

University of Nevada, Reno

**Western Literary Reactions to the End of the Studio System: Critical Regionalism,
Film Violence, and Regional Production**

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English

by

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THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

We recommend that the dissertation
prepared under our supervision by

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**Western Literary Reactions to the End of the Studio System: Critical Regionalism,
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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

This dissertation asks what connections between film and literature exist beyond shared thematic content. As outlined below, the answers to this question have implications not only for western American literature and film—my two primary areas of focus—and for theories of critical regionalism. In recent years, critical regionalism has become vital for scholars exploring the connections between the local and the global. I argue that the roots of some place-based aspects in western literature run back to the mid-century end of the studio system. Because the decline of the studio system made filmmaking riskier financially, filmmakers used the appeal of violence to draw reliable audiences to theaters. Taking the changes to the western film genre wrought by the end of the studio system as a starting point, I argue that western authors resist the sensationalized image of the West by opposing homogenous, nihilistic film violence through the use of place-based sensibilities and strategies. Using four celebrated western writers—Charles Portis, Leslie Marmon Silko, Larry McMurtry, and Cormac McCarthy—my dissertation highlights the ways western writers have worked to create a more authentic vision of the West, as opposed to the desolate, amoral vision presented by post-studio films. My dissertation takes two fundamental questions as a starting point: Why are western literary characters suddenly in the 1960s faced with such violent situations in a region supposed to hold so much promise according to the western myth? And, why do characters react against their violent setting rather than integrating themselves into it? These questions have been thoroughly explored in the context of the multi-faceted social upheaval of the 1960s. By closely reading the ways these authors use place-based sensibilities to offset exaggerated violence, my dissertation pivots from the

carryover effects of industrial change in the film industry to the important thematic response in western literature. Taking a critical regionalist perspective, this dissertation argues that western literature and film are bound together by more than their shared thematic or adapted content. In fact, that thematic content is an avenue for exploring how the film industry, not simply films themselves, shapes other forms of cultural production, such as literature.

Methodologically, this project is situated at the overlap of genre theory, film history, critical regionalism, and western literary studies. By establishing connections between literature as a form of cultural production and the seemingly disconnected industry behind cinematic production, my dissertation analyzes western literature beyond an exchange of cultural trends and values. In doing so, I establish a deeper understanding of the complex network that makes up western American culture, what Neil Campbell calls “the rhizomatic West.” Tracing these lines of flight then connects regions with the forces of global capital. I argue that to fully understand the West, we must understand material forces that drive western imagery on the page and on the screen.

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Chapter 1. Introduction: The End of the Studio System and a Changing Western Genre

“The western culture and western character with which it is easiest to identify exist largely in the West of make-believe, where they can be kept simple.”

—Wallace Stegner

I.

In his slim but essential collection of lectures delivered at the University of Michigan Law School in 1986, Wallace Stegner articulated a vision of the American West with implications that are today still not fully realized. After explaining the various ways aridity, rural life, and environmental exploitation feature in the West’s identity, Stegner concluded his lectures by taking on the more fluid topic of western culture. Even from his lofty position as a writer and a mentor to Stegner Fellows who would go on to considerable fame, Stegner struggled to wrangle the West into a form that could be fully described. However, he uncovered an important tension between western insiders and outsiders. Both, he said, have romanticized the West, and both, he decided, have been homogenized by “media” that mislead westerners about who they really are (71).

As the world becomes more connected and stands at a fork in the road between continued, expanded global interconnectedness, or a return to populist nationalism, the West looms large in the national imagination and the imaginations of people looking at the U.S. from outside. A view of the West as an enduring and vital component of American identity seems at odds with Stegner’s conception of the West as a place subject to the homogenizing forces of “media.” Although it is not clear which media Stegner would have blamed for homogenization, a discussion would no doubt begin with Hollywood cinema. Like many others, I am convinced that Hollywood has played an

important role in shaping a misleading version of the West. It is easy to believe that Hollywood, with its generic conventions and moneymaking machinery, has homogenized the West into a clichéd representation replete with problematic representations that nevertheless remain easily digested and popular. What is less obvious, and less explored, are the ways western *literature* has *resisted* the homogenizing forces of global capital present in Hollywood productions, and the ways western authors have taken aim at distorted tropes in an effort to preserve what they see as authenticity. My study begins with western writers walking up to their local post offices, looking back over collars raised against the wind and under hats lowered against the sun, and nailing to the façade a sign that reads: UNWANTED: Hollow Representations of the West.

This dissertation draws upon the interdisciplinary overlap of film genre theory and critical regionalism to more fully understand western American culture in the late twentieth century. Reading both inscription (writing for film and literature) and production (financing and shooting films), this project examines how filmmakers and writers influence each other. I argue that the mid-century restructuring of the American film industry made the western genre violent in ways that were in turn resisted by western literature beginning in the 1960s. In making such an argument, my research is framed by two histories of production: first, the material production of films, including financing, ratings, and distribution; second, the literary and cinematic representations of the American West. Despite western studies' complexity as a network of cultural and industrial influences on aesthetics, narratives, and representations of the region, the interaction between film and literature has been confined either to adaptation studies or to scholarship that ranges freely between the two media—considering both together as a

unified “representation” of the American West. This dissertation considers film and literature as separate fields linked by more than shared thematic content or adapted narratives. I argue that a critical understanding of western American literature requires a reading of the material-industrial influences between film and literature. In short, readings of western American literature that consider film and literature as mutually influential media without considering the industries behind them fail to fully grasp the deep economic roots shared by literary and cinematic westerns.

My interest in this project begins with post-1960 western literary works in which characters resist violence as presented in western films. My interest is in a *resistance* to violence presented under the guise of realism. The American West is often portrayed in print accounts as a difficult place to live; that difficulty constitutes a major part of the pioneer narrative. However, beginning in the 1960s, western writers situated characters in settings that go beyond the challenges associated with the myth of conquest and make it more like the cinematic West of the late 1960s. They imagine it less as a place to be conquered by law and order and more like a breeding ground for amoral violent opportunists.

In the context of literary scholarship, many western writers assert what Nathaniel Lewis calls their “claim of authenticity” by writing as “active agents” defining the region (3). For Lewis, authenticity holds readers “between the aspiring text and the more perfect form of the West itself” that “suggests a writer deeply connected to place...through which place shines without interference of language, desire, or intention” (7). By subverting the dark, sinister, and “phony” imagining of the cinematic West, western writers stake a cultural position as arbiters of an authentic West. Although authenticity is

an embattled and privileged position that can be difficult to define, western literature's investment in the cachet of realism demands attention to authenticity's role in literary trends. Even when taking a skeptical view of western literary authenticity, its role in the region's literary history cannot be denied. Even as western literature adapts to a dynamic popular conception of the West, "western literature is frequently, perhaps fundamentally, *about* authenticity" (Lewis 7). Authors such as Charles Portis, Larry McMurtry, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Cormac McCarthy depict a violent West against which their characters must stand in order to resolve narrative crises. The literary trend toward resisting an increasingly violent West raises two important questions: Why are these literary characters suddenly in the 1960s faced with such violent situations in a region supposed to hold so much promise according to the western myth? And, why do characters react against their violent setting rather than integrating themselves into it?

The first question is answered by historicist studies of mid- to late-twentieth-century westerns by interpreting western films and literature since the 1960s as reactions against or commentaries on cultural events. The Civil Rights movement, women's rights movement, and environmental movement, along with the Vietnam conflict, and political assassinations, play a compelling role in arguments showing the fictional western's changing face in literature and film after the 1960s. In this dissertation, I turn toward the mid-century restructuring of the film industry that resulted in the demise of the studio system as another important and heretofore neglected factor contributing to important changes in the western genre. Film genres frequently ebb and flow in number of releases, aesthetic style, and thematic concerns. This ebb and flow results in some years seeing the release of a large number of films that are stylistically similar or take on a particular

concern. Westerns have historically boomed at times when the U.S. has experienced some perceived threat to our way of life. These periodic influxes of a particular genre, called “genre cycles,” are followed by a period of reduced attention to that genre. An important turning point in the western genre occurred between two cycles of western films—those dealing with the aftermath of World War II, and those dealing with the anxiety of the Cold War. While both these constellations of western films presented their own fictional versions of the West displaying attitudes that fit the times, they were part of a lineage of films that presented their impressions of the region and as real.

