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EMPIRE IN THE AMERICAN WEST: A NEW  
HISTORICIST INTERROGATION OF  
NARRATIVE IN OWEN WISTER'S THE  
VIRGINIAN, WILLA CATHER'S DEATH  
COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP, AND  
CORMAC MCCARTHY'S ALL THE PRETTY  
HORSES

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NARRATIVE IN OWEN WISTER'S *THE VIRGINIAN*, WILLA CATHER'S *DEATH COMES  
FOR THE ARCHBISHOP*, AND CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *ALL THE PRETTY HORSES*

by

Brian Patrick Steinbach

B.A., Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2007

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
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THESIS APPROVAL

EMPIRE IN THE AMERICAN WEST: A NEW HISTORICIST INTERROGATION OF  
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Brian P. Steinbach

A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Master of the Arts

in the field of English

Approved by:

Dr. Edward Brunner Chair

Dr. K.K. Collins

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Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Brian P. Steinbach, for the Master of the Arts degree in English, presented on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: EMPIRE IN THE AMERICAN WEST: A NEW HISTORICIST INTERROGATION OF NARRATIVE IN OWEN WISTER'S *THE VIRGINIAN*, WILLA CATHER'S *DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP*, AND CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *ALL THE PRETTY HORSES*

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Edward Brunner

This thesis explores the evolution of American Western narrative after the 1893 closing of the Western Frontier. Formerly representing a seemingly limitless fuel of symbolic growth, the frontier's closing threatened further national prosperity. Without new Western lands to conquer, narratives about the West began to be romanticized in a new way, selectively omitting non-Anglo narrative elements and presenting a more palatable West in the form of celebratory conquest. Ignoring its imperial roots, this new twentieth-century mythologization of the West became an increasingly ubiquitous narrative of America's honorable origins. Despite its ties to the perpetuation of empire, the pervasiveness of contemporary Western narratives remains largely benign in resonance, resulting in a past that is wholly severed from the present.

Using a New Historicist approach, this study pairs literary works with cultural artifacts, tracking the role of Western narrative in the furtherance of empire. The first chapter examines Frederick J. Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" and Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) as representatives of the new romanticization of the West. Chapter two looks at how Willa Cather's anti-spectacle novel, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), responds to the spectacle of Empire at early twentieth-century World's Fairs. The final chapter pairs Japanese-American Internment during World War II with Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), as a commentary on the oppressive rhetoric of western space.

DEDICATION

To Mary Lou Norrington, my loving mother

And

To Simone D. Becque, the girl who waited.

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I want to first thank Dr. Edward Brunner. Without his help and guidance this project would have almost certainly found its way to completion down a far longer and difficult path. I owe much of this project and my continuing interest in its subject matter to his literary insight, and willingness to sign on as my Thesis Chair. I would also like to thank Dr. K.K. Collins. He has been a pedagogical mentor and beacon of encouragement to me for nearly ten years. To say that I'm not sure where I would be now without having met him would be an understatement. Thanks also to Dr. Joseph Shapiro for agreeing to be a reader for this thesis, and to Dr. Scott McEathron for his ever-ready willingness to council me during the pursuit of my degrees.

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## INTRODUCTION

The “Western” genre supposedly provides a view into the past of American Frontier history, prescriptive of an origins story that is wholly American. Whether the telling of that “history” is derided as a campy romanticization of a bygone era, or is fondly embraced by some as the historic remembrance and source of America’s nationally accepted (and internationally recognized) ethos, one revelation about the West remains persistently illusive: the romanticizing of the West and its conquest has enabled a sense of entitlement for imperialism that has since been embedded in much of American culture, and has very much so remained a part of the narrative norm (regardless of medium or genre) well into the twenty-first century. The obscured role of Western narratives in the furtherance of empire is largely due to something New Historicist William Cronon critiques as an antiquarian approach to history, wherein historians fall into the trap of “loving the past for the past’s own sake, neglecting to translate its artifacts to render them meaningful to the living present” (9). And Western Studies is “meaningful to the living present” (more on this later). New Historicist Patricia Limerick decided as much when she came up with the impetus for her book, *The Legacy of Conquest*, responding to business officials at a conference who “complained about the current problems of the West,” demonstrating a prevalent belief that “these problems were quite recent in origin and bore little relation to the distant frontier West” (9). Even though Limerick is directly addressing issues involving the West, her concerns are not limited to the geographic West—nor should they be. The problem Limerick first identified at that conference is—I argue—the result of how the popular image of the geographic West, and its histories, presents a compartmentalized origins story, contradictory in its existence in the popular eye as being both isolated in the past (as an affecter of our present) and as an ubiquitous symbol for the nation’s beginnings. The

romanticization of the West in the early twentieth-century changed the way in which conquest was recorded into national memory. Limerick describes this phenomenon well in her book:

In the popular imagination, the reality of conquest dissolved into stereotypes of noble savages and noble pioneers struggling quaintly in the wilderness. These adventures seemed to have no bearing on the complex realities of twentieth-century America. In Western paintings, novels, movies, and television shows, those stereotypes were valued precisely because they offered an escape from modern troubles. The subject of slavery was the domain of serious scholars and the occasion for sober national reflection; the subject of conquest was the domain of mass entertainment and the occasion for lighthearted national escapism. An element of regret for “what we did to the Indians” had entered the picture, but the dominant feature of conquest remained “adventure.” Children happily played “cowboys and Indians” but stopped short of “masters and slaves.” (19)

The West is more than a geographic zone, and its cultural and historic narrative is certainly more than a fanciful genre of fiction; it has nation-defining ties with a direct bearing on contemporary culture—a bearing that has been lost, severed through selective narratives of Western conquest.

To help demonstrate the meaningfulness of Western narratives to contemporary culture, I turn to Amy Kaplan and a brief excerpt from a popular television show to exemplify this effect. Kaplan’s work as a scholar of American Empire puts a great deal of emphasis on how the perpetuation of empire has in part resulted from post-1890s Western narratives that promoted new hyper-masculine identities and conflict-driven jingoistic behavior; however, these narratives, reverential of Western histrionics, do not simply tell us about the early twentieth-century American culture; these pro-empire narratives remain apparent as a dominant cultural

paradigm even now. Often these narratives covertly fulfill the entitling function of patriarchal Western rhetoric and iconography without even being a part of the Western genre. The use of frontier rhetoric that is celebratory of selective histories and encourages merit-based national entitlement inherently encourages imperial tendencies. Take for instance this excerpt from Aaron Sorkin's *The West Wing* (a text that on the surface is far from anything resembling a Western), wherein two White House employees argue over the allocation of taxpayer funds to further American space exploration:

Sam Seaborn: There are a lot of hungry people in the world, Mal, and none of them are hungry 'cause we went to the moon. None of them are colder and certainly none of them are dumber 'cause we went to the moon.

Mallory O'Brian: And we went to the moon. Do we really have to go to Mars?

Sam Seaborn: Yes.

Mallory O'Brian: Why?

Sam Seaborn: 'Cause it's next. 'Cause we came out of the cave, and we looked over the hill and we saw fire; and we crossed the ocean and we *pioneered the west*, and we took to the sky. The history of man is hung on a timeline of exploration and this is what's next. (*West Wing*, emphasis mine)

The scene between these two wealthy, white political aides ends with Mallory swooning over Sam's invocation of how the West was "pioneered," and how she was only arguing in the first place because she likes to hear *him* explain it. This scene, like much of Sorkin's writing, is meant to espouse American pride and a political idealist's meritocratic sentiment. And for the most part, that's how many viewers positively interpret this oft-quoted scene. Setting aside that the space race was directly linked to the arms race, and that this dialogue subordinates a strongly

opinionated woman to the myopically one-sided nationalistic passions of a white male (our stand-in for the lone, self-reliant cowboy), audiences swept up in the romantic image of progress forget that (past the discovery of fire) this abbreviated tale wholly whitewashes non-Anglo-only history, and, perhaps more grievously, implies that nothing bad ever happened as a result of Anglo-exploration. This nostalgic Anglo-American reading of “pioneering” for progress sake is a rhetorical substitute for the less-pleasant “conquest” of the West. The rebranding of Western conquest one-sidedly embraces the connotative “triumph” that the word “conquest” evokes, while selectively disregarding the violently conquered “other,” inherent to conquest. This scene is of course just one example of contemporary text’s subtle use of selective Western narrative as ideological fuel for further geopolitical action. The presence of the symbolic cowboy and celebratory frontier rhetoric is a mainstay in contemporary American culture even outside of narrative texts that are not strictly “Western” in subject matter. In addition to questions raised over the celebratory use of Western rhetoric and iconography in contemporary prescriptive narrative, the changing face of empire—namely the neoliberal transition of power from nation-state to corporate-state, which I would cite as a more contemporary outlet for what Amy Kaplan interprets as ways in which the mythological West “has endured parasitically by feeding on new outposts of American empire” (“Romancing” 684)—threatens to further obscure the oppressiveness of the ubiquitous American West. The prevalence of Western narrative elements in American culture demands the continued examination over the role that the post-Manifest Destiny romanticization of the West has played as both a complicit and resistant force in the furtherance of American Empire.

My reasoning for beginning this project at roughly the start of the twentieth-century is due to what I see as a major shift in American Western narrative. When, in 1890, the census

bureau came to the conclusion that so much of the American West was now inhabited that it was no longer necessary to collect frontier data, two nation-defining well-springs, formerly infinite as a conceptual resource, were revealed as finite. The first was the implied boundless-nature of national growth through the tangible material acquisitions of conquest that the frontier had provided for centuries; the second was the seeming end to the narrative fuel for entitlement and conquest afforded by the “limitless” bounds of the “uninhabited” Western Frontier. The latter of these, the intangible narrative, is essential to this study, as it has become a major driving force for the ideology of empire and national growth in lieu of further Western lands to conquer. However superficial the end of frontier data collection appears, it nevertheless signaled the end of the tangible in the “boundless” West, and thus endangered the intangible celebration of Western conquest (or so one might think).

Historically, we know that American imperial endeavors continued past the closing of the frontier, branching out overseas. These further geo-political events are not my primary focus with this project, but are nevertheless worth noting. While Western conquest represents pre-twentieth-century American imperialism, the recognition of future overseas endeavors serves as evidence to the continuance of America’s imperial tendencies. And more important, the West is constantly invoked in the promotion of, and justification for, these post-frontier geo-political endeavors. What I am interested in is what, if anything, changes in the continuance of empire during this transition between the corporeal acquisition and consumption promised by pre-1890 Western conquest, and the post-frontier narratives of Western conquest?

This is not to say I am interested in identifying a cultural text or texts that fundamentally affected the way in which the culture of empire was driven, but rather my attention centers upon exploring texts that reflect a widespread cultural desire for further conquest after the closing of

the frontier. For instance, while Frederick J. Turner's "Frontier Thesis" and Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) represent recognizably influential texts at the turn of the century, neither can be said to have fundamentally changed the ideology of empire; the popularity and concurrence of their works merely demonstrate the ease of empire's mutability even in the absence of more Western lands to conquer, and show how the culture of American empire sustains its momentum through the consumption and idolization of the narrative West after having long been since revealed as finite. Thusly, I see Western narrative and its iconography as having become the go-to form by which American geo-political action is justified, and inversely critiqued. The non-literary cultural texts used in this study are meant to show how frontier rhetoric has fundamentally ingrained itself in the American cultural narrative of entitlement to empire. And what's more, my respective pairings (Owen Wister and Frederick J. Turner; Willa Cather and *World's Fairs*; and Cormac McCarthy and *Japanese-American Internment*) demonstrate the importance of taking a New Historicist approach when examining frontier literature.

In Chapter 1: "Interrogating Post-Frontier Imperialism: The 'Romantic' American West in Frederick Turner's 'Frontier Thesis' and Owen Wister's *The Virginian*," I examine two major cultural texts that are widely viewed as integral to having established the romanticization of the West, and thusly—I argue—have promoted the selective Anglo-only narrative of celebratory conquest. New-Western Historicists have struggled over the role of Historian Frederic Turner's "Frontier Thesis," identifying it as a myopically nationalistic and ethnocentric call to action, and yet accepting of it as a text that is integral to understanding the evolution of American Western. As with Turner's thesis, Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, which is largely considered to be the first Western novel, omits much of the non-Anglo elements of the historically diverse West in favor of creating a masculinized, post-frontier national identity that excludes or subordinates the West

and its inhabitants in favor of a new narrative—one that would popularly come to mythologize Western conquest as an origins story of American meritocratic success. Along with perpetuating Anglo-only Western narrative, some of the distinguishing features of Wister's "West" include post-bellum escapism (presented in episodic formats that originated in short fiction), and the search for a new masculine identity; each of which is implicit as part of the driving force of mythologizing the West, and its conquest, ultimately becoming a major source of charged-rhetoric used in the promotion of future geo-political endeavors. This chapter concludes with a brief analysis of how the syndicated stage adaptation of *The Virginian* reveals how the new cultural narrative of the mythic Frontier, without Manifest Destiny to fuel the entitlement to conquest, had become popularly internalized in lieu of the infinite West that had now clearly been revealed as finite.

After my first chapter establishes the role of the romanticized Western in post-frontier American culture, and the popular internalization of that mythos, my second chapter, "Resistant Materialism: The Intersection of Ethnicities and Western Landscape in Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*" (1927), examines the growth of American Empire through prosthetic modes of acquisition. This chapter first examines the spectacle of World's Fairs from 1898 to 1915 as major grounds for the popular consumption of imperial achievement. Millions of Americans were able to see "first hand" the domineering growth of the country in neatly corralled exhibits of empire, celebrating both the past (Western conquest) and the nearer present (overseas conquest). The arrangement of these displays, rather than the actual feats of conquest, mirror the kind of episodic, exclusionary-narratives seen in romanticized westerns like Wister's *The Virginian*. Following this analysis, I examine Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* as a text that responds to the spectacle of empire through anti-spectacle. Cather's

return to the mid-nineteenth-century presents a narrative rich in the kinds of cultural content that has been omitted in early twentieth-century Western novels, and preempts Modern prostheticizing advancements—like the railroad—that, as Alan Trachtenberg puts it, allowed “mechanized access” in a “blithe leap over wagon tracks and rotting carcasses that marked a mode of access only a few years past” (19). The early twentieth-century narrative of the West only offered selective spectacles of material acquisition, while Cather’s meditative novel rejected that narrative, creating instead a narrative that not only retroactively re-inserts the omitted others in a period of Western history, but attempts to thoughtfully navigate, rather than subordinate, these supposed material acquisitions of conquest that would later appear as exhibits in World’s Fairs.

Having examined a text that points to the precariousness of narrative exclusion through the use of vast space and inclusivity, Chapter 3: “Unsettling the Binaries of Western Romance: A Postmodern Response to World War II Japanese-American Internment and Cormac McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses*” (1992), interrogates the intersecting point between the diminishment of romanticized Western geographical space, and the systemic harmfulness of binary narratives in the mythologized West. This analysis pairs World War II Japanese-American internment in the interior west, and McCarthy’s narrative set in the late 1940s, as a means of revealing the harm that institutionalized Western rhetoric/narratives create. In examining both of these subjects, I focus on the role of Western space in the romanticization and perpetuation of empire. Both case studies see Americans in Western space, who are imprisoned against their will, and have their ideological beliefs challenged, or rather, have foreign ideologies forced upon them as a stipulation for their reinstatement into society. The end result for many Japanese-American internees, and for McCarthy’s protagonist, is a broken bildungsroman that results in disaffection

and dispossession at the hands of a prescribed mythology of Western space, now firmly ingrained as the progenitor source of American identity.

The chapters in this thesis are arranged to demonstrate a continuing pattern of the romanticized Western in post-frontier geo-political endeavors that, though not necessarily demonstrative of a transhistorical phenomenon, can be revealed as having been infused in various cultural, empire-promoting texts throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which continue to feed on the fanciful narratives of the mythologized West. My concluding chapter will briefly address some of the temporal and conceptual gaps in this project that I would like to explore with further research. Chapters one, two, and three of this thesis are not meant to be comprehensive, or even represent chronologically adjacent texts that can be used to trace the role of American Western narratives in the development of empire; however, I believe that these case studies adequately highlight (in broad strokes) the continuing complicity of the mythologized West in the furtherance of American empire, beginning with the establishment of the Western novel (Wister's *The Virginian*) as a foundational work, ensuring the now-gone frontier's continuing role in empire-building, and proceeding to two texts that use the West to resist popular ideology: a Modern text (Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*), and a Postmodern one (McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*). The latter two respond to the romanticized West negatively, either seeking to anachronistically reinsert the omitted past (Cather), or to pensively critique Western mythology through satire and ontological tragedy (McCarthy). Ultimately, my efforts in this study are New Historicist in nature, seeking to reveal popular ideologies of each primary text's period by pairing it with other cultural events/texts. While I am only beginning to trace the cultural trends in the evolution of American Empire, I hope that this project will serve as a foundation for my continued studies.

## CHAPTER 1

INTERROGATING POST-FRONTIER IMPERIALISM: THE “ROMANTIC” AMERICAN WEST IN FREDERICK TURNER’S “FRONTIER THESIS” AND OWEN WISTER’S *THE VIRGINIAN*

Reading Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* (1902) as a foundational work that would help establish the popular American mythos of western settlement immediately raises a question of epistemological orientation. If we think of recorded history and fictional events as intertextually dependent, as semiotician Keir Elam does, then the way in which these texts have informed popular perceptions of the American West reveal “[constructs] deriving from the conceptual and textual constraints on the spectator’s understanding” (97). Elam posits that we can access these worlds “because our notion of the world and its individuals and properties is founded on a certain epistemological (and thus ideological) order” (97). Put more simply, readers of Wister’s *The Virginian*—or audiences in the case of its many subsequent stage, radio, television, and film adaptations—accepted its selective narrative because it aligned with long standing Anglo-American ideologies of westward conquest, and what’s more, these popularly accepted texts helped reaffirm a future adherence to such nation-defining ideological desires well into the twentieth-century and beyond.

