

Crossing the Divide Between “The Western” and Writing About the West

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**Abstract**

Crossing the Divide Between “The Western” and Writing Western Fiction

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The Western as a popular fiction and, later, cinematic genre has dominated the American mythos for more than a century, but the genre itself is grotesquely inauthentic. In this essay I survey the origins of the imagery of The Western in European hero myths and its translation into American colonial frontier mythology and then rebirth as an East-Coast urban male pulp fiction genre just as the Frontier was being declared closed, coincident with the forced confinement of indigenous populations. I then examine the literary trap that the genre represents for fiction writers attempting to write legitimately about the American west, particularly those writers like myself who are incomers, focusing on the work of Cormac McCarthy, Annie Proulx, and Thomas McGuane. Finally, I examine the work of two Native American novelists, James Welch and Louise Erdrich, as examples of the historic and artistic sensibilities of which anyone, local or incoming, wishing to develop a genuine western voice must be aware.

*...the strands of subject which I have attempted to braid are not of equal width and I have only managed to twist them into a very rough plait. That I have not been able to do a smoother job is probably due to the fact that I am a novelist and thus quite unaccustomed to the strain of prolonged thought.*

Larry McMurtry, "Take My Saddle from the Wall"  
From: *In a Narrow Grave*, 1968

## **I: Introduction**

The only extant photo of me as a child that shows me with a human rather than a dog or a horse (or, in one, a large white duck) was taken in 1949 and shows me sitting on my grandfather's lap in full cowboy rig being read a *Hopalong Cassidy* comic book. The thirty-six years from the release of John Ford's *Stagecoach* in 1939 through the final season of *Gunslinger* in 1975 were the apogee of the cowboy in American iconography, mostly on film but also in popular fiction. This popular phenomenon, particularly as an overt fiction genre, collapsed fairly abruptly with the historical events and social, cultural, and economic changes of the late 1970s, but even as a reliquary of the American Myth, the Western retains a disproportionate hold on popular and critical imagination world-wide, a hold widely acknowledged, particularly among western writers,

as “a trap” (Kittredge, 1987).

In this essay, I mean to explore three core issues facing me and anyone who wants to write fiction set in the modern American west and how I see myself having responded to these same factors as I attempt to forge for myself an authentic western voice.<sup>1</sup> The first of these is that “The Western” and writing about life in the American west are not the same thing. Writing (or any other form of human cultural expression) about the west is, at its core, writing about the confrontation, indigenous, imperial, or colonial, with a landscape that dwarfs and humbles the human will and requires as many subtle variations of cultural attitudes and skills to survive in as the subtle metabolic variations required of any physiologic adaptation to extreme environments. The Western as an artistic genre—written or film—is not that. It is a unique popular historical fiction genre deeply rooted in European culture and literature that emerged as a critically identifiable subset of American cultural expression just as “the frontier,” itself a core icon of European-American identity, was declared closed,<sup>2</sup> an act that was also a marker for the final internment of native peoples. However, as important and as insightfully explored in recent years in post-modern criticism and gender-studies as is this connection with the foundation myths of what has become American cultural, political, and economic hegemony, I believe that there was a personal psychological basis as well for the huge and ultimately evanescent popularity of the mature artistic form of the Western and that this was tightly tied into the American experience of World War II. Part of my compulsion to interweave themes of the male experience as cowboys, Indians, and soldiers in *Crossing the Divide* comes from this belief and the belief that this thematic interplay may still have some resonance for post-millennial readers.

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<sup>1</sup> In this essay, “the Western” refers to the fiction genre, and “the west” and “westerners” refers to the American West, not a western hemisphere or post-industrial cultural base. The latter will be indicated as need by terms like “Euro-American” or “Anglo-American” etc. However, the word “indigenous” may refer to western or Native American, depending on its immediate context.

<sup>2</sup> The government declared the frontier “closed” in 1891; Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*, the founding sire of the Western as we know it, came out in 1902.

The second issue is that of trying to write a novel set in the American west in the post-Cormac McCarthy/Annie Proulx era. Like trying to play Hamlet and deliver the line “To be or not to be, that is the question” without being laughed off the stage, trying to write about the American west in the decades after *Blood Meridian* and “Brokeback Mountain”<sup>3</sup> and be taken seriously is to set oneself what may be an insuperable challenge. This issue is itself closely linked to what I see as another key issue. Because the Western is so linked in the minds of non-westerners with life in and the meaning of living in the west, getting past this cultural black hole without getting sucked into it is, for incomers as were McCarthy and Proulx and their contemporary, Thomas McGuane, extremely difficult. I will argue that both McCarthy’s and Proulx’s canonical western fiction works<sup>4</sup> are Westerns, not writing about the west, that is, their work has been characterized as “anti-Western” but would have little meaning without the original literary target. And for all my strivings to become, like McGuane, a green-card-carrying immigrant to the west, I remain, like McCarthy and Proulx, fundamentally an outsider: I must operate in the same force-fields as the western fiction of McCarthy and Proulx.

The third issue can be summed up by the title of William Kittredge’s 1996 collection of essays on western life and writing, *Who Owns the West*, though in truth my concerns here are much narrower than his. For me, writing about the west without acknowledging the ongoing effects of our indigenous genocide is no more possible than it is to write about the American south and ignore our still-resonant heritage of African slavery. This is an extreme view but one that I can’t suppress as I revise this essay and continue to work on my western fiction. It relates directly to my understanding of what for me is something close to what Orhan Pamuk, in *The Naïve and*

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<sup>3</sup> Obviously both of these writers’ mega-star reputations as Western writers are based on more than these two works, but these were the first of what became their Western canons.

<sup>4</sup> Oversimplifying a bit, I would include here McCarthy’s Border Trilogy, of which *Blood Meridian* is the first, and *All the Pretty Horses* and Proulx’s *Close Range* stories. *Bad Dirt*, Proulx’s second collection, is much closer to the more recent themes and voice of Tom McGuane, much more what I would call “writing about the west” than modern Western. As of this draft, I have not yet read Proulx’s final collection of Wyoming stories, *Fine Just The Way It Is*.

*the Sentimental Novelist* (Faber and Faber, 2010, p. 155), calls the secret center of my fiction set in the American west (and indeed that set among the Maya of Guatemala), what another age might have called its moral compass and what Pamuk describes as “...the intuition, thought, or knowledge that inspires the work.” This has to do with notions of survival, personal and cultural, and how that survival depends on getting out of and beyond the trap of Western imagery, a trap of which Native Americans and Native American writers are of necessity more exquisitely conscious than anyone else writing about the west. In the third section of this essay, I will explore how the work of two Native American writers, James Welch and Louise Erdrich, has influenced my personal experience of the west, and my thinking and writing on these issues.

