

## **‘Your Wilderness’: The White Possession of Detroit in Jim Jarmusch’s *Only Lovers Left Alive***

Matthew J. Irwin

American Studies, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico  
(matthewji@unm.edu)

### **Abstract**

After a decade of accelerated disinvestment and depopulation, Detroit (re)appeared in the national imaginary as “urban frontier” open for (re)settlement by (mostly white) creative entrepreneurs. Recently, scholars have begun to address the ways in which this frontier rhetoric underscores a settler colonial discourse of erasure for the purpose of land acquisition and (re)development. The post-industrial landscape assumes a veil of wildness and abandon that arouses settler colonial desire for land through a narrative of white return that relies not just on a notion black criminality or ineptitude, but also more fundamentally on an assumption of deferred white possession. Though this work has productively described the settler colonial conditions of racialized (re)development in the Motor City, it has remained tied to a binary of black/white relations. It has ignored, therefore, white possession as a process that mythologizes and absorbs Indigenous history and delegitimizes Indigenous people. In this paper I read Jim Jarmusch’s 2014 vampire film *Only Lovers Left Alive* as a “landscape of monstrosity” that inadvertently and momentarily recovers Indigenous *and* African American presence in moments of erasure and absence. Where the film centers on a white vampire elite and suggests a “zombie” white working class, the Detroit landscape recovers African Americans through their invisibility (as ghosts) and Native Americans through savage or regressed nature (as werewolves). More broadly, I argue that *Only Lovers Left Alive* actively participates in an ideological process of (re)settlement that disguises land speculation (and its inherently disruptive cycles of uneven development) in a renewed frontier mythology. I read the film’s central characters, the vampires Adam and Eve, as disaster tourists whose nostalgia for Detroit’s lost civilization heralds in its renewed form. Their arrival presages the growing tourist presence in Detroit, and Eve’s promise that the dark, dangerous city will “rise again” presents it as a sublime world of possibility, while their departure at the end of the film marks the turn from destination to development.

**Keywords:** settler colonialism; white possession; urban frontier; disaster tourism;

Detroit; Jim Jarmusch; cinema; vampires; landscape of monstrosity

It's nighttime in Detroit and vampires are driving around the city. Adam lives there. Eve, his wife, is visiting from Tangier. They pass dilapidated or otherwise abandoned homes which appear just on the edge of dimly golden streetlights that give the impression of eternal dusk. Eve says, "So, this is your wilderness." "Everybody left," Adam replies.

This depiction of Detroit as empty, depopulated and wild in Jim Jarmusch's film *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2014) is by now a common trope for the Motor City. Images of urban decay have so troubled and excited the public imagination that they have come to be known as "ruin porn" (Kinney 2012; Safransky 2014), representing the Detroit landscape as a no man's land that foregrounds urban nature while ignoring the city's 700,000 residents (Safransky 2014, 240). Scholars such as Rebecca Kinney, Sara Safransky and Jessi Quizar have leaned on these representations of a Detroit succumbing to nature to explain recent (re)development discourses that invite "creative" white people to settle the wild "urban frontier" (240).

Working within these settler colonial frameworks, I pull from tourism studies, whiteness studies, visual culture, and indigenous studies to understand *Only Lovers Left Behind* as an instance in which landscape representation, tourism, and land speculation collide and collude to suggest Detroit as not merely in need of saving from poor black people, but more insidiously as a space rightfully *reclaimed* through a logic of white possession. It is part of an ongoing settler colonial project that erases Indigenous people and repeats its violence against other people of color—here, specifically, Black people. I argue that, as an example of landscape representation, *Only Lovers Left Alive* is a process and a discourse that constructs Detroit as a landscape of monstrosity to mark its availability to settlers. Further, where scholars have understood the settler-colonial return to Detroit in terms of a black/white binary, I employ Aileen Moreton-Robinson's theoretical intervention into whiteness studies and Kyle Mays's study of "Indigenous Detroit" to understand how the logic of white possession relies on a mythologized Indigenous past that also erases, denies or delegitimizes Indigenous people. Thus, one goal of this paper is to provide a settler colonial critique of Detroit that does involve Indigenous people, even as it tries to deny that they live in the city. Next to the vampire elite and the mindless mass of zombies (the ineffective white working class) who populate the film, Black people are ghosts (that is, invisible) and Native Americans are savages (that is, regressed/wild).

*Only Lovers Left Alive* assumes the narrative of Detroit's white return through a disaffected European immortal whose lamentations over better days elide the causes of decline. Adam is the custodian, if not the architect, of a frontier mythology that "doesn't argue its ideology," Richard Slotkin (1985, 19) would say, but valorizes it through acts of bravery. As vampires, Adam and Eve represent capitalism's last-ditch efforts to suck the life out of Detroit at the same time that they offer it as a refuge from a world that hasn't come face-to-face with its demise. The film's narrative, meanwhile, represents Detroit's decline as a failure of culture, rather than the inevitable outcome of disinvestment. Thus, I also read Adam and Eve as disaster tourists, whose nostalgia for a lost civilization herald in its renewed form. Disaster tourists, Eric Purchase informs us, make visible, and therefore desirable to land speculators, landscapes that otherwise don't exist in the public imagination. These constructed landscapes, W.J.T Mitchell would add, also naturalize and create an ideological perspective that makes development possible or attractive (1994, 2). In this sense, *Only Lovers Left Alive* is actively participating in an ideological process well under way in Detroit. Where creative entrepreneurs are the "urban

pioneers” settling the postindustrial Motor City (Safransky 2014, 241-242; Quizar 2015), Adam and Eve, Slotkin would say, represent “beleaguered capitalists and besieged bureaucrats” playing Custer to the savage “dangerous classes” (Slotkin 1985, 14) of the urban frontier—that is, the white working class, Black people, and Native Americans.

