Through A Xenophobic Lens: Degeneration Theory in W. Christy Cabanne's *Martyrs of the Alamo*

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ABSTRACT

At the turn of the twentieth century, social theories developed in both the U.S. and Europe suggested that those at the top, or those most well endowed with good genetics, would stay that way, while those with poor genetics had little hope of changing their circumstances. Degeneration theory, as this concept was called when it took root in the United States from the late 1890s, before it had evolved to formally become eugenics in the 1910s, and beyond. While eugenics offices opened in Berlin in 1905, in England in 1907-08, and in the United States in 1910, there were many forms of it, including degeneration theory. What bound all the theories together was the notion of biology and heredity.

Westerns like *Martyrs of the Alamo* became a vehicle to explore these concerns because they inundated everyday Americans with illustrations of national identity. Films like these often mixed fantasy with ideology. This is clearly evident in W. Christy Cabanne's anti-Mexican sentiment in *Martyrs of the Alamo*. Examining Cabanne's film through the lens of degeneracy theory provides a greater understanding of American social concerns in the 1910s. These concerns, characterized by xenophobic depictions of immigrants, particularly Mexicans, culminated in the linking of immigrant bodies and disease with heredity and genetics, namely through theories of degeneration . Cabanne's *Martyrs of the Alamo* suggests, through the reproduction of the conflict surrounding the Alamo Mission, that the alternative to "race suicide" is a fantasy of American heroism, collectivism, and cultural exclusion. (SS and TZCS)

KEYWORDS: degeneration theory, immigration, cinematic nationalism, Texas, W. Christy Cabanne, *Martyrs of the Alamo*

I.

In the 1890s, degeneration theory was linked to notions of germ plasm and biological inheritance (Stepan 24-5). Germ plasma, expanded upon by German biologist August Weismann, "was inherited continuously by one generation after another without alteration from outside influences" (24). Weismann countered the Lamarkian theory that suggested social influences could alter germ plasma through transmutation (25). Other important figures before Weismann, such as Galton in the 1860s, similarly rejected social opportunities or influences as being responsible for altering germ plasma (25). If Weismann's theories proved correct, then each generation would have to start over because they would not inherit positive characteristics such as high intelligence, or other forms of successful traits, if they were not already there. As a result, as Nancy Leys Stepan argues, Weismann's theories could be read either positively or negatively, depending on their interpretations (27).

At the turn of the twentieth century, social theories developed in both the U.S. and Europe, which suggested that "socially successful individuals and groups were taken to be genetically and innately well endowed" (27), thus claiming that Weismannism had been interpreted pessimistically. In other words, those at the top, or those most well endowed with good genetics would stay that way, while those with poor genetics had little hope of changing their circumstances. More importantly, the evolution of degeneration theory from Larmarkian to Weismannism indicates that from the late nineteenth century to the early portion of the twentieth century when eugenics emerged, science had become politicized (27), focusing on

social theories and opinions. Degeneration theory, particularly a cynical version of Weismannism, took root in the United States from the late 1890s, before it had evolved to formally become eugenics in the 1910s, and beyond. While eugenics offices opened in Berlin in 1905, in England in 1907-08, and in the United States in 1910 (Stepan 28), there were many forms of it, including degeneration theory. What bound all the theories together was the notion of biology and heredity.