The American Frontier officially closed in 1890, leaving a hole where the need for Manifest Destiny had provided not only justification, but also hope in whatever comes with new land acquisitions and other discoveries. Those interested in pre-romanticized western endeavors did not need to dwell long upon negative aspects of Western expansion, such as the lack of easily cultivatable land west of the one hundredth meridian line, or in the violent, aggrandized, geopolitical conflicts with western “others”; up until the closing of the frontier, there was still more “something” to look forward to through future acquisitions. But whereas one might

imagine the closing of the frontier would lead to a period of historic assessment and reflection, its closing instead lead to a more histrionic assessment, romanticized by both historians and fiction writers alike. New Historicist Patricia Limerick includes twentieth-century historicists in her criticism of the tendency to over-romanticize “events from the category ‘frontier’ [immersing] the Western historian in conceptual fog” (*Legacy of Conquest* 24). Limerick rightly cautions such tendencies, noting that, “the distinction says a great deal about the emotions of historians but little about Western history” (24). Wister’s novel easily falls under this criticism. This is not to say that *The Virginian*’s romantic slant renders it useless and should thus be discarded, but rather that what allows *The Virginian* to be useful as a historic novel is that it provides a text informed by historical elements, and in spite of those elements forming a text infused with an undercurrent of historically selective and oppressive ideologies, its romantic oversimplification in this effort revealing the contradictions inherent in a nation simultaneously celebrating independence and conquest.

This chapter will seek to reveal not only how Wister’s *The Virginian* is a fictional text full of reaffirming imperialistic elements, but also how Wister’s novel tapped into this very real, yet uncertain, cultural ideology, at a time when the physical limitations of a continued westward expansion required a new outlet for national imperialistic desires. Focusing on Frederick Turner’s “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (hereafter abbreviated as “Frontier Thesis”) as a prominent cultural text during the relative time in which Wister was developing his novel, I will briefly examine how this cultural artifact reflects a societal determination to continue the celebration of conquest, formerly provided and justified by the now defunct Manifest Destiny. Once I have established this desire as a continuation of a deeply ingrained cultural conviction, I will proceed to examine *The Virginian* as a text threaded with

imperialistic undertones, and provide a close reading of its long-running, and well-received stage adaptation, demonstrating the twentieth-century internalization of this newly adapted national ethos.

*Furthering the Empire Through the Histrionic Rhetoric of Meritocracy and Exclusion*

While the latter half of this chapter will focus on Wister's *The Virginian*, I will first address an important text of American Western historicism, and a major problematization of that text by New Historicists. For historicists of American Westward expansion, one of the most problematic issues is that there is no clearly identifiable milestone event resulting in a fundamental change for the country as a whole. Patricia Limerick is quick to point out that scholars of Postcolonial studies have the Revolutionary War, and Southern studies have the American Civil War, whereas Western historians found themselves without the benefit of a distinctive watershed year (*Legacy of Conquest* 23). Due to this problem, it's hard to say whether Western Historicists owe fellow historicist Frederick J. Turner a debt of gratitude when he basically invented a watershed year for Western studies, declaring, "four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history" (38); Turner effectively periodized the American West. The basis for Turner's "Frontier Thesis" centers upon the 1890 census finding that "the unsettled area [of the west] has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line" (1). The census bureau's elimination of frontier data collection hardly seems a comparable bookend event to what Postcolonial and Southern historicists had to work with for their respective watershed years.

What, if anything, had fundamentally changed at the emphasizing of 1890 as a year of great import for the American West?

The answer can be derived, though complicatedly so, by attempting to qualify the significance of American westward conquest as Turner understood it, and as the predominantly white American culture largely perceived it. In his "Frontier Thesis," Turner does not shy away from distinguishing the "to-be-celebrated" meritocratic endeavors of the United States from other oppressive imperialistic societies:

In the case of most nations, however, the development has occurred in a limited area; and if the nation has expanded, it has met other growing peoples whom it has conquered. But in the case of the United States we have a different phenomenon. Limiting our attention to the Atlantic coast, we have the familiar phenomenon of the evolution of institutions in a limited area, such as the rise of representative government; into complex organs; the progress from the primitive industrial society, without division of labor, up to manufacturing civilization. But we have in addition to this a recurrence of the process of evolution in each western area reached in the process of expansion. Thus American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. (2)

While Turner appears objective in his identification of other nations' expansionist tendencies as meeting "other growing peoples whom it has conquered," his assessment of the United States in similar expansionist endeavors shows a clear bias, celebratory in the country's triumph over the

repeated challenge of overcoming “primitive” obstacles. Turner provides a prime example of Amy Kaplan’s assertion that “United States continental expansion is often treated as an entirely separate phenomenon from European colonialism of the nineteenth-century, rather than as an interrelated form of imperial expansion” (“Left Alone” 17). The entitlement to the land involved in American Westward conquest ignores the often hostile acquisition of those lands. And perhaps more grievously, Turner implies vast emptiness of unsettled land waiting to be conquered, rather than identifying it as one of the more diverse cultural intersecting points of America, with respects to Native America, Latin America, Anglo-America, African America, and Southeast Asia. This omission alone is enough to affirm Limerick’s criticism that Turner’s account of American Western history is “ethnocentric and nationalistic” (*Legacy of Conquest* 22). It seems an apt criticism when considering Turner’s charge that the Anglo-American settlers on the ever-advancing frontier were in a constant state of rehabilitating a primitive environment. The omission of all native and foreign “others” from Turner’s history effectively relegates the West’s diverse culture to that empty, “primitive” backdrop for Anglo-American history, and all non-Anglo elements in that history become props of Anglo-American history, rather than distinct peoples within it. Turner reveals this bias as a major driving force behind past and future American ideology: “This Perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West” (2). Though I’m not as willing to dismiss cultural developments of the nation’s Atlantic coast, I do see “the Great West” (or at least, the “idea” of the West) as a major influencer in the development of American culture. At the turn of the twentieth-century, Turner’s focus may have been on celebrating the

greatness of an expansive nation, but a New Historicist re-examination of his work, and many other surrounding cultural texts, demonstrates a national ethos, desirous for further national imperialistic endeavors.

Turner's selective history celebrates the conquests of the West as a series of easily quantifiable meritocratic success stories. In that way, American Western history is extremely telling of the nation's reluctance to accept its national undercurrent of imperial subjugation. Though Turner may be considered by some to be a prominent founder of American Western history, it is important to note that he is not of course by any means a founder of the hidden imperialism imbedded with American culture. Nor is his work unrecognized as problematic, creating an issue for New-Western Historicists, wherein "abandoning [Turner's foundation of Western History threatens] the West's place in the mainstream of American history" (*Legacy of Conquest* 22). However, even those critics who wish to discredit Turner's thesis as an important historic document have run into an issue, as Limerick points out, wherein the "Frontier Thesis" has in a way become "exempted from the usual tests of verification, evidence, and accuracy" while "other historical models are stopped and inspected at every checkpoint and at many sites in between" (*Something in the Soil* 142). Her argument, in short, suggests that despite all of the widely recognized errors and ethnocentrism in Turner's "Frontier Thesis," it remains a cultural text that must be "worthwhile and important if it [is] still worth attacking a century later" (143). Turner's "Frontier Thesis" was not the only source promoting the furtherance of American empire; however, its continued importance for Western historians demonstrates its presence as a powerful representative of a cultural ideology that selectively remembered American conquest, and of which has subsequently been mirrored in the further romanticization of the Western conquest in literature. Thus, despite the issues of Turner's histrionic representation of the

American West, it still remains—I argue—a useful and revealing text of cultural import. His work might be considered particularly effective in the perpetuation and obfuscation of our imperial tendencies, but here I only highlight his role as one producer of important cultural texts among many during the late nineteenth-century, which culminate in an identifiable and systemic cultural narrative of Anglo-American oppressiveness.

Though Wister's *The Virginian* is widely considered to be the first “Western” novel, it's hardly the first literary indicator of a sensationalized American West. Jesse Aleman and Shelley Streeby interpret as a common misconception that American imperialism only began with the coming of the twentieth-century (1898 onward, beginning with the Spanish-Cuban-American War), arguing that this misunderstanding assumes an entitlement over already conquered lands, firmly located within the fixed twentieth-century borders of the United States. As such, westward expansion represented a mastering of lands, which Americans believed to have been rightfully earned, or simply inevitable extensions of the United States. Aleman and Streeby highlight this trend in selected Western Dime novels, positing that these popular texts invoke a memory “of mid-nineteenth-century imperialism, the Manifest Destiny, that [...] was a repetition of the past and proved to be a harbinger of the future” (xiii). I interpret the “past” and “future” referred to here broadly; the future can be any trans-national or neoliberal conflicts occurring in the twentieth and twenty-first century onward, whereas the past influencers and indicators of an undercurrent of American imperialism seem only as limited as how far back one is willing to trace the formation of the United States as a long-standing endeavor, rather than a singular big-bang moment of national identity wherein a new national ethos was wholly created from scratch in its severance from the British Empire, and histrionically assumed control over much of the continent. Put more simply, in order to interpret and critique the United States as an empire, its

formation should be interrogated as a nation whose texts of Westward expansion reveal a national identity that is inherently imperial.

Though the United States was founded in part from a desire to escape the oppression of the distant British Empire—and thusly celebrated its newfound freedom from oppression—many of our western texts retain similar rhetoric, celebrating entitlement to conquest, and romanticize mundane endeavors through militaristic diction. Further challenging a national identity exempt from pre-twentieth-century imperialism, Aleman and Streeby deny the existence of a pre-conflict America, problematizing the nomenclature of the “Antebellum Period”—the pre-1861 period of American history. Their challenge to this antebellum periodization asks, “Before which war?” (xiv). Though Aleman and Streeby’s challenge to the exact meaning may be a bit too literal in limitation of scope—the American Civil War does after all result in subsequent major ideological shifts for the country—the period’s name does preclude the existence of a country that had previously been steeped in violent geo-political conflicts. Furthermore, this assumption reinforces a cultural narrative that whitewashes westward conflicts central to the formation of the United States. While the ideological rhetoric of empire was threaded throughout American culture at the close of the frontier, much of its agency was established through the literary romanticization of the West, wherein the fanciful West became iconic for the nation’s identity.

Distinct from dime-novels, the fully fledged “Western novel” genre could, as Bill Brown argues, “discursively [reproduce] the American naturalist and ethnographic spectacles (at world’s fairs and natural history museums) that depend on the modern imperial/metropolitan network as a mode of collection” (138). Wister’s novel fulfills Brown’s definition as a work that acts like more of a carefully selected assortment of episodic narratives than a single work. While many of the episodes in *The Virginian* are adaptations of past short stories Wister had written—

informed in part by his own experiences over occasional summers spent in the West—the loosely constructed framework story might as well serve as the literary stand-in for the “primitive cultures” exhibition halls at World’s Fairs, early twentieth-century museums, and other displays of selective cultural dominance and superiority (More on this in Chapter 2). Wister’s *The Virginian* is a spectacle of historical fiction, designed for a society aware of imminent cultural changes—developing issues of modernity: the new woman, the continued growth of the middle class, Reconstruction, etc.—that also relies on a nationalistic desire for a self-contained origin story that would help fuel future post-westward geopolitical endeavors.

*Allegorizing the Romanticized Western Male as a Chief Tenet of Post-Frontier Empire*

As a type of origins story, *The Virginian* reflects some of the turn of the century concerns in the form of what are now largely considered “Western” tropes. The end of Westward conquest raised questions about the nation’s future in lieu of new lands to conquer. Westward settlement had provided an outlet for a sense of national individuality and freedom in contrast to older more post-colonial and aristocratic mainstays of national identity. The new emphasis was clear: create a national identity that is not only independent now, and in the future, but would also be independent in its origins. While *The Virginian* addresses this concern largely through a sensationalization of manhood in the West, it also ignores the roots of empire embedded throughout Western Civilization. Kaplan identifies this inherent connection between the concepts of empire and manhood, and interprets these tropes as not only affectors of past geopolitical endeavors, but future endeavors as well. Her essay, “Romancing the Empire,” concludes with this indictment of Western romances, in which the narrative role of males in past and present empire-building is made apparent: “the quintessential twentieth-century symbol of

American nationhood—the lone self-reliant cowboy on the frontier—has endured parasitically by feeding on new outposts of American Empire. As the precursor of the modern Western, the historical novel of the 1890s romances the empire with a potent nostalgia that renders imperial conquest and the struggle for power over others as nothing more than the return home to the embodied American man” (“Romancing” 684). Again, the characters in Wister’s novel may seem like progenitors to simple Western tropes, but as characters in a text responding to a myriad of social change with defining ties to the cessation of new westward settlement, they act as symbols for an Anglo-exclusive narrative that serves to resolve this question of national identity.

In Wister’s novel, three primary characters represent symbols in this search for national identity: The Virginian, Molly Stark Wood, and the Narrator. While each has a distinct import as a mutable symbol, the Virginian, not surprisingly, is the sounding board to which both Molly and the Narrator respond. The Virginian (the man) is a complex, frequently contradictory symbol for the “Wild West.” The narrator pursues the Virginian as a model for masculinity, frequently providing descriptions wherein the Virginian becomes a personification of the awe-inspiring, yet untamable wilderness of the West. To this end, the narrator often describes the Virginian’s actions and mannerisms as though he were the very embodiment of a wild animal:

Then for the first time I noticed a man who sat on the high gate of the corral, looking on. For he now climbed down with the undulations of a tiger, smooth and easy, as if his muscles flowed beneath his skin. (7)

...

But like a sudden snake I saw the noose go out its length and fall true; and the thing was done. (7)

...

[...] and there came into my memory the Bengal tiger at a trained-animal show I had once seen [...] the Bengal tiger did not smile. He sat with his eye fastened on his employer. (143).

The narrator's incorporation of animalistic qualities in these descriptions, positions the Virginian in a place within untamable nature, and thus a position of resistance to, and independence from, Eastern American influence. The Virginian is also intentionally divorced from society, creating an issue wherein a patriarchal desire to assimilate the Virginian (The West), as the new model for the American male, must first deal with the Virginian's reluctance to be assimilated (to be conquered).

While each episode in the novel's progression focuses on a plot-specific conflict, the separation between East and West is ever-present as the chief thematic conflict of the novel. This conflict is perhaps most apparent in "The Virginian" as a pseudonym for the protagonist, which while we are to understand that he came from the east (with respects to his past in the east as having been pre-war, and his home being a southern state), we quickly learn that he has more or less disowned his eastern American origins. In the one scene in which he briefly recounts the abandonment of his colonial heritage, the Virginian expresses not only his final encounter with his eastern family, but also clear decisiveness in his choice to sever ties with them in favor of the West:

'I could not live without it now,' he said. 'This has got into my system.' He swept his hand out at the vast space of the world. 'I went back home to see my folks onced. Mother was dyin' slow, and she wanted me. I stayed a year. But them Virginia mountains could please me no more. Afteh she was gone, I told

my brothers and sisters good-bye. We like each other well enough, but I reckon I'll not go back.' (161)

In addition to representing eastern decay via his mother's death, this account also provides an agency to his character that at times seems contradicted by the seemingly happenstance nature in which he describes travel in the West: when asked whether he has been to Vermont, he replies, "I never was there. [...] Never *happened* to strike in that direction" (161 emphasis mine); and when describing what "home" means in the west, he says, "Folks come easy, and they go easy. In settled places, like back in the States, even a poor man mostly has a home. Don't care if it's only a barrel on a lot, the fella' will keep frequentin' that lot, and if yu' want him yu' can find him. But out hieh in sage-brush, a man's home is apt to be his saddle blanket. First thing yu' know, he has moved it to Texas" (37). Again, the Virginian's rhetoric implies a contradiction of Western life that is at once one of belonging and independence from the more common restrictions of, or commitment to, a fixed social identity.<sup>1</sup> In this way, the Virginian, as our symbol for the untamable West, can be established as an elusive redefining model of independence for the American male.

Whereas the Virginian is the stand-in for the idealized West, Molly and the Narrator are representatives of the East. Next to nothing is known about the Narrator outside of the reflections afforded by his eastern male gaze, but he plays a major role as the "everyman" of the nineteenth-century. As such, he functions as a surrogate for the gaze of the reader, and as a deictic tool for indicating exactly which examples of masculinity are to be praised, and which are to be mocked or discarded. The Narrator, like so many other narrators, is in many ways the stand-in for the author (in this case Wister, based off of his "outside looking in" summers spent in the West), but in adding the fanciful Virginian to these scenes, Wister has in a way reinvented

actual experiences with a more favorable outcome. For example, one reimagined episode highlighted in Phillip Durham's introduction to the novel singles out an event wherein Wister revisits a violent incident of horse abuse. According to Durham, the real life occurrence left "Wister [looking] into the 'sinkhole of blood' where the eye [of the horse] had been, but he did nothing other than sit by helplessly, 'dazed with disgust and horror'" (ix). Wister regretted his helplessness in the moment, and when it came time to adapt the event into a short story that would appear in *Harper's Magazine*, and again in a revised version for a chapter in *The Virginian*, Wister rewrote history, creating a replacement for himself capable of exuding a rugged individualism, who would respond with "vengeance," could "hurl [Balaam, the maltreater of horses] to the ground," and dispense "sledgehammer blows of justice" (189). While Wister's fanciful redemption provides a new model for the American male's identity, we must remember that this model largely appears to be an unwilling participant as a national model that needs to be assimilated.<sup>2</sup> With the Narrator's clear identification of the Virginian as the quintessential model of masculinity, this model, like the West, must be "won." Wister resolves this conquest of the Virginian through Molly Stark Wood, who comes closest to fulfilling the role westward conqueror.