### **In Motown**

If we were to make a list of filmmakers who have considerably influenced their fields or popular discourse in the U.S., Jim Jarmusch wouldn’t likely scale to the top; indeed, his largest audiences and the majority of his financial backers come out of Europe, and few of the books written about him have appeared in English (Suárez 2007, 2). Yet Jarmusch is also a favorite of countless critics and fans of independent cinema. Juan Antonio Suárez, one of the few scholars to address Jarmusch’s films at length, claims that the director is “one of the most influential filmmakers to emerge in the United States” (1). He’s been referenced by Spike Lee, Kevin Smith, and Gus Van Sant. His aesthetic shows up in the films of Tom DiCillo, Hal Hartley, Sofia Coppola, and Richard Linklater (Suárez 1-2).

Importantly, Suárez also sees Jarmusch as a rebel auteur, carrying the banner for 1960s and 1970s arthouse (1). Thus, Suárez’s Jarmusch “drew considerable attention to the independent cinema” (1) at a time when “hegemonic stories and worldviews were called into question, when minority perspectives erupted into public debate, and... the boundaries between high art and low culture turned progressively blurry” (2). Jarmusch “downplay[ed] the centrality of class and nation” for “temporary social locations,” featuring outsiders, “transients and immigrants,” and subjectivities that “go against the grain of birth-given nationality and ethnicity” (5). In other words, Jarmusch is both producer and product of liberal multiculturalism. The trouble with this positionality really comes into view in the context of this paper, where Jarmusch’s investment in “a world that is immediately recognizable but also fantastic and intertextual” (5) becomes a space for the articulation of fetishized Others. If the Europeans in *Only Lovers Left Alive* are recognizable and fantastic because they are vampires with an abundance of Euro-American historical knowledge, then the working-class and ethnic immigrants in Jarmusch’s films *Stranger Than Paradise* and *Mystery Train* are recognizable and fantastic because they are naïve exotics with a superficial knowledge of American pop culture and often a tendency for whimsical acts of desperation, like betting on dog races and stealing food. Though *Only Lovers Left Alive* does seem to depart from the thematic realism of the Jarmusch universe—in which actors and characters migrate from film to film (5)—the director’s aesthetic of recognizable fantasy brings it back into line. And so, too, does his continued tradition of making films from “preexisting stories, films, and songs” (5), considering that he modelled Adam and Eve on the eponymous characters of *The Diary of Adam and Eve* by Mark Twain (Pinkerton 2014). The recognizable fantasy drawn from cultural memory invites my reading of Adam and Eve as vampires metaphorically (re)settling an American city. It also invites us to think of Jarmusch himself as a “creative entrepreneur” through whom the ideology of (re)settlement, Stuart Hall would say, becomes a ‘material force’” (Hall 1996, 27) in Detroit.

At the outset of *Only Lovers Left Alive*, Adam (played by Tom Hiddleston) and Eve (Tilda Swinton) live separate lives of leisure. In Detroit, Adam’s a musician who collects rare instruments and builds “alchemist” devices based on the theories of Nikola Tesla. He’s around 500 or 600 years old (*Sight & Sound*). In Tangier, Eve collects literature and seems to be a

connoisseur of all-things fine and/or antique, which she dates merely by touching them. She refers to flora and fauna by their Latin names. She's about 2,000 thousand years old (Pinkerton 2014). In Detroit, Adam's main contact with the outside world is a local "rock-and-roll" kid, Ian (Anton Yelchin), who slips Adam's anonymous records into the underground market and eagerly tracks down guitars and other "weird, interesting" items for his enigmatic client; he even found a guy to make a wooden bullet by Adam's request. In Tangier, Eve's main contact is Christopher Marlow, the very "Kit" Marlow of Elizabethan England who, rather than being mysteriously murdered, actually penned a number of Shakespeare's plays. As a vampire, he's also immortal.

Despite the distance between Adam and Eve, they live a stock heteronormative existence steeped in Western-European cultural traditions. Yet, Adam is suicidal. Eve recognizes in a video chat that something is wrong: "Can't you tell your wife what your problem is?" Eve says. "It's the zombies and the way they treat the world," Adam responds, referring to living human beings, whom Adam, as the sole witness to the decline of Western civilization, blames for marginalizing civilization's greatest (Western) minds. Photographs of this brain trust line the walls of his study. His heroes include Edgar Allan Poe, Franz Kafka, William Burroughs, Mark Twain, Joe Strummer, Buster Keaton, and Max Ernst. Throughout the film, references are also made to Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, Samuel Coleridge, and certainly Tesla. All of them, Adam suggests, have suffered at the hands of zombies, who are "afraid of their own imaginations."