With a growing understanding of how hygiene impacted public health, and how disease could spread within communities, theories like degeneration theory functioned as a popular explanation for public health issues, social problems, and the effects of a changing world due to industrialization. While degeneration theory had many applications, when applied to anti-immigration sentiment, it provided an explanation for, and a solution to, social ills experienced in the United States in the 1910s. During one of the heaviest periods of immigration, from 1880 to 1924 (Jaret 9), immigrants became an overwhelming presence in metropolitan centers, causing Americans to unfairly connect them to urban problems. From an American perspective, many immigrant groups were often associated with disease, since they "tended to be impoverished and located in overcrowded neighborhoods with poor sanitation" (Moloney 105). Linking immigrants with disease, despite the lack of scientific proof of such a direct connection, led Americans to believe that immigrant contagion and disease were genetically, not environmentally based. Because of this connection, U.S. immigration centers instituted medical exams; however, the line between bona fide diseases and cultural contagion was never clear even at the federal level. Nevertheless, immigration officials used the ambiguity of these exams to reduce the number of entrants from undesirable regions "without directly limiting immigration on the basis of racial identities" (115). Yet, from an American viewpont, the purpose of linking immigrants with disease in the first place was to limit their

presence in the U.S. by providing a ready excuse: immigration from certain regions compromised racial purity.

Degeneration theories presented a scientific explanation for those who linked immigrants with social and racial decay. The degeneration theory was responsible for launching eugenics in the twentieth century, which merged science, racism, and legislation (Stern 14). Nancy Leys Stepans explains that "the belief that many of the diseases rife among the poor—tuberculosis, syphilis, alcoholism, mental illness—were hereditary merely fueled the fear of social decay" (9). Degeneration theory purported that biological defects and social ills were both inherited conditions and could weaken entire generations of people through watering down superior genetics. Americans who linked degeneration theory with immigrant communities were worried that immigrants could literally destroy the nation through their genes. These fears surfaced within popular culture, particularly the cinematic western during the 1910s, wherein racial communities were described as racially and biologically inferior to their white counterparts.

Shot in a single day, W. Christy Cabanne's *Martyrs of the Alamo* (1915) fictionalizes the famous 1835-36 Texas Revolution against Mexico, while exaggerating both American heroism and Mexican sexuality in order to convey a fearful message about immigration. It is the oldest surviving film depicting the Alamo, and achieved great success because it served as a companion piece to D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. Griffith's film, called one of the greatest and the most racist films ever made (qtd. in Barrett 48), pursues specific themes that work comparably with *Martyrs of the Alamo*. In his analysis of Griffith's film, and the original novel and play, *The Clansman* by Thomas Dixon, Jeffrey B. Martin argues that *Birth of a Nation* involves a love affair halted by war and racial theories, as well as the Black desire for White women (92). Griffith further departs from Dixon's novel when he emphasizes the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, a fact that allows for allegedly persecuted Southerners to have their

way of life restored at the film's conclusion. The essence of the two films, the championing of White American might over perceived racialized threats, is the same. Not surprisingly, Griffith's background, prior to becoming a film director, was the stage where he learned about "dramatic values with heroes, and villains and strong threats playing on basic fears" (93). Furthermore, he saw himself as an "historian, and the cinema as an educational tool" (Barrett 48), thus suggesting that both *Birth of a Nation* and *Martyrs of the Alamo* were meant to influence mainstream thought regarding race. Other films, such as *The Cheat*, released in the same year, portray Japanese businessmen, most specifically Hishuri Tori, as sexual predators who love nothing more than branding White women, typified by the film's heroine, Edith Hardy, when owed money. The theme of race, particularly when it comes to portraying Mexicans, African Americans, and Asians as barbaric, sexual predators seems to be a common theme in this era of film. In addition to this, these films grossed top dollar, which testifies to their popularity among mainstream American audiences.

Martyrs of the Alamo utilizes traditional elements of the western, such as frontier development and noble adventurers. The western of the second and third decades of the twentieth century focused on frontier development and the "advancement of the [W]hite man's culture and economy" (Bandy and Stoehr 32). To this end, Cabanne focuses solely on the irreducible differences between superior Americans and inferior Mexicans. These reach their logical outgrowth in the eventual triumph of the heroic Texans over Santa Anna's lustful troops at the Battle of San Jacinto. Because the Alamo story "deals with a sensitive racial question," it is difficult to separate its 1830s history from notions of degeneracy rife in 1910s scientific racism (Hutton 5-6). Films like *Martyrs of the Alamo* "provide a looking glass through which historians can observe the popular mood of the audience" (5-6).

