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**‘Who isn’t that masked man’:
the absence of re-authoring in *The Lone Ranger***

ABSTRACT

From its radio debut in 1933 through to the 2013 film, The Lone Ranger (TLR) franchise has continued to grow, expanding from these beginnings into television, novel, comic books and, as noted, film. With the expansion of TLR still a continuing, albeit occasionally dormant, process, the franchise itself possesses a broad history filled not only with additions but also absences. This article is concerned with one absence in particular with: re-authoring. Other media franchises featuring popular Superheroes typically delved, with varying degrees of frequency, into re-authored variants of their canonical narrative – producing distinct images and varied ideas surrounding their characters. Yet, TLR has remained squarely within a pseudo-historical nineteenth-century-western United States and concerning an ambushed Texas Ranger who becomes a masked vigilante-Superhero – and it is this absence that marks TLR as distinct compared with other long-running media franchise texts. Through history along with media and genre theory, this paper explores the history and character of TLR retrospectively, focusing on the absence of setting and genre variation in contrast to the use and theme of the Frontier throughout the franchise. Within this exploration we position the figure of the masked man as Superhero surrounded by the history of the American West, attributing the absence of re-authoring to this positioning. This positioning, we further argue, sees the idea of the masked man entrenched rigidly into ideas surrounding the nineteenth century westward expansion of the United States.

KEYWORDS

Lone Ranger
frontier
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Westerns
Superhero

RE-AUTHORING: PLAYING WITH CANON

From its beginnings in radio to the 2013 film, *The Lone Ranger* (TLR) has thrilled audiences with tales of justice and adventure on the United States (US) frontier. However, unlike numerous other popular heroes – one whose existence is not contained within a limited set of texts (Bennet and Woollacott 1987: 14) – TLR has yet to produce a re-authored variation of the masked man's adventures. That is, one located outside the masked man's typical nineteenth century western US setting, and western/Superhero blend, to involve other genres and narratives. This absence strongly suggests that – unlike other popular heroes and despite narratives of the masked man drawing on the Superhero – TLR does not lend itself easily to re-authoring. This article argues that the key issue surrounding re-authoring in regard to TLR is that it is extremely difficult to disentangle the masked man from the narrative of the Frontier and its symbolic associations. While productions of TLR may draw upon the Superhero genre, the title character is fundamentally tied to the symbolic associations of the West.

RE-AUTHORING: PLAYING WITH CANON

Henry Jenkins defines a media franchise as storytelling across multiple media, an act that sees a popular character exist in a particular 'media mix' (2006: 110). TLR, Batman or Spider-Man are each examples of a media franchise – occupying film, television, comic books and other media. The result of this media mix for popular heroes is a myriad of distinct – in terms of medium and aesthetics – depictions united through the franchise's canon in the form of specific and repeated knowledges. These knowledges include narrative details and recurring elements. True, knowledge of a franchise's canon is a subjective experience as audiences consume with 'different degrees of attentiveness and selectivity' (Jenkins 1992: 57). Yet, for those that consume multiple productions, there are clear connections that build both convention and expectation (Jenkins 1992: 90). For instance, Will Brooker notes the standard Batman narrative begins with the death of Bruce Wayne's parents and his transformative sojourn (2005: 51). Likewise, Dan O'Rourke and Pavin A. Rodrigues outline the canonical Spider-Man narrative concerns Peter Parker, a New York boy bitten by a radioactive spider (2007: 120).

Many Superhero media franchises produce narratives that manipulate their canon, importing new and exporting familiar elements. Noting this tendency, Jenkins employs the phrase 'transcreation' in reference to 'reinventing and localizing an

existing fictional franchise to make it more acceptable and attractive to a particular national market' (2006: 323), pointing to Spider-Man: India as a key example. Conversely, in denoting national markets, transcreation has a particular focus. And while drawing on Jenkins' notion, O'Rourke and Rodrigues note a more general tendency of producing varied texts that contain a 'stretched' (2007: 120) canon. Stretching a text in this manner can be seen as an act of boundary pushing that helps define the character's 'evolution' (O'Rourke and Rodrigues 2007: 120), contrasting themes and motifs fitting the character with those typically abstained, constituting a creative reinvention 'without the fear of repercussions from long-term traditionalist' (O'Rourke and Rodrigues 2007: 122). Noting a general tendency to expand the Superhero beyond their canon, this article employs the phrase 're-authoring'.