In the first drafts of what follows, I depended almost entirely on my own memory and confrontation—physical, professional, and emotional—with the West and its literature and rather dreaded the equivalent of Wikipedia’s withering tag: “This article is written like a personal reflection or opinion essay that states the Wikipedia editor's particular feelings about a topic, rather than the opinions of experts.” More recently, I have located a number of essays that document the historical issues behind and explore general themes of the frontier and the frontier hero in general and the work of Cormac McCarthy and Annie Proulx in particular.<sup>5</sup> Although I have left my own reflections intact and will cite relevant sources in conventional fashion, I must admit that Mark Asquith’s introduction to *The Lost Frontier: Reading Annie Proulx’s Wyoming Stories* (Bloomsbury, 2014), although it supports much of what I had come up with on my own, expands, develops, and puts these ideas into clean prose and a scholarly context of thinking about the west that I have no capacity to match or better. Likewise, Denise Mary MacNeil’s *The Emergence of the American Frontier Hero 1682-1826* (Palgrave/Macmillan, 2009), part of the publisher’s series “American Literature Readings in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, hooked up disparate

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<sup>5</sup> These references are clustered in the Bibliography under “Criticism.”

personal history, reading, conversations, and thinking about these issues with an all but audible clunk. Withal, as far as I know, my discussion of the link between what MacNeil calls the post-mature form of the Western and World War II is my own.

## II. The Western and writing about the west are not the same thing

*Driving south across Nevada on Highway 95, through the steely afternoon distances, you get the sense that you are in a country where nobody will cut you any slack at all. You are in a version of the American West where you are on your own; the local motto is take care of your own damned self. That's where I was, just south to Tonapah, maybe 150 miles north of Las Vegas, dialing across the radio, when I heard the news that Louis L'Amour was dead of lung cancer at the age of 80....*

*If you had never lived in the American West, you might have felt elegiac, and you imagined the last of the old legendary Westerners were dying. I knew better. I grew up on a horseback cattle ranch and I knew a lot of those old hard-eyed bastards. They're not dying out. What was passing was another round of make-believe.*

*The old true Westerners I knew never had the time of day for shootout movies, and they mostly thought western novels were just so much nonsense. They would soon tell you that much of what passes as authenticity in the Western, no matter how colorful and indigenous it might seem... must have come from library research. I remember my grandfather's scorn for a pulp paper copy of *Ranch Romances* he found in the bunkhouse when I was a kid. "Book people," my grandfather said. "Nobody ever lived like that."*

William Kittredge "The Death of the Western"

Kittredge's note of "the passing of another round of make-believe" with the death of Louis L'Amour, the single most widely published writer of Westerns of all time, has two important aspects. The first is that he was right. The death of Louis L'Amour in 1988 coincided with the end of the Reagan era and the collapse of agrarian America, the last time that the immediately-derived myths and iconography of the cowboy were a major cultural force in American life and, by the way, the final petering out of the Western as a marketable genre.<sup>6 7</sup> However, precisely because

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<sup>6</sup> Through the 1990s, many literary agents listed in sequential editions of *Writer's Guides* even if they would accept other forms of genre fiction would not accept westerns.

<sup>7</sup> Elmore Leonard, a far more astute and skilled genre fiction writer than L'Amour, started, like L'Amour, with Westerns in the 1950's but had bailed from the genre by 1979. (Challen, 2000)

The Western has very little to do with life in the modern American West—other than, as so clearly documented by Annie Proulx, poisoning its interiority—and everything to do with a certain view of the individual male hero, the basics of this iconography have shifted into other genres (mainly noir crime fiction, to which the social and literary history of the Western is very closely linked, and sci-fi/fantasy, which, as the genre of “the new frontier,” is the most obvious successor of the Western.)

### ***Birth, death, and resurrection of the western hero***

The need to identify and explore the nature of the individual hero goes back to the origins of Indo-European culture: aspects of what would become the lone hero of the American Western genre can be identified in the epic of Gilgamesh. In that poem, Enkidu, the rather golem-like individual sent by the gods to confront Gilgamesh’s oppression of his people, is also characterized as a man of the wild, unused to civilized behavior until transformed by a sexual encounter with a sacred prostitute.<sup>8</sup> As a general statement, in ancient Hebrew texts and Greek poetry and plays, the individual that steps forward to confront the evil threatening the community is typically from the community (viz: David v. Goliath), and much of the struggle involves meddling divinities. By the time Beowulf, the first English-language hero, arrives from southern Sweden to save the Danish court from the monster Grendel, Grendel is loosely associated with the descendants of Cain and his strength and attributes are demonic, but neither he nor the warrior Beowulf are gods or have any direct dealings with divinity. Beowulf is also very much part of The Establishment. The forests of northern Europe are all around him, but he is an imported persona of Norse sagas translated into a proto-Christian origins hero. He is not of the forest; he is not an echo of the horned-god sorcerer or Green Man traditions of Celtic Europe and Britain embodied in Robin

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<sup>8</sup> The Epic of Gilgamesh, 2004

Hood, Shakespeare's Oberon, or Tolkien's Tom Bombadil, nor an iteration of the sacred hunter myths common to many, not just European, cultures.

MacNeil, in the collection of essays noted above, makes a cogent argument that the solo hero who comes out of the wilderness to save the community, a fundamental trope of the Western, is not only another of America's peculiar institutions but evolved through a process of gender-based reinterpretation of the American encounter with The Wilderness (which would become, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, The Frontier). She bases this argument on Mary Rowlandson's account, first published in 1682, of her capture and life with the Algonquians who razed Lancaster, Massachusetts, in 1676, which became and remained hugely popular well into the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this account, Rowlandson reports graphically on and negotiates advantageously through her captivity (including for other prisoners, some of whom are male) with the Algonquian community and survives in good order her return to Puritan society some months later. MacNeil tracks this image of a woman operating independently "upon a carefully calculated restraint rather than timidity" (ibid, p. 64) and ultimately not-unsympathetically with the Native American community through the subsequent transformation of this image "when fictional texts play with Rowlandson" (ibid, p. 81) into what she calls an "Adamic" figure, without mother or femininity, that reaches recognizable golemic form in Cooper's Natty Bumppo and then a kind of apotheosis as played by John Wayne in John Ford's *The Searchers* of 1956.<sup>9</sup> In that film, Wayne's Ethan Edwards has no feminine qualities, no ability to communicate with females, and despite his role as a putative rescuer is in fact searching for the female protagonist to kill her (to absolve her from the shame of her captivity by the Indians, who clearly like and care for her). Unlike Natty Bumppo, who emerges from the mythic forest to save the community from immediate evils but is ultimately

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<sup>9</sup> This is done through close readings of the anonymously published (and seemingly borderline Gothic) novel *The Female American; or, the Adventures of Unca Eliza Winkfield*, of 1767; Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly, or Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker*, of 1799, and James Fennimore Cooper's five *Leatherstocking* novels, 1826 – 1841. I have read the Cooper novels and Rowlandson and have seen *The Searchers*. I have not read the other two novels.

unable to stomach civil corruption and returns to the wild, Nathan Edwards is ultimately a danger to the community and must therefore, however poignantly, be excluded. One can argue that, in *The Searchers*, Ford at once raised the Western form to what enthusiasts view as its heights and sounded the first peal of its death knell in the wake of the *Brown versus the Board of Education* decision two years earlier. Ford would revisit more overtly these themes of the meaning of (and gender and racial concerns with) the rule of law six years later with *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*. Modern audiences rightly balk at the characterization of Pompey in the later movie, but I am fascinated by how far forward Ford was willing to push those issues at that time in that genre and find it hard to mistake his opinion in the matter.