This project seeks to further answer questions about why these literary characters are suddenly faced with such violent situations in the 1960s and why those characters react against those violent settings rather than integrating themselves into them by attending to the rise of a revisionist West. Subscribing to such a broad term as a “revisionist West” is complicated by the many meanings that term might have for different readers. For film studies, a revisionist West is difficult to define. Andrew Patrick Nelson points out in *Still in the Saddle* (2015) that the term has been broken into subtypes such as “anti-western,” “new western,” “personal western,” and “traditional western” (18). While these terms are valuable for specifying film types’ aims, I find William Beard’s description of the changes in the 1960s and ’70s the most succinct and useful for my project. Beard’s collection of essays on Clint Eastwood, *The Persistence of Double Vision* (2000), incisively parses the difference between traditional westerns and revisionist westerns as the difference between heroic violence and nihilistic violence (6). Films from this era, such as the spaghetti westerns directed by Sergio Leone and ultraviolent films like Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* (1968), epitomize the trend in

1960s western films toward a West that carries on the genre's traditional violence but renders that violence less classically heroic. The portrayal of self-serving violence is perhaps the best example of the changing cinematic West I'm describing.

Attending to the complex network of cultural and industrial influences on western literary production advances critical regionalist work that broadens the scope of how western realities are shaped by outside influences and how that culture in turn shapes cultures outside its regional locales. Recent critical regionalists such as Neil Campbell, Stephen Tatum, and Krista Comer have engaged with the theoretical work of Edward Soja, Michel Foucault, and James Clifford. They consequently initiated a long process of tracing connections between both the real conditions that shape culture and the imagined versions of the West that, as Susan Kollin writes in her 2007 book *Postwestern Cultures: Literature, Theory, Space*, influence the "minds and hearts of its readers" (xvii). My project identifies and taps into the rich overlap of real conditions and imaginings of the West through the film industry, which is economically determined to imagine the West as entertainment.

Before discussing the literary reactions that will be the focus of this dissertation, it is worth discussing the post-studio industrial conditions against which I argue western literature reacts. The post-studio system conditions I'm interested in stem from film violence and its role as part of the film grammar of the western genre, or what Rick Altman calls the "syntax" that contributes to a genre's definition.¹ One of the ways I begin tracing the connection between changes in the film industry and western literature

¹ In this dissertation, when I use the term "post-studio," I intend it to refer to the period from 1960–1980, following the demise of the studio system about 1950.

is through film genre theory. Altman's influential "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre" makes the case that a genre can be determined by a film's iconography or narrative structure. Deciphering the grammar of a film, especially the combination of syntax and semantics, reveals a genre's flexibility and consequently the difficulty of defining it.² Most important for this project, Altman's concept of film grammar highlights how filmmakers alter a western's thematic content while maintaining the appearance of a western. I use Altman's film grammar to explain how westerns in the 1960s maintained the appearance of westerns, ostensibly presenting a vision of the West, while significantly altering the western's essential syntax. I argue that those changes to the western film genre's syntax were both enabled by the end of the studio system and provoke an anxious response within western fiction. I find this twice-removed reaction from literature useful for reckoning a critical understanding of the West as a region because it establishes both a financial interest in the region from the film industry and a place-based interest from western writers. The increased cinematic violence in films of the late 1960s is one of the most easily recognizable shifts in film history. It is no coincidence that the increased violence I'm interested in as a pathway for exploring the relationship between film and literature happened at the same time Hollywood underwent massive shifts in the way film companies produced and distributed films.

² For a more complete discussion of the challenge of defining a genre, see Barry Keith Grant's *Film Genre Reader IV*.

Three important shifts in the film industry led to the boom in post-studio cinematic violence.³ The first is that federal legislature broke up the vertical integration that film studios enjoyed and compelled them to distribute their films outside of their own theaters. The end of vertical integration led to the end of the factory system of production in which studios employed actors and set-craftspeople and assigned them to projects as the studios saw fit. In place of the factory system, film companies began using package production, a system in which each project is individually financed, staffed, produced, and distributed. The move away from vertical integration and factory production dealt a blow to the way film producers managed financial risk. The third change was abandonment of the Hays Code and institution of a ratings system to guide consumer viewing choices based on maturity level, rather than deciding via committee what was acceptable in a given film.⁴ The ratings system allowed for much more violent action than what was allowed by the Hays Code, but ratings on their own attracted audiences by making films more appealing through, among other things, violence.

Considering the relationship between the western genre and Hollywood production strategies raises the question of how film producers work to manage their financial risk when funding a film project. One of the ways filmmakers mitigate risk is by producing films within well-defined genres. Producing films with themes and aesthetics that have an established audience allows film financiers to safely release a film to a

³ For a more thorough explanation of the impact of the end of the studio system, see Steve Neale's *Genre and Hollywood*, in which he details the many roles genre plays in Hollywood production along with "cycles and 'production trends'" (181).

⁴ The Hays Code is another name for the Motion Picture Production Code, an industry self-censorship system that enforced restrictions on depictions of violence, sex, and other taboo subjects in film.

reasonably reliable demand. What is more interesting for my dissertation is that R-rated films, according to Altman, in some ways constitute their own genre. Most importantly, an R rating consistently draws more of the most desirable audience demographic, those between the ages of 15 and 25.⁵ Youth, it turns out, seeks to avoid the ratings that are directed at wide audiences—G, PG, and PG-13 (Altman, *Film/Genre* 111). Moreover, during this time, young adults ages 16-24 made up 48% of theater ticket sales (Prince 8). In the context of film history, these facts mean that once liberated from the Hays Code, film companies had a financial incentive to make films more violent. As a way to offset the increased financial exposure associated with package production, more leeway for “R rated” violence meant more potential box office earnings.

The financial incentive for filmmakers to make more violent films was compelling, but that wasn't the only reason violent films were so popular in the 1960s. The film western genre always included the potential for violent death as a legacy of the pioneer narrative. Outside the realm of law and order, cinematic settlers defended against the predatory practices of others. Even in the genre's beginnings, western protagonists asserted their agency through morally justifiable violence. It's important to keep in mind that even as the Hays code enforced reduced levels of violence, those on the board did not mind depictions of violence that were perceived as just or heroic. Examples abound within the western genre, as shootouts were commonplace. But even outside the western, in gangster films like *Scarface* (1932) and *White Heat* (1949), portrayals of psychotic

⁵ This age group is responsible for the highest percentage of ticket sales. Because they accounted for a large percentage of ticket sales and had reliably predictable interests, film companies often appealed to this age group.

killers were screened with little interference, since the villain rather than the hero performed the immoral violence and eventually received their just punishment.

Western writers didn't mind if sensationalized depictions were inauthentic. Western literature is of course complicit in promulgating a certain amount of romanticized violence. In 1968, with the adoption of the Code and Ratings Administration system (CARA), the amount of on screen violence exploded. The level of violence depicted grew as visual effects become more graphic, and the style of violence received a lot of attention.^{6, 7} However, it was the motivation behind the violence and its ends that became controversial. The more postmodern depictions of violence, described as self-serving, nihilistic, and unheroic, concerned audiences, including western writers, even more than visual brutality. Films such as the spaghetti westerns that came out of Italy set a new standard for both tone and violence that American films quickly imitated. Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* quickly followed the trends set by Leone and Arthur Penn, expanding on ultraviolent depictions in a western setting.

This tone was carried over to films outside the western genre that shared themes with the western, such as Clint Eastwood's "Dirty Harry" films. Pervasive violence became one of the pigments with which filmmakers made their work more artistically meaningful. Visual techniques combining many cinematic elements—"lighting, editing, performance, choreography of movement" and especially sound engineering—played a

⁶ Squibs and other practical effects played an important role in film violence because they created another possibility for motion, which Prince says is the primary motivator for artistic filmmakers to create violent scenes.