After Eve arrives in Detroit, she and Adam spend their time having sex, drinking blood, and site-seeing. They tour city relics that represent, for Adam, signs of more cultured, more civilized times: the ruins of the Michigan Theater built where Henry Ford designed the prototype for the first car; the Packard plant "where they once built the most beautiful cars in the world"; and Jack White's house, which ends up standing in for Detroit's long, multiethnic music history.

Lest Adam and Eve fall into a sex-laden, drug-induced and immortal rut, Eve's younger sister Ava (Mia Wasikowska) shows up. They haven't seen her in decades as a result of some unspecified wrong she had committed, and despite Eve's hopeful observation that Ava has grown up, she remains a destabilizing force. Ava begs Adam to go out on the town, and Eve, to convince him, says, "We *are* in Detroit," suggesting, as a tourist, that they take advantage of the attractions while they can. Ian takes them to a local club where, during the band's set break, the house plays Adam's music, and Ian steps away to sell an unmarked LP in a black case—presumably Adam's music—to a hipster who declares, "So mysterious." The hipster also steals a look at Adam, and the whole scenario seems to make Adam nervous, so he abruptly stands up and says it's time to go.

The vampire family vacation comes to a sudden end when they go back to Adam's house. Stupidly not seeing Ian out before they go to bed, Adam and Eve wake to find that, in addition to having broken a number of Adam's LPs and instruments, Ava also "drank" Ian. They kick out Ava and get rid of Ian's body by melting it instantaneously in a pool of acid at the Packard plant. But, after more rock-in-roll kids, presumably Ian's friends looking for him, come to Adam's house, he and Eve flee to Tangier, leaving behind all of Adam's instruments, recording gear, heroes and all. They arrive in Tangier just in time for Kit to die from a dose of bad blood. Growing weak without a supply, Adam and Eve stalk a couple of victims. The film

fades to black as they bare their fangs, bearing down on the young lovers who are making out on a park bench.

### **Landscape of Monstrosity**

Although *Only Lovers Left Alive* is an example of larger settler colonial discourses in a postindustrial era, I'm interested in Detroit as a particular settler colonial landscape, or "urban frontier." The apocalyptic, post-industrial Detroit landscape represented in *Only Lovers Left Alive* does not sit idly behind Adam and Eve, reflecting Adam's mood or his flight from (Western) civilization in the midst of one of its greatest failures. Rather, Jarmusch actively constructs a landscape of social and spatial monstrosity. The language, behaviors, and physical form of Detroit "stand in for a particularly American set of fears about urban society and where it is headed" (Draus and Roddy 2016, 69-70), or what Slotkin (1985)—describing the frontier myth as an ongoing "political rhetoric of pioneering progress"—would call "eternal strife with the forces of darkness and barbarism" (12).

Mitchell (1994) writes that "landscape" acts like ideology—it's a *medium* that "naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable" (2). His definition extends landscape representation to any number of media, including cinema, but also to discourse, "in which various political positions may be articulated" and to cultural practices that "silence discourse... to carry out a process of institutional and political legitimation" (3). This is consistent with Hall's (1996) understanding of ideology as the "mental frameworks" that social groups and classes "deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works" (27). Continuing, Mitchell (1994) calls landscape a "technique of colonial representation," or what Purchase (1999) calls a process of "treating land—regardless of its state of development—as if it were a new frontier" (43) for the purpose of profiting from it. The ideological perspective that Detroit is a landscape of monstrosity doesn't just encourage the (re)development of Detroit but makes it possible by denying the events and politics that turned a one-time "model city" into a zone of conflict.

The "race riots" of 1967 are the metaphorical, if not actual, point of decline in Detroit's social-economic history (Detroit Documentary Production et al. 2010). Yet, the conditions that led to the conflict began almost a century earlier with the concomitant and systematic processes of racial segregation and ecological degradation. The Homestead Act of 1862 was the first of these racially structured projects (Vojnovic and Darden 2013, 91), both excluding Black Americans and depending on the removal of Native Americans. Throughout the mid-twentieth century, the act's exclusions continued in spirit: Covenants circled in white neighborhoods to prohibit integration, and the mortgage lending industry introduced "redlining" to identify neighborhoods where loans could not be made (92).

Though its economic and ecological conditions began to take shape as early as the 1920s, "white flight" began in earnest during the 1950s, when Ford, Chrysler and GM constructed twenty new plants in the suburbs. Kinney (2012) writes that white people fled in a such a panic about the city's "increasing blackness" that white flight should actually be viewed as "black containment" (5). From 1964 to 1966 an average 22,000 white people left the city each year and, to accommodate them, Detroit converted wide swaths of "natural/agricultural" land into suburbs, reaching out at a rate of 13 times faster than population growth from 1960

to 1990. Though biodiversity is generally higher in suburban areas (Colding and Barthel 2011, 156), suburbanization obliterated Detroit's wetlands, forests and farmlands, while increasing carbon output through automobile use. The number who used public transportation dropped from 13.8 percent to 2.6 percent (Vojnovic and Darden 2013, 95). At the same time, regional pride in and economic dependence on the automobile led both the legislature and citizens of Detroit to reject subway development in favor of roads and highways (92).