Except that popular culture clearly did and continues to do so. Ford notwithstanding, and central to the Western template as it emerged at the end of World War II,<sup>10</sup> like Beowulf but unlike most of his other ancient male literary predecessors, Natty Bumppo and his Western hero progeny are essentially good guys. Essential to their heroism, and unlike Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and Hebraic and Hellenic heroes (and Ford's later roles for John Wayne), they are not fatally flawed. Grumpy, yes, awkward with the opposite sex, and often minimally bathed, but fundamentally admirable and potentially lovable. These stereotypes have been thoroughly, appropriately, and importantly blasted out of the artistic and critical water by the achievements of the last fifty years. They also were (and remain) central to the Euro-American mythos, the need to believe that the environmental and cultural devastation of indigenous North America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was at least inevitable if not (in polite society) altogether right. However frustrating and dangerous it was and remains, this white-hat attribute is I believe a key to the astonishing popularity of the Western in the two decades after World War II and, likewise, a key to its sudden demise in the decades

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<sup>10</sup> This template form must be distinguished from The Pioneer or The Frontier Hero protagonists of a number of early 20<sup>th</sup> century writers, ranging from Laura Ingalls Wilder and Willa Cather through Mari Sandoz and A.B.Guthrie. The Western template is white hats/black hats, final scenes with pistols hung just lateral to genitals, etc.

after the Vietnam War.

The relatively few (by British, Commonwealth, French, and German standards) American boys who went off to World War I and the very much larger proportion of American males who went off to active combat in World War II (twelve percent of the American population was in uniform in WWII), had been brought up to believe that they could and should be heroes in the styles of their favorite *Boys' Own* stories. The reality of war, of what they saw and did and who they became in a war, was very different, but they came home to a world that needed to believe that they had been heroes, insisted that they were heroes, and that what they had participated in was fundamentally good and right, and if their personal memories and thoughts on the matter ran counter to that, they should keep their damned mouths shut—anything else ran counter to the heroic code of loyalty and self-sufficiency and was probably anti-American.

### *The Western as a literary style*

The Western as a literary genre also has two distinctive stylistic features that are important links to its power over the post-WWII male mindset and the genre's curious relationship to film. The first is a clipped and paratactic Hemingway-esque syntax and diction. Modernist literary fiction of the inter-World-wars and post-WWII was honest enough in its own way, but with the exception of Ernest Hemingway, not an obvious refuge for wounded warriors.<sup>11</sup> By the beginning of World War II, Hemingway was not just a dominant voice in American literary fiction but also the dominant voice relating a man's experience of war. Starting in the late 1930s and writing as Max Brand, Frederick Schiller Faust recast the 19<sup>th</sup> century diction and syntax of Wister, Gray and their imitators in the journalistic voice of Hemingway, and Faust/Brand's books quickly

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<sup>11</sup> I have stopped trying to get my Iraq-vet nephew to read any of the very fine work that is emerging from "the current conflicts" as my Army colleagues call them. "It's too close," he says. "I lived it." However, in a curious goes-around-comes-around link, a blog entry of 2010 notes that the family of Louis L'Amour was donating copies of his books to new military recruits: <http://www.heymliller.com/2010/08/louis-lamour/>

dominated the rapidly expanding market for Westerns as World War II began.<sup>12 13</sup>

The second stylistic oddity of the Western is that it is dependent on visual imagery to a unique degree in prose fiction. Michael Crichton, in an otherwise rather self-serving 1969 essay that evolves into a review of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (Crichton, 1972), in considering the relative quality of the writing associated with what he calls "the great triad of pulp writing—science fiction, westerns, and detective fiction," notes: "Westerns, being the closest to the heart of American mythology, have been almost entirely absorbed by the ubiquitous tube." The "American mythology" to which Crichton refers is not simple and requires more than a quick and assumptive dismissal, but through this same peri-WWII period in which the film industry itself was expanding and developing geometrically, the visual possibilities of the hero-tale as text and the western landscape as setting meant that, first, widescreen and then, in the post-War period, small-screen cinematography became inextricably part of the artistic process of the Western genre and vice versa.<sup>14</sup> Some of this is inevitable. It's just the way it is. The western landscape is just so damn big, so all-encompassing, so much part of being American, even if one's only encounter with it (as is increasingly true) is virtual, it must be dealt with, and, unless you're Aaron Copeland, about the only way to do that is visually. The opening of Kittredge's "Death of the Western," quoted above, is a perfect evocation of this reality, just as the opening paragraph of Annie Proulx's "Brokeback Mountain," discussed in more detail below, takes on this truth tusk-to-tusk.

But a major part of that literary dependence on visual imagery is the unique marriage of media—fiction and cinema—that created what MacNeil calls the post-mature Western in the years

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<sup>12</sup> Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler had started this process a decade earlier for what became noir crime fiction. (Chandler, 1950)

<sup>13</sup> Like L'Amour and their much more accomplished genre colleague Frank O'Rourke, Faust/Brand served in combat theatres during the war, though Faust was apparently impelled by a kind of Kipling-esque romanticism rather than the draft. He died of wounds during the Italian campaign. (Tuska, J. "Frederick Faust". <http://www.maxbrandonline.com/biography.htm>)

<sup>14</sup> Mark Asquith, in the introduction noted above, makes a useful distinction between the "real" and the "reel" West and notes that both are illusory.

after WWII. When Louis L'Amour signed over the rights to one of his Western short stories (like many popular writers then and now, he crossed genres frequently and often under various names) to John Wayne's studio in about 1951, he retained the rights to its novelization. This was *Hondo*, L'Amour's first novel.<sup>15</sup> The opening 450 words of the novel provide the description of the main character and the landscape in the post-Faust/Brand jerky syntax and diction that was becoming the hallmark of the Western style,<sup>16</sup> a description that a talented film crew might transform into something with the potential to surprise and engage but that is almost word-for-word derived from the prototype Westerns of the early 1900s and leaves the modern reader cringing.<sup>17</sup> None of L'Amour's later much-praised attention to veracity of detail alters the problem that these details decorate a manikin and a movie set.

### III. Coming into the country

At the heart of the problem of the Western versus writing about the west is the fact that the Western is not an indigenous literary genre, but by the time important indigenous literary work on the 19<sup>th</sup> century confrontations between Europeans and the American West was beginning to accumulate in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mainly in the form of letters and memoir and then, after mid-century, in the voices of Native American poets and novelists, the damage had already been done. Of this event, Mark Asquith writes (Asquith, op.cit., p.9):

For those not lucky enough to get ringside seats [to Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild

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<sup>15</sup> Sources vary and are of uncertain value but L'Amour's obituaries in the New York and Los Angeles *Times* newspapers repeat these assertions.

<sup>16</sup> Asquith links the dominant style of Proulx's Wyoming stories to this style (see especially op.cit. p.20) though I believe that analysis short-changes the range of her stylistic achievements in these stories.

<sup>17</sup> "He was a big man, wide-shouldered, with the lean, hard-boned face of the desert rider. There was no softness in him. His toughness was ingrained and deep, without cruelty, yet quick, hard, and dangerous. Whatever wells of gentleness might lie within him were guarded and deep...." (One of the absurdities of the opening two pages of the novel is that the word "deep" is repeated three times; in Spanish, the adjective "deep" translates as *hondo*.)