As a symbol, Molly transcends what simplicity may be implied by her plot function as a romantic interest, instead representing a separate conflict between two origin stories; as a descendent of both colonial aristocratic means, and as a patriot with revolutionary blood, she is in essence an amalgamation of conflicting historic ties that must be resolved. Where the Narrator represents an eastern male's gaze that passively looks on in assessment and desire, Molly's role of fulfilling the eastern woman's gaze upon the West represents the active force in

resolving the novel's thematic conflict of defining a post-frontier national identity. As such, Molly's ancestry plays an important role for her character:

Had she so wished, she could have belonged to any number of those patriotic societies of which our American ears have grown accustomed to hear so much. She could have been enrolled in the Boston Tea Party, the Ethan Allen Ticonderogas, the Green Mountain daughters, the Saratoga Sacred Circle, and the Confederated Colonial Chatelaines. She traced direct descent from the historic lady whose name she bore, that Molly Stark who was not a widow after the battle where her lord, her Captain John, battled so bravely as to send his name thrilling down through the blood of generations of schoolboys. This ancestress was her chief claim to be a member of those shining societies which I have enumerated. But she had been willing to join none of them, although invitations to do so were by no means lacking [...] her most precious possession—a treasure which accompanied her even if she went away for only one night's absence—was an heirloom, a little miniature portrait of the old Molly Stark, painted when that far-off dame must have been scarce more than twenty. (59)

Molly's ancestral ties are at once a source of power, prestige, patriotism, and financial and marital security. But that same source of inherited privilege also provides her with the independent will to opt-out of her family's aristocratic expectations. Even while sitting next to the coachman when heading west for the first time, she rejects the coachman's insistence that he would make "a good suitor for marriage," choosing instead to get down and ride inside, "independence and Grandmother Stark shining in her eye" (65). While she is certainly more conflicted about her choice to break from these expectations (to marry, and to stay in the east),

Molly is not unlike the Virginian in her independent streak and desire to part with eastern society. Kaplan identifies the “Western” genre as unusual in the way in which it “neither banishes woman from a rugged male terrain nor simply tames her; it co-opts her desires and includes her in its pleasures of romancing the empire” (“Romancing” 684). Molly, unlike the eastern narrator, has agency over her life and eventually the Virginian’s. It is in part, the endeavor to resolve Molly’s and the Virginian’s courtship—through evocative war-like diction and a selective Anglo-narrative—in which *The Virginian* succeeds, to use Kaplan’s words, at “romancing the empire.”

Again, it may at a glance seem as though the romantic interludes woven throughout *The Virginian* are little more than simplistic pulp fiction; however, more is being sold in the courtship of Molly and the Virginian than a simple pairing of cow-puncher and school-marm; a national ideology is being prescribed. Remembering that the Virginian is a reluctant model for national identity, we can ascribe import to the Narrator’s assessment of the effect of the Virginian and Molly’s first encounter: a “seed [that] had floated across wide spaces, and was biding its time in [the Virginian’s] heart” (44). While this is certainly a romantic description that foreshadows their inevitable relationship, it is also an invasion of a man, previously established as reluctant in fulfilling the part of the new social model. Further rhetoric can be seen as metaphors of conflict, evoked through the narrator’s choice of militaristic diction, wherein he imbues the courtship of Molly and the Virginian with the conquest of the West. The first time the Virginian asks Molly to go riding with him, her independent nature instinctively causes her to resist, and the narrator describes this resistance as such: “Grandmother Stark flashed awake deep within the spirit of her descendant, and she made a haughty declaration of war” (83). The narrator’s account of the Virginian’s response is equally suggestive of militaristic action: “Now was his danger. [...] And

any rudeness would have lost him the battle. But the Virginian was not the man to lose such a battle in such a way. His shaft had hit. [...] This was all that he had wished to make sure of before he began operations” (83). This rhetoric continues throughout the novel, but both characters’ reactions to one another are often presented in a way that suggests neither of them is at a great advantage or disadvantage in the relationship. While the Virginian may wax philosophical about independence and equality in the U.S., causing “that fortress within her [...] to shake” (91), and Molly may lend him books in an effort to “tame” the “wild man” (139), the Narrator often undermines these heightened moments of romantic battle rhetoric with a hint that something else is happening entirely: In referring to an argument of wits between Molly and the Virginian, the Narrator asks, “Which of the two won a victory this day?” (92), and in response to his initial accusation that Molly was attempting to “tame” the Virginian, he somehow intuits “that she didn’t want to tame him,” asking, “But what did she want to do?” (140). As Kaplan has observed of the role of women in other westerns, here too Molly seems so very much to be co-opting both of their desires. The romantic conflict does resolve in marriage, an institution Molly is initially resistant to early in the novel. But while marriage in this case could be interpreted as an oppressive patriarchal “win” for the Virginian, the amount of agency Wister has supplied Molly’s character would seem to grant her an equal share in their eventual decision to marry. I don’t make this assertion to suggest that *The Virginian* is not a novel heavily focused on a patriarchal identity—it most certainly is. My focus, instead, is on the symbolic role of Molly and the Virginian as representatives of a revised national identity. Their relationship, in alignment with more ethnocentric and nationalistic histrionic accounts of Westward conquest, romanticizes such endeavors, carrying with it all the glory and none of the complex injustices of conquest. Put a different way, their courtship is projected as an enjoyable series of battles, ending

amiably—just as early twentieth-century historians preferred to record westward conquest as a celebration, choosing to ignore the inherent oppressiveness involved in campaigns of conquest.

*Re-Remembering Origins: The Importance of Anglo-Exclusive Narrative*

With respect to Anglo-exclusive narratives of the West, it's not surprising that Wister's novel is entirely focused on the exploits of the Virginian and the eastern and western Anglo-Americans he encounters. This doesn't necessarily mean that Wister is oblivious in his omission of the Western "others" in his narrative. Certain episodes in *The Virginian* nearly beg the reader to be cautious of the intentions behind well-told fanciful narratives. Throughout *The Virginian*, Wister devotes a fair amount of time to the art of telling "tall tales" as a kind of battle of wits in the establishment of a preferred model for masculinity. These storytelling exercises have a desired outcome of getting the best of a gullible listener. Successfully inventing a story and having someone believe it results in praise and celebration for the storyteller, but a loss of face for the gullible victim (and his associates by proxy). For the men in the novel it is a check on manliness—a check Wister's deictic Narrator is able to identify after he becomes the hapless victim of one such test. Why the inclusion of several of these tests is important in this analysis can be discerned from the Narrator's response:

It had been so well conducted from the imperceptible beginning. Fact and falsehood blended with such perfect art. And this last, an effect so new made with such world-old material! I cared nothing that I was victim, and I joined them; but ceased, feeling suddenly somehow estranged or chilled. It was in their laughter. The loudness was too loud. And I caught the eyes of Trampas fixed upon the Virginian with exultant malevolence. Scipio's disgusted glance was upon me from the door. (113)

The Narrator's exuberance seems almost like a meta-commentary on the novel itself. Though it is more likely an unintended irony that when the Narrator takes note of the Virginian and Scipio's dissatisfaction at a member of their party being duped, it certainly reads like a criticism on a reader that is willing to devour a novel that's exclusively about the entitlement of westward Anglo-conquest without the presence of the conquered others of the American West. As a narrative that celebrates conquest and seeks to establish a national identity born from selective narratives rather than historic conquest, Wister's novel, as with Frederick Turner's Western history, allows "fact and falsehood" to be "blended with [...] perfect art," excluding all non-Anglo elements from its narrative.

"Excludes" might be too near an absolute in this assessment, as Native Americans are mentioned on several occasions. Though the inclusion of non-Anglo elements are rare in the novel, the brief mentions of Native Americans, which seem innocuous at the time of discussion, culminate in an Indian attack that seems almost redacted in the absence of its real-time narrative account. The whole of the event is extremely peculiar. It begins with an account that feels protracted in hindsight of the limited information provided for the culminating incident:

"See any Indians?" [Balaam] inquired.

"Na-a!" said Shorty, in disdain of recent rumors.

"They're heading' the other way," observed the Virginian. "Bow Laig Range is where they was repawted."

"What business have they got off the reservation, I'd like to know," said [Balaam]— "Bow Leg, or anywhere?"

"Oh, it's just a hunt, and a kind of visiting' their friends on the South Reservation," Shorty explained. "Squaws along and all."

“Well, if the folks at Washington don’t keep squaws and all where they belong,” said Balaam, in a rage, “the folks in Wyoming Territory ‘ill do a little job that way themselves.”

“There’s a petition out,” said Shorty. “Paper’s join’ east with a lot of names to it. But they ain’t no harm, them Indians ain’t.”

“No harm?” rasped out Balaam. “Was it white men druv off the O.C. yearlings?” (176-177)

Both Shorty and the Virginian are unconcerned with the supposed Indian threat looming in Bow Laig Range. This late in the novel, there is no reason to suspect that the Virginian is anything but infallible as the ideal male model of superior morality in the West. So when the Virginian takes a position opposite Balaam here, it should be possible to interpret Wister’s protagonist’s empathy for the Indians as a projection of his own, and thusly the entire conversation should operate as a way of revealing Balaam as a bigot. Further compounding Balaam’s distinction as morally inferior to the Virginian, by this point in the novel, the Narrator has already called into question Balaam’s moral character on a number of occasions, including the reveal that Balaam is the fictionalized stand-in for the “maltreater of horses” addressed earlier, based upon, and revised from, Wister’s personal experiences. The horse abuse scene takes place between this conversation and the Indian attack, reaffirming the Virginian’s suspicions of Balaam’s unscrupulous behavior. What then is to be made of Wister’s design, wherein the only negative commentary on Indians is proffered by the morally corrupt Balaam, who— only a few pages earlier— the Virginian beats nearly unconscious for his abuse of a horse? While Balaam’s lack of courage is reaffirmed in his decision to abandon the Virginian after he goes missing, Balaam’s paranoia of hostile Indians is reiterated before the chapter ends: “‘Peaceable’ Indians were still in

these mountains, and some few of them had for the past hour been skirting his journey unseen, and now waited for him in the wood, which they expected him to enter” (193). Wister channels Balaam’s thoughts, using sarcasm, which acts as a validation of Balaam’s prior concerns, suggesting a naiveté on the part of the Virginian. Further complicating this incident as a narrative whole, is the absence of the Virginian’s attackers from the narrative altogether. The attack is not accounted for in any real detail, occurring entirely off-stage, and distinguishing itself from every other major and minor episode in the novel. In fact the Virginian is only seen again once Molly finds him after the attack, and proceeds to nurse him back to health.<sup>3</sup> The attackers are supposedly caught, but the only account we receive of this is as follows:

The Indians who had done this were now in military custody. They had come unpermitted from a southern reservation, hunting next thieving, and as a slumbering spirit roused in one or two of the young and ambitious, they had ventured this in the secret mountains, and perhaps had killed a trapper found there. Editors immediately reared a tall war out of it; but from five Indians in a guard-house waiting punishment not even an editor can supply war for more than two editions, and if the recent alarm was still a matter of talk anywhere, it was not here in the sick-room. (140-141)

The absence of the Indians as tangible characters or as players worthy of a firsthand account, confirms Balaam’s treatment of Indians as the Bogeymen of the American West, and resolves their intrusion into the narrative by relegating them to a brief aside in an otherwise noteworthy event. Regardless of Wister’s intent, either through the foreshadowing of the Indian attack by a character well established as morally inferior and untrustworthy, or in the omission any firsthand account of the encounter, the event reaffirms Native Americans as dangerous “others” who have

strayed from their designated reservation, and have thus doubly encroached upon the Anglo-only West; the first invasion is by the Indians into the Anglo-exclusive areas within the narrative, while the second is an invasion of the preferred Anglo-exclusive narrative of the American West.

Oppressively obfuscating counter-narratives in *The Virginian* and other texts, like the incident with Balaam and the culminating “off-stage” Indian attack, act as a prelude to further marginalizations and erasures in popularly received Anglo-exclusive narratives. The normalization of these Western set Anglo-exclusive narratives can be further tracked in Wister’s adaptation of the book as a stage drama.

#### *The Normalization of Empire Through the Syndication of Western Mythology*

In approaching *The Virginian: A Play in Four Acts* as a continuing maturation of ideology from the original text, at least one important consideration must be addressed; the first Western novel and its subsequent adaptation into a stage play crosses mediums, and thus it is necessary to recognize that what changes from one to the other is in part a result of adhering to a new medium’s maxims. Though recognition of these necessities will help dissuade a reading designed to reveal Wister’s explicit attempts, through revision and collaboration (with Kirke La Shelle), to heighten the degree of exclusion present in the original text, it does not preclude the heightened effectiveness of such changes to the prescribed narrative. The Narrator’s absence in the stage adaptation, for example, can be interpreted as an element of the novel that is dispensable on the stage; however, his absence from the production results in a hard-boiled version of the narrative that assumes the audience’s informed understanding of the basic fabula and other genre specific elements. While action beats and some rhetorical monologues about the West and national identity still remain (these have taken over by Ogden, a British man rather

than the New England Narrator from the novel), the narrative voice—whose role was to act as the voice of someone wholly new to, and somewhat naïve about, “the ways of the west”—is wholly absent. Where the novel was making a case for an ideology fueled by the West, the stage drama assumes the acceptance of its mythologized agency before the curtain even rises.

Opening just two years after *The Virginian* (the novel) was published, and running for over ten years (being performed on and off again as late as 1927), Wister’s stage adaptation was primed with an audience familiar with its source material (Rush i). This does not mean that there were not criticisms, but any criticisms of these various stage performances frequently make it a point to compliment Wister’s ability to capture something like a “real” West, rather than the unpleasant depictions of earlier Western Works. A list of positive and negative newspaper criticisms in the introduction to the stage text provides one such example of this caveat to a negatively received viewing. The unspecified “New York Paper” reads:

The accuracy of detail, and the consequent wealth of true atmosphere, is therefore, the chief value of the play. And this quality in *The Virginian* is especially worth while because heretofore the West of the dramatic stage has been—except in such rare plays as *Arizona*—a picturesque and bloody No-Man’s-Land. (Rush iv)

Clearly such reviews are more concerned with the palatability of the narrative display rather than on the professed authenticity of Western representation. Teddy Roosevelt once berated Wister for his violent, dime-novel-esque, description of the Balaam and Pedro incident in his short story; the revised version for the novel kept the incident but excised the explicit violence; and now, the stage production has removed the event entirely, along with the ensuing off-stage Indian encounter, which contradictorily presents the Balaam character as emblematic model of

unmanly behavior, and as a model cautionary tale for acceptable bigotry. What remains is the Virginian's injury and recovery—though, this time the wound is at the hands of a white antagonist. In replacing the marginalized Indian attack with a front and center revenge plot by Trampas, the evolved narrative further normalizes an Anglo-only western narrative. I don't make this case solely based on exclusion alone; the depiction of each antagonistic agent's use within each respective narrative (the novel and stage adaptation, respectively) says a lot about one of the philosophical tenets of both the novel and the stage production: equality.

Whereas the Virginian delivers much of this politically charged rhetoric in the novel, here the Judge takes over as Wister's mouthpiece:

I thought you were more far-seeing than that, Ogden. Liberty-Fraternity-Equality, eh? It's the general opinion, I suppose. But it's wrong. By the Declaration of Independence we Americans acknowledge the eternal in-equality of man. For by it we abolished a cut and dried aristocracy. We had seen little men artificially held up in high places and great men artificially held down in low places, and our own justice-loving hearts abhorred this violence to human nature. Therefore we decreed that every man should henceforth have equal liberty to find his own level. By this very decree we acknowledged and gave freedom to aristocracy saying—"Let the best man win, whoever he is." Let the best man win, that is America's word, that is true democracy, and true democracy and true aristocracy are one and the same thing. If anybody cannot see this, so much the worse for his eyesight. All America is divided into two classes, the quality and the equality. Both will be with us until our women bear nothing but kings. Do you think we are crazy? (Wister and La Shelle 30).

Thus a meritocracy for “equals” is the only means by which the inevitable inequality of a people can be determined. But that same meritocratic rhetoric in which we “let the best man win,” assumes that the “he” is of the quality to be eligible. In the stage production, the attack is carried out by Trampas, whose misdeeds serve as the chief lesson by which a man of “quality” proves himself unwilling to do honest work, instead taking an easier route, stealing cattle and tempting others to steal cattle as well. Conversely, the attack in the novel is carried out by non-descript Indians, whose misdeeds serve as a different kind of lesson, in which “other” men, not of the “quality,” are deemed unworthy of narrative inclusion beyond a peripheral nod in a text that’s already tellingly bloated from its propensity for including superfluous amounts of narrative exposition. Thusly, while this decision can be read as more than a simple adaptive consolidation of important narrative high points for the limits of the theater, it also represents an evolution in solidifying an ethnocentric Western mythology concerned chiefly with preserving the masculinized ideal through the West and blotting out alternative narratives.

It is in the vein of denying agency to the popularly “unpleasant” counter-narratives of conquest in which men like Frederick J. Turner and Owen Wister created cultural texts that emblemize a nation’s willing desire wear blinders for the promise of future to-be celebrated geo-political endeavors. These carefully selective “success” stories of the West, wherein the completion of celebratory conquest, and the creation of a model for white masculine individuality, were designed—ironically—to leave audiences wanting more. The San Francisco *Chronicle*’s review of Wister and La Shelle’s *The Virginian in Four Acts* inadvertently reveals this irony: “When the final curtain fell on *The Virginian*, the last evening at the Columbia Theater, everyone was sorry that there was not more of it” (Rush iii). That there “was not more” assumes a furtherance of the ideology of empire, while ignoring the obfuscated counter-

narratives that complicate any such celebration at the continuance of Westward conquest.

Having established the country's popular investment in such romanticized, and myopically

Anglo-only, spectacles of Western conquest, I now turn to Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the*

*Archbishop*, which responds to this trend by going out of its way to destabilize the Anglo-centric

western narrative, lending voice to a plethora of complicating counter-narratives.

## CHAPTER 2

RESISTANT MATERIALISM: THE INTERSECTION OF ETHNICITIES AND WESTERN LANDSCAPE AT WORLD'S FAIRS AND IN WILLA CATHER'S *DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP*

I have previously characterized early twentieth-century American Western history and its literature's attempts to preserve—or rather, “to invent”—a national identity through select depictions of the West as an indicator of a popular, yet myopic, ethnocentric, and nationalistic ideology. This criticism is suggestive of an early twentieth-century popular culture that was unwilling to reflect upon past expansionist endeavors as inherently, and oppressively, imperialistic, preferring instead to carve out a more palatable mythos for Anglo-American origins. But to whatever degree the preferred narrative at the turn of the twentieth-century romanticized, rather than reflected upon and assessed, acquisitions and outcomes following the cessation of Westward expansion, it is clear that—with time—authors and historians began questioning celebratory myopic Western representations like Frederick Turner's “Frontier Thesis” (first presented during the 1893 Chicago World's Fair) and Owen Wister's, *The Virginian*. Thus we can find merit in turning to a modernist text like Willa Cather's 1927 novel, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, as a work that revisits the mid-nineteenth-century settlement of the West (beginning just after the annexation of much of the eventual American Southwest from Mexico).