By the time of the rebellion, Detroit was thoroughly segregated, with white Americans in the wealthy suburbs and Black Americans in the underfunded city (Safransky 2014, 238). Throughout 1980s and 1990s the decommissioning of Detroit's auto factories accelerated the city's economic decline. Over the last 10 years, white flight, industrial flight and, more recently, "Black flight" brought the population down by 25%, or 2,000 people per month (Quizar 2014, 4). By 2010, a city built for nearly 2 million people had dropped to roughly 700,000 residents, 83 to 85 percent of them Black. The decline left from 44,000 to 100,000 vacant lots (Safransky 2014, 239; Quizar 2014, 5), which were subsequently set on fire, graffitied or appropriated by squatters.

Ruins, Purchase (1999) explains, are part of an "epochal cycle," represented in the nineteenth century by Thomas Cole in his series of paintings, *The Course of Empire*. The series marked "increasingly intensive uses of land" that cautioned Americans to seek wealth through "hard work and steady savings" (1999, 77-78), but didn't account for the ways in which ruins would inspire the entrepreneurial spirit by erasing the causes of disaster (84). Landscape and those who "make" it, participate in the cycles of uneven development in which capital, according to Neil Smith (2008), "strives to move from developed to underdeveloped space, then back to developed space which, because of its interim deprivation of capital, is now underdeveloped" (150). This is an all-too-familiar cycle for Detroit, expressed in popular culture through death and revitalization rhetoric. *Time* magazine has been pronouncing the city dead since 1961, while films such as *Robocop* (1987) and *The Crow* (1994) have presented a city overrun by violence (Draus and Roddy 2016, 69). The proliferation of empty lots over the last decade has resulted in the phenomenon of Detroit "ruin porn" populating the Internet: photos of burned out houses, crumbling structures and vacant land.

Representations of Detroit as an urban nightmare have coincided with a persistent "narrative of rebirth" (Draus and Roddy 2016, 68). In December 2013 the city released a 50-year "Detroit Future City" (DFC) plan, which introduced the desire for green infrastructure to revitalize the city. The "greening" of Detroit has also received widespread support in popular literature and film. In particular, books like the *Unreal Estate Guide to Detroit* and *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, as well as films like *We are Not Ghosts* and *Urban Roots*, chronicle the hope and enthusiasm of locating the city's revival in urban farms and community gardens. Meanwhile, the city reduces public services for people who had been trying to keep up their neighborhoods (Safransky 2014, 238; Quizar 2014, 3).

A crop of entrepreneurial farmers and community gardeners has arisen to stake their claims on abandoned lots. Detroit's small-scale urban farmers view themselves as creating sustainable businesses and community endeavors, while wealthy investors such as John Hantz of Hantz Farms see agriculture as a way to increase property values. Often viewed as an innovative urban renewal strategy, however, the hope for a future Detroit is nothing new. Indeed, hopes for a future Detroit tend to reflect popular accounts of the 1960s that describe

the Motor City as *the* model American city (Detroit Documentary Production et al. 2010): racially integrated and industrialized, with a booming middle-class. Even the Latin phrases on Detroit's official flag—translated as “we hope for better things” and “it will arise from the ashes” (Mays 2015, 22)—seem to suggest a permanent desire for arrival that teeters eternally between developed and underdeveloped.

The representation of Detroit as an urban wilderness indicates a turning point, back to (re)development after more than a half-century in the lurch, while the harmony between humans and nature that landscape seeks to represent in the interim acts as “compensation for and screening off of the actual violence perpetrated there” (Mitchell 1994, 7). Thus, when Kinney (2012) notes that the “[t]rope of past greatness of Detroit is essential to the narrative of present day decay” (5), she's marking the continuation of a frontier ideology that operates through myth as “part of the language... contain[ing] all of the ‘lessons’ we have learned from our history and all of the essential elements of our worldview” (Slotkin 1985, 16). The decay narrative prepares the Motor City for a settler colonial takeover. Eve's wilderness view of Detroit is an invitation to creative development, made active when she declares, “This city will rise again.” Importantly, she makes this declaration on a foundation of exploitable nature and through a natural metaphor: “There's water here,” she continues. “When the cities of the south are burning, this place will bloom.” Eve signals nature as a site for development, but also development as nature's inevitable outcome, a notion complicated by the urban agriculture movement, ranging from massive agribusiness to community gardens, that has staked a claim on Detroit's future (Draus and Roddy 2016, 68).

Various stages of development and existence persist between these extremes of ruin and perpetual renewal, but the play between them has grown wider in the post-industrial context, where representations of ruin, resurgent nature, empty land, and potential present the Motor city as *terra nullius*, a no man's land, Safransky (2014, 241) writes, “for which there is a moral imperative to settle.” Though Jarmusch claims that “the decline of American empire is very much transparent in Detroit” (Pinkerton 2014), he simultaneously constructs the city as no man's land by absorbing its non-white residents into a landscape of monstrosity. Though, as I've said, black people make up more than 80 percent of Detroit's population (Safransky 2014, 238), the only black actors in *Only Lovers Left Alive* work as service people—a bartender, a cab driver. A black doctor (played by Jeffery Wright) acts as a drug dealer, selling Adam the “really good stuff”—O-negative blood—on the black market. The metaphor of blood as a drug really takes off when we see Adam and Eve drink it in small amounts and then slide back with their mouths open in ecstasy. Aside from these subordinate positions, black people do not exist in the Detroit of *Only Lovers Left Alive*. They are ghosts, as Draus and Roddy (2016) write, “disappearing into the landscape, especially when confronted by law enforcement” (71). Thus, the images of abandoned homes and overgrown lots in *Only Lovers Left Alive*, Safransky (2014, 238) would say, encourage a settler colonial logic of ownership-via-labor while ignoring that the 100,000 acres of “empty” land still house around 90,000 people, many of whom care for vacant properties.

