“This ain’t no ancient culture here, mister”:
Cultural interaction in Jim Jarmusch’s *Ghost Dog*
ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the Jim Jarmusch film *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* from the perspective of cultural interaction and what it says about race relations with its presentation of a stylized version of a culturally pluralist America. Sociological theories and formal analysis were applied to examine the film’s depiction of the melting pot in American society, otherness of different ethnic groups and preservation of cultural traditions. The study suggests that though the melting pot may face problems even to the point of violence, the coexistence of different cultures within a society is an attainable goal.

Keywords: melting pot, the other, cultural pluralism, intertextuality
TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION
2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND
   2.1. MELTING POT
   2.2. OTHERNESS
   2.3. INTERTEXTUALITY
3. ANALYSIS
   3.1 THE CHARACTERS AND THEIR WORLD
   3.2 RACE RELATIONS
   3.3 RELATIONSHIPS TO OTHER TEXTS
   3.4 CODES AND PHILOSOPHIES
   3.5 LITERATURE’S IMPORTANCE
   3.6 THE NEW GENERATION
4. CONCLUSION
5. WORKS CITED
1. INTRODUCTION

*Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999) is a film by writer-director Jim Jarmusch. As of this writing, he has made 11 feature-length fiction films of which *Ghost Dog* is the seventh. Juan Antonio Suarez characterizes Jarmusch as one of the most influential American filmmakers of the last few decades whose brand of independent cinema first rose to prominence in the 1980s when the action-packed blockbusters were already the dominant form of cinema coming out of the United States (Suarez). Suarez encapsulates his contrasting style of filmmaking by noting “Jarmusch followed on the steps of the art cinema of 1960s and 1970s and made formally spare, slow-moving films concerned with intimacy, the exploration of character, and the reformulation of the classical narrative molds […] his films are largely about displacement, cross-cultural communication, and exile, he has often described himself as an estranged American, and he has come to rely increasingly on European and Japanese funding” (Suarez). Due to its crime genre trappings, *Ghost Dog* has more action than most Jarmusch films but stylistically and thematically it continues in a similar trajectory, taking particularly the themes of displacement and cross-cultural communication to scrutiny by placing characters of varying cultural backgrounds in contact with each other within a large American city.

*Ghost Dog* tells the story of a reclusive African American man Ghost Dog living his life very ascetically according to the bushido code, the Way of the Samurai, that he has learned from an old collection of writings on the samurai lifestyle called *Hagakure*. He lives on an apartment building rooftop with his pigeons and his best, and seemingly only, friend is a Haitian ice cream vendor called Raymond who only speaks French and neither of them understands the language the other one talks. Ghost Dog uses his samurai discipline and skills by working as a hitman for the Italian American mafia and he regards his contact Louie as his master. Ghost Dog has devoted his life to serving Louie since he fortuitously saved Ghost Dog from a violent street brawl.

Ghost Dog is ordered by Louie to kill Handsome Frank, one of their own mob members, because he has been sleeping with Louise, the daughter of the mob boss Ray Vargo. The hit succeeds otherwise but Louise happens to be present and sees Ghost Dog on the scene. This makes Vargo decide that Ghost Dog in turn has to be killed. After the mob manages to hunt down Ghost Dog’s rooftop home and kill almost all of his birds, Ghost Dog retaliates by going on a rampage to kill all of them. At the same time, he still stays loyal to his master Louie.

*Ghost Dog* is a postmodern film with a plethora of intertextual references throughout. The story is not a conventional one and aesthetically it is not a film one can easily attribute belonging within the
conventions of a particular genre. It blends together elements from samurai epics, gangster films and westerns while maintaining Jarmusch’s own brand of low-key aesthetics and deadpan humor. The film has a hip hop soundtrack composed by RZA, the founder member of Wu-Tang Clan, a group that became popular in the early 1990s for mixing martial-arts film samples and Eastern philosophies with an East Coast hardcore hip hop aesthetic.

*Ghost Dog* was generally well regarded at the time of its release though it did not earn quite the rave reviews that some critics afforded Jarmusch’s previous film, *Dead Man*. These two films are often written about as sister films, as A.O. Scott notes that *Ghost Dog* attempts the same postmodern, deconstructionist approach to samurai epics and gangster films as *Dead Man* did to westerns. Scott further states that *Dead Man* used the western genre to study genocidal dispossession of the Indians in the 19th century and similarly *Ghost Dog* uses its genre mashup to study race relations in contemporary America though he felt that the film suffers from an indecision about its themes (Scott). Jonathan Rosenbaum, who went on to write a book about *Dead Man* and claimed it as one of the most important films of the 1990s, said that “Ghost Dog may be a failure, if only because most of its characters are never developed far enough beyond their mythic profiles to live independently of them” (Rosenbaum). However, Suarez states that the film is about “composite identity, quoting as a way of living, and building text out of preexisting fragments”. (Suarez) *Ghost Dog* is a deeply intertextual film and its intertextuality is one of the key concepts for interpreting the film’s themes. Suarez also expresses dissatisfaction with the fact that scholastic works regarding Jarmusch’s films often tend to be more descriptive than analytical and fail to place his oeuvre in a larger, cultural context (Suarez). In my view, *Ghost Dog* is one of Jarmusch’s richest films thematically and deserves to be analyzed for its eclectic content and subtext.
2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