Cather's re-visitation to this time period comes after the first quarter of the twentieth-century had continued to boast nationalistic and ethnocentric displays of Anglo-superiority, furthering the celebration of future imperialistic designs that had clearly come to pass. These nationalistically driven celebrations of imperialism and displays of ethnocentrism were sensationalized at World's Fairs alongside modern advancements that afforded new possibilities

for prior limitations on perceived lines of geo-political power, which would in turn help further the nation's concurrent evolution from post-Westward conquest to various over-seas geopolitical conquests (including, though far from limited to: the Philippine-American War, the Spanish-American War, and the annexation of Hawaii). Though, again, I am not dealing directly with these further imperialist endeavors in this project so much as I am responding to a Western narrative that appears implicit in the naturalization of American imperialism—simultaneously obscuring the awkward and difficult to discuss non-Anglo “acquisitions” and conquered others of the West, while establishing a Western mythology that would in turn help develop post Westward settlement and postbellum national identity.

What makes *Death Comes* particularly revealing of these popular celebrations of empire comes in part as a result of Cather's determination to turn back the clock to revisit a pre-sensationalized American West at a time when it could hardly be called the “American West.” In effect, this return to the past allows her novel to re-codify early Anglo-exclusive narratives, which featured the justification, and ease, by which complex navigations in “acquiring” the West were overcome, to produce a too tidy understanding of the material elements that made up the conquered acquisitions throughout Westward settlement. Her novel reveals the myopia in texts that cleaned up a messy conquest of western lands into neatly aestheticized narratives, which approached material acquisitions (including racial/ethnic and aesthetic) through assimilation, subjugation, or obliteration.

Cather's relative designation as a Western native (though born in Virginia, she spent her formative years in Nebraska) undoubtedly contributed to her ability to recognize the West as a difficult negotiation of what I would like to call for the purposes of this case study: the Western “material elements of conquest.” Despite Cather being a relative native of the West, her novel's

meditative inclusivity of a number of these material elements was met with difficult interpretations by fans and critics alike. On the one hand, many who enjoyed the novel seemed to misunderstand Cather's careful sensitivity to a complex, yet difficult, mid-nineteenth-century West, identifying it instead as just another one-dimensional pastoral romance. On the other, her contemporary critics struggled with her novel's incorporation of the many equally regarded, though rigidly fitting, material elements of the West, questioning whether or not it could be considered "a novel" at all. In response to the positive (though by Cather's estimation, incorrect) interpretations of her novel as solely pastoral and romantic in purpose, Cather's dismay can be found in her recently published letters:

I think it's rather a mistake to emphasize the landscape—to me that suggests ornamental descriptive writing, which I hate. There really is a good deal of movement in this narrative. In future announcements won't you, with Dr. [Henry Goddard] Leach's approval, use something like the enclosed, publishing the stress more on the people than the scene?

Cather enclosed description of her novel read as follows:

Miss Cather's new narrative, *Death Comes* etc, recounts the adventures of two missionary priests in the old Southwest. Two hardy French priests find themselves set down in the strange world at the end of the Santa Fe trail, among scouts and trappers and cut-throats, old Mexican settlements and ancient Indian pueblos. The period is that immediately following the Mexican War, and the story is a rich, moving panorama of life on that wild frontier.

(*Selected Letters*, September 24, 1926)

It is true enough that one cannot help but note the level of detail included in her descriptions of the Western environment in *Death Comes*, relative to other popular depictions of the West, which seem to omit, subordinate, or severely sideline much of the American Western material ecology altogether. In other romanticized texts, non-Anglo material elements typically appear only as an obstacle that must be overcome, and thus conquered. Cather's inclusion of these descriptions is for balance, rather than to emphasize Anglo-superiority through subordination. As to the critics who suggested that *Death Comes* was hardly deserving of the designation: "a novel" at all, she writes:

The morning World [sic] tells me that judged as a novel, [*Death Comes for the Archbishop* is] a very poor performance. Just what is a novel, I wonder?  
(*Selected Letters*, September 1927)

...

This book is just one too many for the poor reviewers. They complain about it and say "it is almost impossible to classify this book," as if I had put over something unfair on them. They feel so bitterly because Knopf calls it a novel, I, myself, wanted merely to call it a narrative. I'm not sure that I know just what a novel is, and I'm not sure that the reviewers do. However, none of these things really matter. Enthusiastic reviewers may help a book along at the start; but after the first year or so, a book, like an individual, has nothing but its own vitality to carry it. (*Selected Letters*, November 9, 1927)

What her critics see as a flaw in the way her book is "almost impossible to classify," I see as a culmination of thoughtful inclusiveness. In other words, that "vitality" she astutely invokes, is in effect the import she leaves up to the scope of literary history to determine. Unlike more

ethnocentric and nationalistic origin stories revolving around the settlement of the American West, which seek to exclude or subordinate non-Anglo elements, Cather goes out of her way to objectively meditate on a “moving panorama of life,” including “Mexican settlements and ancient Indian pueblos,” French missionaries, “Trappers and cut-throats,” as well as Americans (*Selected Letters* September 24, 1926). I suspect that her critics’ issue over the “classification” of *Death Comes* as “a novel” is little more than an inability to recognize her narrative as a unique palate of diverse and historically rich elements that make up a national identity, balking at not only past ethnocentric and nationalistic narratives, but at times also pushing against humanistic American conquests of nature. In inclusivity, Cather’s novel is a poster child of a 1920s New Historicist fiction concerned, not with creating a new national identity, but rather with uncovering an obscured one that was quickly disappearing as Modernity pushed the development of the nation further and faster from formative events in the nation’s Westward settlement.

Before engaging in a close reading of Cather’s text, I will first examine collected displays of twentieth-century jingoism and geological feats of technological advancement popularly exhibited at World’s Fairs between 1898 and 1915. These displays are some of the best combined demonstrations of Modernity’s continuing Anglo-superior narratives through celebrations of technological advancements, adding to the celebratory narrative of past, present, and future Anglo-American imperial endeavors. After establishing a cultural ideology of further imperialism that had escalated since the closing of the frontier, I will then provide a close reading of how Cather’s novel re-inserts various dominated, or omitted, “others” of the historic American West, wherein I will proceed to explore her narrative’s more complex West—a West in which she sets her protagonists to negotiating with numerous, difficultly-fitting Western

“material” elements (racial/ethnic and aesthetic) which were presented as “acquirable”—and thus conquerable—over the course of reaffirming the Anglo-centric narrative of Westward settlement.

*De-Materializing the Spoils of Empire at World’s Fairs: 1898-1915*

*“It’s almost as good as a trip to the islands.”—New York Times*

*“[Now] you do not need to visit the Canal itself.”—Pan-Pacific International Exposition Advertisement*

The national and ethnocentric materialism at World’s Fairs during the early twentieth-century was nothing new; past World’s Fair spectators indulged in “other” exhibits, designed in part to emphasize ethno-nationalistic superiority; and it was at the Columbian International Exhibition in Chicago, 1893, in which Frederick Turner delivered his “Frontier Thesis” to fairgoers. What distinguishes the American World’s Fairs of the early twentieth-century is their newfound celebration of materialism through overseas conquest. While other countries imported their own displays, and “primitive” exhibits had been commissioned and displayed at past American fairs, these displays of foreign primitivism in many cases were no longer simply spectacle—they were evidence of militaristic acquisitions by a mono-ethnic and newly minted imperial nation.

This escalation of American imperialism is part of the natural progression so invoked by Turner in his thesis; the West was conquered, and now that the American spirit of exploration needed new outlets (overseas) in order to continue thriving—and this “need” begat the satiating geo-political endeavors in 1898 with Cuba, Hawaii, and the Philippines. But it is important to remember that these endeavors were not accessible as part of the American everyday quotidian. Not dissimilar to the American West, a “Virgin” land now tamed, many Americans relied upon imported and highly selective displays, and fanciful accounts of these prosthetic extensions of

the United States' growing geo-political presence. Alan Trachtenberg has also made this connection between the romanticization of the West and the spectacle of World's Fairs in his book, *The Incorporation of America*, positing that the "ways of interpreting the [Western] land tend to become equivalents to acting upon it, consuming it as an aesthetic object, as a resource" (18). Likewise, it is not the action of conquest that interests me in this case study so much as it is the narrative portrayal, aiding in the perpetuation of American entitlement to oppressive geo-political acquisitions. American World's Fairs from 1898 to 1915 were a hugely popular breeding ground for a cultural belief in myopic Anglo-histories as Robert Rydell has shown, "easily" partitioned displays of civilization and primitivism, and celebrations of assimilated betterment of those "others" or—in lieu of their submission/ cooperation—their obliteration from the popular narrative altogether.

Subsequent to the Philippine-American War, Philippine exhibits were one of the more highly sought after, and extremely popular, spectacles at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York and at the Louisiana Purchase International Exhibit in St. Louis (1901 and 1904, respectively). Both fairs' displays were large, and highly elaborate surrogate spectacles for the ameliorative effect of American imperialism on "primitive" cultures:

In an eleven acre enclosure, a village that was based on photographs of villages in the Philippines was constructed and populated with a few Filipinos brought over for the occasion. Visitors rode around in carts pulled by water buffalo, leading the *New York Times* to gush, "It is almost as good as a trip to the islands." The Village made one point clear: the Filipinos, who were represented as a people indifferent to work, were greatly in need of American intervention and uplift. The Filipino Village was such a successful endeavor that the federal government

decided to jump in and began planning for a more elaborate installation at the St. Louis Exposition. (Rydell 50)

Exhibits like these served the Anglo-centric narrative of superiority, as ethno-nationalistic signifiers (the construction of grandiose displays that exude authenticity, despite being constructed and thus forming a distinct, fabricated narrative), and signified the ameliorative effects of American Imperialism. Further examples of this signified Anglo-intervention in primitive societies were present at most fairs. Among these exhibits were emphases on contributions to primitives' quality of life, and demonstrations of physiologically "well-defined" theories of "racial hierarchy" based on "differences in cranial capacity and manual dexterity among the races" (Rydell 54). However disconcerting the underlying propaganda behind displays such as these, more extreme displays were proposed. One of the more horrific—and thankfully unrealized—designs for the Pan-American fair's Philippine exhibit was to bring Emilio Aguinaldo, the leader of the Philippine insurrection, to the Pan-American exhibit and put on display for public voyeuristic consumption (50). Thankfully, the government "refused to provide any funds for such an attraction" (50), demonstrating at least some reservations for the implications such displays of conquest might have. Even still, the remaining ethno-nationalistic displays of conquest at World's Fairs were clearly indicative of a culture no longer in need of popular justifications for such endeavors—justification was now implied in the ameliorative effects of empire. But the American populace still desired meaningful imperial trophies to stand in for the material consumption of imperial acquisitions.

This espoused narrative of empire as a form of national philanthropy did not of course preclude the economics of imperialism. The level of saturation in which imperial justifications were embedded in the signifying narrative displays at World's Fairs would continue in further

trans-national feats of modern imperialism. Though the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exhibit (PPIE) in San Francisco celebrated the construction of the Panama Canal (I'll return to this shortly), it also continued the tradition of exotic sensationalism. Robert Rydell equates shows of exotic acquisition at the PPIE with American growth and investment, listing “replicas of a Mexican village, a Samoan village, and an African village as well as the Mysterious Orient, Japan-Beautiful, and a Chinese village, which portrayed China as a land ripe for American investment” (67). Despite the projection of a well-intentioned philanthropic form of imperialism that many World's Fair exhibits sought to exude, the import of material acquisition was equally present. But it is the popularly romanticized narrative in conjunction with economic drive that jointly stimulated modern imperial reasoning. Again, Alan Trachtenberg traces this phenomenon in American imperial identity to Western mythological conquest:

Land and minerals served economic and ideological purposes, the two merging into a single complex image of the West: a temporal site of the route from past to future, and the spatial site for revitalizing national energies. As myth and as economic entity, the West proved indispensable to the formation of a national society and a cultural mission: to fill the vacancy of the Western spaces with civilization, by means of incorporation (political as well as economic) and violence. Myth and exploration, incorporation and violence: the process went hand in hand. (17)

This two-fold process is at the heart of reforming a postbellum national identity. This new identity was formed through the absorption of the West's untapped resources and the supposed philanthropic incorporation of its people, or—in the case of their resistance—a violent (both literal and historic) erasure.

Next to other centerpiece displays at World's Fairs between 1898 and 1915, the one at the PPIE—the Canal replica itself—was perhaps the most reflective of the perpetuating narrative of empire through prosthetic spectatorship. In “Science Fiction, the World's Fair, and the Prosthetics of Empire, 1910-1915,” Bill Brown's astute observations about the exhibit and its advertising campaign reveal a great deal about the popular spectatorship of American empire. Of the exhibit itself, he writes:

One “of the most remarkable reproductions ever seen,” the canal left viewers agreeing with ‘the advertisements’ that said, now ‘you don't need to visit the Canal itself.’ This sort of hyperreality achieved by the diversion—no one needed to see the real canal to know that they did not really need to see it—may well have resulted from its prefiguration of aerial cinematography, its anticipation of the visual experience that inventions at the fair were beginning to produce within the everyday: ‘one can almost imagine he is taking an airplane trip over the Isthmus of Panama. A birdseye view of the entire country is obtained as the moving platform slowly conveys one over the five-acre tract of land upon which has been constructed this clever piece of engineering work.’ (Brown 142)

As with the Philippine exhibit in Buffalo, New York, the spectator is assured he or she need not “visit the canal itself.” This “hyperreality,” as Brown calls it, naturalizes a highly orchestrated model in place of the material accomplishment—all the while assuring American spectators that the constructed narrative should be interpreted as a pristine actualization of the real thing. As for the “actual” canal, it is of course a sea-fairing extension of a growing U.S. imperial power. The modern display of simulated aeronautics used to present the model canal at the PPIE, seems almost preemptively anachronistic in its celebratory convergence of growing naval empire via

aerial display. Gillian Beer's essay, "The Island and the Aeroplane," commenting on H.G. Wells' *The Way the World is Going* (1927, coincidentally the same year Cather published *Archbishop*), works well to highlight this odd confluence of technological advancement:

H.G. Wells astutely commented [...] on the contrast between the steamship and the aeroplane era: "the steam-ship-created British Empire...is, aerially speaking, decapitated. You cannot fly from the British Isles to the vast dominions round and about the Indian Ocean without infringing foreign territory" (*The Way the World is Going* 131). In the Victorian period, he suggested, the sea-tracks of the long-distance steam-ships could foster the illusion that the British Empire dominated the entire world, because it was possible to set out from the central island and stay always within either British or international waters. This is an ingenious rationalization of the expansionist phase of the island story. (Beer 272)

As with the growing American empire, the prosthetic "illusion" of overseas expansiveness helped foster the ideological drive of the British Empire. Beer's essay may suggest a waning of empire with the rise of aeronautics and decline of naval power, but she fails to recognize "empire" as a mutable organism. Empire after all may rely on a means of expansion and sustainability, but the ultimate definition relies on breaking, maintaining, and redrawing foreign and domestic man-made lines power. And it is on the "man-made," rather than the technological, in which the PPIE chose to focus its advertising emphasis:

Despite the fair's display of technological marvels (and despite the fact that a hydroelectrical magnate, Charles C. Moore, served as chairman of the Panama Exposition Company), the official poster for the fair, Perham Nahl's "The Thirteenth Labor of Hercules," displays nothing technological. Instead, it shows a

muscled, naked, Michelangelesque hero forcing apart a pastoral Culebra Cut to create the canal—or, as Frank Todd, the fair’s official historian, phrased it, “thrusting apart the continental barrier at Panama to let the world through to the Pacific and incidentally to the...Exposition, whose fair domes and pinnacles rise mistily beyond.” [...] If such engineering marvels as the Crystal Palace and the Eiffel Tower were emblems of “progress,” here it is instead a transcendental hero who emblemizes “power.” (Brown 146)

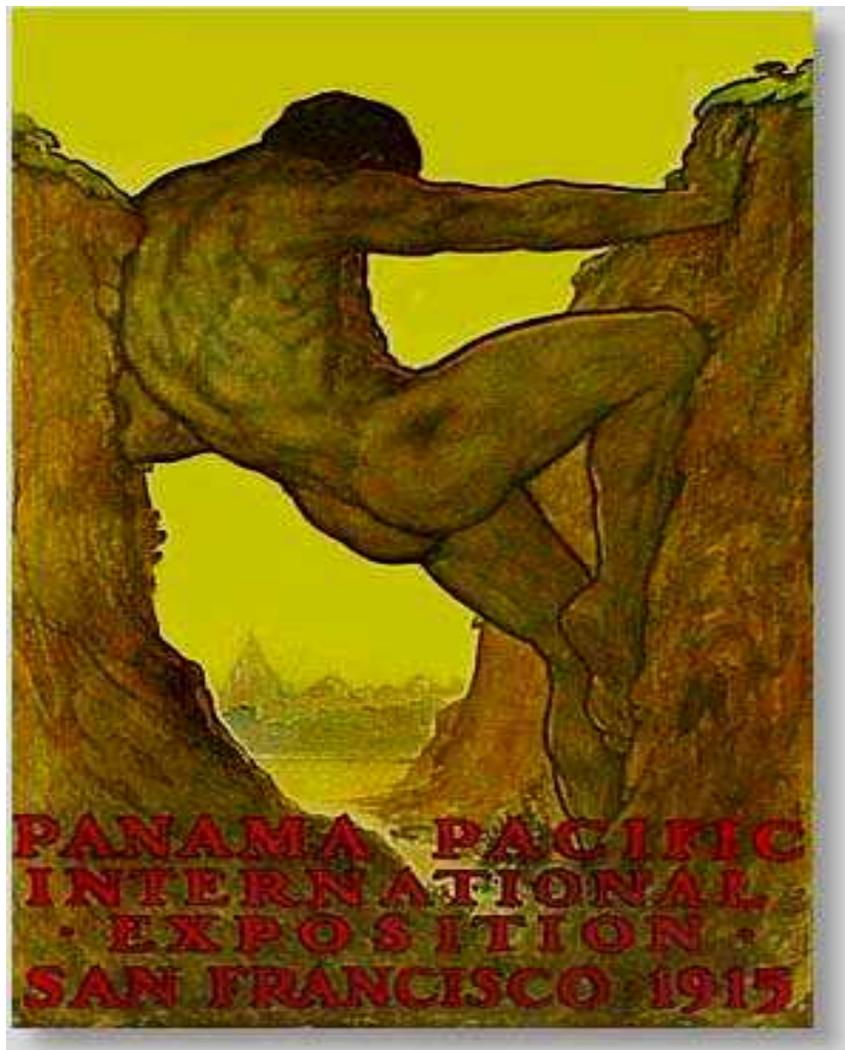


Figure 1.