Where Black people are absent from the abandoned spaces of *Only Lovers Left Alive*, nature reclaims space. Plants grow through the cracks; they *create* cracks and tear buildings down. In the crumbling, gutted Packard plant, Adam and Eve hear coyotes before catching their eyes flashing in the light. When Eve says, “I think they're clocking you,” she seems to be

nodding toward the competitive relationship between vampires and werewolves that shows up in popular films such as the *Twilight* (2008-2012) and *Underworld* (2003-2016) series. If vampires represent civilization, then werewolves represent wildness, a city sinking into a savage state. Where *Twilight* and episode 207 of the *X-Files* (1994), “Shapes,” also associate werewolves with Native Americans and where Native Americans repeatedly appear as the embodiment of nature in colonial representations, the suggestion in *Only Lovers Left Alive* is not only that Native Americans don’t exist in the present, but that, in order for them to exist at all, civilization must fall. But, as I’ve shown and Eve has confirmed, the apparent return to nature is just preparation for new development.

Jarmusch’s Detroit landscape contains and implies this imperative to develop, accounting for both his depiction of the city as empty in the film and his description of the “black parts of Detroit,” in *Sight & Sound* magazine, as “like a lot of urban America... kind of apartheid, segregated, heavily.” Jarmusch ignores completely the history of racial spatialization that caused Detroit’s decline. Further, though he said his depiction of Detroit is “limited and somewhat unrealistic,” he also said the Motor City is the “best city you could imagine” for a character who is hiding out. In the film he periodically drives us around the city with Adam and Eve to see the ruins, and when Eve describes Detroit as Adam’s “wilderness,” she locates the postindustrial landscape within a sublime landscape tradition forged by many a settler and Romantic painter/poet (Purchase 1999, 2). Like Slotkin’s frontier, Detroit becomes a “mythic region whose wildness [make] it at once a region of darkness and an earthly paradise” (1985, 11). It’s perfect for vampires who live in the dark but who take their names from Christianity’s first couple. Yet Jarmusch based his characters on Mark Twain’s in *The Diary of Adam and Eve* (*Sight & Sound*), which largely takes place outside of paradise after Adam flees, “hoping to get clear of the Park and hide in some other country before the trouble should begin (Twain and Updike, 10).” Detroit, then, is not Paradise, but that “other country,” a landscape of monstrosity waiting to be inhabited—indeed, to be *made*—by (white) settlers.

In short, Jarmusch has produced his own ruin porn, obscuring racial spatialization as the force behind Detroit’s decline. He ignores that some of the most opulent homes in the country exist in Detroit’s suburbs (Darden 2013, 93), that certain neighborhoods are quickly developing, that people still live in this “wilderness,” and that these people have fought against illegal dumping, arson, vandalism and squatting (Quizar 2014, 2-3).

### **Vampires on Holiday**

Understanding that Adam sees Detroit as a failure of civilization, Eve’s reassurance that the city will rise is not merely a sentimental vision of great societies. Rather, Eve’s by saying that it will rise *again*, she defines great societies as the product of Western/European ingenuity, written into the landscape. Mitchell (1994) reminds us that landscape acts like ideology, interpolating the beholder of the representation in “relation to its givenness as sight and site.” Where ideological categories, such as colonizer and colonized, position us as social actors in discourse (Hall, 40), monstrosity “reaffirm[s] the shared normality of the person or people encountering the monster,” drawing “a clear line of difference between them and the ‘other’” to justify mistreatment of the other (Draus and Roddy 2016, 70). That is, as ideology, landscape doesn’t just predict or insist on some kind of ownership, but also determines who owns and who doesn’t. Furthermore, if speculation depends on the process of making undesirable land



valuable, then tourism is one way to accomplish that, and disaster tales play a key role in concealing the “entrepreneurial spirit” at work (Purchase, 76), while at the same time perpetuating a narrative of wealth saving destinations from poverty.

It’s difficult to overstate the degree to which Jarmusch’s narration of Detroit places it on a continuum of disaster tourism, land speculation, and white possession that includes Twain’s *The Diary of Adam and Eve*. In the foreword to the 2002 Hesperus edition, John Updike writes that in 1893 Adam’s diary appeared in *The Niagara Book*, a souvenir for the 1893 World Fair in Buffalo, New York (Twain and Updike 2002, vii). Updike writes, “[Twain] saw that ‘Adam’s Diary’ might be relocated to an Eden that contained Niagara Falls” (vii). Indeed, the falls appear in the first few lines of the text, where Twain’s Adam writes, “[T]he great waterfall... is the finest thing on the estate, I think. The new creature [Eve] calls it Niagara Falls—why, I am sure I don’t know. Says it *looks* like Niagara Falls” (5). This ability to name the Falls and Twain’s willingness to locate them in his Eden, mark what Ginger Strand (2008) describes as a “monument to man’s meddling” (5). “The manicured, repaired, landscaped and artificially lit” Falls are a study in self-delusion,” she writes (5), scheduled to suit tourists. The Falls represent the commodification of mythologized nature and Native American history upon which Americans forge their national identity. Though a lengthy comparison between Niagara Falls and Detroit as tourist destinations falls outside the scope of this study, both locations exhibit a sublime quality that arouses a sense of danger and excitement in potential visitors: Where the magnitude of the Falls attracts people to Niagara Falls, the magnitude of destruction attracts visitors to Detroit.<sup>1</sup>