My theoretical approach will be guided mainly by three different fields of theory. First, I will introduce the melting pot theory and how the theory has evolved from its inception to denote slightly different concepts. I will interpret how the film exemplifies the melting pot in its stylized narrative. Secondly, I will introduce the sociological concepts of the Other and otherness. These concepts are highly malleable and have been applied to studies in a wide range of fields. I will examine how these concepts apply to the noteworthy characters in *Ghost Dog*. Thirdly, I will introduce the concept of intertextuality and a few different levels of it to describe how it can be employed in texts. I will also analyze some parts of *Ghost Dog* from a film theory perspective but I chose not to devote a chapter for it in this theory section. In my view, most of the significant talking points can be traced back to the film’s screenplay and are not inherently reliant on the film’s aesthetic presentation. However, I will introduce some relevant concepts from film theory in the analysis section when necessary, instead of compiling them in this section into a few fragmentary paragraphs.

2.1 MELTING POT

Melting pot is a theory that was invented to describe cultural integration and interaction in postcolonial societies, especially that of the United States. David Michael Smith points out that it is crucial to the national identity of the United States that it has always been a nation of immigrants. The diversity of backgrounds has not stopped the US in forging a sense of unity and attempting to not let that diversity create social, economic or political division. However, the melting pot theory suggests that contradictory realities exist within America and the embracing of this fact is essential in creating national cohesion. In essence, the melting pot theory in relation to America has become a national myth in which to reconcile both the diversity and the unity into a cohesive narrative that excludes the occasionally harsh reality of cultural division (Smith 387-402).

Smith proclaims that the phrase itself was popularized through a play called *The Melting Pot*, written by Israel Zangwill in 1908 in which people shed parts of their identities as ethnics of a different land and contribute aspects of their experiences to become a new kind of person, an American (Smith). J. Hector St John de Crèvecoeur argues that by mere virtue of living in close proximity to each other,
these different individuals assimilate some cultural middle ground and develop a new identity and essentially a new race of men based on their shared experiences (Crèvecoeur).

By the first half of the twentieth century, the melting pot narrative had started to gain criticism. Smith sums up the views of Horace Kallen and Randolph Bourne by saying that melting pot was thought to be a way of expressing Anglo-conformity or “Americanization”, a derogative term that denotes the loss of one’s own heritage; the quantity of ethno-cultural diversity in America was to them unprecedented and a defining factor of the national identity instead of any type of so-called homogenous American (Smith). Kallen argues that the idea of a melting pot suggests different nationalities melting into a mould betrays America’s democratic ideals and he prefers the idea of “cultural pluralism” that does not diminish ethnicity, to which one’s membership is always involuntary and unalterable (Kallen). Bourne continues this thinking to the conclusion that the melting pot does indeed result in a unique American nationality whereas Kallen does not. However, they both concur on the value of cultural pluralism and Bourne goes further to promote “group distinctiveness and identification – manifested in dual citizenship – with their foreign countries of origin. America then becomes not a nationality, but “transnationality wherein the new American nation overlays its intact, constituent parts” (Smith 387-402)

Will Herberg maintains that “Our cultural assimilation has proceeded in essentially the same way as has our linguistic development – a few foreign words here and there, a few modifications of form, but still thoroughly and unquestionably English. The “Anglo-Saxon” type remains the American ideal to which all other elements are transmuted in order to become American” (Herberg) Milton Gordon concurs with the concept of a transmuting pot and points out that “old” immigrants from Europe had an easier time adjusting to the Anglo-dominated social atmosphere whereas racial minorities are discriminated and blocked from meaningful assimilation into the core institutions and social groups; the melting pot myth celebrates the integration of ethnic minorities but diminishes the reality of racial minorities not being able to fully assimilate into the culture (Gordon).

Even if ignoring the question of how well cultural assimilation is able to be actually established, it is still an undeniable reality that ethnicity is central to American life. Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan argued that one cannot fully explain the political, economic and social life in America without referencing the different ethnic groups. They state that a direction towards an Anglo-Saxon-shaded cohesion is not likely since ethnic differentiation has always been a part of American life (Glazer and Moynihan). Therefore, the melting pot has only ever existed essentially as a myth. Eric Kaufmann suggests that after the World War II, the Anglo-Saxon national identity has shifted more towards a liberal, cosmopolitan ideal with a limited requirement for “melting” (Kaufmann).
In the end, the reason for the prevalence of the melting pot myth is that there is not a clear consensus about the term’s meaning. As Smith details, the term has been employed by groups such as immigration restrictionists, nativists, multiculturalists, and pro-immigration advocates to further their points of view (Smith). Therefore, even given its shortcomings, it is a useful vehicle through which to attempt understand and examine the American ethnic experience.

2.2 OTHERNESS

Otherness is a highly malleable term used in a wide variety of fashions. Jean-François Staszak encapsulates that essentially anything that does not belong to the dominant in-group is therefore the Other. The difference of the groups by themselves is a matter of fact but otherness as a concept is a matter of discourse and can be used as a possible motive for discrimination. The norm, in the western world, has generally been perceived as being the white male and early attempts in exploring heterogeneity of societies went as far as to seeking to demonstrate the superiority of Western civilization, while attempting to maintain a more or less objective front on the issue (Staszak). Obviously, attempting to demonstrate the superiority of a race is highly problematic in the modern world yet arguably defining otherness is the basis for many relations, from personal relationships to relations between world powers.

