assuming the role of ethno-nationalist savior who helps "make America great again". These elements are salient in the final scene of *Last Blood*, where Rambo mounts his horse and rides into the sunset – a mythic frontier space that echoes the Western anti-heroes (and heroes) of eras past. Furthermore, it reflects ideological narratives of 'manifest destiny' in the era of westward expansion of the USA, both eras reflective of when America was "great" within a Trumpian mythos.

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[48] See Newsom / Lengel / Yeung (in press).
[49] See Taylor (2019).

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