As *Martyrs of the Alamo* juggles contemporary issues within a past context, it avoids historical accuracy. While Cabanne acknowledges Texans' desire for independence from

Mexico, he reduces the conflict to a "White man's burden" type of argument. Christopher Sharrett describes the film as a "typically racist fantasia portraying the capture of Mexico as a necessity to protect [W]hite women from lascivious, apelike Hispanics" (14). The film ignores any Texan motivations beyond this, in particular those making Texas a slave state after independence.[1] In addition to the importance of slavery, the fact that many Mexicans residing in Texas, called Tejanos, aided Americans in the battle for independence, cannot be disregarded. Slavery in Texas, a centralized issue motivating the conflict (Onion, Sullivan, Mullen "Battle of the Alamo"), divided the two sides of the battle: federalists (liberals) and centralists (conservatives). While Texans were welcomed and allowed to self-govern at first, once Santa Anna repealed the Mexican Constitution of 1824, more policies were put into place that limited Texans' rights, such as the 1830 policy that rejected more American immigration to the region. Santa Anna's growing power converted him into a dictator, thus leaving Texans in a precarious position, causing them to rebel ("Battle of the Alamo"). While the Alamo, an old Spanish mission, had been used as a military garrison for Texans and Mexicans alike, it became a symbol of Texan rebellion against a dictator ("Battle of the Alamo"). Although the conflict resulted from illegal changes in government that the Texans had not agreed to, the fact that William Travis and Jim Bowie championed slavery, testifies to the racial underpinnings behind the conflict. Making Texas a slave state explains why Cabanne's film, a western, was paired with Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, a film about the origins of the Ku Klux Klan. It also helps explain why Cabanne deviates so much from the Alamo's rich history, choosing to emphasize good versus evil along racialized lines instead.

Westerns like *Martyrs of the Alamo* became a vehicle to explore these concerns because they inundated everyday Americans with illustrations of national identity. Silent films had an incredible influence on moviegoers as they attempted to mimic what they had observed from these films' content (Bachmann 32). Films often mixed fantasy with ideology,

and therefore became a "vehicle for overtly presenting social problems to the public" (Sloan 33). Film, then, is an "invaluable propagandist tool in times of stress and national emergency" (Everson 223). This is clearly evident in Cabanne's anti-Mexican sentiment. Examining Cabanne's film through the lens of degeneration theory provides a greater understanding of American social concerns in the 1910s. These concerns, characterized by xenophobic depictions of immigrants, particularly Mexicans, culminated in the linking of immigrant bodies and disease with heredity and genetics, namely through notions of degeneracy. Cabanne's *Martyrs of the Alamo* suggests, through the reproduction of the conflict surrounding the Alamo Mission, that the alternative to "race suicide" is a fantasy of American heroism, collectivism, and cultural exclusion.

II.

While theories of degeneration affected immigrants like the Chinese in the nineteenth century, they became applied to other groups, including Mexicans, in the 1910s. Since the nineteenth century, American officials recruited Mexicans to work in agriculture in the United States. Indeed, the large Mexican population in the Southwest is a "phenomenon that did not predate the conquest of the region by the United States, but . . . followed it" (Portes and Bach 76). Growers' associations and railroad companies aggressively recruited Mexicans as a source of cheap labor, and for the first fifteen years of the twentieth century, Mexicans easily crossed the border (77). At first, lax regulations stemmed from the impermanency of Mexicans, who were mostly sojourners, rather than permanent settlers.