Re-authoring plays with the connections within a franchise. For instance, Marvel acclimatized Spider-Man 'to South Asian tastes' (Jenkins 2006: 111) with Spider-Man: India, immersing 'the character in the mythology of India' (O'Rourke and Rodrigues 2007: 121). In Spider-Man: India young Pavitr Prabhakar of Mumbai is given his powers, costume and destiny by a Yogi with a spider tattoo who claims it is the boy's destiny (Kang 2005: 11–12). Here the differences between Peter and Pavitr are obvious, employing distinct geography and interpretations of Spider-Man's origin – mythic versus scientific, fate versus accident. Likewise, Brooker notes Batman has been transported into narratives of Robin Hood, Sherlock Holmes, Dracula and others (2005: 9). Such is the case with Castle of the Bat, a text that stretches Batman's broad concept across Frankenstein's plot. Exchanging Gotham City for the south Germany of 1819 we find parent and child's last words to each other arguing over Bruce's desired career as an actor versus his father's desire for a Doctor (Harris 1994: 8). Guilt compels Bruce to follow his father's path, becoming a Doctor who stumbles onto the secret of life and resurrecting his father. The elder Wayne, traumatized by his own death, becomes the vigilante Batman (Harris 1994: 44).

THE LONE RANGER'S CANON

TLR originated as a radio series from WYZZ Detroit in 1933, and airing its final original episode in 1956 (Dunning 1998: 405). The title has been applied to a large quantity of productions, including comic books, television and film. Amongst the long list of TLR productions, those enjoying some degree of longevity listed by David Rothel include a series of novels published from 1936 to 1956 (1981: 191–12), the noted television series (which

aired from 1949 to 1957) (1981: 193, 219) and a comic book series, published by Dell (1981: 178–91). Though Rothel lists no date for the comic, the Grand Comic Database notes the first issue appeared in 1945 while the last was published in 1962. Although productions of TLR became limited following the 1950s, the 2010s witnessed a resurgence in during the production and promotion of Disney's new *The Lone Ranger* (Verbinski, 2013) film. In 2006, TLR returned to comic books with Dynamite Entertainment's series (Mathews, 2006) while in 2012 Moonstone books published the prose short story collection, *The Lone Ranger Chronicles* (Various 2012) and novel *The Lone Ranger: Vendetta* (Hopkins, 2012). The eponymous film was released in the subsequent year.

Despite the quantity of shifts of medium and era, each incarnation of TLR has maintained a consistent plot and setting. Certainly there are numerous variations on the theme, but the masked man's fictive history is employed throughout as a concise explanation of *TLR*. This history is noted by John Dunning as the story of John Reid, a Texas Ranger in the Old West, who is ambushed and left for dead by the Cavendish Gang but found and nursed to health by Tonto (1998: 406). After regaining health, John masks and arms himself with silver bullets (made in his secret silver mine), and mounts the great horse Silver, becoming the Lone Ranger (Dunning 1998: 406). Thus in regard to *TLR*'s there is general consistency as shown in the matrix below:

	Old West Setting	Is a Texas Ranger	Ambushed	Cavendish Gang	Found by Tonto	Fights for justice.	Silver	Silvermine	Silver bullets
Radio series (1933–1954)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
novels (1936–1956)	X	X	X	Some novels	X	X	X	X	X
Television series (1949–1957)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Dell comics (1948–1962)	X	Implied				X	X	X	X
Dynamite comics (2006–)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Moonstone books (2012)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Disney film (2013)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	

THE LONE RANGER AND HISTORY

Part of the emphasis for many Superheroes, such as Spider-Man and Batman, is their location within the contemporary world of ‘our society’ (Fingerroth 2006: 25), which grows with the character, and is continually familiarized in accordance with contemporary events. Citing a similar case with the figure of James Bond, Tony Bennet and Janet Woollacott note popular heroes’ existence within a perpetual ‘now’, where the character functions ‘above all as a hero of modernisation’ (1987: 20–21). That is, a figure capable of expressing distinct and even contradictory cultural and ideological values, a ‘moving sign of the times’ (1987: 19)