⁷ Jack Valenti, head of the Motion Picture Association of America, was summoned to testify before the National Commission on the Commission and Causes of Violence in 1968.

vital role in creating the “stylistic amplitude” of screen violence (Prince, *Classical* 88). Leone, Peckinpah, and other filmmakers responsible for increasingly brutal depictions of violence often claimed that their effort was to demystify it, that somehow spectacular violence might scare people away from its visceral and visual appeal. I find this claim dubious considering the clear evidence that violence was being used for mass appeal. These directors’ financial success further challenged claims to artistic altruism.

Fresh license to depict violence fostered a significant artistic movement just after the end of the studio system. “New Hollywood” emerged out of the countercultural movement and took on ethical concerns associated with the myths Hollywood had thus far created. It pushed the boundaries of what Hollywood had historically done up until that point in two important ways. It pushed the industry “politically, by raising taboo topics and views...[and] aesthetically, by striving to replace a seemingly transparent and natural norm of realist representation with self-reflexivity” (Horwath 12). The countercultural attitude of the new Hollywood was less financially reliable, but brought about an era of highbrow attention to creative works previously intended for mass consumption and taken less seriously by critics. The more artistic vision of directors in the new Hollywood changed the understanding of film directors into the “lead artist” image we have today. Auteur theory, not without its dissidents, argued that directors were the primary visionaries of particular films and bolstered American cinema as an art form deserving of critical and scholarly attention. These films from the New Hollywood era in the early seventies carried on the more violent vision of the West and presented it as realism. In other words, films of this era distinctly moved cinema into the post-classical era.

Auteur visions of the West that were intended to interrogate the western's use of violence instead gave rise to an even more violent vision of the West. That hyper-violent vision was nihilistic in the way Beard describes, capitalizing on the selfish benefits of being violent rather than depicting violence as an ugly necessity of establishing law and order. Many audiences received ultraviolent westerns like *The Wild Bunch* with disgust. In his 1969 *New York Times* review of the film, Vincent Canby criticized the male relationships "transformed into neuroses," and the terrifying beautification of violence to the point of performing a "blood ballet" (1). Despite these condemnations, Peckinpah stated repeatedly that his intention in depicting such intense, graphic violence was to demystify it through a realist lens, revealing that violence was both impotent and inglorious. Despite his adamant response to the condemnation, many nevertheless saw the film as a glorification of violence, even claiming Peckinpah's film was responsible for some patrons' violent outbursts following the film's release.

Coupling nihilism with revisionist westerns' realist aspirations struck a chord with many viewers and created enduring film classics in the western genre. However, they provoked a reaction from authors who lived in those geographical and cultural spaces depicted in the films, and knew their history. In response, western writers began producing a body of literature that questions cinema's nihilistic vision of the West. So began a counter representation of the West that attempted to be more accurate and reflected the specific places western authors took up as their concern. These tangled, yet oppositional, forces set the stage for literary work that would demystify violence as an enduring theme in the region's imaginary and instead articulate what westerners valued, how they spoke, and what the locales they inhabited were actually like. Rather than an

open space where freedom meant one could reap as many benefits as he liked if he were willing to lie, kill, sabotage, or betray, western writers promoted the positive ideals of their homes. While these ideals range from family life to spiritual well-being, they all ultimately reimagine the West as a place with real-life concerns and positive, moral principles.

II.

With that brief understanding of film history and financing in mind, I argue that as filmmakers take advantage of R-rated films' appeal, and the associated freedom to increase the violence in their films, they in turn change the western film genre by accentuating violence as part of the genre's cinematic grammar. This is the beginning of an answer to my second question: why are literary characters written to resist their violent settings in some way. Western authors after the late 1960s worked to contest the hyper-violent impression of the West such films endorse because they have a vested interest in the actual region, rather than an alienated financial incentive to sensationalize it or exploit its visual opportunities as filmmakers tended to do. This is not to say that western writers are free of any financial interest. A novel's success is very important to the publishers printing the books and investing their resources to promote its release. And an author's livelihood is also at stake. However, novels are not funded on the same scale as films and are not as artistically subject to the preferences of those funding the project.

More specifically, in order to contest the new, more violent western genre as a representative of the region, western authors resist excessive violence in ways that are place-based in order to resist cinema as a homogenizing force. In other words, western

writers work to create counter narratives that reject the more violent post-studio cinematic West. This emphasis on place is rooted in the western literary tendency toward authenticity. As Ann Ronald writes in her 2005 book *GhostWest: Reflections Past and Present*, that drive toward authenticity is often connected to an observable past as “artifacts and [the West’s] ambience feed a hunger for a personal connection between history and a sense of place” (6). What Lewis and Ronald both drive at has an even earlier precedent established in regional writing by authors like Hamlin Garland who strove to deepen regional writing beyond the picturesque of local colorists and “got at the texture, the spirit of a place that made a statement about... [and] would strike readers as being ‘indigenous as plant growth’” (Turner 9). These opposing goals of film and literature set the stage for my inquiry into the relationship between the film industry’s policies and western literary content.

Taking a multimedia approach, as I do in this dissertation, provides a clearer understanding of the complexity of regional writing and art. I begin by tracing connections between western film genre formulations of the West and western literary production. Focusing on these two media reveals a two-pronged approach to representing the West and helps to reveal why and how the connection between film and literature runs deeper than their shared thematic content. In fact, industrial shifts in film production carry over in the violent setting in western writing in ways that are crucial to critical regionalist approaches to western literature. Such a connection beyond thematic content suggests a need for closer attention to western regional reactions to changes in the way the film industry—not simply films themselves—changes a cultural vision of the West.

My close reading of western writers' engagement with the brand of "West" imagined in films provides evidence for western literature's resistance to external financial interests. Such a resistance reveals a subtle and yet unexplored movement by western writers in the second half of the twentieth century to resituate, reconstitute, or otherwise reclaim the way the American West is portrayed by the film industry. Western writers work to reclaim the West in two ways. The first is by emphasizing a place-based sensibility in direct contrast to sensational violence. For example, in *True Grit*, Charles Portis establishes Mattie Ross's sense of morality as distinctively place-based in Yell County, Arkansas. Her locally-shaped worldview offsets Rooster Cogburn's exaggerated capacity for violence, challenging his coarseness even as his violent acts work in her favor. In a similar way, Leslie Marmon Silko writes Tayo's recovery from PTSD as being rooted in his acceptance of his western home in spite of the violence that permeates it. Tayo's revelation that he can cure himself by ending a cycle of violence and revenge is deeply tied to his evolving tribal identity. Like Mattie Ross, Tayo confronts the violence he encounters and ultimately rejects it. These two examples typify the first response from western writers, in which a version of the West that has been homogenized by sensational cinematic violence is challenged by a specifically place-based literary sensibility.

The second way western writers have worked to reclaim the West from the film industry is more subtle. Larry McMurtry parodies the corporatization of the western film genre through Woodrow Call's work protecting the interests of eastern money in *Streets of Laredo* (1993). Call's new role differs significantly from his role in *Lonesome Dove* (1985), in which he was made to suffer the harsh fate of foolhardy pioneers whose determination spawned the western myth through their determination only to be undone

by the consequences of their convictions. Call's dedication to *Lonesome Dove*'s cattle drive to Montana is rooted in the same drive as his commitment to return Gus to Texas after his death. Rather than working as a vehicle to demonstrate the struggle and torment of making a way in the West, as he did in *Lonesome Dove*, Call is completely and ironically sold out in defense of moneyed interests in *Streets of Laredo*. Ironizing Call's role as a western hero is a method less overt than the place-based approach to resisting western homogenization, but it is one that has received some critical attention in the context of border theory.⁸

McMurtry has a long career in the film industry in addition to his literary career, and he considers storytelling an important regional practice.⁹ His initial goal of demystifying the western myth was cut short by its persistence, but that goal was equally hindered by his novel's reception. While brutality, long odds, and suffering would seem to be undesirable experiences, they nonetheless play an important role in narrative conflict resulting in triumph. So while McMurtry may not have wanted his characters' suffering to be appealing, their experiences were nevertheless romanticized in the manner of the westerns he was trying to break down. This was no coincidence, but was instead a result of, among other influences, audiences' expectations about cattle drive stories. Westerns often circulate in genre cycles, and before the time that *Lonesome Dove* was published, a western cycle incorporating cattle drives like the one depicted in *Red River* (1948) had left an indelible mark on what audiences expected from such narratives.