Immigration restrictions impacting Mexicans became stricter after 1910 in large part because of the ongoing Mexican Revolution, but also because American officials witnessed typhus outbreaks along the United States–Mexico border. Immigrants were divided into two groups: "new" and "old" immigrants. According to Howard Markel and Alexandra Minna

Stern, “new” immigrants originated from eastern, central, and southern Europe, while “old” immigrants came from northern Europe (758). Many Americans considered “new” immigrants, such as eastern European Jews, as less “assimilable and far more troublesome than their “old” counterparts” (758). By the twentieth century, science had informed people about contagious diseases and proper daily hygiene, and Americans became concerned with disease control, sanitation, and the worry “that the new immigrants had inherited weaknesses” (Park and Kemp 720-23). In *Legislative History of American Immigration Policy, 1798–1965*, EP Hutchinson discusses how the fear of contagion led to stricter medical examinations. These examinations “served as a surrogate for race among non-European immigrants” (Moloney 115). Social prejudices were often disguised as medical evidence, which lent itself to limiting the acceptance of immigrants deemed undesirable before the 1917 establishment of a literacy test, and additional quotas in the 1920s. As a result of these growing concerns, by 1917, Mexicans had to provide two birth certificates, two marriage certificates, a certificate of good conduct, another of good health, ten dollars for a visa, and eight dollars for entry tax in order to enter the United States, even on a temporary basis (Portes and Bach 77). During an outbreak of typhus in Laredo in 1915, American officials kept infected Mexicans in isolation, dousing them with kerosene in order to prevent the spread of the disease. In January 1917, anyone who entered the United States from Mexico was quarantined, even though fewer than five cases of typhus had reached El Paso in the previous two months. Disease almost always led to deportation by the United States Public Health Service (Markel and Stern 1316).

Because of a small typhus outbreak, many Mexicans were viewed as carriers of contagion. Border inspectors focused their attention on the spread of disease by “contaminated” Mexicans (Young 229). In order to protect the nation, the “degenerative influences of immigrants” had to be curbed (Park and Kemp 725). Contagion was interchangeable with genetics. In an article in the *Engineering and Mining Journal* in 1908,

author Allen H. Rogers suggested Mexicans were superior workers to Native Americans but still prone to "low morals and the spread of disease" (qtd. in Acuña 102). Remington Barr, a representative of the copper mining company Phelps Dodge, commented that "the Mexicans, naturally indifferent to sanitation, conducted and aided in the spread of all the filth and disease by their habits and carelessness" (102). In conjunction with their fear of contagion, Americans called attention to what they described as Mexicans' "birthright of laziness" (qtd. in Reisler 130). American nativists worried about the low intelligence of foreigners, seeing them as innately intellectually inferior (Jaret 15). Degeneration "replaced evolution as the major metaphor of the day, with vice, crime, immigration, women's work, and the urban environment variously blamed as its cause" (Stepan 24). American "nativists baldly claimed in scientific medicine a weapon that white Anglo-Saxon Protestant civilization could use to defend itself against the intrusion of those it regarded as of inferior breed" (Kraut 5).

Martyrs of the Alamo was the first to introduce these issues by presenting the theme of good versus evil that animates the relationship between Texans and Mexicans. The topic of the Alamo is particularly apt given its role in what Edward Tabor Linenthal calls the "patriotic landscape" of American history (510). In fact, for enthusiasts of the battle, the Alamo itself was a monument that enshrined the "memory of heroic martyrs whose courage and blood sacrifice created Texas" (Matovina 1), thus presenting a possible origin for Cabanne's title. At the same time, the silent western perpetuated the myths of the frontier, namely the differentiation between those who "belong" and those who do not (McVeigh 66). Yet, the nature of the American West itself is a site of "individual and collective quests for land and dominance (Paul 314). Cabanne builds upon these themes when portraying the Mexicans as inferior before presenting the Americans as the solution to this problem, and the only ones worthy of belonging in the Texas frontier. In the opening title card, for example, Cabanne categorizes the Americans as inherently superior: " Santa Anna had failed to reckon with the