That emblematic “power” is a distinct portrayal of a single white American show of accomplishment and implied futurism of material prosperity, disregarding due credit to whom Frank Todd, the PPIE’s official historian, identified as “the work of the 30-40,000 ‘white and negro workmen’ (Todd 18), primarily West Indians, employed to construct the canal” (Brown 146). The mono-herculean feat pictured in the poster is not a lie, so much as it is a fanciful rendering of a labor-intensive— and ethnically exploitative—project. The rendering is suggestive of a subsumed effort—an all-inclusive “oneness” of national identity. And yet, the ethnocentric displays throughout the PPIE and other World’s Fairs after 1898, reveal a romanticization of empire, largely fueled by cultural narratives of superiority through racial othering and prosthetic aestheticization of the western landscapes.

*Temporality, Ethnicity, and Aesthetics—Resisting Material Conquest in Western Narrative*

*“Beyond the balustrade was the drop into the air, and far below the landscape stretched soft and undulating; there was nothing to arrest the eye until it reached Rome itself” (Death Comes 3).*

Unlike the central theme of empire at American World’s Fairs of the early twentieth-century, which sensationalized and subordinated foreign and domestic others, Willa Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop* resists narrative spectacle, and is sensitive to diversity. Though Cather’s novel is anti-spectacle in nature, she is keenly aware of that the Western genre is spectacle-based. In numerous incidents throughout the novel, Cather sets up all the requisite situations and catalysts in which the spectacle of conflict in dime novels, or the polarized heroics/villain showdowns of Romantic Westerns might be played out, only to diffuse any given conflict through anti-spectacle and anti-heroics. One of the better examples of these anti-action

incidents in the novel takes place when Latour first meets Magdalena and her husband, Buck Scales.

Latour and Valliant come across the dilapidated house while in need of shelter for the night, only to be warned of danger by Magdalena's signage (a cutthroat motion of her hand coupled with a "look of horror beyond anything language could convey" (68). The scene escalates thusly:

Father Joseph was the first to find his tongue. "There is no doubt of her meaning. Your pistol is loaded, Jean?"

"Yes, but I neglected to keep it dry. No matter."

They hurried out of the house. It was still light enough to see the stable through the grey drive of rain, and they went toward it.

"Señor American," the Bishop called, "will you be good enough to bring out our mules?"

The man came out of the stable. "What do you want?"

"Our mules. We have changed our mind. We will push on to Mora. And here is a dollar for your trouble."

The man took a threatening attitude. As he looked from one to the other his head played from side to side exactly like a snake's. "What's the matter? My house ain't good enough for ye?"

"No explanation is necessary. Go into the barn and get the mules, Father Joseph."

"You dare go into my stable, you-----priest!"

The Bishop drew his pistol. “no profanity, Señor. We want nothing from you but to get away from your uncivil tongue. Stand where you are.” (Cather 68-69)

The action ends there. The priests ride away, leaving Buck Scales and Magdalena behind at the cabin. The remainder of the episode plays out like an afterthought rather than an aggrandized tale of Western honor and fortitude. Buck Scales is revealed as a murderer of travellers and hanged “after a short trial” (77), but that is the extent to his story. The priests may have revealed a gun for defense, but no pretense of action over preservation is made, and Magdalena’s salvation comes not at the hands of heroics, but at the hands of careful navigation and through an avoidance of romanticized conflict.

Here and in other incidents throughout the novel, careful navigation, rather than forced/imminent conflict, it seems, is the mode in which Cather chooses to have her protagonists navigate the various complexities of the American West. It is no coincidence that the above scene is set up the way it is. Cather’s resolution to a potentially explosive situation (spectacle) is not to set it off, but instead to diffuse it (anti-spectacle).

Such restraint, however, is not by any means representative of the kinds of spectacle-narratives at World’s Fairs. Her novel is meditative on the vastness of the newly acquired West, and temporally conscious of Anglo and non-Anglo histories alike. In terms of materiality of the settled west as a place of exploration and conquest, nothing is navigated without considerable difficulty, and nothing is collected without risk or the certain eventuality of loss. Everything that is presented as part of the Western material conquest in Cather’s novel, is done so, not as one would view them at World’s Fairs—acquirable, assimilable, conquerable, invisible, subduable, etc.— but with a kind of equitable acknowledgement that breathes life into the objectified

material elements that made up the “to-be conquered” West in cultural texts that one-sidedly aestheticize the achievement of empire; Cather de-normalizes the romanticized superiority narratives of conquest by presenting the “to-be conquered” as complex, resistant, and demonstrative of a Western landscape rich in history, ethnicity, ecology, belief, and language.

By preempting the increasingly popular romanticization and modernization of a U.S. Empire, Cather is able to re-visit the West before the historically rich and diverse ecologic totality of that West became recorded as the celebratory conquered material acquisitions of the West. Having already demonstrated how these popular displays of “material acquisitions” at World’s Fairs imply a narrative necessity for imperialism, I would like to turn again to Bill Brown, whose research highlights this connection, showing how materiality and modernity together complement what Roland Robertson recognized as the

“take off period of globalization.” [...] we can respect science fiction as the genre that projects the aerial and the “interplanetary” as the point of view form which the globe—newly produced and miniaturized globe—becomes perceptible.

Additionally, we can argue that the genre discursively reproduces the American naturalist and ethnographic spectacles (at world’s fairs and natural history museums) that depend on the modern imperial/metropolitan network as a mode of collection. (138)

In contrast to the collection of material spectacles at World’s Fairs, Cather accomplishes a de-simplification of Western materiality by representing two broadly defined and difficultly fitting subsets of “materialized objects” that fall under the classification of “to be conquered others”—race/ethnicity, and aestheticized Western landscapes. Both of these subsets are essential to

understanding Cather's work as a subtle meditation on the normalization of empire through narrative.

Because the novel so relies on preempting the modern romanticized "Western" narrative, it is necessary to identify Cather's concentration on these material elements with a Modern understanding of both history and the passage of time well in mind. Despite beginning approximately seventy-five years in the past, Cather's text is still Modern in its approach to the murky assessment of temporality. The title—*Death Comes*—itself includes the most important indicator for the passage of time. Without death as a marker, the passage of time becomes meaningless. On Bishop Latour's deathbed near the end of the novel, he is in a constant state of reflection on the past and finds that it "[takes] him several seconds to bring himself back to the present" (189). After all, "there was not much present left; Father Joseph dead, the Olivares both dead, Kit Carson dead, only the minor characters of his life remained in present time" (189). It is in the novel's constant inclusivity of temporal signifiers that largely distinguishes it from more romanticized images of the West that tend to adhere to a more timeless, un-phasable, and monolithic mythological template. This is not to say that *Death Comes* functions as a retelling of history, or even a "truer" history, but rather that it functions as a text that is temporally considerate of multiple complex racial/ethnic and geographic histories that are at once distinctly separate but intersecting.

One caveat should be addressed before undertaking a reading of Cather's complex and temporally aware counter-narrative to Western race and ethnicity as material objects of conquest. While Modernity is partially defined by a heightened sense of temporality due to the technological advancements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these same advancements also enabled and—I posit—likely encouraged an ease of ignoring the oppressive

history of Western conquest. Like the aerial spectacle that provided both access and illusion at the PPIE World's Fair, the railroad system also permitted an over-simplified sense of acquisition, access, and erasure in the American West. Alan Trachtenberg identifies this proto-globalization phenomenon within the American settlement of the West, writing:

The buried contradiction here between the appeal of wild grandeur and the comfort of mechanized access to the site where such an appeal can be satisfied is not merely comic in its blithe leap over wagon tracks and rotting carcasses that marked a mode of access only a few years past; it indicates a special kind of denial of social fact that afflicted sections of American culture in these years. Thus the railroad, the prime instrument of the large-scale industrialization which created American nature into 'natural resources' for commodity production, appears as a chariot winging Americans on an aesthetic journey through the new empire. Tourism, already implicit in the landscape conventions becomes yet another form of acting upon the land. (19)

*Death Comes* may begin at a point long before the railroad had reached the Pacific—“[the] railroad had been built through from New York to Cincinnati; but there it ended,” wherein it took Bishop Latour “nearly a year” to travel from the Mississippi to “the old settlement toward which he had been journeying so long” (*Death Comes* 20, 21)—but by the end of the novel, as Latour rests upon his deathbed, we see a cautious, yet hopeful, effect of the railroad during a visit from Eusabio (a Navajo Indian and Latour's longtime friend):

Out on the Colorado Chiquito [Eusabio] had heard the word, passed on from one trading post to another, that the old Archbishop was failing, and the

Indian came to Santa Fe. He, too, was an old man now. Once again their fine hands clasped. The Bishop brushed a drop of moisture from his eye.

“I have wished for this meeting, my friend. I had thought of asking you to come, but it is a long way.”

The old Navajo smiled. “not long now, any more. I come on the cars, Padre. I get on the cars at Gallup, and the same day I am here. You remember when we come together once to Santa Fe from my country? How long it take us? Two weeks, pretty near. Men travel faster now, but I do not know if they go to better things.”

“We must not try to know the future, Eusabio. It is better not. (189)

Despite Latour’s insistence that they “must not try to know the future” in this scene, it is nevertheless Cather’s intention to draw our attention to Modern considerations of fading pasts, precarious presents, and an unknowable future. Of course, Cather’s 1927 readership would have been in the keen position of “knowing” that future—a future is the one that was on display in ethnocentric “menageries” of conquest at twentieth-century “world’s fairs and history museums” (Brown 138).

### *Narrative Outcomes of Ethnic Inclusivity*

The previous scene and others like it deliver something of a prospective future of a shared ethnic prosperity, rather than possible future resolutions by assimilation, or an establishment of a hierarchical “Anglo: Other” relationship, as certain romanticized western texts have done. At the same time, there are just as many moments, if not more, wherein racial and ethnic differences appear irreconcilable; however, Cather’s attention to either of these difficult

possible outcomes is neither to emphasize their eventuality of an Anglo-dominant resolution, nor an implausibility of any such resolution, but rather to disseminate the complex negotiations between ethnicities, which Cather presents with equally weighted agency despite their highly oppositional ideologically driven cultural identities.

Consider that save for perhaps Kit Carson, no one in the novel seems to belong to his setting. Latour and Valliant are French Missionaries in “new” land that Western Civilization knows next to nothing about outside of James Fennimore Cooper novels; the native Indian population is ever in territorial conflicts between tribes, and—at novel’s present—the U.S. Government’s efforts to displace them off their land, and—in the recent past—the Mexican Government’s bounty on Indians and their goods; and Don Manuel Chavez and other Mexicans living in the newly annexed American Southwest are without certainty of current associative national identity.

Though Cather clearly uses Father Latour as a central protagonist, his actions are far from those of a dominant or egocentric Anglo-superiority narrative. It is no coincidence after all that Bishop Latour’s language is laden with not only awareness and acceptance of differences—

Jacinto usually dropped the article in speaking Spanish, just as he did in speaking English, though the Bishop had noticed that when he did give a noun its article, he used the right one. The customary omission, therefore, seemed to be a matter of taste, not ignorance. In the Indian conception of language, such attachments were superfluous and unpleasing, perhaps. (91)

—but also with the flexibility to navigate these cultural differences—

‘We missionaries wear a frock-coat and a wide-brimed hat all day, you know, and look like American traders. What a pleasure to come home at night and put on

my old cassock! I feel more like a priest then—for so much of the day I must be a ‘business man’! (35)

It is clear that the “mission” of these two protagonists is not to subvert, objectify, or conquer a recognizable cultural ecosystem. Bishop Latour and (to a less overt degree) Father Valiant are thoughtful and gracious French visitors in a culture that has a diverse and long-established history. And though they are on a theological mission in this foreign land, they carry that awareness as a tool for adaptation, rather than subjugation—even if those cultures are frequently at odds with one another, as they are with one particular Mexican, Don Manuel Chavez. To describe Chavez in brief: he lives in the territory annexed from Mexico by the United States; he “[is] jealous of [Kit Carson’s] fame as an Indian-fighter, declaring that he had seen more Indian warfare before he was twenty than Carson would ever see” (184); and boasts that “before the American occupation, ‘hunting Navajos’ needed no pretext, it was a form of sport” (183), yet he would take part in friendly competitions when “Indians came up to the village to shoot with him for wagers” (183). Both the wagers and the blood sport result in trophies. Additionally, his feelings towards Americans, and those associated with them, are made clear: “[he] never reconciled to American rule”; “he loved the natural beauties of his country with a passion, and he hated the Americans who were blind to them” (184); and he openly “distrusted the Bishop [Latour] because of his friendliness toward Indians and Yankees” (185).

I do not highlight Chavez here as a singular encounter or as an unusual outlier that Latour meets over the course of their twenty years in the West—he’s not. His character is just particularly useful as a revelatory tool, which produces a western society with more than one competing ideological points of view. There are plenty of other characters with complex moral and philosophical belief systems that are antithetical to the typically simplified Anglo-Western

narrative. Kit Carson, one of only two Americans in the novel, stands out as another potent example—though his case is far more protracted than the upfront conciseness of Chavez's.

Kit Carson's presence as a minor character popping up throughout the novel is surely Cather's way of acknowledging not only Carson as a historic figure, but also as a historic figure whose fame in part resulted (and was reciprocally aided) by the popular use of his name and character in dime novels in the mid-nineteenth-century. These dime novels depicted Carson as a "skilled horseman, expert hunter, and first-rate guide," and characterized him as "fearless in the face of danger, capable of withstanding extreme physical hardships and of overcoming tremendous odds to avenge wrongs committed by 'brutal savages'" (Miller 5). While historic accounts of Carson seem to suggest something of an amiable persona, there are also contradictory accounts of him being both friend and foe to the Navajos Indians. These contradictions raise concern for caution when navigating the murky biographical records of a historic figure that was also featured as a fancifully rendered character in fiction. Cather is well aware of these conflicting accounts, though one would not know it during early encounters between Latour and Kit Carson. The very first meeting presents him as a kind and considerate man, though certainly emblematic of the typical model of romanticized frontier masculinity. Cather's narrative design delivers a persona that feels like a combination of Latour and some generic "capable" western frontiersman. The following two evaluative passages highlight this correlation:

His face was both thoughtful and alert; anxiety had drawn a permanent ridge between his blue eyes. Under his blond moustache his mouth had a singular refinement. The lips were full and delicately modeled. There was something curiously unconscious about his mouth, reflective, a little melancholy,—and

something that suggested a capacity for tenderness. The Bishop felt a quick glow of pleasure in looking at the man. As he stood there in his buckskin clothes one felt in him standards, loyalties, a code which is not easily put into words but which is instantly felt when two men who live by it come together by chance.

(74)

...

Out of the hardships of [Kit Carson's] boyhood—from fourteen to twenty picking up a bare living as a cook or mule-driver for wagon trains, often in the service of brutal and desperate characters—he had preserved a clean sense of honour and a compassionate heart. (76)

Here, we are left with no doubt as to the resilience of Carson's fortitude against the corruptions of "brutal and desperate characters" and his ability to maintain a "clean sense of honour" and compassion. But Cather unsettles this literarily and historically lauded persona in the final pages of the book, as Latour reminisces on an unfavorable account from the now dead Kit Carson's life:

It was his own misguided friend, Kit Carson, who finally subdued the last unconquered remnant of [the Navajos] people; who followed them into the depths of the canyon de Chelly, whither they had fled from their grazing plains and pine forests to make their last stand. They were shepherds, with no property but their live-stock, encumbered by their women and children, poorly armed and with scanty ammunition. But this canyon had always before proved impenetrable to white troops. The Navajos believe it could not be taken. They believed that their

old gods dwelt in the fastness of that canyon; like their Shiprock, it was an inviolate place, the very heart and centre of their life.

Carson followed them down into the hidden world between those towering walls of red sandstone, spoiled their stores, destroyed their deep-sheltered corn-fields, cut down the terraced peach orchards so dear to them. When they saw all that was sacred to them laid waste, the Navajos lost heart. They did not surrender; they simply ceased to fight, and were taken. (291-292)

Latour attempts to reconcile Carson's contrary actions with his amiable persona by first identifying Carson's raid on the sheltered Navajos as "misguided" only to ascribe his capacity to do so to the requisite sliding moral compass of a soldier—"Carson was a soldier under orders, and he did a soldier's brutal work" (292). Latour's assessment of Kit Carson earlier in the novel as a pleasant beacon of American "goodness" in the west is clearly used as a comparative to the—by Latour's estimate—less-pleasant, and newly displaced Mexican, Don Manuel Chavez. But it is no coincidence that both are presented as having made a name for themselves from dealing with and killing Indians—and both result in trophies:

[Chavez] would come home bringing flocks and ponies and a bunch of prisoners, for every one of whom they received a large bounty from the Mexican Government. It was with such a raiding party that the boy Chavez went out for spoil and adventure. (184).

...

[Chavez's] house and stables were full of trophies. He took a cool pleasure in stripping the Indians of their horses or silver or blankets, or whatever they had put

up on their man. He was proud of his skill with Indian weapons; he had acquired it in a hard school (183).