Creating the Other originates from a hierarchical discourse that classifies people into two groups: them and us. Staszak describes that the out-group is only coherent in its opposition to the in-group. The in-group has a distinct identity and it can construct one or more Others with a stigmatizing and simplified lack of identity. Others are not able to prescribe their own norms due to being subject to the categories and practices of the in-group (Staszak). Frantz Fanon submits that the Other only exists relative to the Self and vice versa but in an asymmetric power relation. Therefore, Black Man is the other of the White Man but opposite is not true (Fanon).

All societies create the Self and the Other with their own practices but Staszak singles out Western society as being noteworthy for being the most effective in creating such discourse. First, since Western thought exists largely in binary dichotomies that oppose a positively connoted term and a negatively connoted term, such though system applies directly to creating the Self and the Other. Examples of these kinds of differentiations would be God/Satan, male/female, believer/nonbeliever, heterosexual/homosexual, etc. Secondly, the West has been exporting its values through colonization
and in doing so, Western categories of identity and otherness have reached far beyond the boundaries of the West itself (Staszak).

Staszak chronicles the history of otherness stating that as civilizations first progressed, the criterion for hierarchies moved forward to set the most primitive people against the most civilized. The most recent template for creating otherness has been the separation of world into continents and humanity into races. On a smaller scale, minorities have often been relegated to their own “designated” parts of neighborhoods, like ghettos, where the location then becomes a self-justifying factor for stigmatization when the out-group in the area will come to derive part of their identity from their territory (Staszak). Interestingly, the first steps of otherness, being more civilized meant being the in-group. It is notable that pursuing to be civilized is a voluntary endeavor and in theory almost everyone can attempt it. Nowadays, otherness is born mostly out of involuntary characteristics like one’s race or ethnicity.

2.3 INTERTEXTUALITY

Charles Bazerman defines succinctly that intertextuality is “the relation each text has to texts surrounding it” (Bazerman). There are different levels of intertextuality of which I will introduce the ones that I have found relevant for analyzing Ghost Dog. Regarding the different ways prior texts can be used, Bazerman presents that the text may prior texts can be used as authoritative or supportive statements to be taken at face value or they can be used as contrast to the text (Bazerman). Often the effect of the intertextual reference relies on our knowledge of that prior text and its meanings, the mere mention of the name of another text can work as a shorthand to introduce a wide range of ideas to our minds. Bazerman notes that intertextuality often exists in less explicit fashion, when “the text may rely on beliefs, issues, ideas, statements generally circulated and likely familiar to readers” (Bazerman). This kind of intertextuality can exist almost regardless of the text’s own intentions, meaning that our judgment will be influenced by other texts and their previously established conventions when we are introduced to a new text. The author’s conscious intention is therefore ultimately irrelevant as the text exists in relation to all other texts in the culture and the interpretation provides the text its meaning.

If we are not fully familiar with the prior text, employing intertextual references means that the author of the new text has power over the prior text’s meaning. As Bazerman reminds, even when using
direct quotation, the second author “has control over exactly which words will be quoted, the points at which the quote will be snipped, and the context it will be used in” (Bazerman). Another form is indirect quotation where the source may be specified but the second author puts it into their own words, Bazerman describing that it “allows the meanings to be more thoroughly infused with the second writer’s purpose” (Bazerman). In addition to these, the mere mentioning of another text is an oft-used way of intertextual referencing. The mention of another text may result in various interpretations of that text’s relation to the second text when the whole text as opposed to choice details are specified for intent.
3. ANALYSIS

In this section, I will analyze the film from the perspective of the aforementioned theories. The analysis is not divided into chapters according to the separate theories but it is more informed by the findings from the film. I will examine the film from the perspective of some of the most important themes and the theoretical perspectives will factor into all of the chapters.

3.1 THE CHARACTERS AND THEIR WORLD

Every prominent character in *Ghost Dog* represents a certain minority of America and their surroundings also present the varied heritage of current American culture. Ghost Dog and the young girl Pearline that he befriends, are both African American. The man Ghost Dog calls his best friend, Raymond, is a dark-skinned Haitian who only speaks French and most of the other people he comes to contact with are the Italian American mobsters who have their headquarters in the back of a Chinese restaurant.

Ghost Dog is the main character and his presence affects most of the film but Jarmusch avoids shooting him in a noticeably different fashion when he shares the screen with other characters. Typically for Jarmusch, his compositions often stay far back enough to allow room for several characters and many interactions unfold in wide shots. James Monaco declares that usually in film compositions “the closer the subject is the more important it seems” (Monaco). The measured style of Jarmusch keeps the characters on the same plane and they also exist as parts of their environment, even on an aesthetic level.

In a way, the film’s depiction of the melting pot is more in line with the more liberal cosmopolitan ideal of the society where little melting occurs and different ethnicities do not alter in order to fit in. However, As far as integration into society is concerned, the main characters exist on the fringes and get by more or less while unquestionably remaining as outsiders. We experience America through the eyes of these minorities and we have to judge their stature in society without the “dominant” figure of America present. In that regard, the film’s view of America could be argued to be closer to multiculturalism than cultural pluralism. The difference is that multiculturalist society lacks a dominant culture and the on-screen absence of that would uphold that view (Fiore).
Arguably, Jarmusch has populated the film very scarcely in keeping with his usual aesthetic. David Bax and Tyler Smith note that it is common for Jarmusch to focus on characters from varying backgrounds coming into contact with each other and his tight focus removes extraneous people from the surroundings to the point that almost every person we meet is either a friend or an enemy (Bax and Smith). We rarely see any people on the screen apart from the prominent characters who live on the outskirts. Moreover, crime films typically depict outsider characters, Others, and Jarmusch merely takes that convention and diversifies these different groups of Others to comment on cultural interaction. Apart from the Italians, there is little Anglo-Saxon-shaded cohesion visible in the film’s depiction of American society. The fact that most of the Italians are dead by the end of the film suggests that Anglo-Saxons will become less and less prominent while a variety of different ethnicities will convey the complexion of the melting pot.