This is to say that Jarmusch’s Adam and Eve have been prepped for travel by their progenitors. So, while Eve is one kind of tourist in *Only Lovers Left Alive*, taking in the sublimity of Detroit’s remains, Adam is hiding out; he’s on retreat. His wilderness is not so much a place to *make* himself as a place to withdraw. He does as his heroes have done, except where James and Cole sought a remedy for civilization’s decline in landscape, Adam wants to wallow in civilization’s failures. By blaming zombies for those failures, he maintains his savior narrative, like Twain’s Adam, who witnesses, after the fall, “every beast was destroying its neighbor” (10).

Adam’s zombies are not the flesh-eating undead. Rather, Adam uses the term “zombie” symbolically to refer to everyday humans whose brain-dead ideologies or motivations don’t align with his own. They are “mindless, automaton-like bodies,” the “lowest of the low,” a “persistent mass” (Draus and Roddy 2016, 73), and, yet, in *Only Lovers Left Alive*, they are living (white) humans. They represent a kind of white Other, which I read as working-class Detroiters, caught up in “the same ‘laws’ of capitalist competition” that formed the “ideological underpinnings” of film’s frontier myth (Slotkin 1985, 15). Adam’s exalted position depends on his denial of capitalism as the logic of deindustrialization as well as his denial that his heroes have participated in capitalism’s recurrence. Adam doesn’t find this problematic because, as a vampire, Adam too is a capitalist. Richard Dyer (1997) recognizes the association of whiteness, as a color, with the pale, exanguinated skin of death—thereby figuring vampires as representatives of white capitalism, sucking the life out of cities and their inhabitants (210). His wall of dead white men secures his authority and reinforces his nostalgia for better capitalist

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<sup>1</sup> As a coincidental aside, it’s worth noting that Germans are among the most frequent visitors to Detroit for this reason (*The New York Times*, Nov. 9, 2012), that they funded *Only Lovers Left Alive*, and that Jarmusch filmed a number of scenes in Germany, using a German crew.

times, but it also identifies him as the inheritor of their entrepreneurial “white spirit,” which Dyer defines as that “get up and go, aspiration, awareness of the highest reaches of intellectual comprehension and aesthetic refinement (23).” It’s a spirit of (re)settlement that identifies the one fit to rule (31) over people and the environment (14-15),

Clearly, Adam’s misanthropy in some ways resists this classification. He seems to contradict the white spirit in his melancholy laments for the decline of civilization, but “the right not to conform, to be different and get away with it is the right of the most privilege groups in society” (Purchase, 12). For example, Adam has time and money, so he’s not worried about being recognized or getting paid for his music. He just wants it “out there,” and, as someone who does not have to worry about aging or poverty, he flippantly argues that artists shouldn’t complain about appropriation—it’s the ideas that matter, the poetry, the art. From this privileged position, Adam’s view of himself as savior is very much tied to a landscape that invites creative activity while foreclosing possibilities for others. As a narrator of Adam’s experience who guides him through his existential crisis, Eve is as much an author of this particular settler landscape.

Amy Kaplan (2002) has argued that women in nineteenth century literature domesticated the landscape by taming wild children in the home (32), conflating progress with Manifest Destiny (34), and rescuing men from foreign influence (47). On the flipside of this “civilizing mission,” Dyer (1997) recognizes that white women have also been represented as a challenge to imperial rule, by “enflame[ing] the already overheated desires of native men” (186) and by condemning settler treatment of Native people (186). Where Eve expresses her “moral conscience” by undermining Adam’s melancholic vision of existence, her younger sister, Ava, represents a “negative variant” (184): She is simultaneously the wild child that the motherly Eve cannot tame and the temptation for the white “native,” Ian. Ava’s seduction of Ian, in fact, “signals the beginning of the end” (185) for vampires in Detroit. Moreover, her declaration that she just couldn’t help herself (“He was so cute,” she says) and Eve’s muted façade of disappointment at Ian’s death embrace the seemingly contradictory do-nothingness of “white femininity” (187), repeating colonial violence by refusing to do anything about the suffering of locals, except sympathize with it. And yet, rather than indicate a turn away from imperialism, the forced departure of the nonconformist Adam heralds the return of civilization: They broke the rules by killing a white man. This explains why, with Western civilization harassing his characters, Jarmusch takes the orientalizing turn back to Tangier. Though Eve tells Ava that they can’t go around killing people in the “bloody twenty-first century” of Detroit, Adam and Eve kill locals in Tangiers, ostensibly Arabs, with impunity. Jarmusch says that Tangier is a city in decline, like Detroit, but that, unlike Detroit, Tangier suffers from *overpopulation* (*Sight & Sound*), which both justifies knocking off a few people and creates an alternative landscape of monstrosity, in which Adam and Eve, corrupted by civilization, seek their true natures.