Like Chavez, Carson's orders to subdue "the last unconquered remnant" of the Navajos people results in conquest and acquisition; the distinction between the two being that the former is given personal agency to do so, while the latter is institutionalized, and therefore somehow less egregious.<sup>4</sup>

*Intersecting Ethnicity and the Narrative Aesthetic Consumption of Western Ecology*

Long established American beliefs that lead to government sanctioned Indian displacements of the 1830s, or the "Join or be Crushed" assimilationist mantra of the 1887 Dawes Act were ideologies that were acquisition-based, and thus inherently imperial. In the case of the Dawes Act, which asked male Indians to declare independence from their tribe in exchange for quantifiable land, "it offered a choice: either abandon Indian society and culture, and thus become a 'free' American, or remain an Indian, socially and legally dependent" (Trachtenberg 33). But even if the offensive ideological assumptions about property and monoculture are overlooked, it is still just a prettied up version President Andrew Jackson 1830s sanctioned Treaty-based Indian displacements—treaties, which, "as the [then] governor of Georgia [described it,] 'were expedients by which ignorant intractable, and savage people had the right to possess by virtue of that command of the Creator delivered to man upon his formation—be fruitful, multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it'" (Trachtenberg 29). This is the intersecting point, and inherent locality of land-based oppression, between material acquisitions of conquest in Western romance novels and the collected spectacles at World's Fairs. As I indicated earlier in this chapter, Trachtenberg elegantly describes this type of

materialistically romanticized voyeurism as an interpretation of the land that “becomes [equivalent] to acting upon it, consuming it as an aesthetic object, as a resource” (18).

Relating the spectacle of World’s Fairs with the aesthetic consumption of the romanticized West enables a clearer understanding of how the materiality of aesthetics can be translated into a form of possession, thus revealing early twentieth-century romanticized spectacle as a major cultural perpetuator of empire. A text like Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* clearly depicts the West with an aesthetic pleasure that’s both mysteriously beautiful and uncaringly dangerous. But at the same time, Wister’s landscape is simply there as a carefully corralled spectacle by which *The Virginian* can demonstrate his masculine agency over that nature. With that in mind, how then can Cather’s particular aesthetic brand of anti-spectacle in the West be read as an identification of another form of consumable material—the spectacle of Western landscape—and what does it say about the rise of America as an empire?

Lee Clark Mitchell provides a simple explanation, connecting literary place with a personal need and fulfillment for identity, writing “literary truth is not geographic truth [...], but serves a larger metonymic, often psychological role. And the sense of place we cherish in fiction thus offers more than mere lyrical delight in landscape” (102). Western literature that focuses on an unspoiled landscape for the sake of demonstrating man’s dominance over it clearly serves a greater underlying purpose than aesthetic pleasure alone. The aesthetic materialization of that landscape repackages an idea of the West into something obtainable, whether that piece of literature’s metonymic function bears any resemblance to the actual place doesn’t matter in the process of its literary consumption and its subsequent assimilation as part of the nation’s identity. And this is where Cather’s novel further impresses its distinctness from other Western literature.

Without the luxury of railway travel, Latour is limited to travel by mule, allotting Cather ample opportunity to detail the natural forces around him. In one of the earliest episodes of Latour's meditative encounters with nature, he has become lost and without food or water for some time before happening upon a spring in the middle of desert-like terrain. Shortly after arriving here, he finds that a Mexican family had discovered this spring long ago, choosing to build their house near it, though they now fear that the recent annexation of their property from Mexico will enable the Americans to seize it from them. Latour later ruminates on the spring, thinking, "This spot had been a refuge for humanity long before these Mexicans had come upon it. It was older than history, like those well-heads in his own country where the Roman settlers had set up the image of a river goddess, and later the Christian priests had planted a cross" (33). Here, Latour is saved due to circumstances of chance rather than any particular human ingenuity on his part. What's more, Cather ascribes a temporal agency to these natural springs, taking care to demonstrate the inconsequentiality of both national and theological claims to these natural resources have in the grand scheme of things.

While Cather is providing a counter-narrative to the material conquest over nature present in other romanticized texts, she also holds a certain reverence for the native's impact upon their Western surroundings. She expresses this distinction using an aging Latour as her mouthpiece:

They seemed to have none of the European's desire to "master" nature, to arrange and re-create. They spent their ingenuity in the other direction; in accommodating themselves to the scene in which they found themselves. This was not so much from indolence, the Bishop thought, as from an inherited caution and respect. (233)

The “inherited caution and respect” here is key to understanding Cather’s juxtaposition of, and meditation on, differing cultural functions of narrative. And Cather’s reverence for the land is certainly not simply reverence for reverence’s sake; if it were, it would be no better than Wister’s material projection of a different perspective on the appreciation of Western ecology. Instead, her objective is to metalinguistically single out the truly efficacious function of ideology via narrative. Whatever prescribed aesthetics are invoked, it is in the cultural prescription that the Navajos in Cather’s novel inherit in the process of continuing their ideological practices—just as American ideologies were perpetuated through the prosthetics of narrative spectacle in literature concerned with Westward conquest, and through the spectacles at World’s Fairs in the early twentieth-century.

It is no new concept to suggest that dominant cultures are responsible for whatever popular histories come to be widely believed; however, this is precisely what gives New Historicism its drive and import in examining cultural texts that seem at cross-purpose with one another. New Historicists don’t presume to rewrite history; instead, New Historicism functions best by presenting popular narrative and counter-narrative as two parts of the whole. Together, questions about American culture can be unearthed through popular and unpopular/forgotten narratives alike. Like a work of New Historicist fiction, Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop* seems to suggest a complexity of narrative that resists exactness or agency of the more widely espoused historical narratives about the West. It’s a fictional text, with researched historical ties, presenting the American West as anything but the neatly parceled out displays of conquest (both Western and abroad) at World’s Fairs. Cather’s pre-Modern West is resistant to the material acquisitions of conquest that have so defined the mythologized American West. And as such, *Death Comes* can be read as an antithetical narrative to the popularized Western

narrative, which acts as a major driving force behind building the American ethos of empire through the active modes of prosthetic narrative displays of acquisition.

## CHAPTER 3

UNSETTLING THE BINARIES OF WESTERN ROMANCE: A POSTMODERN RESPONSE  
TO WORLD WAR II JAPANESE-AMERICAN INTERNMENT AND CORMAC  
MCCARTHY'S *ALL THE PRETTY HORSES*

The early twentieth-century may have been the starting place for what would come to be understood as the beginnings of American imperialism; however, the first two decades hardly demonstrate any sort of bookend diminishment of geo-political conflict and controversy. The entirety of the twentieth-century, and clearly now well into the twenty-first, has been fraught with international conflict that I will not tediously list out in full here. But while each conflict undoubtedly had its own unique motive and catalyst, I would argue that each was imbued with the same underlying frontier pride of conquest, helping to fuel the American brand of “Us” versus “Them” binary warfare. One of the more apt examples of this intersecting point of War and the West came during World War II, with the internment of over one hundred thousand first (Issei) and second (Nisei) generation Japanese-American immigrants—over half of whom were American citizens (Hayashi 75).

The romanticization of Westward conquest inherently relies upon a binary—that one-sided myopic gaze I emphasized in my last chapter, and to which Willa Cather was so consciously resistant. But in naming *Death Comes for the Archbishop* a proto-New Historicist text, I mean to identify it as a work that is not attempting to change the past so much as it is an effort to reveal a more complex past in a more inclusive manner. And besides, the bravado of the mythic American cowboy and the romanticized conquest of the West live on in popular representations stemming from television and film to active military nomenclature (Apache Attack Helicopters, Tomahawk Missiles, and Geronimo Base, to name a few).<sup>5</sup> That is to say, *Death Comes* should be read as meditative representation of its contemporary culture, rather than

a functionally affective text. Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, too, represents just one cultural artifact among many even though it can be interpreted as a progenitor mold of future Western tropes. It has not been my intent to identify any of these texts as highly functional in their implicitness in the shaping of American ideology, but rather to demonstrate their ability to capture, either through supplementation or resistance, these cultural trends wherein the Western Myth intersects ideologically, over time, with the development of American Empire from the closing of the frontier, to the Modernism of the early twentieth-century, and finally to the Postmodernist movement of the late twentieth-century and beyond. And thusly, for my concluding chapter I have chosen to examine Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* (1992) as a postmodern text resistant to the binary master-narratives of American Western mythology and war.

Like Wister, McCarthy was also raised in the east. But it is his postmodern incredulity towards metanarratives that enables his outsider writing to become the antithesis of Wister's romanticization of the West. In a rare interview with the reclusive author (un-ironically titled "Hollywood's Favorite Cowboy"), *The Wall Street Journal* asked McCarthy how a man who was born in Rhode Island and grew up in Tennessee ended up writing in and about the Southwest:

I ended up in the Southwest because I knew that nobody had ever written about it. Besides Coca-Cola, the other thing that is universally known is cowboys and Indians. You can go to a mountain village in Mongolia and they'll know about cowboys. But nobody had taken it seriously, not in 200 years. I thought, here's a good subject. And it was. (*WSJ*)

One of my own experiences traveling in Southeast Asia met with similar results when I spoke with native Thais at Ratchapabra Dam, a remote manmade lake in Thailand's Khao Sok National

Rain Forest, when the response to my American nationality was more often than not met with the signature gated walk of the cowboy, or a mimed hat brim tap and head-nod. That “universally known” aspect of the American West and Southwest may have been the draw for McCarthy, but his work is indicative of anything but a perpetuation of those romantic images. In mimicking the universal narrative representations of the American cowboy of the west, McCarthy’s novels are pessimistic at their most reverent moments, and unrelentingly satirical at their most scathing. Much has been written, for example, about the lack of any amiable protagonist in his first Western novel, set in the mid-nineteenth-century, *Blood Meridian*, and some critics have gone so far as to deny the existence of a protagonist at all. This and future novels in McCarthy’s Western canon violently counter the over-simplified binaries of “Good” versus “Bad” in American Western mythology. The violence in his novels is not so much used as a way of telling “hard truths” about these supposed universal narratives, so much as they unrelentingly punish the belief and adherence to those supposed universalities.

For this case study, I will be examining one of McCarthy’s more subdued, and incidentally extremely well received novel, *All the Pretty Horses* (1992). While other McCarthy texts may serve as a better corollary and challenge to Anglo-history’s ongoing redefining of geopolitical boundaries of power, *All the Pretty Horses*, as a bildungsroman, better serves this study as a narrative that not only implicitly questions the sustainability of this perpetuated faux-nostalgia of the West, but also challenges whether that nostalgia was ever built upon anything real to begin with. Before beginning this close reading, I will examine the cultural reliance of frontier space during the World War II era of Japanese internment, as McCarthy’s text takes a different approach to the same concerns during a period when master narratives of western conquest were becoming more difficult to swallow. Yet through the closing of the frontier, and

the pursuit of new and murkily defined frontier space overseas, the American West still retained an agency through mythos, effectively becoming in itself the sounding board progenitor trope for celebratory warfare and national identity. In McCarthy's novel, the protagonist's search for this mythic West is mirrored in both the binary romanticization of Western paradisiacal space, and in the postmodern shattering of that space through internment.

*Revealing the Fallacies of Binary Warfare and Master Narratives*

Three months after the 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor and the United States' official entrance into World War II, Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066. The order enabled a limited, ethnically-driven martial law that gave specific high-ranking military officers the power to create "Exclusionary Zones," mostly along the Pacific Coast, wherein "all persons of Japanese ancestry could be removed from those zones" (*Toyasaburo Korematsu v. United States*); and "War Relocation Camps" were created to house the displacement of over 110,000 Japanese Americans affected by the order. Recognizing the extensive restriction placed on those within the camps, and the loss of these Japanese American citizen's rights and property on the basis of ethnicity, reveals this effort of war-necessitated humanitarian-relocation as something closer to another term carefully avoided in much of the government's displacement rhetoric: "Internment." Evasive rhetoric alone was not employed in the assurances made to the thousands interned in camps throughout the interior West. In one government produced Q&A pamphlet for evacuees, an answer to a question over relocated life for internees reads: "Be prepared for the Relocation Center, which is a pioneer community. So bring clothes suited to pioneer life and in keeping with the climate or climates likely to be involved" (*Questions & Answers for Evacuees*). The West—the original grounds of conquest to the "unclaimed" empire of the "New World", and

the ideology of entitlement which has since been mythologized into further geo-political fuel for empire—had become, as John Streamas so vividly puts it, “the site for barbed wire structures alternating between imprisoned animals and imprisoned humans” (172).

Streamas’s essay on young adult literature about Japanese internment during World War II not only examines the injustices endured by internees then, and in the following years in which these effects rippled beyond actual internment (more on this later), it also spends a great deal of time examining the oppressiveness of using and promoting the interior west as an adventurous place of “frontier life.” For Streamas, the government’s use of the interior West was about obfuscating the issue, both literally—through Japanese Americans’ relocation out of sight to the remote interior—and figuratively—through the public reliance on the well-established narrative role that Western space represented for many when defining America’s national identity. And true enough, these Japanese Americans were depicted as “evacuees” and “pioneers”, not “prisoners” or “internees.” In the following passage, Streamas deconstructs this ideology of the West as it was used to rebrand internment as an opportunity for Japanese Americans to expand their American-ness, since their internment would take place in an honored space of celebrated conquest and American individualism:

The frontier myth assumes the existence of pioneers who are rugged individualists; it also assumes that the frontier, however ultimately beautiful, must be “conquered.” Almost all memoirs by former inmates recall that the harshness of camp life owed not only to the government’s insensitive provisions but also to the physical environment. “Desert wasteland” is a phrase that resonates through many of these memoirs. This is not to say that the desert is inherently ugly and

harsh but that the government knowingly placed in it a people who had had no prior experience with it and were unprepared for its conditions. (Streamas 181).

It's worth noting that this "insensitivity" on the part of the government somewhat mirrors the negligence of the government-ordered displacement of Native Americans over a century earlier; however, at least with the Japanese displacement, the government's attempts to rebrand the internment experience inversely implies the existence and recognition of a potential wrong. And so it is clear that any such misgivings about the internment of over one hundred thousand Japanese Americans was easily subordinated to the doubt over their loyalty to the United States. This doubt over loyalty would pre-empt the binary pursuit of "American" versus "Un-American" designations in the Joseph McCarthy-era to come.

Thusly, the detaining and obscuring of a Japanese presence in America also served to ascertain internees' loyalty to the country that had just suspended many of their rights as citizens. One of the more notorious means of making this determination came from the precariously worded twenty-six questions of loyalty, which made up the "Statement of United States Citizen of Japanese Ancestry." While many of the questions range from "providing one's name" or "date of birth" to more superficial questions that relied on "American : Other" binaries of culture—questions over religion, hobbies, and sports seem clearly concerned with the arbitrary determination of one's "American-ness" rather than one's "loyalty"—there were two questions that troubled many in the camps, and have since gained much attention due to the problematic request for simple "yes" or "no" responses to complicated questions. The 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> questions (the final two on the questionnaire) appeared as follows:

26. Have you ever applied for repatriation to Japan? .....

27. Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered? .....

28. Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power, or organization? .....

.....  
(Date) (Signature)

NOTE.—Any person who knowingly and willfully falsifies or conceals a material fact or makes a false or fraudulent statement or representation in any matter within the jurisdiction of any department or agency of the United States is liable to a fine of not more than \$10,000 or 10 years' imprisonment, or both.

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Figure 2.

For those interned, certain citizen's rights had already been revoked. Caroline Chung-Simpson argues that these two questions “amounted to a catch-22” for Japanese American internees: “If they answered ‘yes-yes’ then they were placing themselves wholly in the hands of a government that viewed them as second-class citizens with few if any constitutional rights. If they answered ‘no-no’ [...] then they irrevocably sealed their fates as disloyal subjects who were open to punishment” (13). Demonstrative of the nation’s ignorance to the predicament World War II anxiety heaped upon Japanese-Americans, Chung-Simpson, among other scholars, has identified the answering of these final questions with a “yes-yes” or “no-no,” as an impossible decision for any internee who was remotely concerned over his current state of citizenship. And if the weight of answering these two questions “incorrectly” was not already apparent in their proximal location to the date and signature line on the questionnaire, the “NOTE” at the bottom of this final page—

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—underscores its seriousness, further adding to the awkward difficulty of answering any of the document’s questions from a present state of internment and persecution. That is not to say that those who answered “yes-yes” were free from persecution or unquestionably accepted thereafter either. One such Japanese American soldier, pre-dating the era of “yes-yes” men service, details how his post-Pearl Harbor “military experience obligated [him] to face his unique bicultural place in society.” His diary entry two months after Pearl Harbor reports: “Rumor or truth I heard we Japanese soldiers are going to be transferred to inland under psychological reason. Doubtful about our loyalty, suspicious about our allegiance to Stars and stripes[sic], I don’t feel very normal” (Walz 153).<sup>6</sup> The imposed creation of this soldier’s dual nature, as a patriotic soldier and “othered” Japanese American, is further inherent in his keeping of two diaries during his time in the service—one for tracking “survive buddies, awards received”, “duty stations”, and a record of daily events, the other with a “telling commentary of discrimination, internment, and cultural engagement [, including] a significant number of entries written in Japanese” (153). Whether a “yes-yes” man or a “no-no” man, the simple binary rhetoric of internment had struck an irreparable divide between Anglo and Japanese Americans that went beyond the remote confines of the interior West.

The importance of what’s reflected in the government’s over-simplification of a complex predicament for interned Japanese Americans is inherent in the government’s binary approach—an approach that mimics the desired romantic binaries of the interior West’s mythos. As Chung-Simpson points out, many internees were gladly willing to answer “yes-yes,” but only “after the restoration of citizenship rights stripped from them without due process.” For those who held qualms over these binary responses, it seemed “the only alternatives offered by the government were to submit completely to one’s second-class status or to engage an active resistance that

placed one on the margins of society” (Chung-Simpson 13). While Chung-Simpson is almost certainly right in her identification of marginalization through “resistance,” an even greater ostracism is suggested in Robert Hayashi’s partly biographical book on Japanese life in the American West. He posits that:

the rift between those who complied with the evacuation and those who resisted, especially the so-called no-no boys, men who resisted the drafts, remains unhealed. Not only did these men experience ostracism within the larger Nikkei community after the war, as recounted in John Okada’s novel *No-No Boy*, but the focus on the outstanding accomplishments and sacrifices of the 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team has threatened to wipe their protest out of Nikkei history and eclipse the total history of Japanese in America. (136)

In the celebration of victory in Europe and in the Pacific, the complicated position of “non-loyal” Japanese Americans was nearly eclipsed right out of history. Hayashi goes on to note the Japanese American Citizens League’s (JACL) implicitness in that obfuscation of that history through its “reluctance to divulge the extent of its cooperation with federal authorities” during the 1940s internment (137). As hindsight reveals a complex relationship between Japanese Americans and their response to the simplified “all or nothing” rhetoric of internment, so too the complicated relationships amongst Japanese Americans has further threatened to conceal the disaffection of Japanese Americans without the presence and acceptance of counter-narratives, which might otherwise present a resistance to the prescribed “pioneer-like” caveat of government instituted ethnic displacement.