West shows of the 1880s and '90s], Cody's vision was replicated and amplified in the dime novel market which, due to cheap paper and improved manufacturing techniques, exploded in the latter half of the century. The West was a popular subject, partly because its heyday (1860-90) aligned with the chronology of settlement, but also because the industrialized slaughter of the Civil War found America looking West in search of a new pastoral narrative of bravery and conquest. The West, as it had done for the first emigrants, once again became a geography of hope. The aim was to produce escapist fiction for eastern audiences, particularly young men emasculated by the drudge of office life. The novels may have been set in the West, but they were manufactured in the East (all major publishers were headquartered in New York) on an industrial scale (the celebrated Prentiss Ingraham authored over 600 novels) by authors who had seldom been out of the city....The speed of production and lack of first hand production meant that authors relied on the work of one another and an increasingly codified set of caricatures, symbols and events. The result is that the dime novel market augmented Cody's process of fictionalization to produce a fantasy West.

Owen Wister's *The Virginian* of 1902 concentrated and set the socio-cultural and literary genre forces Asquith describes into the template characters, settings, and themes that we now think of as the Western. Despite its western trappings, *The Virginian* is basically a novel about the establishment of rank order among young males with the ultimate goal of securing resources and mating. Its central image is the quintessentially phallic image of the pistol. The stereotypic but casual Confederate veteran status creates unpleasant harmonics for those who hear them, but most young white 20<sup>th</sup> century urban coastal males didn't hear them. If any connection was made at all, it was a vague association between gallant defenders of states' rights against paternalistic Big Government. (Josh Whedon's peri-millennial *Firefly* scripts are a recent example of this phenomenon.) The themes of white male sexual anxiety are much more heavily cloaked and embroidered in Zane Gray's *Riders of the Purple Sage* of a decade later but are likewise its core. Like Arthur Conan Doyle's first Sherlock Holmes story, *A Study in Scarlet*, published twenty-five years before, the wildly Romantic and over-complex plot centers around the persecution of a

young woman by Mormon polygamists,<sup>18</sup> though this main character is rescued by a tall, black-clad ex-gunslinger named Lassiter who may hate and kill Mormon men but does so politely and respectfully and, as for *The Virginian*'s "Tenderfoot" narrator, provides a role model figure for a less-experienced younger man, tropes that Cormac McCarthy would take over in *Blood Meridian* with what can only be described as a vengeance.

Very much as a clash between the post-Vietnam and Reagan eras, at least as I remember living those times, three well-established American novelists lined up from 1981 to 1996 to throw clods into the grave of the Western literary genre. None traced their cultural origins from the west; all three relocated to the west as established writers who had not written about the west before; and one, at least, has subsequently moved on. They were of course Thomas McGuane, with *Nobody's Angel* (1981), Cormac McCarthy, with *Blood Meridian* (1985), and Annie Proulx, with "Brokeback Mountain" (1996). With these three works, these three writers started periods in their writing careers that would revive interest in and re-define critical and popular expectations of western writing. For a number of reasons, McGuane is the outlier in this trio, and I will explore his work last because his is the most direct influence my own work sent in the west. However, McCarthy and Proulx, even without the obvious differences of gender, make an interesting dyad, and the thematic and artistic choices benchmarked by each and then carried forward in their subsequent work, makes them worth considering together.

McCarthy and Proulx are both writers of ideas<sup>19</sup> who approached the west consciously from the outside as a venue for engaging (or proposing) a debate on European-American identity myths, particularly myths of masculine identity (which inevitably spin off myths of male/female

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<sup>18</sup> Chronic "Gentile" anxiety about Mormonism seems to have resurged toward the end of the century when Utah applied for statehood. One of the curious residua of this anxiety, along with the Doyle and Gray novels, is the meandering course of the Pacific and Mountain Time zone borders across present-day Utah.

<sup>19</sup> See especially Asquith, op. cit., on Proulx and various titles by Sara Sturgeon and Kenneth Lincoln on McCarthy.

interaction). Both have been discussed critically as reconceiving the nature of regionalist writing.<sup>20</sup> Both have done this, as I see it, via a genre, the Western, which is itself an imposed rather than an indigenous form. The work of both of these writers has formed the substrate of important scholarly work and literary criticism on American mythmaking, and both writers appear to appeal most strongly—in keeping with the history of the Western—to younger, urban, academically-minded non-westerners, to whom this new “anti-Western-ism” has the ring of truth by its being so contrary to received conservative wisdom, especially as embodied in the post-millennial disasters of George W. Bush. The work of both writers has been explored critically as emerging stylistically from hyperrealism (McCarthy<sup>21</sup>) or at least from “gritty realism mixed with magical realism” (Proulx<sup>22</sup>) but could also fairly be said to arise from European medieval grotesqueries, Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre, and Belle Époque-early 20<sup>th</sup> century *Grand-Guignol*. McCarthy’s pre-2005 western novels are frankly historical (in keeping with the Western template) and deal frankly with male-myth, regeneration-through-violence themes. Proulx’s Wyoming stories are more nuanced but the largest proportion are set in the past and, though she tends to flip McCarthy’s themes into *degeneration-through-violence*, one way or another the shadow of The Western is omnipresent.

### ***Cormac McCarthy***

In her introduction and first three chapters of *Exploding the Western: Myths of Empire on the Postmodern Frontier* (2005), Sara Sturgeon frames her arguments for and then explores in depth Cormac McCarthy’s engagement with the myth of the American Frontier. This includes a damning, though in no way overwrought from a feminist or indigenous perspective, outline of the history, modern workings, and potential future consequences of this myth and of McCarthy’s

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<sup>20</sup> *The Geographical Imagination of Annie Proulx: Rethinking Regionalism* and others.

<sup>21</sup> Lincoln K. *Cormac McCarthy: American Canticles*. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2009, p.20

<sup>22</sup> Asquith, op.cit. p.19

engagement with this myth. Of the three of McCarthy's western novels Sturgeon explores, I admit to having never read *The Crossing* and finding both *Blood Meridian* and *All the Pretty Horses* immensely difficult.

I agree with and feel a need to respect in my own work McCarthy's overall interpretation of the history and issues of the Frontier America myth and of the personal consequences of the male-myth for the individual male.<sup>23</sup> However, I am unable to derive support from his work for my own for two fairly simple reasons. The first is thematic. The single most common word used in describing and assessing McCarthy's work is "violence," and although it is not my personal taste, I admit to the centrality of interpersonal violence in human life and McCarthy's single-minded genius in exploring it. My problem is, in reading his work, I can't see the "meridian" (to use his word) between pain and pleasure. I have difficulty seeing the point in his work where the legitimate artistic exploration of and concern for the nature and pervasiveness of interpersonal violence, particularly as it relates to women, children, and non-humans, ends and snuff-porn begins. I can't avoid thinking that—to quote yet again Roland Barthes much quoted lines about myth—"...it abolishes the complexity of human acts...wallowing in the evident."<sup>24</sup> Somewhere, for me, McCarthy protests too much. This is perhaps in part a response to the response of many of those who enthuse about McCarthy (particularly the gender differentials in that enthusiasm), but I am also unable to see the difference in the work.

Collado-Rodrigues, in a 2012 article in *Papers in Language and Literature*, interprets in some detail the themes and consequence of violence in *No Country for Old Men* (which I have read) and *The Road* (which I have not), and the following passage sums up the range and the limits of my ability to engage with McCarthy's work:

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<sup>23</sup> This is the central issue surrounding the character of Petersen Tolstad and my defense of him as an independent narrator for *Crossing the Divide*.