If one pictures an American crime film with an African American gangster as the main protagonist, Ghost Dog is not the one kind of character one thinks of. It is never explained why Ghost Dog follows the bushido code of the samurais and it appears as alien a concept to the other characters as it does to the viewer. In a flashback, we see Louie killing, in a random encounter, a man who was beating up Ghost Dog, and we learn that it is the event that led to Ghost Dog seeing Louie as his master and working for him. Yet we do not know if Ghost Dog was already immersed in the samurai lifestyle by then or if that event somehow altered his life philosophy towards it. Perhaps precisely because he possesses such an eclectic collection of traits, viewers are purposefully left wondering of his origins. Nevertheless, he has lived according to the Way of the Samurai for several years and the lifestyle only becomes impossible when it clashes with the “code” of the Italian Americans and neither are willing to move away from their respective codes. Ghost Dog follows the teachings of the Hagakure very precisely and he lives very ascetically but he has also adjusted to the modern world as much as is needed. He uses silenced handguns, drives cars and he even uses a couple of unspecified electric devices that he is seen soldering and possibly has even made himself. Despite Ghost Dog being more skillful and learned than his white master and the other Italian Americans, he is still the Other because of his race, lack of wealth and transgression from societal norms.

In addition to an African American, Ghost Dog represents also a smaller subculture that has originated with African Americans: hip hop culture. He listens to hip hop music at several points in the movie and whenever he encounters people rapping in the park or people dressed in hip hop attire, they always respectfully salute Ghost Dog and address him by his name. These encounters act in contrast to the fact that the character remains almost invisible to everybody else and even the mafia that he works for has barely ever seen him. This points out that even a character as unusual as Ghost Dog is still a
recognizable and respectable part of his minority, even if the dominant white characters are oblivious to his presence.

Furthermore, it can be assumed that his affiliation to hip hop culture is a byproduct of his location in a slightly poor, predominantly black, part of a large city. The city is never specified in the film itself but filming details reveal parts of the film have been shot in New York which is the exact birthplace of hip hop. Therefore, the territory has in part influenced his identity. As geography is considered the most effective way of creating otherness, living in a poor neighborhood creates segregation and stigmatization on a smaller scale that is a defining part of his American identity.

The territory of Ghost Dog is shared by Pearline who lives in the same neighborhood as him and who is also part of the African American minority. They meet by happenstance in the park and befriend each other quickly through their mutual affection for literature. Presumably, the ice cream vendor Raymond lives in that part of town as well. Pearline questions his friendship to Raymond as they do not understand each other’s language at all. However, in almost all of their scenes they share a mutual understanding that transcends language barriers. For instance, Raymond says “I guess you got some business to take care of, because the sun's gonna be coming down” to which Ghost Dog responds “I gotta go. I've got some business to take care of. The sun's gonna be coming down”. Even if they do not understand the specific language, their relationship is an explicit example that different cultures can coexist in the melting pot and have an understanding for each other.

The Italian Americans are at a unique intersection in the film as they represent both the Self and the Other. To the minority characters they represent the norm of the white man. They are not noticeably different ethnically from the Anglo-Saxon norm and they are able to transmute to the American society. They also resemble the traditional American because of their Christian faith. Although, their religion seems dictated more by tradition than commitment. In fact, it is only detectible by the crosses they have on their walls and the fact that Louie makes a cross sign after killing Ghost Dog. Nevertheless, even if they resemble the white man in this manner as well, their assimilation to American society is not entirely successful due to their transgressive lifestyle and the stigmatization it issues them with.

In a larger context, Italian Americans are still Others. John Maggio illustrates that although America has been largely made up of European immigrants, Italians were not among the first waves of immigration and for a long time they have faced out of proportion prejudices about their supposed links to the Mafia (Maggio). Due to the fact that some Italians also have a slightly darker complexion, they are therefore not completely “equal” to the white European in terms of racial discourse. The
mobsters’ criminal lifestyle here is the one unquestionable factor that renders them transgressive from societal norms and makes them Others in the eyes of the society. However, in the film’s context they are the oppressive and racist white men of America.

3.2 RACE RELATIONS

The relationship between ethnicities is made complicated as Ghost Dog willingly treats Louie as his superior, as his master. When his pigeons are killed, Ghost Dog is quick to hunt down and kill all of the mobsters with no apparent hesitation or compassion, yet he stays loyal to Louie, the one man inside the mafia he has a personal relationship with. Intrinsically, a black man’s willing acceptance to a submissive role for a white master would be a bold proposition for American race relations. However, it is telling that the Italian Americans are the ones who speak derogatorily about other races and see themselves as the dominant in-group as opposed to them. Ghost Dog never communicates anything that would denote differentiation by races or ethnicities. His submission is strictly because of his belief in the bushido code.