⁸ Cordelia Barrera, "Written on the Body: A Third Space Reading of Larry McMurtry's *Streets of Laredo*."

⁹ See *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen* for more on this point from McMurtry.

Crucial to films like *Red River* is the will of their protagonist, which is closely associated with Manifest Destiny. Trials along the way are to be expected and overcome.

While McMurtry's story hardly seems one people would want to experience firsthand, it is one that people respect. There are other parts of the story that are less respectable and likely do more for *Lonesome Dove*'s corrective aims. For example, Call's lack of emotional engagement speaks to the harsh challenges put to the rudimentary civilization that would follow such men onto the frontier. Even so, the message was lost and McMurtry's desire to undo the western myth led him to more directly address the way the film industry had manipulated depictions of hardiness in westerns. McMurtry took on that task by turning Call from an independent trailblazer to a defender of Eastern money in *Streets of Laredo*. McMurtry's use of gritty realism to turn people away from the romance of the cowboy lifestyle is similarly flawed as Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*. What he thought would expose the inaccuracies in classical western mythmaking was instead widely praised.

Finally, Cormac McCarthy's southwestern novels offer valuable complexity to my claims about a clear distinction between literary and cinematic uses of violence. McCarthy's literary violence is married with a thorough investigation of place that tests my arguments about Portis, Silko, and McMurtry. For this reason, I attend to McCarthy's marriage of place and violence in *Blood Meridian* (1985) and *No Country for Old Men* (2005). There is a useful tension between these two McCarthy novels: *Blood Meridian* is widely proclaimed to be un-filmable because of its extreme violence, and *No Country for Old Men* was written sparingly as a literary draft of a screenplay in anticipation of a film adaptation. While it is difficult to say if McCarthy's writing pushes cinema to new

heights or cleverly adapts violence to specific places, I argue that he shifts the ambiguity away from the region and toward individual characters. That movement of ambiguity from region to character does little to dispel the impression of a violent West, but it does allow him to delve into regional concerns at a local level—making specific locales and geography important contributors to the violent narratives set within those locales.

McCarthy, along with Portis, Silko, and McMurtry, confronts on both thematic and structural grounds an antagonistic encroachment of cinematic western sensibilities into the western literary imaginary. These writers' work demonstrates that film trends can influence literature and that literature can and does speak back to capital's interests in the region manifest in western films.

III.

It is no surprise that western American studies would take an interest in both film and literature when making arguments about the region. What is somewhat surprising is that scholars so readily draw from film and literature at the same time in making their arguments. Although both film and literature convey narratives set in similar locales, they differ substantially in form, reception, and production. Interestingly, western scholars have often given equal measure to films and literature when discussing western myths. Richard Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation*, which focuses largely on film, carries much of its cultural weight because of his earlier work in *Regeneration through Violence* and *The Fatal Environment*, which deal exclusively with literature. His work on twentieth-century film westerns proved vital to arguments about political uses of mythic violence. In a similar vein, Jane Tompkins takes both cinematic and literary westerns as the subject for

her feminist critique of the genre in *West of Everything* (1992). It is worth noting that these two examples stand outside the field of adaptation studies. So while many scholars have recognized the value of considering film and literature in the same project, none has yet taken the further step of exploring the ways the industry policies and practices that guide film production might influence literature. Although my effort to do so here is new in that regard, it is made possible by the overlap film and literature share in the West as a region. In other words, the imagined West works as a connective thread by which I can explore carryover effects from film into literature.¹⁰

An important consequence of my connection between the film industry and western American literature is that it exposes western literature to the choices made by film executives, effectively arguing that this regional literature is subject to changes from outside its cultural borders. For this reason, I take a critical regionalist view of the project in order to work through the connections between the film industry and literature in a way that might otherwise seem unrelated. At the same time, my work extends existing critical regionalist scholarship that seeks to lay bare the many influences upon the West as a region, rather than closing it off as an isolated or independent culture all its own. These goals of exposing and opening up are somewhat different from Kenneth Frampton's call for "a 'critical regionalism' whose prevailing aesthetic is the built environment and whose cultural productions would oppose...increasing homogenization and abstraction of lived space" (Tatum 8). I see Frampton's foundational description of critical regionalism in the literary reaction to a homogenizing cinematic version of the

¹⁰ Similar influences may exist between films of other genres and other types of literature, but they would be even more difficult to establish without the shared thematic content between western American literature and the western film genre.

West. However, there is more to be said beyond western writers' Framptonian response to cinema.

The kind of opening up of western regional literature I'm arguing for benefits from recent contributions to critical regionalist scholarship such as Douglass Reichert Powell's 2007 book *Critical Regionalism*. Powell imagines regionalism as a starting point for making arguments about broad connections within and among regions, rather than as regionalism's traditional use as a way to "define and isolate networks of places and spaces" (4). Powell's approach emancipates regionalism from a closed off idea of place delineated by authenticity in favor of using regional study to ask questions about "whose interests are served by a given version of a region" (7). By deploying regionalism this way, Powell thus moves beyond some of the nativist problems associated with regionalism. His focus outward rather than inward lays the groundwork for my own investigation into whose interests are served by cinematic representations of the West. Perhaps most importantly, Powell attempts to move beyond an observational academic model and politicize critical regionalism into supporting "projects of change" (8). The specifics of those projects are left undefined, but remain a valuable call to action for regional scholars, and Powell's opening up and politicizing of region closely mirrors the recent critical regionalist boom in western studies.

For recent western critical regionalists, the scholarly objective is to more fully understand regional culture as connected to a network of influences, rather than existing as an isolated, spontaneously germinated culture. Neil Campbell's *The Rhizomatic West* (2008) perhaps best describes this concept. Campbell borrows Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the rhizome as a metaphor representing a vast cultural network that is non-

hierarchical. The non-hierarchical nature of the rhizome is useful for Campbell because it moves beyond the fractal, and consequently hierarchical, nature of roots as a network metaphor. Although the rhizome is helpful as a way to reconceptualize culture's interconnectedness in a way that does not privilege particular influences, one of the challenges with the rhizome metaphor is that it is exceptionally difficult to map out all of the various influences on a region, and its concurrent influences outward. Campbell's intensely theoretical book rounds out previous critical regionalist approaches to the West as a place that is neither static nor ideologically pure. *The Rhizomatic West* revises Frampton's initial vision for critical regionalism as somewhat oppositional between the local and the global. By rearticulating the West as a multifaceted region through his survey of theorists such as Mikhail Bakhtin and James Clifford, Campbell reveals that critical regionalism has theoretical roots in many fields, all of which advance an idea of regions in flux and focus on the region's dialogic nature. His assertion is in keeping with Powell's approach to regionalism, but Campbell's most important contribution is his focus on what he calls critical transnationalism, a term that encapsulates his efforts to deterritorialize the West from the United States. That kind of deterritorialization is precisely what is done by the globally-influenced film industry working within the western genre. The film industry's utility is not lost on Campbell, as he calls for attention to critical transnationalism within regional culture. However, I argue that it is important to understand that transnational interests not only shape the cinematic West and, as a consequence, profoundly shape western regional literature.