<sup>24</sup> Asquith p.13 quoting Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, 1957, and cited p.193 note 46 as quoting from Neil Campbell, *The Cultures of the American New West*(Edinburg: Edinburgh U Press, 2000) P6

They also warn readers about the necessity of questioning the power of storytelling, and above all they offer an understanding of the individual self and our civilization as structurally traumatized, with the implication that some moral issues should be reconsidered if the human species is to survive. Although violence has always been a reiterative theme in McCarthy's fiction, in the two novels under scrutiny the topic is openly connected to collective devastating results. Unremitting violence is the destructive force that results in the tragic end of civilization, as predicted in *No Country for Old Men*, but, paradoxically, violence also becomes the necessary tool to survive in the post-apocalyptic context of *The Road*.

Striving to be a storyteller, I am grateful for the reminder about the narcotic risks of the art. That is important. And, torture-porn aside, I can deal with and, with qualifications, agree with the assertion in the first clause of the last sentence. What I can't deal with is the second clause in that sentence, assuming Collado-Rodriguez's reading is correct. Not because of its truth—it probably is true, both in the context of the novel and the likelihood of the future. What I can't deal with is the implied tautology: because violence exists and has defined our national past and that of many (but not all) human societies, it is inevitable and, ultimately, necessary.<sup>25</sup> That may be McCarthy's view (and is certainly a seductive and highly marketable one), but it isn't mine nor is it likely to be, I would guess, for a large proportion of women, particularly once childbearing has committed them to trying to salvage a future for more than themselves. Despair is cheap.

Almost as an aside, I must admit that the other thing I find off-putting about McCarthy's work is that his style tends to be overwrought, sometimes grossly so. In the works of his that I have read, this quality is least obtrusive in *No Country for Old Men*, possibly because the novel is set in the near-present, and he didn't feel the need for stylistic sepia-toning. In *Blood Meridian*, the monumental, Old Testament tone is arguably legitimate to the novel's themes and is relieved by

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<sup>25</sup> Much is made of the epigraph about the 300,000 year old Ethiopian skull at the opening of *Blood Meridian*, that the skull appeared to have been scalped. Like McCarthy's work, that has to be read as interpretation, not fact. One interesting result of modern forensics applied to paleo-pathology is that a number of injuries previously ascribed to interpersonal violence now appear more like environmental trauma. See especially Michael Wood, "In Search of Beowulf" and "Anglo-Saxon England" available from BBC via YouTube.

engaging variations in character voices, including Spanish, but does get tiresome over four hundred pages. The stylistic *sturm-und-drang* in *All the Pretty Horses* is somewhat less obtrusive than in *Blood Meridian* and again perhaps could be justified on the basis that the story is an interpretation of adolescent male themes, but it was a barrier to my engagement with the book.

### ***Annie Proulx***

Perhaps unexpectedly for a woman of my age and prejudices, I found Proulx initially almost as difficult as McCarthy. Some of that was jealousy—both were successful writers living and writing about places and communities I care about and I was not—but there are some underlying rationales for my prejudices, however shallow. McCarthy passion for the grand narrative allows him, among other thing, to torture the people who inhabit his books because, in the grand scheme of things, they don't matter (nor his readers, if you take him that way).<sup>26</sup> Proulx can be read—at least in *The Shipping News* and *Close Range*—as torturing communities with the cool and nerveless blade of the historian, laying open my own romanticism as well as that of the people and communities of which she writes. I find that (as they must have) a painful process. And one probably especially difficult to take from an outsider. With *The Shipping News*, I did feel that I was engaging with a writer with some emotional skin in the game, whereas I don't get that at all from the Wyoming stories, even at their mildest and funniest. I can't get closer than exquisite (and rather carefully slanted) reportage.

Proulx is however an intoxicating stylist. Asquith, as noted above, links her style in the Wyoming stories to the Hemingway/Chandler-esque prose of the mature Western taken on, he also asserts, as speech among westerners themselves (though I have listened to enough garrulous westerners myself to question this). This misses, though, the range of what she is capable of and

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<sup>26</sup> An assertion I first saw made by Ann Hornaday, senior film reviewer for *The Washington Post*, in her review of *The Road*, 25 November 2009: "He's a stylishly austere sadist."

visibly deploys in these stories. The wry, surprisingly good-natured voice of many of the stories in *Bad Dirt* resonates through Baxter Black and Garrison Keeler to Mark Twain. And the opening three paragraphs of “Brokeback Mountain” are a lyric tour-de-force of hypotaxis and imagery, prose rhythm, alliteration and assonance, vocal and syntactical control that provides, despite the gritty “facts” these paragraphs relate, a moment of sensory—partly imagistic; partly actual—grounding (for it is never ever again so palpably revealed) on which the reader can accept that a genuine and therefore tragic affection must have existed between the story’s two main characters. Among the treasures of those thirteen sentences is an engagement with the western landscape in a cascading series of auditory images of the wind outside Ennis’s trailer, “outside the box” of his dream of Jack. Although I find Proulx’s view of western life almost unbearably intense (though often limited, other than in the *Bad Dirt* stories, by its curiously francophone humorlessness, its refusal to give up a micro-dyne of control), I also find her command of language, her willingness to set the bar of prose fiction writing that high, an ideal worth the struggle.

### ***Thomas McGuane***

In contrast to Proulx and McCarthy, Tom McGuane can seem like a critical and artistic lightweight and his arrival on the western literary scene in the early 1980s more a seepage than a bombshell. The thematic and stylistic changes in his writing that can be followed through the 1980s with the first of his Montana novels, *Nobody’s Angel*, *Something To Be Desired*, and *Keep the Change*, capped by *Nothing But Blue Skies* in 1992, seem much more the overt product of personal struggles than an artistic drive to challenge traditional western forms and themes. For me, as a writer with not dissimilar cultural origins, family history, and impulses, that difference has meaning. In the lead essay in his collection *Some Horses* (1999), McGuane provides two interesting bits of biography. The first is that he bought his original Montana property in the late

1960s (in the Paradise Valley south of Livingston, one of four gateways to Yellowstone Park and a long-time Hollywood celeb hot-spot). The second is that when his parents' generation emigrated from Ireland to New England in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, "My uncles joined the Boston mounted police because it was the only way they could afford to have a horse" (ibid., p.6).

This personal face-off between Hollywood and horses may be a key to understanding McGuane's post-1980 work. In the decade after finishing a Stegner fellowship in 1968, his personal and writing life travelled an outsized roller-coaster between Hollywood, Michigan, and Key West, a time in his life sometimes called his "Captain Berserko" period,<sup>27</sup> and produced the "macho-angst" fiction on which his early reputation was built.<sup>28</sup> This work included the screenplay for *The Missouri Breaks* (1976), which provided him an unusual degree of economic security for a literary writer with a critically decent but not huge reputation.<sup>29</sup> By the late '70s, however, he and his family had settled permanently on a working cattle ranch where they also started raising and training cattle-working ("cutting") horses. From that time, his writing took a serious tilt in other directions, first with the semi-autobiographical novel *Panama* (1978) and then in 1981, with *Nobody's Angel*, the first of his Montana novels. All of his subsequent work has been based in Montana and has been differentiated critically from his earlier style by a far less florid comic literary style and a central concern with the working out of family relationships.<sup>30</sup> This assessment is true but misses some interesting specifics.