If the masked man is a moving sign of the times, however, he is a moving sign of past times in that the character is a figure consistently situated into the history of the nineteenth century western US. The masked man has mingled with, for instance, Wyatt Earp (1848–1929) who, during his lifetime established a high profile public image from his career as a lawman (Woog 2010: 7) in ‘The fallen angel of Dodge City’ (Smith 2012: 137–56); or General George Armstrong Custer (1839–1876), the American Civil War veteran and Seventh Cavalry commander who was defeated in 1876 at the Battle of the Little Big Horn (Utley 2001: 459–60) in the 1941 radio episode, ‘Custer rides With The Lone Ranger’ (WXYZ Detroit 1941); or the Transcontinental Railroad, the construction of rail lines across the continental US. following the Civil War’s 1865 conclusion through government railroad grants, stimulating ‘an industrial workforce’ and ‘massive immigration’ (Dunlavy 2001: 650) in Gaylord Dubois’ *The Lone Ranger* (1936). The masked man’s positioning within history takes on further significance regarding the character’s fictive beginnings as a Texas Ranger. Founded in 1823 from volunteers, the Texas Rangers were, and are, popular embodiments of frontier virtue, consisting of ‘self-reliant individuals who knew no military discipline’ but made up for it ‘in fighting ability’ (Newark 1984: 248). Indeed, Robert M. Utley explicitly describes how throughout popular culture the Texas Rangers ‘flourish as legend’ (2002: ix) in a way that their historical and living incarnations cannot. With special reference to TLR, Utley goes on to argue that the masked man embodies the Texas Ranger legend in popular culture, noting that ‘no Ranger of record could boast the dazzling exploits of the lone survivor of that ambushed squad’ (2002: ix). In this sense, the masked man’s placement as a Texas Ranger further ties the character to the West and the western.

While TLR heavily features a strong historic element, we must stress that it is not a historical text. Rather, the western genre in general is noted to contain an imaginative or metaphoric linkage to US culture and history (Jewett and Lawrence 2002: 30; Wright 1975: 2). For the US, this link sees the nation’s nineteenth century expansion act as ‘a vivid and

memorial set of hero-tales' that serves for the 'moral justifying of action on the stage of historical conflict' (Slotkin 1998: 3). Symbolically expressing national identity, Richard Slotkin frames the western genre as 'radical adaptations of historical mythology' (1998: 282). And while the conventions of the western are not necessarily in and of themselves nationalistic, the genre's mainstream (Hollywood) examples illustrate 'anxious and often unstable attempts at dealing with the contradictions of another settler colonial project' (Limbrick 2007: 69). Expressed in terms such as 'the frontier' or 'manifest destiny', David Hamilton Murdoch argues that through the Western, the US has established an 'Homeric version' (2001: 13) of its history. Noting Avi Santo's argument that the masked man is a 'purposely vague' (2012: 195) figure drawn from distinct heroic influences (Robin Hood to the Cowboy), the West can be understood as a particularly apt location for TLR when approached as a mythic setting. Santo goes on to argue the Ranger's vague nature helps forge 'the illusion that the Lone Ranger had a mythic, rather than scripted, existence' (2012: 187), helping to situate the character as a peer to the 'other great heroes' of popular culture 'rather than merely a derivative of them' (Santo 2012: 194). Considering the close association of the imaginative past of the 'Wild West' with the vague, 'mythic' figure of the Ranger in TLR there a rigid relationship exists between masked man and history.

A SUPERHERO IN THE AMERICAN WEST

TLR's relationship with history entrenches into the text specific themes, contrasted against the masked man and discouraging re-authoring. As a legendary figure in a legendary past, Danny Fingerroth identifies the Ranger as a Superhero, arguing his 'origin echoes that of many of the masked adventurers', which contains the 'ingredients that would be added to the cultural stew from which the Superhero would emerge' (2006: 42). While not necessarily delving into the same historicity as Fingerroth, Raymond William Stedman shares the view of the Ranger's place as a Superhero. He argues that many of the items associated with the masked man are Superhero tropes such as a 'mercy gun' (shooting a weapon from an opponent's hands), 'masks', 'unbeatable methods of transportation' (Silver), 'sidekicks' (Tonto), 'unique calling cards' (silver bullets) and 'solid financial undergirding' (the silver mine) (Stedman 1977: 175). Stedman's association further implies that in this capacity the masked man's own tools and abilities can be compared, for instance, to Spider-Man's webs or Batman's Batmobile.