undaunted valor of the hardy American pioneers of that age" (Cabanne). By attaching "of that age" to the end of the sentence, Cabanne suggests that the American men of the 1830s evidenced characteristics unusual in 1915, when the film was released. The western hero "needed charisma, personality, an abundance of virtues, and an unrealistic lack of vices" (Everson 239). The presumed absence of such traits from American culture in the 1910s made it vulnerable to corrupting elements, such as degeneracy. Although modern science had informed Americans about contagious disease, biological heredity, and sanitation, it was also influenced by ethnocentric attitudes. Films that explore these themes "found audiences primarily among the many Americans whose lives were dominated by the uncertainties of . . . the cultural ruptures of immigration" (Sloan 35). When Cabanne hails a prior age as one of American purity, he suggests the United States can return to better times through regeneration.

Cabanne's Mexican characters are depicted as despotic or stupid, in contrast to the Americans, who are unfailingly honest and clever, furthering the good versus evil trope. In a later scene in *Martyrs of the Alamo*, the Americans easily outsmart the Mexican troops, demonstrating their intellectual superiority. When Santa Anna forces the disarmament of Americans, the heroes pretend to follow Santa Anna's orders, yet they have only hidden their weapons under the floorboards in the house. One of the men laughs, wondering how this hiding place has not been discovered yet. Cabanne's depiction of Mexicans is connected to "a society struggling to maintain order in a period of terrific unrest" (Sloan 41). This is especially the case in the film's focus on the maintenance of White supremacy. Cabanne consistently describes Mexicans as lascivious, unethical people who desire, more than anything else, to corrupt American women. Before the battle begins, the film depicts Mexican soldiers as doing nothing but "hat dancing, cockfighting, and insulting Anglo women" (Graham 46). The Mexicans in *Martyrs* "are so ugly and rapacious, the Americans so much

the embodiment of the bourgeois American values of family and property, that historically determined territorial conflicts are displaced onto very simplistic moral grounds: the fight for territory becomes the defense of family against the fiendish lust of the Mexicans" (Williams 14). In the second title card of the film, Santa Anna is described as "despotic and vain," thus creating his nickname "[t]he Napoleon of the West" (Cabanne). Although historically this name was attributed to Santa Anna's military prowess, in the film the nickname aligns with Santa Anna's vanity. This caption leads directly to a close-up of Santa Anna, followed by the title card that reads: "under the dictator's rule, the honor and life of American womanhood was held in contempt" (Cabanne). This negative characterization of Santa Anna is fairly typical in the film: "only rarely is Santa Anna raised above the level of cardboard tyrant and abuser of everything human" (Graham 40). Santa Anna is as lascivious a character as the common soldiers who fill the streets. His sole pursuits in life seem to be "blondes and opium" (Hutton 8). Outside of Santa Anna's quarters, drunken Mexicans wander aimlessly, and rank-and-file Mexican soldiers disregard or even laugh at their deplorable behavior. One soldier joins in the debauchery by touching the blond curls of a woman who is helping her elderly father. By touching her, the soldier exemplifies the title card's content: American womanhood is under attack by the Mexican horde. The threat directed at American women is the threat of miscegenation, and these women, and any children they bear, are at risk of contamination. Cabanne includes scene after scene of women being insulted by Mexican officers, especially when they carry their babies in their arms, the infant presence insinuating the racial degeneracy that can arise from such contact. Silent Smith witnesses these moments and intervenes when a woman he knows is mistreated. In the meantime, his girlfriend unfurls an American flag inside her home and recalls what life was like when she experienced "American protection." Christopher Sharrett argues that the film is a "typically racist fantasia" that served the "increasing xenophobia of a nation approaching World War I" (14). In the

film, superior White Americans protect women like her from base immigrant desires and safeguard her future offspring. With women surrounded by degenerate immigrants, Cabanne portrays the American race on the verge of extinction. In the film, "no woman is safe from the Mexican threat" (Graham 40). Cabanne's representation of Mexicans exemplifies the idea that "degenerationism translated into alarm about immigrant invasions and miscegenation, and admonitions against 'race suicide'" (Stern 14).