The first is that the depth of the investigation of the nature and consequences of family relationships develops very slowly through the first four Montana novels, listed above, and within a relatively consistent and narrow frame of point-of-view and narrative. The stories are related

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<sup>27</sup> Gregory S, McCaffery L. Interviews: Thomas McGuane, *The Art of Fiction* No. 89. *The Paris Review*, 1987; Fall (no. 97): <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2867/the-art-of-fiction-no-89-thomas-mcguane>

<sup>28</sup> *The Sporting Club* (1969), *The Bushwacked Piano* (1971), and *Ninety-Two in the Shade* (1973).

<sup>29</sup> Some of this history is from the *Horses* essay; some from *The Paris Review* interview cited above, and some is local Montana gossip at the "I danced with a man who danced with a girl who danced with the Prince of Wales" level.

<sup>30</sup> Interview, op.cit.

from the third-person point of view of a central male character, and, as a very general statement, cast the workings-out of this character's disastrous relations with a sequence of women against his relationship with the land. Interestingly, in all of these novels, this character is a local bright-boy who went off to make some kind of living (if not fortune) elsewhere to get away from poisonous father/son and inadequate mother/son relationships and now has come home to lick his wounds and/or stake his claim. These tropes are the least typical in *Nobody's Angel*,<sup>31</sup> but the subsequent three novels follow the basic pattern more closely, to a degree that in fact stalled my reading them until I decided to push through them for the purposes of this essay.

What does leap out at the reader is the contrast between the vivid characterizations of the landscape and animals as independent lives and actors and what can seem the predictable flawed-but-basically-good-guy male protagonists. My first contact with McGuane's writing was an article about cutting horses in the Sunday *Denver Post* in about 1984, when we were still living in Colorado: a man who wrote about horses and dogs and their lives in the west in a way that could be called post-humanist and that for many years I could only describe to people as *real*. And though *Nobody's Angel* turned out to be something of a disappointment, the passages—sometimes little more than a subordinate clause—where he describes the main character's reawakening relationships with his horses, particularly the mare Leafy—have stayed with me for thirty years and were something of a beacon of faith for me as an access into a male voice and sensibility as I tried to fill out that sketchy first draft. And although McGuane's subsequent three novels were disappointing, in the essays and more recently short stories that emerged through the perimillennial decades, I see again unique moments of lyric engagement with the pre- and post-

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<sup>31</sup> The central character, Patrick Fitzpatrick, is single, a recently discharged Army tank commander in his thirties (on whom his putative military career seems to have had no effects), and the two women who dominate his homecoming are his sister, who is trying to kill herself with drugs as her response to their upbringing, and the wife of a hyper-wealthy incomer with whom he has a predictably torrid and disastrous affair which ends with the suicide of the cuckolded husband and Patrick's going back into the Army.

humanist world.

These moments also appear to anchor moments of central importance to McGuane and his development through this period. In *Something To Be Desired*, the structural and thematic climax of the novel is the scene when Lucien Taylor, the bog-standard McGuane narrator, takes his partially estranged young son on an expedition to band hawks. As often happens in these novels, aspects of the scene can seem a bit unlikely, but the emotional plausibility and importance of the event on the page takes over, for the character and for McGuane himself (Vintage paperback edition, 2004, p. 125):

Each time the bird's wings beat, Lucien could actually feel the lift in his forearm, could feel the actual pull of the falcon's world in the sky. He had seen hawks on the ground, graceless as extremely aged people, and he knew their world was sky. He'd seen old cowboys limp to their horses, then fly over the land, and he knew what their world was too. He wanted his own life to be as plain.

As much as I admire Proulx's stylistic virtuosity, the limpid syntax, diction, and prose rhythm through this passage is for me a compelling ideal. Artistically, emotionally, I respond to and find myself trying to emulate this quiet, rhythmic, self-effacing voice. Of the three incomers to the west discussed in this section, I don't read McCarthy as ever having moved on artistically from *Blood Meridian*. Proulx's voice certainly shifted and changed through her decades in Wyoming, but I don't know that she ever moved on from her need to stomp up and down on the Western as a genre and, in her view, social toxin. Now that she has moved on physically, it will be interesting to see what happens to her thinking and her art in a new venue.

What McGuane has done over this same period is quite distinct. Whatever the failings and limitations of his novels through the 1980s, he appears to have gradually reset his artistic and personal compass in the west and, in the process, managed to side-step the literary trap of The Western. His last novel to date (all of his subsequent book-length publications have been collections of essays or short stories) is *The Cadence of Grass* (2002). Though recognizable in all

of its basics as no particular departure from his previous Montana novels, this novel at once sums up, dismisses, and visibly moves on into the themes and concerns of his subsequent short fiction. The plot centers on the will of a disgusting old patriarch, the rapacious owner of a local soda-bottling plant in a town which appears to hover between McGuane's customary fictional Deadrock and Livingston and Bozeman, Montana. "Sunny Jim" Whitelaw's will ties what everyone presumes to be the old man's considerable fortune to the elder daughter Evelyn's withdrawing her suit for divorce from her even more disgusting husband Paul (apparently a great favorite of the old man though, as the plot proceeds, one is less and less sure) and, after the old man's death, the machinations of the survivors to pressure Evelyn to reconcile with Paul so that they can get their cut. The novel is not overtly revolutionary in any way. It is a classically constructed five-act characters-in-a-landscape/plot-driven novel in near-perfect blocks of divisions of its 240 pages; the prose style clearly emerges from that of the previous novels; and the formatting and punctuation are conventional. Although it starts from the point of view of the standard quasi-burlesque third-person restricted male narrator of so much of McGuane's fiction, it develops quickly into a partially-restricted third-person that shifts from one to another character's mind within a given scene and then into the frank if rare and brief interposition of a truly omniscient narrator. However, the first moment that the reader begins to understand that something new is happening here—in contrast to the pre-Montana as well as his more recent work—starts on page 30, when Evelyn takes over as the most important (and most sympathetic) narrative point of view.

The importance of this point-of-view shift for McGuane's work is, I think, quite important. Even in his earliest Montana novels, his willingness to limn a range of female characters is evident. Some of these are just what a former workshop colleague of mine would label "booty call," but even when they are, they are surprisingly individuated and appear to enter (and leave) relationships with McGuane's male narrators on surprisingly equal terms (often gently

humorously so, with the male narrator as the butt of the joke). This trend has its most visible early roots in the character of Lucien Taylor's on/off sex partner Dee in *Something To Be Desired* and reaches a remarkable apex (so far) in his 2012 short story "A Prairie Girl"<sup>32</sup> in which he explores the stereotypic Western character cliché of the "hooker with the heart of gold" with results equal parts comic and poignant. This willingness, tentative as it was in the earlier Montana novels, to reach across the perceptual and experiential differences between men and women and to try to develop legitimately alternative points of view without violating them or credulity, is central to my interest in McGuane's Montana fiction.<sup>33</sup> Wyoming, for all its failings, was the first state to enfranchise women, in 1869, and the first to elect a woman governor, in 1924.<sup>34</sup> One could say that American male mythmaking may center on the exogenous imposition of the Myth of the Frontier or the Myth of the Cowboy, but the actual history of the west, like Mary Rowlandson's account of her time with the Algonquians, supports an alternative set of indigenous archetypes for women, one to which McGuane's work seems to be responding.