As a Superhero, we also note the masked man breaks with the western's classic formula. Within his analysis of the classic western, Will Wright argues that the western

projects specific images of a hero – a figure that is both is ‘a stranger’ (1975: 41) and marked as ‘special and different’ (1975: 42). As a result ‘society does not completely accept the hero’ (Wright 1975: 44), until having proven themselves by defeating the antagonist. Wright argues that this confrontation and the antagonist’s subsequent defeat is a key moment in the classic western formula (Wright 1975: 46); the emblemized shootout on a dusty street. Though the Ranger’s abilities and equipment marks him as both separate and special, he never accomplishes the antagonist’s defeat alone. Rather, as Robert Jewett and Shelton Lawrence note, the Ranger always involves the local sheriff or other authority into his actions (2003: 152). As such the masked man behaves much like Superman, Captain America and other agents of society rather than displaying the frontiersman’s rugged individualism (Jewett and Lawrence 2003: 31).

The masked man’s conduct violates one tenet of the western, acting as a mediatory figure between the narrative’s problems and authority figures and an arbitrator for the history and ideology of the Western. For example, in the 1949 television episode, ‘The Renegades’ (Seitz, 1949) the Ranger engages with the Reservation system. Within this episode a corrupt government agents steal supplies intended for Reservation-bound Native Americans, causing tensions as the latter party begin taking matters into their own hands. The Ranger does not intervene in this directly, but instead gathers evidence and contacts a local army garrison which rides in, making arrests and installing honest officials. Still, by featuring the Reservation system – slowly reduced allotments of land where indigenous peoples were situated in the face of an ‘encroaching agricultural frontier’ (Meyer 2001: 373–74) – ‘The Renegades’ touches on the highly controversial history of US colonial expansion. The colonization of Native America and expansion of the agricultural frontier act as twin symbols of the Old West and, when combined, create a narrative of ‘primitive’ and ‘direct combat with nature’ (White 1994: 47). Within this framework, Tonto is a Native American in partnership with the Ranger represents nature’s conquest. Tonto’s role as a Native American in this regard can be framed as proscribing ‘the proper roles of Indians and whites to children of both groups’ (Churchill 1998: 80). Thus, in episodes such as ‘The Renegades’, both the Ranger’s action and Tonto’s silent approval of them presents a grossly sanitized history of the settler/indigenous encounter. Likewise, a 1949 radio episode, ‘John Wesley Harden’, revolves around the former’s criminal career, concluding in his violent death. In characteristic fashion for TLR the episode’s title character is based on the historical John Wesley Hardin (1853–1895), who committed his first murder at the age of 15 and spent most of his life drifting. While Hardin reformed, pardoned in 1894 and practicing as a lawyer, he was killed

in an argument with police a year later (Newark 1984: 117). The masked man features prominently only in the middle of the narrative, with the episode focusing on Hardin. Meeting Hardin early in his career, the Ranger attempts to warn him away from a life of violence, but also notes Hardin is 'a born killer' with eyes hard as 'outlaws three times his age' (WXYZ Detroit 2006). In this act, the Ranger frames Hardin's violent life and death as inevitable.

The masked man's role as history's arbitrator sees this element not only entrenched in TLR, but also a key to the masked man's characterization. In this sense we suggest that there is rigidity to TLR's construction, seeing the character lack the 'fluidity of form' (2007: 114) O'Rourke and Rodrigues argue is necessary to lend a character to re-authoring. Other popular characters are read 'vaguely, naïvely, mythically' (Brooker 2005: 40), becoming associated with shifting circumstances and notions. In contrast, TLR is understood as tied specifically to the nineteenth century western US. Ideas of the western, the Frontier, 'Manifest Destiny' or other ideological expressions may vary over time, yet these associations as associations in and of themselves remain endemic to TLR, rendering the masked man less of a distinct character than a distinct combination of genre elements. It is this characteristic that renders TLR a difficult candidate for re-authoring.

HI-YO SILVER, AWAY

An arbitrator figure, the masked man acts as a guide to the interpretation and understanding for the audience's experience of history as presented within TLR. In this fashion, I suggest that TLR is a text constructed in a very particular manner. While narratives of the masked man may draw upon the Superhero genre, the character is fundamentally tied to the symbolic associations of the West, drawing on association with a highly specific notion of history and heritage. This is seen throughout TLR's general theme of an honest but isolated civilization under threat from crime and frontier violence, drawing upon US ideology and popular memory. Specifically, it comes in the form of the masked man's construction as a Texas Ranger, associating the character with the continuing legend of westward expansion rather than drawing on a more general archetype such as student or man-about-town. Thus, while other long-lasting Superhero media franchises have seen their characters adapted to divergent genres and narratives, TLR has remained squarely within the realms of the western.

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