### **White Possession**

*Only Lovers Left Alive* narrates the (re)development, or (re)settlement, of Detroit through a settler colonial landscape that affects and administers Native Americans and Black Americans in significantly different ways. Meanwhile, Adam and Eve claim the moral authority and presence (of body and mind) to exclude others—a common sense logic of white possession, Aileen

Moreton-Robinson (2015) writes, that assumes they have *the right to exclude* in the first place (xxiv). However, even as it “produces ideology and exists within it” (Bermingham 1986, 4), the film also, as Anne Bermingham writes (1986), “registers the inconsistencies within [settler colonial] ideologies” (4). By repeating the stereotype of Native American savagery in resurgent nature, *Only Lovers Left Alive*, however derogatorily, reinserts Indigenous people into the landscape of Detroit. The film, in other words, “threatens to unravel” (1986, 4) the logic of (automatic) white possession that underwrites the (re)development of Detroit by inadvertently marking Indigenous presence.

Quizar (2015) notes that a narrative of return for or rebirth of whiteness persists in Detroit through the proliferation of artist residencies and other programs to encourage creative economic development. With Kinney (2012), she has also argued that, accompanying narratives of Detroit’s decline, white people harbor a sense of nostalgia, believing that they were driven out of the city by violence; they see themselves as refugees of violence and economic collapse (Kinney 2012, 8). The opposite is true: White people who left the city center accelerated Detroit’s economic collapse by taking their tax dollars with them as they “increasingly sought newer and larger residences in the suburbs” (4). This discourse of mobility, Kinney adds, depends on “access to whiteness” (4), while ruin porn suggests that people (of color), who stayed, didn’t keep things up, allowing white people to think of themselves as exiled caretakers awaiting their return. Indeed, Jarmusch’s depiction of a hip, all-white music scene in an abandoned city blatantly references gentrification as much as it erases black Detroiters, suggesting by their absence in a scene of urban activity that black people are “both a cause and a symptom of ruin” (Quizar 2015). Moreover, when Adam chauffeurs Eve past Jack White’s house—rather than, say, Berry Gordy’s—the film neglects the city’s black cultural history at the same time that it suggests that, despite Detroit’s reputation for poverty and violence, creative (white) people still or can thrive in the Motor City.

However, recent attempts to recognize the erasure of black people and black history in Detroit as a settler colonial process have failed to take into account the ways in which that process depends on the continued erasure of Indigenous people. When Safransky (2014) recognizes that settler colonialism shows itself “in the abrogation or containment of native rights, the racial geography of cities and the selected absorption of immigrant populations” (239), her lowercase “native” invites a reading of Black Americans as “native Detroiters,” thereby disappearing Indigenous people. The frontier myth, Hall (1996) would say, explains how the ideology of (re)settlement intervenes in social struggles (41), so it would be no leap for the settler state to view any number of enemies as “Indians” (Slotkin 1985, 16-17). Indeed, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz’s excellent history, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*, details the ways in which the rhetoric and logic of the U.S. genocide of Indigenous people has continued in current U.S. military strategy. And yet we should be careful not to repeat the violent erasures of settler colonialism in our critiques. Though Safransky (2014) recognizes the ways in which the dispossession of Native people has set a legal precedent for white land acquisition in Detroit, she treats Indigeneity as a method, foreclosing the possibility of Native possession in Detroit. Quizar is more careful: Where she observes that “Black land has become the site of settler colonial desire,” she also acknowledges that a settler colonial critique figuring Black Americans as “native Detroiters” repeats the logic of Native dispossession (Quizar 2015). Both understand that settler colonialism inserts Native Americans and Black Americans into the

same landscape, and they recognize how settler colonialism also operates through the assumption that white people already own Detroit. Yet neither have explored the constitutive connection between white possession and Native dispossession in Detroit.

Moreton-Robinson (2015) has demonstrated that the black/white binary of whiteness studies, maintained by Dyer, ignores the “positioning of Indians as incommensurable savages” in American history (48-49). Further, Kyle Mays (2016) has argued that while many Detroit historians have “focused on the tensions between Black and white races... focusing on labor” (25), the twentieth century has produced only one book on Detroit’s Native American community (30). Safransky (2015) does root white possession in Detroit to the legal designation of property rights (238), but she doesn’t go as far as Moreton-Robinson does in Australia, arguing that possessive individualism is a hallmark of privileged (white) subjects who claim the right to property as, and through, “normative behavior” (50). As a vampire/capitalist, Adam exists “on a continuum of behavior that is understandable” (Draus and Roddy 2016, 72), yet his “sense of belonging is [also] expressed as a profound feeling of attachment... derived from ownership and achievement.” But where Moreton-Robinson (2015) argues that this sense of belonging relies on a version of history that privileges white people “by representing them as the people who made this country what it is today” (4), Adam identifies with the white people who made the U.S. what it *was*, before the zombies got to it.