Attending to the lines of flight from industrial practices in the film industry to regional writers' reactions to them helps elucidate authors' efforts to preserve their

culture in the face of global capital's homogenizing forces. Given Campbell's insight that postwestern films derive meaning from earlier films and history, I extend the idea by demonstrating that many literary westerns inherit and perform an identity rooted in American cinema. Such an inheritance speaks to Stephen Tatum's work on spectrality, which is a useful way to describe how powerful global demand for western products transforms the region by tracing the roots of culture back through the capital investment of transnational investors. Moving from Powell's and Campbell's opening up of regions to an intra-regional focus, Tatum's "Spectrality and the Postregional Interface" calls the tension between the local and the global into question by pointing out that local cultures in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are no longer isolated from global forces, chief among which is capital. It is through this articulation that he arrives at the neologism "glocal" to describe the simultaneously locally and globally developed regional cultures. Tatum's argument that all local culture is inherently also global helps me argue that investment in films shapes the West as a region. Tatum's sketch of western culture's formation through transnational investment mirrors the large-scale investment in film projects and their subsequent shaping of the western imagination. The key difference for my project is that I attend closely to the ways literary and cinematic art (and the industries behind them) affect the hearts and minds of the region's inhabitants rather than the occupations (such as those in the beef industry) around which western identities are often forged. That kind of carryover effect from an industry is inherently tied to critical regionalist attempts at tracing cultural lines of flight.

Given western studies' recent interest in opening up the region in order to fully understand how western culture interacts with outside forces, as the scholars listed above

do, it is also useful to consider some of the specific sources of that pressure. Just as Tatum's work begins with the vast infrastructure that enables the beef industry, my project takes as a starting point the vast industry that enables cinematic visions of the West. Although violence has been depicted on film since the technology was first put into use, it has not always been given the social attention it received in the late 1960s. Steven Prince's work in *Classical Film Violence* (2003) reveals that although films often had to negotiate with Hays Code administrators, it was not until the 1960s that film violence was conceived as we think of it today (254). As the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) struggled to establish a policy about film violence in the late 1960s, the question arose as to whether or not films adequately depicted the negative consequences of violence (Prince 259). This kind of question about the nature of violence, rather than its presence, plays an important role in social attitudes about film violence, especially after Sam Peckinpah's landmark 1969 film *The Wild Bunch*.

Taking up similar concerns to Prince's, Rick Altman points out the financial value of film violence as a means to achieving an R rating. Altman's claim that R-rated films are essentially "pre-sold property" that is categorized similarly to the way genres are categorized speaks to violence's mass appeal, despite simultaneous reservations expressed by much of the public (*Film/Genre* 112). Moreover, and perhaps extending Prince's argument, William Beard argues that films in the 1960s, specifically spaghetti westerns, embody a neoclassical heroism that challenges traditional heroic mythology by incorporating nihilistic violence. Heroes in popular films of the 1960s had "seen through the tired old shibboleths of self-sacrifice and devotion to the common good" (Beard 7), and that popularity speaks to a view of the imagined West that was changing in profound

ways. It is here that I find the impetus for exploring literary resistance to those changes in the form of place-based moralities, sets of principles that are shared in common among people hailing from a particular place in the West. The contrast between such place-based moralities and cinematic violence demystifies violence in western literature.

By situating my project between critical regionalism, film genre theory, and western literary studies, I've uncovered rich ground for my argument that western literature reacts powerfully to excessive cinematic violence. While this dissertation is foremost a study of literature, I first identify the motivations for including nihilistic violence in western films, a motivation rooted in mass appeal meant to mitigate filmmakers' financial risk. By attending to those outside monetary interests, my dissertation inherently intersects with the vision of critical regionalism laid out by Kenneth Frampton's "Toward a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance." By further utilizing critical regionalism as a scholarly lens, my project extends earlier explorations of western literature as a regional literature bound up with the forces of global capital and establishes specific ways western writers have responded to the influence of global capital in ways that defend the region against cultural homogenization.

My goal in this dissertation is to further uncover literary studies' relationship to cinematic production. I believe western American literature is uniquely positioned to make that connection because the West is doubly imagined. On the one hand, it is imagined by a rich culture of regionalist writing. On the other, it is the only region to be thoroughly imagined by its own dedicated film genre, and the film western has its own rich culture of cinematic conventions that are followed and subverted by filmmakers

exploring the possibilities for artistic play. Critical regionalism is a useful lens for this project because it allows me to focus on the ways in which western American literature directly situates a place-based sensibility or morality against the homogenizing cinematic trends that characterize post-studio system Hollywood.

Looking at the interaction between two media (film and literature) can further inform the critical regionalist aims set out by Douglass Reichert Powell and Neil Campbell, who use regionalism as a way of connecting regional cultures rather than closing them off. I agree with Campbell's assertion that postwesterns play an important role in correcting a false history of the West. This term, postwestern, will play an important role in my dissertation. I use it regularly to mark the differences between classical westerns that were historically inaccurate but did not use violence in a way that created a homogenized view of the West as a region marked primarily by the potential for violence. In general, I use Campbell's definition of postwesterns, which is an amalgam of earlier scholars' use of the term. Campbell begins with Phillip French's use of the term to describe westerns that are aware of the "way in which the characters are influenced by, or victims of, the cowboy cult" (*Post-Westerns* 3). He then draws from Victoria Scharff's use of the term to describe texts that "recognize 'the weight of the western frame' and treat this frame with skepticism." Finally, Campbell connects the term to "what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari term *deframing power* [which expands] onto a plane of composition or an infinite field of forces" (*Post-Westerns* 4).

Campbell's definition eventually becomes too sweeping for my purposes, but I define postwesterns in much the same way—as western films that demonstrate some self-awareness of the genre and perform their genre functions critically. Many of the

postwesterns I refer to in my dissertation use extreme violence in a way that its classical role in westerns is deglamorized in favor of a clearer awareness of the dangers of frontier life in regard to realism, or the role violence has played in the genre's popularity in regard to formalism. With this definition in mind, I think there is merit in examining the way postwestern critical awareness is made possible by financial interests outside the region they represent. I therefore extend Stephen Tatum's reading of the western industries' financial structure onto literary imaginations of the West. By extending these critical regionalist visions of the West and incorporating genre theory, I challenge the seemingly positive elements of postwesterns' syntactic difference in favor of a new understanding that is aware of the economic roots of those changes and, as a result, can question their critical validity.

As a way of challenging the film western's syntax, the western writers I study in this dissertation subvert the narrative structure that would align with the cinematic vision of the West. For example, one common thread among the texts I've included for analysis is a rejection of the formulaic duel popularized in early literary depictions of the West and made a structural keystone by the film western. Portis questions Rooster Cogburn's heroism both before and after his heroic act. McMurtry and McCarthy both depict duels between unexpected characters in anticlimactic ways. And Silko's Tayo repudiates violence altogether. By reading the interaction of these structural changes with western authors' thematic attention to place, I begin making my case for a literary response to cinematic westerns, and I extend the existing scholarship into new territory by attending to the ways film and literature imagine the West in different, sometimes competing, ways.

In Chapter Two, “Resisting Regional Abstraction in Charles Portis’s *True Grit*,” I begin my critical regionalist reading of western literature. I read *True Grit* as a novel resisting some important western film genre trends of the 1960s, specifically the depiction of ultraviolence in non-heroic, non-redemptive ways. Although it is not an outright rejection of violence, *True Grit* resists a postwestern brand of violence through Mattie Ross’s narration. Most importantly, her place-based morality, a set of principles and modes of conduct she formed continually reconnected to Yell County, Arkansas, reveals trepidation about traits Rooster Cogburn shares with postwestern anti-heroes. This chapter takes westerns that predate American filmmakers use of ultraviolence, and I argue that Portis engages with the stylized vision of the West produced by Italian filmmaker Sergio Leone.

Thinking beyond the mere presence of violence to what function that violence might have as part of a cinematic evolution, some have argued that *True Grit* joins the postwestern movement to challenge western norms by overlaying realism— that *True Grit*’s violence is useful for detailing the difficult lives of frontier dwellers. I, on the other hand, read Rooster Cogburn’s relationship with violence as problematic for the more positive postwestern assertions. *True Grit* gradually reveals that not only is Cogburn a ruthless marshal, he is also guilty, at several times, of inciting or participating in self-serving violence, while his checkered past establishes him as a cynical hero.