In the scene where Vargo decides on the fact that Ghost Dog has to die, the mobsters reference the fact that Ghost Dog as a name is similar sounding to the black gangster or rapper names, like Method Man (a member of Wu-Tang Clan) or Ice-T. One of the more prominent members of the mob, Sonny, mentions his like for Public Enemy and raps a few lines from his favorite song. In a later scene, he is seen in his house dancing in a velvet robe and rapping along to the same song. Both of these scenes are comical in tone and even this seemingly positive attitude towards hip hop is seen as superficial and ignorant of the subject matter and the culture it has originated from. Tellingly, the song he raps along to is Cold Lampin’ with Flavor, a relatively light song from the group’s highly acclaimed It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back, an album that Graig Jenkins lauded for changing the landscape of rap music with its didactic social consciousness coming from a radical black perspective. (Jenkins)

The white men are mostly shown to be ignorant towards African American but a couple of scenes show their animosity towards the Native Americans as well. In the aforementioned scene, the mobsters also compare the black gangster names to Native American names such as Black Elk or Crazy Horse and one character bluntly remarks “Indians, niggers, same thing!” The mobsters lump two ethnic groups into one and strip them of their distinctive identities. Yet they ignore their own
similarities to said groups when in the same scene they mention by name many of their own members Sammy the Snake and Joe Rags, remaining oblivious to the fact that their own habit of alternate names within their ranks is not all that different.

When the mobsters try to track down Ghost Dog, two of their henchmen stumble upon a man who also lives on a rooftop with multiple birds, portraying a similar lifestyle and accordance with animals as Ghost Dog. When asked, he tells the men he is a Cauyga Native American. The henchmen are almost positive he is not the man they are looking for, yet one of them still shoots one of his birds in frustration. The Cayuga responds by saying “Stupid fucking white man” which almost provokes the henchman to kill him as well. The former scene presented the dominant in-group judging two ethnic groups as one but this scene highlights their connection in a positive fashion. Both Ghost Dog and the Cayuga man are more attuned to nature via animals. Ghost Dog’s preservation of his ancient culture and attacking towards the white oppressors is also an advocacy to the ancient culture of the Native Americans.

In one scene Raymond pulls out a picture book and quotes a passage about bears to Pearline, explaining their behavior and comparing his friend Ghost Dog to bears. Later on in a key scene, Ghost Dog runs into two white hunters in the countryside standing beside a killed black bear.

**GHOST DOG**
You know, it’s funny because I didn’t even know it was bear hunting season.

**HUNTER**
What are you a HFSJ, some kind of fed or something?

**GHOST DOG**
No, I’m just, you know, asking. You know, just asking

**HUNTER**
Well I’ll tell you. You see there aren’t too many of these big black fuckers around here. So when you get a clear shot at it, you sure as hell take it.

**GHOST DOG**
Huh. That’s why you shoot them, cause there not that many left?

**HUNTER**
I don’t think I understand your question.
HUNTER #2
(pointing his rifle at Ghost Dog) You know, there aren’t too many colored people ‘round here neither. Think you ought to get back in your fancy car and go back to your own business.

GHOST DOG
Yeah, maybe you’re right.

Ghost Dog turns around and shoots both of them. Hunter #2 dies immediately. Ghost Dog walks over to Hunter.

GHOST DOG
You know, ancient cultures, bears were considered equal with men.

HUNTER
This ain’t no ancient culture here, mister.

GHOST DOG
Sometimes it is. (he shoots Hunter dead)

This scene encapsulates in succinct form both the racial tensions and the value of preserving old traditions. It is a random encounter that enforces the themes of the film by expanding the scope and revealing that similar tensions are in power in the world outside from Ghost Dog’s immediate circle of influence as well. The white hunters are quickly provoked to make bigoted remarks and another lesser lifeform or race of man is something for them to exploit to their own means. Ghost Dog is likened to the bear as the samurai is due to disappear as surely as black bears if they face such violent objection from others. He sees the killing of the bear as an attack towards him as he represents one form of ancient culture where animals coexisted and bears were equal to him.

3.3 RELATIONSHIPS TO OTHER TEXTS

Some criticisms of the film share the notion that Ghost Dog is not a believable character. Jonathan Rosenbaum maintained that “The movie’s fascination with Ghost Dog never gives the character enough of a back story to make us believe in him as something more than a cultural premise” (Rosenbaum ). Instead of a real life character, Ghost Dog has to be analyzed as a vehicle for Jarmusch’s ideas and a mixture of varying cultural elements, almost a walking set of intertextual references. If Ghost Dog represents one thing as a character, it is an idea of a person absorbing their
surroundings and influences to be parts of their identity. Somehow Ghost Dog has acquired a copy of *Hagakure* that he has accepted as his entire life philosophy. The frequent references to *Hagakure* are the most explicit instances of intertextuality as direct quotes from it are presented in the film as text cards and Ghost Dog recites them at the same time in voice over.