Cabanne portrays Americans solely through a positive lens, thus presenting them as the solution to "race suicide" due to their allegedly superior genetics and the lack of their susceptibility to contagion. The American heroes are "a blur of coonskin caps and virtue" (Graham 46). The film juxtaposes the purity of the American home with streets filled with allegedly racial inferiors, making it necessary for the Texans to "clean up the streets." Once Santa Anna disarms all of the Americans, he sends his troops away from San Antonio de Béxar (later called San Antonio), prompting the Americans to initiate their revolt in the form of the Siege of Béxar: "after the Americans . . . throw Santa Anna's soldiers out of San Antonio prior to the Alamo fight, the local Mexican population takes to doffing their hats, lowering their eyes, and stepping aside at the approach of an Anglo" (Hutton 8). A title card explains that under a "new regime" women are respected in the public sphere (Cabanne). In various scenes, American men who pass them greet women cordially, and drunken Mexicans have all but vanished. Cabanne uses close-ups of these newly liberated women in order to emphasize the protection of the American race from corrupting foreign influences.

Cabanne also characterizes violence in the film as the result of inherited biological conditions. One of the focal points of degeneration theories was the eradication of criminality, alcoholism, feeblemindedness, or bad "unit characters" (Stern 16). The Battle of San Antonio de Béxar, in which Santa Anna reclaims the Alamo Mission, in Cabanne's film, enacts this erasure: the Texas Revolution is "almost solely provoked by the insults and crude advances of

lascivious Mexicans upon the Anglo women who had settled with their brave fathers and husbands in Texas" (Hutton 8). As a result, violence by the Americans appears justified in defense of American womanhood, land, and culture, even though historically Anglo-Americans were interlopers on Mexican land. Although severely outnumbered, the Americans at the Béxar battle find Mexicans to shoot with their "sure aim" (Cabanne). According to Perry McWilliams, historical fact about the famous battle oftentimes becomes lost in the "most incredible of fictitious fantasies" (222), such as the Béxar siege and battle scenes in the film. Cabanne's is one of the few attempts at portraying this battle in film, due to the awkwardness of filming an enclosed space and the lack of suspense when doing so (Hutton 8). This scene, however, is a clear departure from other westerns, as it emphasizes the dichotomous nature of his characters' identities. Cabanne navigates the awkwardness of the battle scene by using a chiaroscuro effect in order to position the Americans in light and the Mexicans in dark, shadowy corners. Despite Santa Anna's copious troops and weapons, and his eventual success in reclaiming the Alamo Mission, Cabanne focuses more on the heroism and bravery of the Americans, almost as if they had won the battle. Emphasis on their heroism, bravery, and survival serves as an example of why Americans are the "fighting races." Furthermore, the violence that the Americans use against the Mexicans is presented as necessary to combat the threat the Mexicans pose towards racial purity.

The Mexicans' use of violence, on the contrary, is never warranted—not even when defending their own land. Linda Williams argues that the historically determined territorial conflicts are "displaced onto very simplistic moral grounds: the fight for territory becomes the defense of family against the fiendish lust of the Mexicans" (60). For this reason, during the Béxar battle, the Mexicans direct unjustifiable violence toward vulnerable American children. The camera pans out to show various wounded Americans, denoting a turning point in the battle. A close-up of a light-haired, light-eyed American child follows. A Mexican soldier

grabs the child and flings her several feet without cause, killing her instantaneously. Scenes like this render the Mexicans cowardly (Graham 46). The girl's light-haired, light-eyed features are not arbitrary. Rather, they describe what the patriots are fighting for: White racial purity. After the girl's death, Cabanne crosscuts to the deaths of the Americans. In doing so, he again emphasizes that the story of the Alamo Mission and the battle of Béxar are tales of self-sacrifice (Hutton 7). Although the American women taken prisoner are spared, the Mexican soldiers line male Americans up for execution. The executions in this scene run counter to the Americans' generosity after the Battle of San Jacinto, when they permitted Mexican prisoners-of-war to live. Cabanne's crosscutting makes visible the opposition between American superiority, valor, and purity, and Mexican violence, depravity, and vengeance. More importantly, "the stereotype of the Mexican villain works to justify what could otherwise be viewed as American theft of Mexican soil" (Williams 14).