Regardless of whatever histories have been left obscured or have since been unearthed, the post-internment effects are clearly traceable in the resonance of internment embedded in

future generations. Hayashi is keenly aware of this wake, offering up Idaho's official history, which states that 'many Japanese' [were] grateful for the evacuation experience,'" which he identifies as a "misrepresentation that obscures the long-term effects of evacuees and the larger Japanese American community," and, as a descendent of Japanese internment, further expresses the closeted effects on post-internment Japanese Americans, stating, "the lives of those of us not confined to those camps, but who exist only in their shadow image, also remain bordered, restricted, or directed: the communities we can't live in, the families we can't join, and the places where we can't travel safely" (115).

It is here, in the recognition of cultural damages at the hands of "American" binary assessments, that McCarthy finds his subject matter. *All the Pretty Horses* does not include Japanese internment as its subject matter, or a Japanese American character as its protagonist; what McCarthy has done with this particular text is force a white American youth, weaned on the American West's romantic binaries, out of America and into Mexico in search of that mythic West that has been culturally prescribed for him. And by flipping the circumstances—imprisoning the romantic youth in a place that demands postmodern incredulity—McCarthy's text serves as a postmodern response, indicating the self-inflicted harm these binary ideologies of Western American mythology have long since had upon the nation using those ideologies as fuel for the vindication of American empire.

#### *Assessing the Paradox of Anglo-America's Western Entitlement Complex*

McCarthy's novel begins after the death of John Grady Cole's grandfather, and with it the end of the family ranch and the "Grady" family line. The selling of the west Texas ranch prompts John Grady Cole to set out on an "adventure" south, across the border, in search of the

promise of a paradisiacal western ranching space, which appears to no longer exist in the America he was born into. John Grady's journey is a perfect allegory for the residual effects of what Amy Kaplan called the 1890s "lament for the close of the frontier," resulting in a desire and "nostalgia for the formative crucible of American manhood" ("Romancing" 664). John Grady Cole's crossing into Mexico mimics her identification of a post-frontier ideology in which "imperial expansion overseas offered a new frontier, where the essential American man could be reconstituted" (664). But before beginning a close reading of how the protagonist's border crossing reveals a perpetual disillusionment for future generations, via the promise of this culturally mythologized western space, it is necessary to identify the ways in which McCarthy's construction of John Grady Cole implicitly establishes him as both acolyte and victim of the culturally fostered mythos of the American West.

As the protagonist of a bildungsroman, John Grady has a developmental journey ahead of him. But unlike a text seeking to romanticize the West, McCarthy's novel provides us with a character that, having been weaned on the myth of Western romanticism, seems incapable of making the necessary developmental strides to accomplish this narrative function of maturation for the genre. What little we learn John Grady's family is enough to reveal the close ideological ties the family has with frontier and post-frontier ideologies. In a brief paragraph early in the novel, McCarthy first introduces John Grady's full name alongside a terse summarization of the death of the Grady family line:

His grandfather was the oldest of eight boys and the only one to live past the age of twenty-five. They were drowned, shot, kicked by horses. They perished in fires. They seemed to fear only dying in bed. The last two were killed in Puerto Rico in eighteen ninety-eight and in that year he married and brought his bride

home to the ranch and he must have walked out and stood looking at his holdings and reflected long upon the ways of God and the laws of primogeniture. Twelve years later when his wife was carried off in the influenza epidemic they still had no children. A year later he married his dead wife's older sister and a year after this [John Grady's] mother was born and that was all the borning that there was. The Grady name was buried with that old man the day the norther blew the lawnschairs [sic] over the dead cemetery grass. The boy's name was Cole. John Grady Cole. (7, spelling McCarthy's)

Unsustainability is the clear take-away from the introduction of the novel's protagonist. However, the death of this large family line does not presume that there once was a prosperous frontier life now gone. It is an assumption that the ranch was once profitable and, for John Grady, will work despite any number of possible complex hindrances to a mid-twentieth-century operation of this family owned ranch. We are informed that the house was "built in 1872," the ranch ran its "first barbed wire" in 1883, and "by eighty-six the buffalo were gone" (7). What little information McCarthy supplies his reader about the ranch and family history suggests a violent counter-narrative to the inherent prosperity advertised in the perpetuation of the supposed romantic and independent spirit of American frontier life. Furthermore, the deaths of the last two uncles in the U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico in 1898 implicitly tie frontier ideologies to the post-frontier furtherance of American empire. For John Grady Cole—notably going by "John Grady" throughout most of the novel—his desire to tow the family line seems futile at best.

What little hope there appears to be that John Grady might grow wise to the idyllic myth of Western life is delivered via his father, who, though largely absent for much of John Grady's youth, has chosen to abandon the romance of the ranch. His father's disillusionment with

frontier life seems to have been derived from his experiences fighting in the Pacific during World War II. “Experience” may appear to be the most likely narrative end for an innocence to maturity bildungsroman; however, McCarthy makes sure to cast his father in something of a melancholic state, despite this supposed learned state of experience. During the last horseback ride with his father before departing on his unannounced journey south into Mexico, the narrator evaluates the difference between the way in which John Grady and his dying father meditate on the landscape:

His father rode sitting forward slightly in the saddle, holding the reins in one hand about two inches above the saddlehorn. So thin and frail, lost in his clothes.

Looking over their country with those sunken eyes as if the world out there had been altered or made suspect by what he’d seen of it elsewhere. As if he might never see it right again. Or worse did see it right at last. See it as it had always been, would forever be.

...

The boy who rode on slightly before him sat a horse not only as if he’d been born to it which he was but as if were he begot by malice or mischance into some queer land where horses never were he would have found them anyway. Would have known that there was something missing for the world to be right or he right in it and would have set forth to wander wherever it was needed for as long as it took until he came upon one and he would have known that that was what he sought and it would have been. (23)

While the differences in assessment here may seem to be a simple distinction of age versus inexperience, something more is suggested in the difference of his father’s disillusionment and

John Grady's more fanciful, and unrelenting, romantic worldview. McCarthy's pessimistic brand of romanticism and its disillusionment precludes a favorable outcome before the novel's journey even gets underway. And it is in this decision to construct a coming of age novel that resists nearly any deviation from those juvenile, and seemingly unsustainable, romantic binaries, in which *All the Pretty Horses* can be read as an inversion of the Western-imbued ideologies of American-ness culturally prescribed to Japanese-American internees during World War II.

As a flipped reading of the way in which romantic binaries were imposed upon complex situations for Japanese-American prisoners, McCarthy has presented his readers with an Anglo-American and his father—both raised on that romantic binary—who are challenged with the resistance of more complex realities. A less complex narrative might have presented John Grady's father in a more successful manner—perhaps with the masculinized “chest full of medals” so emphasized in John Streamas' analysis of Japanese American World War II young adult literature. Streamas argues that such a route is not an uncommon approach in post-World War II narratives, pointing to how this “fallacy of the frontier myth” causes some writers of Japanese-American World War II fiction, regardless of their sensitivity to the “no-no” men, to imbue their “yes-yes” characters with a “postwar pride” and that “chest full of medals” acquired in fulfillment of the promise of winning a greater American-ness through enlistment. Streamas argues this to be paradoxical logic, positing that “on the one hand, the myth promotes a masculinized and militarized individualism; on the other, it sets parameters around that individualism, beyond which is a disorder that it punishes” (179). Emblematic of this paradox, McCarthy's novel is concerned more with the dangers of perpetuating these systemic and oppressive patriarchal ideologies than with the fulfillment of those cultural prescriptions. McCarthy's novel foreshadows these paradoxical conclusions early on. From the description of

John Grady's father's melancholic view of a world that had been "made suspect" by "what he'd seen of it elsewhere," it is clear that he has not only proffered little in his successful adherence to this western imbued "militarized individualism," but that it implies that the demeanor behind his "thin and frail" body and "sunken eyes" are owed to more than age and cancer alone. Likewise, the unwavering determination of John Grady, as paralleled next to his father's sunken gaze, provides some hint at the generational perpetuation of this western romantic fallacy. That determination is part of McCarthy's design that establishes his protagonist as both faithful acolyte and tragic victim of the culturally endorsed mantra of Western romantic binaries. Regardless of whether any of John Grady's sought for romantic binaries ever truly existed as a functional cultural code in the West (outside of fiction), it is clear here that, like Hayashi's estimate of post-internment generations of Japanese Americans, he is now only following in its "shadow image," forever concerned with finding a space that, as an outcome of the divide between ideological idealism and actuality, is "bordered, restricted, or directed," resulting in "communities [John Grady] can't live in."

*Paradise Lost, Paradise Found—Purgatory: Manacled the Independent Spirit of Western Romance*

"Place," specifically the American Western interior, I have argued, is an essential component in the American ideology of empire. What the West has come to represent transcends mere material land-based acquisitions of conquest—though it certainly is that as well; the West, as a historic "right of passage"-like standard for national identity, exudes the entitlement to geo-political action, and obscures the possibilities of "wrongs" behind the circular reasoning of romantic nobility. Take for instance John Grady's plea of "no wrong doing" on

behalf of Lacey Rawlins: “as good a boy as ever come out of Tom Green County” (166). While it’s true that Rawlins is not guilty of what he stands accused of, the logic—he is a “good boy” and therefore could not possibly have committed any wrongs—carries with it the naïve foil inherent in John Grady’s romanticized world view as they travel to another country unobservant of cultural variances in customs and laws. John Grady’s sought-for setting in the novel is in large part what enables McCarthy’s critique of Western romanticism to be realized. And thus John Grady’s displacement from his family land—with no remaining outlets to fulfill his fantasy—serves as both an allegory for the closing of the frontier and end of the place wherein the “need” for the entitlement of Manifest Destiny could be played out, and as the functional catalyst for his ultimately unsuccessful ontological journey. John Grady sets out across the U.S.-Mexico border in search of a peaceful place to live out these simple binaries of western romance, only to find these supposed binaries de-simplified in increasingly complicated and often violent ways as the narrative progresses.

The tone of the journey is set before John Grady and his friend Lacey Rawlins even head south, when they encounter a young Mexican-American boy who inquires as to where they are heading. Their fanciful role-playing response reads as follows:

Rawlins looked at John Grady. You think he can be trusted?

Yeah. He looks all right.

We’re runnin from the law, Rawlins said.

The Mexican looked them over.

We robbed a bank.

He stood looking at the horses. You aint robbed no bank, he said.

You know that country down there? Said Rawlins.

The Mexican shook his head and spat. I never been to Mexico in my life. (34)

The naïve assumption about the young boy's nationality, and John Grady and Rawlins' decision to present themselves as outlaws, demonstrates their adherence to a normative American binary—Anglo : Other and good : bad—narratives. This isn't to say that John Grady and Rawlins see themselves as villains, or that they see the young "Mexican" as somehow inferior to them as white Americans, but rather that the entire binary narrative is one of innocent fetishization; though it's certainly not a developmentally harmless one. They have associated an ideology with "place," and thusly, the inherent flaw can be ascertained in their journey to find such a space wherein the fulfillment of these roles can be carried out. While they believe they are in search of paradisiacal place from which they can attain and enact these culturally prescribed roles, the truth is that such a simplified life only exists as the narrative ideologies they have come to believe and expect. In other words, these romantic binaries do not exist in a place; they exist metaphysically within each character, and any such "place" that appears to exist is merely a fanciful projection, or short-sighted assessment of the West as a list of simple binaries, rather than a palimpsest of complex cultural ecologies.

This is particularly apparent for John Grady, whose ultimate rejection of postmodernity's incredulity toward these simple lives is the catalyst for their search for a "frontier place" that only exists only inside the frontier narrative. For John Grady, un-idyllic family circumstances and the imminent shuttering of the Grady family ranch come with numerous complexities that he chooses to deny: he is unwilling to accept the irreconcilability of his parent's divorce, responding to his father's plea that he has changed from who he was when they married, John Grady merely says, "You are [the same] inside. Inside you are" (12); and his mother's explanation of

untenable economic and class related realities of running a failing ranch are met with equal stubbornness:

Why couldnt you lease me the ranch?

Lease you the ranch.

Yes.

I thought I said I didn't want to discuss it.

This is a new subject.

No it's not.

I'd give you all the money. You could do whatever you wanted.

You don't know what you're talking about. There's not any money. This place has barely paid expenses for twenty years. There hasn't been a white person worked here since before the war. Anyways you're sixteen years old, you cant run a ranch.

Yes I can. (15)

John Grady expects life to run according to a plan, and ties the enactment of that plan to an enabling space; however, he is incapable, or at least unwilling, to accept the greater socio-economic factors associated with maintaining such a space, and completely oblivious to the superficiality that would result from the capital needed to maintain on otherwise non-self-sustaining ranch. This shortsightedness becomes increasingly evident after his arrival at the discovery of his sought-for Western refuge—the seemingly “paradise-like” La Purisima ranch.

Arriving at La Purisima, narrowly escaping certain violence and imprisonment that awaited them should they have been caught by the Mexicans chasing Jimmy Blevins, John Grady and Lacey Rawlins are delivered not only into safety, but into what they believe is the

“space” they have been looking for since they set out from Texas. Here there are no worries that the ranch will be foreclosed. The ranch, as far as John Grady is concerned, is self-sustaining. However, John Grady is unaware of how an enterprise such as this maintains such a status. While the financial inner-workings of the ranch are far from laid out for the reader to interpret, certain assumptions can be made based upon the proprietor and his family’s clear upper class socio-economic status.

La Purisima is owned by Don Hector Rocha y Villareal, who is the patriarchal head of a one of the last cattle baron family lines in Mexico. Don Hector’s land and interests are described as follows:

La Purisima was one of the very few ranches in that part of Mexico retaining the full complement of six square leagues of land allotted by the colonizing legislation of eighteen twenty-four and [Don Hector] was one of the few hacnedados who actually lived on the land he claimed, land which had been in his family for one hundred and seventy years. He was forty-seven years old and he was the first male heir in all that world lineage to attain such an age.

He ran upwards of a thousand head of cattle on his land. He kept a house in Mexico City where his wife lived. He flew his own airplane. He loved horses.

(97)

Don Hector’s status as a wealthy inheritor of such an enterprise, his other properties and holdings in and around Mexico, and his frequent travel via private airplane suggests a wealth and sustainability not solely tied to the successful running of La Parisima itself. The realities of La Purisima’s financial backings are important in identifying John Grady’s still naïve meritocratic designs to integrate himself into paradise. John Grady and Rawlins may make a name for

themselves through the spectacle of breaking horses in rapid succession, but the business of La Purisima is not horse breeding, or even spectacle—though, the spectacle of the romantic West is certainly essential to John Grady’s personal drive. Breeding quarter horses is just a new hobby and long-standing fascination of Don Hector’s. Thus the entire enterprise, despite the ranch’s history as a long-standing cattle ranch, is an act of class dependent leisure. The existence of a western place as a class dependent space of leisure is in itself a growing modern and contemporary enterprise for those who can afford it. Nancy Cook’s essay, “The Romancing of Ranching,” identifies how “big scenery has been a selling point for ranch land at least since the era of the nineteenth-century land baron” (228). Cook’s identification of this sought-for experience through scenery reveals the intersecting points of Western space, imperial drive, and a traceable evolution of their implicit connection to more contemporary neo-liberal designs of empire. She posits that this idolization of western space has “escalated in the past few decades,” in part due to the “use of imperial ideals and romantic images in selling the buyable West” (228). John Grady is not a man of leisurely means, and is thus only a tolerated intruder upon that space, rather than an accepted or welcome participant within it. As with the corporate Western retreats for the “stressed-out executive or tycoon” analyzed in Cook’s article, La Parisima too qualifies as a place where “there is no pretense about making a living [...]—this is where one spends a living” (235). John Grady is more playing at an ideological role than actually fulfilling a necessary function within its operation. To John Grady, all social and economic considerations are second to the idea that “God had put horses on earth to work cattle and that other than cattle there was no wealth proper to man” (126).

However tenuous or permanent John Grady’s tenure at La Parisima is perceived, it is ultimately a class-related issue—this one, a combination of class and gender norms—which

culminates in his eventual expulsion from “paradise.” John Grady’s courtship of Don Hector’s daughter, Alejandra, gives little thought to class or cultural gender norms that may carry real weight for those who choose to violate them. The voice of experience that attempts to dissuade John Grady from his pursuit comes from Alejandra’s Godmother, Alfonsa. In the following passage she contends through her experience that John Grady is ignorant to the complexities of foreign cultures and the consequences of violating them:

Even though you are younger than she it is not proper for you to be seen riding in the campo together without supervision. Since this was carried to my ears I considered whether to speak to Alejandra about it and I have decided not to.

She leaned back. He could hear the clock ticking in the hall. There was no sound from the kitchen. She sat watching him.

What do you want me to do? He said.

I want you to be considerate of a young girl’s reputation

I never meant not to be.

She smiled. I believe you, she said. But you must understand. This is another country. Here a woman’s reputation is all she has.

Yes mam.

There is no forgiveness, you see.

Mam?

There is no forgiveness. For women. A man may lose his honor and regain it again. But a woman cannot. She cannot. (136)

The entire episode acts as yet another indicator of John Grady’s dedication to, and his reluctance to part ways with, these uncomplicated binaries of romance. This reluctance to compromise his

romantic ideology is the very flaw that results in his expulsion from his romantic haven to a violent postmodern prison—the very antithesis of the romantic binary space he sought. This is the space where John Grady mistakenly attempts to reconcile postmodern realism by imagining it as simply another polemic opposite to his Western romanticism.