Rather than contributing to a realist portrait of the West, Cogburn’s violent history instead paints him as a what William Beard calls a “neoclassical hero,” a cinematic reimagining of heroism in the 1960s he describes as a “lethal agent of generalized regressive anger masquerading as law enforcement...which evades

skepticism by a tacit acknowledgment of its own separateness from realist ideology, it's deliberate self-mythification" (8). Cogburn's brand of violence is reminiscent of Beard's description and typical of Leone's *Dollars* trilogy. This kind of neoclassical heroism is what caused much of *A Fistful of Dollars*' hostile critical reception, specifically critics' objection to "echoes and perhaps causes of deeply disturbing trends in domestic film culture, trends that would later culminate in the New Hollywood" (McClain 52).

Spaghetti westerns, especially those directed by Leone, occupy an interesting place in cinematic culture in that they are revered for their aesthetic brilliance and reviled for the impression of the West they put forth. William McClain writes that the release of Leone's *Dollars* films was "a moment in the history of the American popular critical institutions wherein critics attempted to resist aesthetic change...and in so doing defend the Western as an institution" (53). In this chapter, I have tried to offer examples of how western writers also reacted against the changing aesthetics. By reading *True Grit* alongside a viewing of Leone's spaghetti westerns, this chapter connects the problematic cinematic vision of a violent West with the place-based reaction from western literature and sets up my reading of other western literary reactions to cinematic uses of violence in the West.

Chapter Three, "Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and the Trauma of War Westerns" is dedicated to the ways Native American writers have worked to change the impression of the West as unnecessarily violent. Near the end of *Ceremony*, Tayo, the protagonist, comes to peace with his own reaction to violence. As his friend is killed, he remains hidden rather than moving to protect the friend. Tayo abstains from redemptive violence because he has come to understand that it is not actually redemptive—that

violence always begets more violence. And sometimes that violence ends up being redirected at one's self through trauma. Tayo's resistance to violence stems from his recovery from PTSD after the Vietnam War. However, the setting in the West provides some of the conflict. Rather than returning home to safety, Tayo returns home to a West that embodies many violent struggles through interpersonal conflict, struggles against drought, and the spiritual struggles of finding room for his identity as a mixed-race member of the Laguna Pueblo.

It is worth attending to the fact that Tayo's troubles continue once he returns home. His recovery centers on his ability to accept the world outside the pueblo, rather than closing himself off within it. Silko gives the impression that because Tayo's trauma came from an event that is unrelated to the Laguna Pueblo, Tayo requires a culturally hybrid healing ceremony rather than the traditional ceremony that would normally be used. As Tayo tries to be healed, he and his medicine man question the efficacy of the old ceremonies on new trauma. Tayo's opening up of himself to the outside world mirrors the opening of the region to outside cultural forces. And Tayo's recovery requires that he understand that there is more to the world outside the pueblo than the violence he experienced in the war. Reading *Ceremony* in the context of western films such as *Soldier Blue* and *Ulzana's Raid*, which attempt to make sense of the Vietnam conflict through depictions of savagery, helps make the point that Tayo has to reject violence altogether in order to avoid being consumed by it. *Ceremony* also engages with western films that function as Vietnam War allegories by confronting what Christian Keathley calls the post-traumatic cycle of films in the 1970s. Silko's engagement with the post-traumatic cycle of films speaks to the interaction between film and literature and

highlights the challenge of moving on from trauma by addressing the widespread sense of helplessness prompted by the Vietnam War. The conflicting understanding of violence's redemptive or productive potential, especially as a metaphor for the Vietnam War, helps me clarify the importance of Tayo's rejection of violence within the context of the western genre.

Chapter Four begins by examining the vast difference between Larry McMurtry's stated goals for his most famous novel, and the critical reception of it. I've titled the chapter "Hollywood's Effect on Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove*." McMurtry has said that he intended to subvert the romanticized vision of the cowboy in *Lonesome Dove*, yet the novel is one of the western novels most widely read as a romantic vision of the West. McMurtry's efforts to create a realist portrait of Woodrow F. Call's struggle driving cattle and eventually returning to Texas to bury his friend Gus were meant to convey the agony of western life when one adheres to the "cult of the cowboy." Even so, the novel was swiftly integrated into the popular imagination as a traditional western. Though McMurtry intended *Lonesome Dove* to undo the western myth, cattle drive films such as *Red River* (1948) provide a way of understanding why the struggles meant to challenge the romantic notion of the West fell flat in McMurtry's novel. *Red River*'s narrative, in which Tom Dunson (John Wayne) forces his will upon his employees and the landscape alike in order to settle the Texas territory and fulfill his dream of driving cattle to Kansas, mirrors Call's cattle drive to Montana. Though Call's will was intended to serve as his undoing, it ultimately was received as Wayne's was—a romanticized model of western masculinity consistent with the tropes of the cattle drive narrative. These tropes, I argue, are persistent enough that McMurtry's postwestern methods of critique—his use of

realism and history—were overlooked by readers who mistook his depiction of the harsh reality of cowboy life as a stock example of what his characters would have to overcome as part of a cattle drive.

McMurtry's frustration with the reception of *Lonesome Dove* is evident in the novels he wrote after its publication. Two prequels and a sequel, *Streets of Laredo*, were written as a way for McMurtry to change the way *Lonesome Dove* was perceived. This chapter reads Woodrow F. Call's progression from cattle baron in *Lonesome Dove* to salaried man protecting Eastern moneyed interests in *Streets of Laredo*, as McMurtry's engagement with the coopting of the western genre as a financial interest of moneyed outsiders. Taking the cattle-drive westerns as evidence, I argue that Call's transition from a heroic figure to a servile one is representative of the western genre's progression from romanticized to exploited by film companies. By reading *Lonesome Dove* in the context of cattle-drive films and McMurtry's film career, this chapter sheds new light on McMurtry's work and the way cinematic conventions, especially those of the cattle drive narrative, hinder efforts like McMurtry's to subvert the cowboy legend.

My dissertation culminates in Chapter Five, "Wresting Violent Authority: Cormac McCarthy's Unfilmable Western." This concluding chapter extends the examination of ways western authors have responded to film violence in the western genre by focusing on Cormac McCarthy's writing. McCarthy has long been praised as a visual writer known for his use of violence and one who is very specific about the locales in which his novels are set. In this chapter, I view McCarthy's writing as the culmination of the focus on place as a way to resist violence and continued proliferation of violence in depictions of the West. Rather than using place as a way of resisting violence as a homogenizing

force on the West, McCarthy famously embraces, even expands it. In doing so, McCarthy reclaims control over western depictions of violence in a way that subverts cinematic sensationalized violence by acknowledging the violent history of the region.

This final chapter examines the ways that McCarthy brings together historical texts, place, language, and violence. McCarthy begins with a thoroughly researched setting along the Texas/Mexico border with violence that is rendered in tense, archaic, heavily crafted diction. By crafting the language of violence so strongly, McCarthy's writing turns the homogenizing effect of violence around, instead using it specifically as a stylistic marker that strengthens the novel artistically and complicates efforts to adapt his work to film.

McCarthy's popularity, and the demand for cinematic adaptations of his novels, invites an examination of the connections between film and literature I will have explored up until this point in the dissertation. In this chapter, I further examine generic changes to the film western, and the ways McCarthy's violent prose wrests control over the kind of violence associated with western films. McCarthy's writing binds his depictions of violence within his language in a way that prevents it from being made into a film. If filmmakers were able to secure the rights and funding needed to adapt *Blood Meridian* to film, something that continues to elude those who wish to try, the resulting film would always lack the power McCarthy's prose grants the novel. Thus *Blood Meridian* reasserts the power of literature over the influence of cinema in imagining the West.

McCarthy's use of the southern gothic tradition in his depictions of violence in *Blood Meridian* shows that western literature can be both specific in its depiction of the region while simultaneously engaging with literary trends not typically associated with

the region and cinematic trends in depictions of violence. McCarthy's western writing marks an important transition in the ways western writers had resisted the homogenizing effects of increasing cinematic violence in depictions of the West. This transition point is a fitting final chapter in that it returns to the issue of generic change for film and makes clear that these changes are as a result of western literature's response. Though McCarthy's prose style challenges my arguments for a coherent response against violence, it is valuable for its generic complexity, and it provides a proper conclusion to my dissertation's concern with western literature's resistance to cinematic violence by addressing a novel widely regarded as too violent to film.