The film employs a frequent juxtaposition of cutting from a scene of Ghost Dog’s actions to a scene of children’s cartoon featuring similar actions. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson characterize these types of edits as graphic matches when a filmmaker links shots together with a noticeable graphic similarity (Bordwell and Thompson). The graphic matches in *Ghost Dog* are unique in the sense that the actions match each other closely while obviously the real-life depiction stands in abrupt contrast to the animated cartoon. The similar elements in the seemingly ever-present cartoons and Ghost Dog’s actions leads the viewer to assume that he has assumed these elements onto his persona from an exposure to these cartoons at a young age. Just as Ghost Dog has incorporated elements from disparate sources to form his identity, this type of juxtaposition serves in its own way to highlight Jarmusch’s own influences, as Suarez describes that “Jarmusch was one of the many young artists with avant-garde credentials who sought to blur the boundaries between experimental and mass art” (Suarez). Suarez places Jarmusch’s style in a postmodern framework that gained prominence in the late 20th century, “a time of intense cultural revisionism, where hegemonic stories and worldviews were called into question, when minority perspectives erupted into public debate, and when the boundaries between high art and low culture turned progressively blurry, to the point of nearly complete disappearance” (Suarez).

One of these juxtapositions between cartoons and Ghost Dog shows first a cartoon character shooting rounds of ammunition into a tap and a shower of gunfire coming out the other end which is directly followed by a scene of Ghost Dog in a sewer killing a mobster by shooting upwards through the bathroom drain pipe. This adds another level of intertextuality as Constantine Verevis notes it referencing a similar scene in Seijun Suzuki’s Japanese gangster film Branded to Kill. Jean-Pierre Melville’s Le Samourai is another classic crime film which influence is notable due to Jarmusch making repeated references to it with similar story elements (Verevis). The fact that Ghost Dog is not strictly speaking a believable character is ultimately secondary because the intertextual nature is the foremost feature through which he should be analyzed.

The depiction of Italian American in the film also creates meanings through intertextuality due to the fact that these are not the types of Italian gangsters that are usually depicted in films. Their reckless and violent behavior may be in line with previous tragic antihero depictions in genre classics such as *Godfather* or *Goodfellas* but otherwise their presentation is responsible for much of the film’s comic
relief. Instead of the intimidating figures usually seen in gangster films, we see people whose mere standing around in a street provokes a young boy to throw stuff at them from an open window. Jarmusch assumes the viewer to be familiar with the classic gangster depictions and the intertextual contrast to his characters reveals the deterioration of a lifestyle that used to have a certain dangerous glamour to it in the past. In addition to their less respectful demeanor, their abasement can be seen in the fact that all of their private homes have ‘for sale’ signs on the front lawn and they owe three months’ rent for their small meeting place in the back of Chinese restaurant.

Jarmusch’s filmmaking style often relies on long uninterrupted takes and a static camera. Smith and Bax characterize many of his films having fades to black between scenes that make his films feel like a collection of vignettes more than a traditional plot-driven story (Smith and Bax). In Ghost Dog, Jarmusch uses these traditional dissolves in between many scenes and also dissolves that fade to a black screen with only a quote from Hagakure on the black backdrop and Ghost Dog reciting the text in voiceover. In addition, many scenes featuring Ghost Dog employ dissolves within the scene that serve to blend him to the surroundings or make his movements feel more ghost-like. None of the other characters are presented in this fashion. Although many of the characters will wind up dead, Ghost Dog’s ghost-like presence haunts the whole film with an elegiac tone for his soon-coming demise. The first Hagakure quotation seen in the film even ends with “And every day without fail one should consider himself as dead. This is the substance of the Way of the Samurai” (Tsunetomo 17).

The hip hop soundtrack composed by RZA is important in creating an urban yet moody, dream-like atmosphere for the film. Even if RZA does not mix martial arts film quotes into the soundtrack songs as he often does in his work for the Wu-Tang Clan, the mere fact of Jarmusch picking RZA to soundtrack his film is telling, especially since it was RZA’s first foray into composing soundtracks. Jonathan Rosenbaum notes of the film’s approach to sampling elements that “The overall process of mixing and matching evokes Jarmusch’s background as a musician and is reflected in RZA’s effective score” (Rosenbaum). Not only do they both mix and match genres together but Jarmusch has expressed his admiration for the fact that it goes deeper than that for RZA whose music is also deeply influenced by Eastern philosophy (Hertzberg 198). Moreover, the film also marks RZA’s acting debut as Samurai in Camouflage as he and Ghost Dog meet briefly in the street, stop to salute each other with a few words and continue on their ways. RZA acting the role of the only other samurai in the film and the two of them respectfully acknowledging each other presents itself as Jarmusch paying homage to a kindred spirit.
The hip hop soundtrack is just one part of that genre’s mentality seeping its way into the entire film. Suarez notes about the similarities of hip hop in general and Jarmusch’s films that “They are experimental attempts to combine disparate materials in order to stage an unprecedented dialogue among them […] Jarmusch’s late films further share with this musical style the taste for direct quotation and the combination of pre-existing materials. Originality in hip-hop music resides less in inventing than in creatively combining the available archive; it is an effect of mixing (juxtaposing different components) and scratching (“bending,” “modifying, inflecting by means of subtle manipulation) what lies at hand” (Suarez). In other words, Jarmusch shares with hip hop an intertextual dialogue of sampling foreign elements and creating unexpected meanings.

*Ghost Dog* never employs the score in its action set pieces. This is a clear instance of Jarmusch again going against the conventions of action films as Bordwell and Thompson point out that viewers have grown to expect tense music to accompany action scenes (Bordwell and Thompson). Instead, the hip hop score is employed in between all the action scenes to create the urban but dream-like mood. It is notable that the music Ghost Dog chooses to listen to is not that different from the nondiegetic score, making the presentation of the world consistent with Ghost Dog’s viewpoint into it.