However, McGuane does not leave these issues of the ownership of the western narrative with simplistic mea-culpas and revisionist tropes. He also suggests that there are important and useful narratives in the west for males. This comes through strongly in the scenes in *Something To Be Desired* between Lucien and his son and even more so *The Cadence of Grass*, in the serio-comic but ultimately, in their small ways, much more interesting characters of the wimpy factory manager and other brother-in-law, Stuart (who emerges truly as "the steward" of the good) and the bear-like, cow-savvy Norwegian bachelor farmer and former San Francisco drag-review star, Donald. However, the most import of these alterative male characters is introduced in the second

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<sup>32</sup> The New Yorker, 27 February 2012

<sup>33</sup> For me some of this centers around my perception that while male writers are increasingly castigated for their failure to present believable female characters, women appear still to be being granted a kind of revenge period that relieves them of being held to the same standards.

<sup>34</sup> [http://theautry.org/explore/exhibits/suffrage/suffrage\\_wy.html](http://theautry.org/explore/exhibits/suffrage/suffrage_wy.html)

paragraph of the novel as “an old rancher and longtime partner of the deceased” who “exchange[s] a concerned glance with Mrs. Whitelaw” then disappears for thirty pages. This is Evelyn’s childhood mentor, grandfather figure (and, as it turns out, biologic father), World War II Pacific Theatre veteran, Bill Champion.<sup>35</sup> In his first full scene with Evelyn, Bill interlocutes a story of an old-time western cowboy which starts with mildly backwoods diction but then settles out so that reading it feels like looking at the paintings of Charlie Russell (particularly in contrast to those of another incomer and interpreter of the West, Frederick Remington). One senses McGuane linking arms with Kittredge and Wallace Stegner and Richard Hugo regarding the nature and possibilities of western narrative.

#### **IV. Home on the Range: Who Owns the West?**

In rather the same way that the incomer nostalgia of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century framed the romance of The Western around cowboys and cattle ranching, the flood of incomers into the trophy mc-mansions and multiplex housing now filling the river flats around Bozeman, Missoula, and Boise are framing the romanticisms of our times around eco-activism and, to some extent, Native American issues. The one modern Western on television in recent years, “Longmire,” was mainly notable for the overt inclusion of Native American characters (and actors) in most episodes and a variety of roles. If this feels revisionist, it is what it is and it’s way

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<sup>35</sup> The names of the characters in the novel are at once obvious signposts to conventional mythologies but also have curious harmonics, particularly in the two apparently central male characters. I read Paul as referring to the Greco-Hebraic middleman who initially persecuted the Jewish followers of Jesus but then declared himself—after Jesus’s death—another apostle, wrested Jesus’s quietist and fundamentally Jewish narrative them and reinterpreted it for himself and all time—one of the most astonishing examples of mythic hijacking in human history. Sunny Jim Fitzsimmons was the most important trainer of thoroughbred horses of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but also the trainer who failed to see anything in Seabiscuit, the subject of the extremely popular 2001 novel and 2003 movie that bracketed the release of *The Cadence of Grass*. Likewise, the climactic, Act III, flashback faceoff between Paul and Sunny Jim occurs around a grotesque bit of slapstick in Las Vegas that echoes the far darker themes and images of commercial organ harvesting of the 2002 movie *Dirty Pretty Things*.

ahead of what was. I grit my teeth a bit at the predictability of good guy/bad guy themes but also recognize the wider issue for a non-indigenous—in either sense of the word—writer like me, that is, the fine line between inclusiveness and authenticity. This fine line in my case is complicated by a life-time of living and working among and committed to the communities and experiences of American post-slavery, Latino, and indigenous peoples. I am not a birthright member of any of these communities, but I cannot exclude them from my writing. They are a critical part of my experience and, in truth, Pamuk's "secret center" of much of what I write. If we are to survive as a nation and a culture, we must continue to struggle not just to get individual voices heard (inevitably meaning one's own voice) but to triangulate among various voices and experiences to identify, to understand, and to foster what is worth preserving of our shared middle ground.

As it happened, my first real live encounter with the west, 1975-76, coincided with my first encounter with the writing of John McPhee, Norman MacLean's *A River Runs Through It*, and James Welch's *Winter in the Blood*. The influence of the first two on the development of my writing style is important but tangential to the subject of this essay. The importance of the work of James Welch is incalculable. It was certainly a major force in my pushing my husband's and my decision to join the Indian Health Service. Curiously, I was largely unaware until decades later when I returned to "the academy" of the swell of Native American literary voices led by Leslie Marmon Silko at that time and more recently by Sherman Alexie. Nor, as I have read their work and that of their colleagues, has their fiction gained anywhere near the hold on me as have Welch's novels or, more recently, those of Louise Erdrich. This is, I believe, in large measure, because of the willingness of Erdrich and Welch to reach back into a shared history, however painful, to try to find some common ground on which we can survive.

In Welch's novels, like McGuane's, one watches that process happening rather linearly, from one book to the next. *Winter in the Blood* (1974) and *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979) are

painfully direct modernist realist fiction, set in contemporary Montana and charting in Welch's characteristically direct, deceptively simple prose, the lone adult male adrift in the spent battlefields of lost wars and lost narratives. His third novel, *Fools Crow*, which I have not read, is a historical novel framed around the final Blackfeet resistance to the U.S. military invasion of the 1870s and, by moving back into a time in which his great-grandparents were functioning within an intact culture, seems to have liberated his imagination and artistry.

Both of his subsequent novels, *The Indian Lawyer* (1990) and *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* (2000), move on into new spaces, as their central characters, again young-warrior-aged males, encounter white society on different terms from the pre-*Fools Crow* novels. In *The Indian Lawyer*, Welch returns to a straightforward modernist realist style and structure. Sylvester Yellow Calf is the kind of Harvard-Law-School-trainee ethnic whiz kid much beloved of white society—see what these people can accomplish if they just try hard enough—who over the course of the novel comes a-cropper over a failure to understand, at a very simple level, interpersonal relations, one mutually incomprehensible culture to another. *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* revisits these ideas but in a radically different story arc. Charging Elk is a young Oglala (Sioux/Lakota) recruited into Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show in the 1880s and accidentally abandoned in a hospital in Paris when he comes down with pneumonia. The novel then follows in picaresque fashion Charging Elk's progress, a kind of latter-day Pilgrim's Progress, through Belle Époque France until sixteen years later, in Marseilles, now married to a French girl and with his first child, he stumbles into the latest Buffalo Bill show tour and, like Rip Van Winkle, introduces himself to an uncomprehending younger generation of Oglalas.

Throughout these novels, Welch's syntax is simple, verb-driven, not at all ungraceful, but creating the sense of narrators operating with skill but not perfect confidence in a foreign language. The word that jumps out at the reader repeatedly—never quite in the same place and

always *creating* surprise—is the noun “surprise.” Welch doesn’t confront the reader in his fiction so much as draw one in beside him to recreate and share this ongoing cultural wonder, and I suspect that younger Native American readers read *Heart Song* indignantly, as a tragedy. I am much more impressed by the gentle triumph of the shift from Charging Elk’s imagining his death-song, which dominates his thinking for much of the first half of the novel, to the emergence of the “heart song” of at least this one individual who survives a tectonic cultural shift on his own terms.