This dissertation strives to establish a new connection between film and literature that has yet to be fully explored. Throughout the project I have used representative examples of specific film trends I see western authors engaging with on the page. Though I could never fully cover the western genre, my methodology has necessarily limited the scope of my dissertation. My hope is that this methodology has provided enough coverage to establish the trends and the causes I argue for, and that by using canonical western texts, my dissertation will expose the possibility of further expansion that would include texts that have followed the traditions established by these novels or by examining the ways non-canonical western texts have pushed back, elaborated, or otherwise engaged with cinematic trends affecting the way the West has been imagined. Ultimately, this dissertation concludes with an argument that western literature cannot fully resist the changing tide of western imaginings, but to get there, I will begin by looking at the way western writers, specifically Charles Portis, started the trend of

pushing back on nihilistic violence in response to films released before the stark turning point toward extreme depictions of violence in 1968.

Chapter 2: Resisting Regional Abstraction in Charles Portis's *True Grit*

“True Grit, in short, begins where chivalry meets the frontier—where the old Confederacy starts to merge and shade away into the Wild West.”

—Donna Tartt, “On True Grit”

I. Introduction

On Thursday July 3, 1969, Henry Hathaway's film *True Grit* opened in New York City just in time for Independence Day weekend. Across town, two Sergio Leone spaghetti westerns, *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964, 1967 U.S. release) and *For a Few Dollars More* (1965, 1967 U.S. release), showed in a double feature. At the same time, a third New York theater screened Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*. That those four films were in theaters simultaneously made not only for a great weekend in film going, it also represented a significant evolution of the western genre. The *Dollars* films made a splash as notable Italian forays into the western genre, and *The Wild Bunch* was one of the first American films to adopt something similar to Leone's aesthetic with stylized violence and a landscape that facilitates the violence. These films are often lumped together as early postwesterns made during the time of great upheaval in the film industry. While they have much in common, especially in their attention to frontier violence, this constellation of films sounded the first rumblings of resistance to that postwestern change.

At first glance, Hathaway's *True Grit* appears distinct from the films of Leone and Peckinpah. While the latter two are known for their violence and antiheroic themes, Hathaway's film stars the paragon of western cinematic heroism: John Wayne. Indeed, the film won Wayne his only Oscar. Wayne's history as an actor might lead us to initially

think of *True Grit* as a film that embodies the traditional values of which Leone and Peckinpah were swiftly labeled antitheses. After all, the narrative events in Leone's and Peckinpah's films revolve around the main characters' quests for personal gain at the cost of their morality. In contrast, *True Grit* sees Wayne defending a young girl from harm while avenging her father's death in the absence of a family member capable of enacting vengeance. However, these films have more in common than we might think, and that has much to do with Hathaway's source material: Charles Portis's novel of the same title.

The novel *True Grit* is far more thoughtful than either the traditional films that made John Wayne's career or the amoral social constructions that make up Leone's and Peckinpah's films. Just as Mattie is rescued and saved by Rooster Cogburn near the end of the novel, she likewise drives the narrative forward in crucial ways. Rather than Rooster, Mattie is the protagonist, and she challenges the conventional western genre gender dynamic throughout the novel. Moreover, Rooster is a complicated character that defies many expectations placed on the genre's stock lawman character. His drinking and morally flexible attitude mark him as a less than ideal hero for the narrative. Furthermore, his questionable behavior carries on after the main events of the novel as Mattie divulges Rooster's involvement in the Johnson County War. The combination of Mattie's powerful role as a young woman on the frontier combined with Rooster's scoundrel ways make *True Grit* a nuanced western that engages with the changing trends in the 1960s western film genre. Most importantly, *True Grit*'s engagement with film trends marks a vital turning point in western studies by signaling a literary reaction to a changing western genre spurred by a changing film industry.

The tension I've been describing between those two perspectives is heightened when we consider the difference between media. American cinema represents a rare combination of both the material and cultural construction of regional identity. That position as both economically and culturally driven makes it useful for an analysis of capital's influence on culture. Because cinema makes a deep footprint on both the cultural and economic planes, postwestern studies can benefit from attending to the material influences it carries. In this case the economic forces are those of Hollywood's restructuring, and the cultural forces are those of the postwestern. This carryover speaks to the rhizomatic "lines of flight" described by Neil Campbell in *The Rhizomatic West*. These lines of flight might initially be taken to mean interactions between different cultures or different regions. However, considering the complexity of culture, especially one as diverse as the U.S., attending to the intracultural influence—ways that different aspects of a single culture shape and are shaped by other aspects within that same culture—can deepen our understanding of that diversity. Campbell's insight that postwesterns "*inherit and perform* histories and identities while commenting critically upon their social weight," is illuminating considering much of *True Grit*—the novel—inherits and performs an identity rooted in American cinema (*Postwesterns* 24).

In this chapter, I argue that Portis's Rooster Cogburn follows a trend set by Leone and Peckinpah. While he fulfills his heroic task of rescuing Mattie at the end of the novel, he is better known for drinking, making irreverent and humorous comments, and bending the law to suit his will as a U.S. Marshall. As I argue that *True Grit* marks the beginning of a literary trend resisting the changing impression of the West, I will first place the novel in the wider context of postwestern and critical regionalist studies. I will then

contextualize the film trends I see the novel responding to, specifically postwestern cinema—spaghetti westerns in particular. Ultimately, that the novel presents a counter-narrative to the homogenized West of Peckinpah and Leone by rooting Mattie Ross, and her criticisms of Rooster Cogburn, in her homespun morals stemming from rural Yell County, Arkansas. Rather than presenting a West that simply facilitates violent encounters and is populated only by victims of violent practitioners, *True Grit* uses Mattie’s stringent morals as a way of illuminating the local culture more fully. This place-based critique of 1960s western cinema extends the arguments made by critics such as Nathaniel Lewis that western literature is preoccupied with authenticity. This chapter identifies an impetus for that preoccupation. I also extend Stephen Tatum’s argument that all regional cultures are subservient to a greater hegemonic order under global capitalism. Just as Tatum traces the connection between agricultural lifestyles to the global industries that enable them, I trace the precarious connections between the film industry and western literature as part of a greater argument about critical regionalism. Finally, this chapter challenges previous readings of *True Grit* and postwestern cinema alike and establishes a new connection between literature and film production by attending to the ways that material changes in film production have influenced literature.

II. Critical Regionalism and Film Genre

In his 2005 article “Literature and Regional Production,” Hsuan Hsu argues that the “hearts and minds” of western residents are “restructured by regional art and culture” (37). Hsu’s claim makes valuable headway toward explaining the connection between cultural attitudes, aesthetics, and cultural practices. Essentially, Hsu makes an important

connection to the power of culture to affect everyday lives in the context of regional identity. In doing so, Hsu exposes regional identities vulnerability to change, and it is important to remember that depictions of regional life—especially the West—are not always created domestically. Outsider views of a given culture are less likely to create accurate depictions of their subjects for several reasons: they may misunderstand the meaning of cultural behaviors, or they may latch on to certain events from history and magnify those events to the point that they are disproportionately represented. For example, the preponderance of western films set in the mid to late nineteenth century during the time of free-range cattle and post Civil War hostility has been disproportionately represented, as have the white settler perspectives that inspired those narratives. While these stories have historically been embraced as entertainment, Hollywood has repeatedly used such stories as bankable products. Despite Hollywood's location in the West and its role in adding to the allure of the West as a center of cultural production, the film companies established in Hollywood represent global financial interests. Hence, films made about the West do not represent an insider's perspective on the region.