In the final scenes of the film, racial ideologies are taken to their conclusion. Cabanne portrays Santa Anna as a lascivious despot who will never reform. During a siesta, for instance, Santa Anna appears to have forgotten all about the Battle of San Jacinto so that he can lecherously watch a woman dance. The room is filled with other women, suggesting that Santa Anna's quarters are a mixture of a harem and a military outpost. Santa Anna's dissolute behavior in this scene makes him partly, perhaps chiefly, responsible for the Mexicans' loss (Graham 46). However, Santa Anna's lackadaisical attitude is exemplary of all of the Mexican soldiers' behavior: "when the attack comes, the Mexican general is busy in his tent with several ladies, [while] his soldiers are asleep at their posts" (Hutton 9). In this scene, Cabanne crosscuts between Santa Anna watching the women dance and Silent Smith's infiltration of military quarters, thus contrasting Santa Anna, an unfit frontiersman, with figures like Smith, who put their patriotism first. These two disparate characters are meant to

convey the message that the only recourse for maintaining white racial purity in the United States is to remove figures like Santa Anna from the American landscape.

Cabanne ends the film with the superimposition of a series of flags to further emphasize prevailing degeneration theories. The inherent racism of this scene was a fact not lost on audiences—for example, on the Mexican-American moviegoers who walked out in protest at a theater in Baytown, Texas (Graham 47-8). Flags function as shorthand for each group: the Mexican flag signifies oppression, while the American flag represents freedom and protection. Cabanne superimposes the Texas flag over the Confederate one, and then finally ends with the image of the American flag. He not only represents Texas's shifting national identity, but he also takes sides with White supremacy. Hutton writes "clearly, the defenders of the Alamo had been martyred on the altar of Manifest Destiny and [W]hite supremacy" (9). The temporary image of the Confederate flag suggests that the notions of racial inferiority that undergirded slavery are now being applied to a different marginalized group: Mexicans. With the final image of the American flag, the defeat of Santa Anna represents an ideological success for White Americans. It not only gestures towards the incorporation of Texas into the rest of the nation, but it also maintains White supremacy over degenerates like the Mexicans (Everson 249). The Alamo defenders are "upright Anglo-Saxon heroes, and the Mexicans are craven outragers of everything that is good, pure, and decent" (Graham 46). Cabanne's film interprets "the nation's headlines in dramatic visual images that at once persuaded and entertained" (Sloan 33). Clearly, "films become an index to the key problems of a period and even more importantly, the way those problems were perceived" (Susman 4). When Cabanne uses the western to explore immigrant degeneration, he illustrates Susman's claims.

Cabanne's film speaks to issues of immigration and fear of foreign contact, which preoccupied Americans in the 1910s. Cabanne uses the western to depict Mexicans as the threat to white racial purity and, by default, national unity and stability, and public health. By

utilizing notions of degeneration theory in *Martyrs of the Alamo*, Cabanne casts a nostalgic backward glance on idealized (although always fictional) notions of racial and national purity while commenting on present-day social issues wrought by immigration and class conflict. At the same time, he offers everyday Americans a romanticized version of national identity through the contrast of American purity and heroism against Mexican degeneracy and despotism.

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Notes

[1] Before the Texas Revolution, Texans went by many names, including Texian, Texonians, Texasians, and Texicans, to name a few. Texas residents of Mexican descent were referred to as Tejanos.

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