Louise Erdrich’s fiction can seem quite unlike Welch’s, but I read that difference more as an arguably gender-based artistic continuum than anything of fundamental importance. Welch’s narrators use English as a foreign language; Erdrich’s narrators weave a thick soft cloth of text that feels like it emerges simultaneously from English, Ojibway, French, and occasionally German—whatever works; whatever will tell the story. One feels this less as an exteriorized artistic presence as an endogenous voice and a reiteration of the admonition of Seamus Heaney’s James Joyce persona to the young Irish poet who is concerned about writing in English, the language of the hated oppressor (Heaney, 1990, p.212):

...The English language  
belongs to us. You are raking at dead fires,  
  
rehearsing the old whinges at your age.  
That subject people stuff is a cod’s game,  
infantile....

If my interpretation of the fiction of Erdrich and Welch and the wider issues that they raise is hopelessly romantic—which is quite possible—I am not alone in this. In *Something To Be Desired*, McGuane’s narrator Lucien, otherwise not much of an obviously historically sensitive character notes (McGuane, 1984, 122-123):

Lucien like so many had always felt the great echoes from the terminated history of the Indians—foot, dog, and horse Indians. How could a country produce orators for thousands of years, then a hundred years of yep and nope? It didn’t make sense. It didn’t

make sense that the glory days of the Old South were forever mourned while this went unmentioned. Maybe the yeps and nopes represented shell-shock, a land forever strange, strange as it was today to a man and a boy with a caged bird and makeshift camouflage.

These themes recur, echo, and finally become dominant in the character of Bill Champion in *The Cadence of Grass*. In his first full scene in the novel, Evelyn introduces what seems like a frustrating old man's foible (McGuane, 2002, pp.30-31):

Here was another of his tantalizations: never a word about the war except vague references to his Cheyenne friend, a chief petty officer named Red Wolf. The only decoration in Bill's house was an old black-and-white photograph of the light cruiser he'd served on in the Pacific, and references to Red Wolf ran throughout all the years Evelyn had come here. If Bill said he had an appointment with Red Wolf, it meant he didn't have time to explain why. If the truck broke down, it was Red Wolf, and sometimes it was Red Wolf who came around disguised as the tax assessor. But evidently, there had been a man named Red Wolf, a strangely unforgotten part of Bill's life.

But Red Wolf returns in the novel's last lines as Bill, having more or less engineered his daughter's salvation, walks naked into a blizzard (McGuane, 2002, pp.237-238):

...fifty years comes and goes and you wait for a time like this. The *Gazette* ran a picture of a battleship graveyard around Mobile, Alabama, and I seen our little cruiser in the pack of wrecked ships but I ain't see *you*.

*Well here I am*, said Red Wolf, and I followed him into the canyon where the sky was upside down and we could walk straight into the stars.

I admire McGuane for refusing to let indigenous history disappear altogether into the self-stroking of the affluent (and the literary) classes but am equally aware of the need not to be complicit in one more attempt by Europeans, however craven in this iteration, to feel better about that past by rewriting it. We keep having to ask the questions: who owns the historical, emotional, and narrative spaces between Lelie Marmon Silko's traumatized World War II vet, Tayo, (or the Maori writer Patricia Grace's eponymous Monte Cassio veteran, Tu) and McGuane's CPO John R. Wolf? Where is the interface between the victimized son of a captive people and the young male of a traditionally warrior culture looking for a place to grow into himself now that that

traditional culture is gone? Where is the meridian between truth and the cod's game and who has the right to shine a light on it?

Both Welch and Edrich can be described in their own ways as writing lyrical fiction—not so much a matter of form as their close attention to language—but like all the other writers I have discussed here whose work is forming me as a writer, the narrative, always as character and often as plot, is co-equal with language. In their work one is impressed less with any sense of an imposed McCarthy/Proulx grand narrative—or one of historical victimization—than what Orhan Pamuk describes, for the reader, as consciousness of these works having “a center” (*Naïve and Sentimental*, pp. 155ff):

Reading a novel is the act of determining the real center and the real subject, while also deriving pleasure from the surface details.... Both writing and reading a novel require us to integrate all the material that comes from life and from our imagination—the subject, the story, the protagonists, and the details of our personal world—with this light and this center. The ambiguity of their location is never a bad thing; on the contrary, it is a quality we readers demand, for if the center is too obvious and the light too strong, the meaning of the novel is immediately revealed and the act of reading feels repetitive.

All of Erdrich's novels that I have read and her short stories (between the two forms, covering the temporal span of her fiction) create the effect of stones dropped into a lake-surface: an ever widening and intersecting network of storytelling that recreates a viable past and peoples a convincing present with a Shakespearian array of characters—and I say that not just as a reader/enthusiast but as someone for whom “finding the center” of Erdrich's work has allowed me new access to personal and literary cultural encounters that were for me otherwise distancing and largely despairing. Central to this process is the indigenous tradition of Napi, the Wily Old Man.<sup>36</sup> In Erdrich's earlier fiction, he is Nanapush, part ancestor, part grandfather, the funny and outrageous old man who survives starvation and displacement and epidemics and four wives and

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<sup>36</sup> Bullchild P. “Napi and the Sun's Leggings” in Kittredge and Smith, 1988, pp 41-48.

generations of warring children. In *The Plague of Doves*, (Harper Collins, 2008), he is Mooshum, grandfather of one of the novel's two narrators, Evalina.

For all of the joys of encountering these characters in Erdrich's work, however, the encounter has its dangers for non-Native writers trying to incorporating such characters into their own work, what might be called the Noble Savage/Chief Dan George/Yoda problem. *Plague of Doves* provides something of an answer. The novel's alternate narrator, Judge Antone Bazil Coutts, and the character of his wife, Geraldine Milk, are both successful middle-class Ojibways, surviving on their own terms. In my creative thesis work, Joe Yellow was originally just an evocation of my bleak and frustrated memory of caring for progressive limb loss to diabetes among our older Lakota patients, a horrifyingly personalized slo-mo replay of the cultural events of the previous century. Over the years, like many another older Native American male character drawn by white novelists and screenwriters, Joe evolved through his Yoda phase. However, more recently, he and his wife (the latter based on a professional colleague on Standing Rock) have begun to emerge as themselves, figures certainly reminiscent of Erdrich's Coutts and Milk but also embodying middle class Lakotas I knew on Standing Rock, people more than capable of nurturing a couple of well-meaning bone-heads like my two Euro-American narrators and surviving red-neck locals and the Federal government on their own terms.

If one accepts negotiating terms of survival as "the center" of my creative thesis work, Yellow and his wife triangulate a third view of survival, that of a genuine western American identity. Modern European-Americans struggling to cope with the meaning of survival may aspire to such an identity, but they cannot achieve it without shedding the protective image of The Western, and they cannot do so without the blessing of Joe and Mary.

## **V. What's left to say?**

I strode into this essay determined to abjure grand themes and the trap of The Western, only to discover over its course that I appear to have been playing the mug's game in much of my own western fiction writing, setting three huge Western grand theme traps for myself: the male lead's solo-cowboy-hero-male-myth themes; the female lead's Woman-Surviving-on-the-Frontier (including the White Woman Captured by Indians); and Joe Yellow's Nobel Savage/Who-Says-Who's-A-Real-Indian. I am also not Tom McGuane. Whatever my tenuous Montana connections and aspirations (and minor achievements as a horsewoman) and however close I've come a couple of times, I have not been able to reset my life and artistic bona fides as he has. So I am left playing the incomers' game the best I can and can only hope that like him, and like Welch and Erdrich, I can learn to tell a good story and grow.

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