### 3.4 CODES AND PHILOSOPHIES

In their few face-to-face conversations Ghost Dog does not show much respect towards Louie. He sneaks up on Louie and other mobsters twice after the hit has been ordered on him. In both situations, he kills all the other ones and wounds Louie by shooting him in the shoulder. In their first meeting, Ghost Dog shoots Louie after he half-heartedly begs to be shot because he is in such a difficult situation. The second time he shoots Louie with no warning or consultation beforehand. In both scenes, after shooting he says that he means no disrespect. Ghost Dog is loyal almost out of necessity and due to circumstances. His respect for Louie is not born of ethnicity or race intrinsically but out of his loyalty to the retainer-master-relationship rules and his devotion to his personal interpretation of *Hagakure* makes him act brashly even towards his master. In their last confrontation, Ghost Dog taunts Louie for staging such a dramatic final shootout scene for them in the middle of a city street, even stating it’s reminiscent of a western shootout from *High Noon*. Because the story trajectory of Ghost Dog staying loyal to his master makes it impossible for him to ever outlive Louie, his only option is stay as the dominated party in the relationship and die as an Other. Louie also shows a similar a wrong-headed dedication to his code as he continues the task of his colleagues even as he
mournfully says to Ghost Dog that everything is changing around them and nothing makes sense anymore. He too feels duty-bound to go on living with his code despite the lengths he has to go to.

One of the quotations from *Hagakure* that appear in the film states that “It is bad when one thing becomes two. One should not look for anything else in the Way of the Samurai. It is the same for anything else that is called a Way. If one understands things in this manner, he should be able to hear about all Ways and be more and more in accord with his own” (Tsunetomo 50). This philosophy is challenged since the ones who are the most in accord with their own Ways, are doomed precisely because of it. Jarmusch champions cultural traditions to a point but not only does he illustrate the faults in their philosophies by staging their demise, he also shows his affinity for reciprocity in a formal sense, by mixing together very culture-specific film genres.

Roger Ebert remarks that “Despite the years he's spent studying The Way of the Samurai, he doesn't even reflect that since his master doesn't subscribe to it, their relationship is meaningless”. (Ebert) When Louie makes his halfhearted request to be shot, Ghost Dog answers by saying he cannot do so because he is Louie’s retainer, something Louie expresses not even understanding the meaning of. Ebert resumes to say that a key to understanding the film is to identify that Ghost Dog is insane, “In a quiet, sweet way, he is totally unhinged and has lost all touch with reality. His profound sadness, which permeates the touching Whitaker performance, comes from his alienation from human society, his loneliness, his attempt to justify inhuman behavior (murder) with a belief system (the samurai code) that has no connection with his life or his world” (Ebert). These observations serve to express that there is a limit to which lengths certain belief systems are able to be integrated into modern society. Ghost Dog has not only applied an old belief system to his life that does not fit into a modern environment but it is also imported from a foreign culture. The fact that no one else subscribes to the code, apart from Samurai in Camouflage apparently, means that his way of living is completely decontextualized and therefore meaningless.

Although Louie feels obligated to live by his prescribed code, he questions it repeatedly by stating it makes no sense to him. He is not a blind follower like Ghost Dog. In the end, he will go on as a follower of the new leadership and he will adjust to the new code. As Ghost Dog is dead and the last matter related to the old regime is taken care of, there is reason to suggest a more reciprocal future will take place.
3.5 LITERATURE’S IMPORTANCE

One of the most important motifs in the film is a copy of *Rashomon and other stories*, a collection of short stories by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa. It appears for the first time when Ghost Dog kills Handsome Frank and his eyes come upon the book on the floor to which Louise comments that he should take the book with him. Later, Ghost Dog lends it to Pearline with the condition that she tells him what she thought of the book. Upon returning the book, Pearline that she liked the book and especially the first short story, *In a Grove*, where each character recalls the same event in a different, contradictory way. Ghost Dog says that it is his favorite as well. When Ghost Dog is killed by Louie, in his last words he tells Louie to take the book from him and repeats the request that he must later come back to tell what the thought. Ghost Dog dies and Louie goes back to his new boss, Louise, who also encourages him to read the book.

The reoccurring nature of *Rashomon* and the highlighting of *In a Grove* in particular is a form of intertextual referencing that invokes the nature of the referenced text with the intent of the viewer interpreting *Ghost Dog* partially through the themes of *Rashomon*. In addition with the repeated request for sharing opinions, this means that *Rashomon*, in the film’s context, becomes a symbol for seeing the same thing in different ways and having dialogue about these different viewpoints. The film shows a flashback in which Louie saved Ghost Dog’s life that birthed their master-retainer relationship. In Ghost Dog’s version, Louie shot Ghost Dog’s attacker because he was about to kill Ghost Dog; in Louie’s version, he shot because the attacker turned the gun at him. Jarmusch refers to this juxtaposition as being the explicit *Rashomon* part of his film (Hertzberg).