Like the Japanese-American internment camps in the interior west, the prison McCarthy has designed for his protagonist forces him into a dialogue with the fallacies of Western romanticism that he has so far been able to elude. While I allow that this Mexican prison is not a perfect mirror inversion of a Japanese internment camp and its internees, both provide the manacled chrysalis by which their target residents are meant to be transformed, and both include competing ideologies—one inherited and one imposed. Rather than reenact this imposition via government-sponsored questionnaires of binary loyalty, John Grady (our binary adherent) is instead put into frequent philosophical dialogues with a fellow prisoner named Perez (our mouthpiece for the imposing ideology), “a man whose power could only be guessed at” (190). Perez’s “power” seems little more than a prison myth, but the freedom implied by that power leaves some prisoners to speculate that he is “not confined to the prison at all” (190). While Perez’s freedom is seemingly just another fanciful belief to be discounted along other naïve notions of romantic elements, McCarthy contrasts this perceived freedom with the literal and metaphysical imprisonment of John Grady. Thusly, it is implied that John Grady’s release from prison is all but dependent upon his acceptance of the more complex realities suggested in Perez’s appearance of freedom.

John Grady’s futile adherence to these American black or white/right or wrong master narratives is challenged at nearly every turn in this episode of the novel. When he pleads with the captain who takes them prisoner, saying “there aint but one truth, said John Grady. The truth

is what happened. It aint what come out of somebody's mouth" (168), the captain responds by reiterating the invented narrative of "the assassin Blevins" who came to Mexico "to steal horses and kill everybody" (169). The captain's demonstration of how absolute "truths" are directly linked to those who adhere to them is exhibited at the roadside murder of Jimmy Blevins. In a country without capital punishment, he says "other arrangements must be made" (180). Perez is another—and perhaps the most successful in affecting John Grady—philosophical bargainer of these complex, culturally divergent points of view. Recognizing John Grady's obsession with binaries like "good and evil," Perez attempts to reveal the flaw in his American attitude. The following two passages exemplify this effort:

A Mexican does not believe that a car can be good or evil. If there is evil in the car he knows that to destroy the car is to accomplish nothing. Because he knows where good and evil have their home. The anglo thinks in his rare way that the Mexican is superstitious. But who is the one? We know there are qualities to a thing. This car is green. Or it has a certain motor inside. But it cannot be tainted, you see. Or a man. Even a man. There can be in a man some evil. But we don't think it is his own evil. Where did he get it? How did he come to claim it? No. Evil is a true thing in Mexico. It goes about on its own legs. Maybe some day it will come to visit you. Maybe it already has. (194)

...

Even in a place like this where we are concerned with fundamental things the mind of the anglo is closed in this rare way. At one time I thought it was only his life of privilege. But it is not that. It is his mind.

He sat back easily. He tapped his temple. It is not that he is stupid. It is that his picture of the world is incomplete. In this rare way. He looks only where he wishes to see. You understand me?

I understand you. (192)

Perez offers John Grady a more complex worldview that will enable him to survive his imprisonment—and by extension, a better means to navigate an equally complex world. But despite John Grady's supposed understanding of Perez's philosophizing, he successfully resists conversion until the moment that he buys a knife from another prisoner, Faustino. John Grady may not have initiated the encounter that ends with him gravely wounded and his assailant dead, but in preemptively purchasing the knife from *Faustino*, John Grady is essentially violating the romantic code he rode in on. John Grady's decision to buy the knife (first "yes") and decision to use it under duress (second "yes") violates his initial resolution to resist the "depravity and violence where in an egalitarian absolute every man was judged by a single standard and that was his readiness to kill" (182).

This choice to actively deviate from his code results in a reflective moment wherein McCarthy not only reminds us that his protagonist's father had to at some point make a similar choice to abandon his romantic upbringing, but that it was likely during his father's wartime experience in "Goshee," a Japanese internment camp during World War II. A side-by-side analysis of their respective reflections reveals how John Grady has inadvertently followed in his father's footsteps:

I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for her. When I was in Goshee I'd talk to her by the hour. I made her out to be like somebody who could do anything. I'd tell her about some of the other old boys that I didn't think was going to make it and I'd

ask her to look after them and to pray for them. Some of them did make it too. I guess I was a little crazy. Part of the time anyway. But if it hadnt been for her I wouldnt have made it. No way in this world. I never told that to nobody. She dont even know it. (25)

...

He thought of his father in Goshee. He knew that terrible things had been done to him there and he had always believed that he did not want to know about it but he did want to know. He lay in the dark thinking of all the things he did not know about his father and he realized that the father he knew was all the father he would ever know. He would not think about Alejandra because he didnt know what was coming or had bad it would be and he thought she was something he'd better save. So he thought about horses and they were always the right thing to think about. (203)

Where this all gets messy is that it is John Grady's "no-no" resistance to alternative, complex narratives, and adherence to his romantic binaries that got him to the point he is now. But while his one "yes-yes" move to throw away his qualms enable him to navigate the circumstances and survive physically, his deviation does not save him psychologically. John Grady and Rawlins' release from the prison culminates in a parting of ways that is more than a literal "crossroads" (220): Rawlins ends his pursuit of the binary West, and returns home, while John Grady sets out on a journey to regain the lyrical path he was abducted from at La Purisima. This Journey first sees John Grady returning to La Purisima for his romantic interest—Alejandra—only to find that she has struggled with the events that lead to John Grady's imprisonment, demonstrating her

understanding of a more complex world through difficult questions she poses to John Grady—questions he isn't prepared to answer:

How do I know who you are? Do I know what sort of man you are? What sort my father is? Do you drink whiskey? Do you go with whores? Does he? What are men?

I told you things I've never told anybody. I told you all there was to tell.

What good is it? What good?

I don't know. I guess I just believe in it. (278)

Their final conversation reveals more than John Grady's naiveté of complex relationships; it demonstrates a continuance of shortsighted indifference towards complex relationships (both personal and cultural). After failing to pick up the narrative threads of his romance with Alejandra, he sets out on a journey of retribution to find the stolen horses and bring justice to the captain. While he is successful in retrieving the horses (save one that is shot in the escape), his plan to take the captain hostage proves as shortsighted as had been his future plans with Alejandra. In the end, three riders overtake John Grady and take the captain from his custody, leaving him with no information as to their intentions with the man other than they are "Hombres del pais [Men of the Country]" (281). Left with only one remaining personal mission from his pre-imprisonment journey, John Grady unsuccessfully tries to track down and return Jimmy Blevins' horse to his family. Every one of John Grady's attempts to salvage the narrative threads of romanticism end in failure, leading to his acquisition of the well tempered sense of melancholic dispossession, so evinced by John Grady's father at the novel's start.

Ultimately, his failure to re-establish the lyrical path he set out on at the novel's start, causes him to reflect upon the event that initiated an active deviance from his romantic

binaries—the violent defense from and subsequent murder of the unnamed man in the prison. The event ideologically unmans John Grady, causing him to later seek council from a judge, who essentially tells him that he had no realistic choice other than to compromise his code. The judge implies that the situation, it seems, precludes an entirely “right” or “wrong” action to the circumstances; however, for John Grady those complexities irrevocably reveal the limitations of adhering to these American binary codes as a means of operating in a complex world.

The closing segment of the novel largely deals with John Grady’s choice moving forward: does he turn away from his romantic upbringing, and adopt this new reality of a world that sometimes requires violent compromise; or does he attempt to salvage his damaged ideology, resuming the search for his mythic Western place? Like the Japanese-American internees of World War II, the choice that McCarthy has presented his protagonist is a catch-22. The tragedy of the novel is not in his choosing incorrectly, but rather in the lack of a viable option that will save him from dispossession and disaffection of the place—“the American West”—he has, through cultural espousal, been led to believe exists. McCarthy does imply John Grady’s ultimate choice, if only to emphasize the futility of his circumstances. Having revealed enough about John Grady’s father to imply his melancholic abandonment of Western romantics, McCarthy subtly hints at the alternative—as chosen by John Grady—in the closing image of the text, wherein John Grady rides with:

the sun coppering his face and the red wind blowing out of the west across the evening land and the small desert birds flew chattering among the dry bracken and horse and rider and horse passed on and their long shadows passed in tandem like the shadow of a single being. Passed and paled into the darkening land, the world to come” (302).

The scene ironically echoes John Grady's critique of Jimmy Blevins as the younger boy tried to outrun bad weather: "You cant outride a thunderstorm, said John Grady. What the hell is wrong with you?" (68). McCarthy's novel thus presents the perpetuation of empire-fueling, binary codes of Western romanticism that is as inwardly harmful to the participants culturally instilled with the ideology as it is to those outwardly oppressed by it. Similar to the way in which the disaffection and dispossession of both "yes-yes" and "no-no" Japanese-American internees of World War II has been largely forgotten in lieu of an accepted counter-narrative, McCarthy has responded to the systemic dilemma of the popularized American Western and created a narrative that turns its critical lens inward to reveal the unsustainable mythologization of the West, wholly suggestive of an Anglo-inclusive estrangement of future generations through the disaffection and dispossession of an idolized national identity of place that never existed to begin with.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis was undertaken with the intent to identify a change in the literary romanticization of the West in the early twentieth-century; and, to examine future literary works of the twentieth-century, tracking—broadly—the responses to the romanticization of the West as it relates to empire in post-frontier American culture. In pairing each of my primary literary texts with a relevant cultural artifact, I have begun what I hope to be a much larger New Historicist project that seeks to catalogue other texts that use, or acknowledge, the rhetoric behind the mythologized Western Frontier as an inherently oppressive narrative space with direct ties to America’s imperialistic tendencies.

The use of historic artifacts of empire in conjunction with Western literary works has proved invaluable in helping to uncover more complex histories of the American Empire that have yet to be popularly acknowledged, even in the present day, as a part of a continuing affecter of those effected by American geo-political action. My analysis in chapter one pairs Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* and Frederick Turner’s “Frontier Thesis” in an effort to ground my cultural and textual observation about the post-frontier homogenization, and eventual normalization, of the narrative West as part of a cultural ideology desirous of further imperial endeavors. My second and third chapters interpret large cultural displays of empire: first, at World’s Fairs—as they represented major cultural spectacles of unquestioningly celebrated progress via empire—and, second, during World War II Japanese-American internment—through government sponsored binary frontier rhetoric that was fully prescriptive of the well-established myth of Western space (chapters two and three, respectively). In pairing these historic artifacts with Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (chapter 2), and McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses* (chapter 3), I am able to directly compare the way in which literary narrative

can function as a New Historicist tool for revisiting the popular narratives of empire at World's Fairs and in government-sponsored rhetoric of ameliorative internment.

As a product of an oppressive cultural ideology, both Cather and McCarthy are keenly aware that much of what is acknowledged of this drive in settling the West remains temporally disconnected from any present endeavors. That is to say, rather than seeing the history of Western settlement as a constant reminder of an oppressive history directly linked to the present, the West, as an icon of national identity, largely remains a past that is almost wholly severed from the present. With this assertion I have not attempted to propose any grand schemes of change to contemporary American ideologies, but I am promoting a more transparent understanding of the way in which Western conquest, masculinity, and American national identity dovetail together as something that is, and has been for a long time, ingrained as a major sustaining (and obscuring) narrative force behind the entitlement of empire and other imperial behaviors.

Future areas I would like to expand upon within this project are necessarily concerned with tracing historic gaps in my current work. Furthermore, it is worth noting the importance of expanding my consideration of cultural texts to other forms of media (especially when looking at late twentieth and twenty-first century examples). Some of the areas of extended case studies I have considered are discussed briefly in the following paragraphs.

One of the most accessible avenues to expand upon would be an examination of Western Dime novels in the mid-to-late nineteenth-century. As a kind of antecedent to future mass-produced popular literature, a closer look at dime novels would likely provide a more detailed backdrop from which to better distinguish antebellum narrative consumption from the more

exclusively Anglo-centric narratives offered up in the romanticized Westerns of the twentieth-century.

A second area, filling in for the temporal leap between my second and third chapters, would seek out one or more pairings of literary and cultural texts that bridge the gap between Cather's 1927 novel and McCarthy's 1992 novel. While these texts were chosen in part for their distinctions as Modern and Postmodern, respectively, my argument is built upon the idea that romanticized West has been an ever-present narrative element when examining the ever-transforming lines of power (with consideration to both nation-state and corporate-state). In McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*, there are economic considerations I only lightly touch upon. Granting that power has long since been moving away from a map-drawn system of security in ownership of space (nation-state) towards a power system more closely driven by more difficultly traced lines of power via time and profit (corporate state), there must be literary works that more closely attempt to navigate this shift during the twentieth-century between the coining of neoliberalism (c1930s) and McCarthy's novel.

Finally, I have given some thought to examining another kind of post-frontier narrative that promoted the furtherance of empire—twentieth and twenty-first century science fiction. Whether these futuristic depictions of frontier space are depicted as utopian, apocalyptic, or just strange, each frequently treats foreign territories as “new.” These “new” lands allow their authors to transplant contemporary issues into a metonymic narrative wherein very real and difficult cultural problems might be therapeutically explored at a safe distance with little consequence upon each issue's real-life counterpart. Whatever the outcome (to sustain a status quo, or to challenge it), the genre is not dissimilar to the Western genre: representing a culture's desires,

achievements, and problems via a new frontier, while wholly distancing itself from the reality of its source material and contemporary readership.

On a whole, I see the intersecting points of Literary Studies and Western New Historicism as a way of reconnecting present concerns with the past, using historical narratives of our fondly remembered frontier origins to revisit and challenge popular memory and popular contemporary uses of frontier narrative. That is not to say that overcoming whatever issues exist in Frontier Narrative and Western history is as simple as being critical of oversimplified nationalistic Western Narratives. For example, one need only consider the fact that while literary works that one-sidedly romanticize the West are clearly helping to perpetuate this disconnect, it is just as important to understand that even literary works that display the frontier with a conscious emphasis on past grievances inherent in Western settlement, still have the difficult task of connecting that past to the present, and thus allowing the reader access to, or critique of, the espoused relevance of that so often invoked Western past to the present. It is that disconnection in spite of its pervasiveness that makes this field of study so worthwhile.

<sup>1</sup> This “happenstance” travel provides an opportunity for a separate class-related reading. The Virginian’s migratory attitude seems to imply freedom from control, and yet it ignores that throughout the novel the Virginian is mobile in large part for business reasons. Whether by train or horse, the Virginian is travelling for monetary sustainability. Additionally, while his work requires him to travel more frequently than the average easterner, he clearly identifies his home as the place in which business is orchestrated—The Judge’s ranch in Bear Creek, Wyoming. Perhaps something of a post-nation-state / pre-neoliberal roots are previewed here.

<sup>2</sup> The eventual episode of Balaam and Pedro (the “maltreater of horses” and the horse, respectively) that made it into the final version of *The Virginian* was heavily censored from its initial version in *Harper’s Magazine*. This revision was a result of Teddy Roosevelt’s objection: “it was in consequence of Roosevelt’s immediate and unchanged objection to the facts about what Balaam did to Pedro in *The Virginian*, which [Wister’s editor] had allowed to go into print, that I suppressed the details in the later version of that story, when it became a chapter in the book” (*My Friendship* 17). Roosevelt was two years Wister’s senior at Yale, and a close friend. I suspect it is highly likely that the character of the Virginian was modeled, at least in part, after the mentorship Wister received from Roosevelt during their tenure at university together (10).

<sup>3</sup> In his journals, Wister’s own account (June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1893) of creating this episode appears somewhat troubled beyond the issue over an inclusion or exclusion of explicit details in the episode between Balaam and Pedro: “The chronological trap I have fallen into with my Western stories is rather a nuisance. If Alden [his editor] won’t wait until I can write a missing link in the Virginian’s story, Balaam and Pedro will leave him apparently killed before he has fallen in love with the girl who subsequently is to marry him because he was killed! This tangle will not hinder the links appearing in a book, orderly” (Journals and Letters 169).

<sup>4</sup> As a challenge to Carson’s relationship as a soldier with Indians during the Navajo Campaign, we can turn to Thelma Guild and Harvey Carter’s biography of Carter, *Kit Carson: A Pattern for Heroes*, wherein they note that Carson urged that the Utes (a cooperative Indian tribe in the Navajos campaign) “be allowed to keep their [Navajos] captives” due to the fact that they “were accustomed to fight for booty”; and furthermore suggests that “the [Navajos] women and children taken would be sold into Mexican households, where they would be introduced to the customs of civilization and weaned away from those of their tribe.” Thankfully, according to Guild and Carter, Carson’s commanding officer, “with his New England background, did not forget for a moment” that “trading human beings was no longer legal in the United States” (231). Carson, it seems, had more than a soldier’s sliding moral compass to guide his actions.

<sup>5</sup> For an extensive list of Military helicopter models with Native American origins, see page 225 of Arlene B. Hirschfelder and Paulette Airbanks Molin’s *The Extraordinary Book of Native American Lists*.

<sup>6</sup> Nor were Japanese Americans the only “othered” soldiers who fought for the United States and yet were disallowed from enjoying equality, recognition, and cultural security for their service when all was said and done. Thousands of African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Native Americans, etc. all served in a military for a nation that frequently failed to recognize such service, and thus revealing patriotic, promissories of true American-ness won through service as hollow rhetoric for non-white Americans. Take for instance this excerpt from Karal Ann Marling and John Wentenhall’s book, *Iwo Jima: Monuments, Memories and American Hero*, which recounts the hardships of Ira Hayes, a Native American soldier who was initially omitted

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from the reported/memorialized names of Americans who famously helped raise the flag on Mount Suribachi:

Yesterday's hero had fallen on hard times in New Hampshire: 'I had no success in my attempt to obtain a police or fire department job in Manchester. I can't even find a place to live in my own town. I have to live with my wife's relatives in Hooksett, about eight miles away.'

When it was his turn to answer questions, the once laconic Hayes also decried the fact that those who had won the war had not shared equally in the rewards of peace. With a long list of arrests for vagrancy and drinking already on his record, Hayes blamed racial prejudice for his inability to make a decent life for himself. 'I want to be out on my own,' he insisted. 'But out in Arizona the white race looks down on the Indian...and I don't stand a chance anywhere.' What had happened to the high ideals of freedom and democracy for which America once fought? Had those ideals died, along with the Marines now buried below Mount Suribachi?" (124-125).

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