Adding to Kinney’s understanding that white return is a *nostalgic* process that persists even if white people have temporarily lived elsewhere, if they’ve only recently or temporarily lived there, or never lived there at all, the logic of white possession is also a *common sense* right. Common sense, Hall (1996) tells us, is a “historical, not a natural or universal or spontaneous form of popular thinking” secured by and through ideological struggle (44). While Adam and Eve are visitors to Detroit, their claim to belonging rests on an assumed sense of knowingness that comes with immortality and life on the privileged side of European history. Like Twain’s Eve, who names everything in existence by sight, for instance, Jarmusch’s Eve knows everything by touch; she uses the Latin, which suggests not only origins in Western epistemology, but more specifically science—a colonial tool that, like art, assumes the right to describe, and therefore to define, colonized people. Adam, of course, stakes his claim to Detroit in his knowledge of and sense of loss for history. Jarmusch also clearly separates Adam and Eve from Detroit’s real monsters, saying, “Vampires are not monsters, they’re not zombies, they’re not the undead. They’re humans that have gone through a transformation, so they’re still basically human” (Pinkerton 2014). Adam and Eve earn this humanity in the film through their ability to make decisions. By choosing to live in Detroit and demonstrating self-possessed sense of ingenuity (i.e., Adam’s Tesla-inspired machines), they separate themselves from the immobile locals. By buying blood from blood banks instead of killing people, they separate themselves from the monstrosity of vampirism. They place themselves above the monstrosity of the city and its other inhabitants, which include the hypervisible zombies of Western civilization, but also the very invisible residents of Detroit who are too poor to move or who resort to various forms of violence/savagery in Jarmusch’s Detroit.

When Safransky (2014) writes that “representations [of empty land] become more problematic when excessive nature is celebrated as cleansing, a discourse with racial connotations” (240), she marks the erasure of Black Americans, but neglects the symbolic and selective absorption of Detroit’s Indigenous people—Moreton-Robinson’s (2015) “symbolic

appropriation of the sacred”—into the colonial landscape that “achieve[s] the unattainable imperative of becoming Indigenous” in order to belong (10). Against popular and scholarly narratives that accept these processes, placing Indigenous in (often mythical) pasts, Mays (2016) has argued that Detroit’s urban history is co-constitutive with the region’s Indigenous history, though “[t]he creation of a local history rooted in white male ‘origin myths’” has relied on the appropriated “celebration of indigenous imagery and the memorializing of Indigenous people (and their histories) through pageantry” (18). He offers Detroit’s official flag (adopted in 1948) as an example of “white male settlement and domination” that absences Indigenous history in its depiction of British, American and colonial iconography, as well as its memorializing of the 1805 fire that nearly eradicated the city (21-22).

Likewise, if we read Jarmusch’s coyotes as the monstrous incarnations of Native Americans in the Detroit of *Only Lovers Left Alive*, then they exist only in contrast to modernity, represented by the Packard plant, where Adam and Eve encounter them. The plant looming over the coyotes represents the heyday of industry replacing Indigenous history with an origin myth of U.S. modernity (i.e., Adam’s Euro-American civilization). Yet before Eve declares that the coyotes seem to be “clocking” Adam, she notices them with a hint of excitement, calling them by the Latin name, *canis latrans*. Still understanding coyotes/werewolves as Native Americans, Eve’s sense of surprise acknowledges that Native Americans do exist in the present, even if she still tries to “name” them in a language of colonial oppression, she recognizes their right to be there. As the one being measured, *Adam* is the intruder.

### **You Didn’t Know?**

Settler colonialism in Detroit disappears Black Americans and Native Americans into the landscape as ghosts and resurgent nature in order to ensure the safety of white people in the city, whether they are returning or arriving for the first time to take advantage of cheap land, which is truly *theirs* for the taking. *Only Lovers Left Alive* so readily duplicates this logic that people have suggested to me that the film, its characters and/or its representations might be ironic. They wonder, in other words, whether Jarmusch is mocking creative white people moving to Detroit to work on themselves/their art. Yet in Jarmusch’s interview with Nick Pinkerton (2014), he is sincere in his understanding of, and even concern for, Detroit. He hints to the possibility that Adam and Eve, or the film’s viewers, are twentieth-century hipsters for whom irony is an identifying form of expression and interpretation. This makes it hard to completely deny any ironic tendencies the film may have, yet it’s also difficult to see Adam as anything other than a possible iteration of Jarmusch himself. Though he denies this outright in *Sight & Sound*, he also admits that Adam’s “heroes” are his own, that many of Adam’s obsessions, too, are his own. In other words, his construction of these characters and their relationship to the world is genuine, not ironic. Further, even if Jarmusch does intend to expose the white (re)settlement of Detroit, then he does so by performing the colonial processes of erasure I’ve outlined in this paper, which allows him to acknowledge racism without taking responsibility for it. As irony, *Only Lovers Left Alive* would be a 123-minute “God, Don’t White People Suck?” joke, told by a white person trying to show that he is “down” with people of color without acknowledging he might have benefited from a system that discriminates against those very people of color (*Jezebel.com*, April 26, 2012).

In the film, moreover, Adam and Eve have lived through the colonization of the Americas. Yet, for all the trivial knowledge and fetishized artifacts they have collected from Euro-American culture, they remain impervious to the settler conditions that benefit them and structure the failure of the civilization Adam so adamantly mourns, including the ease with which they uproot themselves, leaving behind all of Adam's treasured guitars. Their Detroit is a city of monsters, predicated on hearsay perpetuated by people who live far away (Draus and Roddy 2016, 69) and who have an interest in speculating on cheap land. This is a very real scenario in Detroit, where a market-only property system ensures that outside investors can buy property on-auction for as little as \$500 *without even being present*. Meanwhile, the people who live in Detroit—the vast majority of them being people of color—are excluded from determining the future of the land they exist on, as we see in the uncertainties experienced by urban farmers who cultivate land that the city can reclaim at the drop of a developer's hat.

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