Other literature is also discussed in the film as having read many of the same books is the first thing Ghost Dog and Pearline bond through in their first meeting and Raymond also recites a passage about bears from a book that he has in his ice cream truck. The heavy employment of *Rashomon* and *Hagakure* is the most important argument in the film for the importance of books in cultural discourse. As *Rashomon* promotes dialogue and the coexistence of different viewpoints, so does the final scene showing Pearline reading intently to *Hagakure* promote the concept of new generations learning about old cultural traditions through cultural preservation in literature.
3.6 THE NEW GENERATION

The film ends on ambiguous note as to what Pearline will actually decide to do with his new-found knowledge of the Way of the Samurai. However, just as the new leadership of the mob by Louise indicates a new leaf being turned over, Pearline is also depicted as a bright young kid who would not apply her knowledge of an ancient culture to practice in her surroundings and decontextualize it in the process. She does not share the apparent mental issues of Ghost Dog, therefore she is also less likely to employ the lessons of *Hagakure* in a violent fashion.

In the beginning of the film it is also revealed that she frequents a psychiatrist and one member of the mob declares her to be insane. Arguably, the reason Louie kills Ghost Dog is because Louise has not withdrawn his father’s orders after she became the de facto head of the mob. However, she is never depicted as having any violent impulses, her apparent insanity is only mentioned once and we merely see her as a largely passive character. Louise is nevertheless the one who recommends *Rashomon* to two different people, just like Ghost Dog, and she is the one whom the cycle of the book changing hands originally begins from. Even if they are both insane and do not fully understand the gravitas of their actions, both Louise and Ghost Dog act as inspirations for dialogue.

Another significant aspect of Louise and Pearline, who are left to pick up the thrones, is that they are both female in a very male-dominated film. Arguably, their gender roles only come into play when Vargo orders a hit on Handsome Frank because of his affair with Louise which is a very aggressively patriarchal action on his part. The only other instance is a scene where one the mobsters, Vinny, is wounded and shoots a female police officer to get away to a hospital.

LOUIE
Jesus, Vin, you just iced a woman, you know that?

VINNY
You know what you are, Louie? You’re a fucking male chauvinist pig.

LOUIE
What do you mean, I’m a chauvinist pig? You just shot a broad.

VINNY
A cop. I just shot a cop. They wanna be equal. I made her equal.
It is notable that one scene so explicitly comments on gender equality. However, that statement cannot really be taken as positive since it is used as a justification for killing her. Apart from that, gender is not really a matter of importance in the film’s own discourse that is much more focused on racial differences. Nevertheless, the very fact that almost every prominent character is a male, reinforces the dichotomy of the female being the Other to the dominant male. Since the film is deconstructing male-dominated genres, it is pertinent for the film be filled with men but it cannot be a coincidence that both of the two “ancient tribes” are left to a woman’s devices. Moreover, Louise is the even female equivalent for the name Louie, or Louis. As we last see them, Louise orders their driver to leave the scene and the binary pair of male and female exit the film with the female in charge. Their upcoming fates are left ambiguous but at the very least it suggests a change from the usual dichotomy for the mob, elevating the Other to the dominant Self.

The film ends with Pearline reading Hagakure and the quotation that ends the film states “In the Kamigata area they have a sort of tiered lunchbox they use for a single day when flower viewing. Upon returning, they throw them away, trampling them underfoot. The end is important in all things” (Tsunetomo 71). This quotation closes the circle in a film preoccupied with endings, as with the literal and figurative deaths of old ways. At one point, Raymond takes Ghost Dog to observe a Spanish-speaking man building a boat on an apartment building rooftop. The scene is completely unrelated to the plot but the obvious intention for its inclusion is to compare the man to Noah building his ark, adding another intertextual reference that reinforces the premonitions of end times. Early in the film, one Hagakure quotation states that “It is said that what is called ‘the spirit of an age’ is something which one cannot return. That this spirit gradually dissolves is due to the world’s coming to an end. For this reason, although one would like to change today’s world back to the spirit of one hundred years or more ago, it cannot be done. Thus it is important to make the best out of every generation” (Tsunetomo 68). Although the passage is fatalistic regarding the future of the world, it still encourages to make the best of a bad situation. Likewise, the passage read by Pearline at the end of the film suggests that all things, great and small, come to an end and the ending is as important as anything else. The ending of a tiered lunchbox adds a lightweight tone to a bleak ending, further promoting the idea that the violent end we just witnessed does not promote a completely pessimistic view on the future.
4. CONCLUSION

*Ghost Dog* presents a stylized version of contemporary America. The film limits its scope to only include members of the out-group and examines their interactions with each other. It presents us with characters who follow their own cultural codes vehemently and denounce any other ways. They follow their code without questioning and that stubbornness leads them to their premature death. However, cultural preservation and even antiquated traditions are viewed as positive if they are not explicitly causing harm to others. Ultimately, Ghost Dog is a sad figure who sees no alternative to his decontextualized way of living and is not able to adjust to the modern America. Likewise, the mobsters march to their deaths because they refuse to adopt an alternative philosophy. The only mobsters left standing are Louie, the one who constantly questions the value of their ways, and Louise, the new female paradigm.

As far as the characteristics of its habitants are concerned, American society will become more and more defined by all its different ethnicities who do not necessarily conform to the ideal that has traditionally been the Anglo-Saxon. Instead, something more akin to transnationality will become more common with citizens holding onto their ethnicities as defining parts of their identities even as fully accepted members of the American society.

Not overtly optimistic about the coexistence of clashing cultures, *Ghost Dog* nevertheless suggests there is hope in the younger generation. If nothing else, reciprocal dialogue is encouraged. People are going to hold on to their beliefs and cultures but through dialogue they are at least able to see and appreciate the viewpoints of others. That is how the melting pot has a chance of being a reality, instead of a myth.