In fact, one might argue that popular depictions of the West are rarely created domestically. In contrast to Hsu's argument, Stephen Tatum claims that there is no such thing as a "western mind" or a "western essence" (7). Such a blanket statement might seem striking. Surely the identities of westerners—the lifestyles we live—not to mention the persistence of the West in the American consciousness cannot be devoid of coherent values, shared experiences, and overlapping concerns. However, I think what Tatum means is only that there is not one consistent, monolithic "western mind." Instead, there

exists a multitude of western minds that share certain attitudes, assumptions, and tendencies, and those many western minds create many western cultures. Even within the West, there is a multiplicity that shifts within a fluid cultural identity. Together, Campbell's, Hsu's, and Tatum's arguments highlight an important truth for regional studies: even regional cultures contain multiplicities, and those multiplicities influence each other in a network of connections. This shifting network of multiple influences constitutes the most accurate definition of a regional culture.

Before jumping to invocations of a harmonious multicultural region where our similarities outweigh our differences, it is worth noting, as Nathaniel Lewis writes in *Unsettling the Literary West*, that “more than clinging to authenticity, western writers express anxiety over a changing impression of the West” (4). If the West is always shifting by degrees in a network of connections among multiplicities, it follows that large shifts in our shared understanding of the West would provoke an anxious reaction. This anxiety is inherently tied to the rise of postwesterns. Given their effort to shift conventions, expectations, and fictions that have been popularly adopted as history rather than myth, postwesterns inherently put pressure on existing impressions of the West and begin to change them. As the impression of the West changes, so do the hearts and minds of western writers, and, as postwestern challenges to convention restructure western writers conception of the West, they react by including this changing impression of the West in their fiction. Their reaction, then, is an effort for writers to come to grips with their new impression of the West and to reconcile this new impression with their history as writers.

In *Landscapes of the New West* (1999), Krista Comer addresses this question of westerners' concern with a changing conception of their region in what she calls "the new regionalism," a conception of regionalism that is enabled by modernism and postmodernism even as the western culture remains generally resistant to those movements. The new regionalism, for Comer, comes about as "an antidote to the postmodern" in order for western culture to take on the persistent challenge within postmodernism of "the subject's inability to locate itself" (3). Part of this chapter's objective is to explore how Portis, as a western writer, seeks to relocate western literature. In some way, Portis carries on the western aesthetic consisting of what Comer calls a "complex alliance between realism, regionalism, and antimodernism" (3). Even so, his resistance to the way cinema had begun representing the West in the 1960s is an important way that he engaged postmodernism as a western writer rather than avoiding it altogether.

In "Toward a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," Kenneth Frampton argues that "The bulldozing of irregular topography into a flat site is clearly a technocratic gesture which aspires to a condition of absolute *placelessness*" (26). I argue that cinematic depictions of the West in the western genre similarly abstract the region into a blank screen upon which filmmakers project their cinematic vision. An absence of the markers of place in the service of mythogenesis presents a threat to westerners' regional identities. These changing depictions of the West raise a fundamental question for western writers who strive to be authentic: How can one be authentic when the way people think of the West is easily be manipulated by genre?

III. Postwesterns and a Changing Genre

There are two primary scholarly discussions concerning the western since the 1960s. The first examines what makes the western “post,” coming after some landmark turn in attention to masculinity, violence, social justice, or mythology. The second group has been primarily interested in the ways authenticity has persistently influenced western writers to tell stories that carry some cachet related to reliably representing an event, a real place, or real people. These efforts at realism have a similar effect to the landmark turns in the first group. By revising our cultural understanding of the West to be more historically accurate, revisionist westerns tug at the seams of old understandings of western masculinity, race relations, and the story of western conquest, while stitching together new understandings of those same issues. The valuable work of revising erroneous cultural impressions made for compelling filmmaking that reinvigorated a western genre growing tired by the 1950s after decades of popularity based on recycled tropes.

These innovations in western film drove a boom in the western’s popularity. Not only did studios jump on the bandwagon, but independent filmmakers did, as well. The impact of postwesterns’ popularity was palpable as “New Hollywood”—the more avant-garde and counterculture-driven group of filmmakers—began to make films in the late 1960s. Writing about the recognizable actors associated with New Hollywood, Alexander Horwath names Warren Beatty, Jack Nicholson, Al Pacino, Dustin Hoffman, Gene Hackman, [and] Robert De Niro as some of the quintessential New Hollywood stars who worked closely with directors in creating their films (14-15). Their films were meant to be free of the influence of global capital, instead securing independent funding and

making films on a tight budget. The New Hollywood might be closer to the idea of purely artistic filmmaking in that it was often considered to be less profit-driven than Hollywood film projects. Horwath describes some of New Hollywood's financial failures as "quasi-liberating" in that they helped resolve "the dialectic between 'autonomous creativity' and large investments (=expectations of profits)" (13). In other words, New Hollywood filmmakers were freer to express their vision since Hollywood film producers did not control it as tightly.¹¹ New Hollywood resisted genre conventions and pushed the boundaries of the art form. As they produced westerns, the New Hollywood directors played an important role in correcting the erroneous version of western history that had seeped into popular cultural memory from western films.

Feeling the pressure from the riskier era of filmmaking that I outlined in chapter one, film companies began integrating more violence into their films as part of their effort to become more commercially successful. Eventually, depictions of violence used by filmmakers from both classical Hollywood and New Hollywood had the controversial effect of resonating with many viewers. As a consequence, the lines between violence being used to cash in and violence that is meant to provoke thoughtful reactions are blurred. And this conflation of the uses of film violence exacerbates the cultural understanding of the West as hyperviolent. As a result, the answer to curbing the violence in mid-1960s westerns lay not with other violent films but with western literature.

We should also keep in mind the western literary attention to authenticity regarding postwesterns, which are geared toward revision of the genre. It might be worth

¹¹ For a more detailed discussion of the way New Hollywood resisted the established order of Hollywood production, see *The Last Great American Picture Show*, edited by Thomas Elsaesser, Alexander Horwath, and Noel King.

establishing a hierarchy of types of westerns that perform some critical function, whether that function is directed at the western genre, social history, or cultural values. In *Still in the Saddle*, Andrew Patrick Nelson delves into the history of film criticism and scholarship addressing the change of what a western is in the late 1960s, and carefully expounds on multiple scholarly redefinitions of the revisionist western, all of which I would argue fall under the umbrella term “postwestern.” What has yet to be explored is the subject of the films’ revision.

Some postwesterns aim to revise the genre, some aim to revise the historical setting, and some aim to revise the cultural attitudes that have been traditionally embraced by the western form. Others are more individually focused—representing a particular director’s interest or perspective (Nelson 21). All of this is to say that the term “postwestern” contains multitudes that are being elided through their amalgamation into one term. Despite the complexity of referents “postwestern” carries, and the vast amount of scholarly attention those referents have generated, Nelson smartly points out that traditional and stylistically consistent westerns dominated the 1970s market, when postwesterns are supposed by many critics to be the rising or dominant force in western cinema. This revelation raises significant questions about why postwesterns have become the topic of interest to the point that cultural scholars have neglected what was both popular and profitable during this key period in the evolution of the genre.

Moving beyond the context of film genre history, the reaction I’m arguing for shares some objectives with the production of traditional cinematic westerns. While traditional westerns may be clinging to an outdated view of the West and its imaginative role in American cultural consciousness, western literature is likewise reticent about the

impression of the West, or what is being revised, in western films. Nelson points to *True Grit* as a traditional western that is more successful at the box office than other traditional westerns of the time. This begs the question of why one traditional western was more successful than others. However, I would refrain from immediately identifying *True Grit* as a paragon of traditional western cinema—if such a thing can be said to exist at all—and the reasons stem from Hathaway's source material. *True Grit* has both traditional and postwestern elements working simultaneously, so characterizing *True Grit* as traditional ignores some of the tension in the text. I would argue that the novel features enough traditional elements to seem familiar to fans of the classical western, and enough of the postwestern to spawn a film adaptation capable of attracting viewers who were becoming more accustomed to innovative elements from Leone's style of filmmaking. The interaction of those two elements in the novel produces the reaction, as I've been calling it, to the changing impression of the West asserted by filmmakers like Leone.

IV. Spaghetti Westerns and an Abstracted Genre

Within the larger scale of postwesterns of many sorts, spaghetti westerns are distinct for several reasons. The first is that, as the name implies, these are films set in the nineteenth-century American West, but made in Italy. The western enjoyed global popularity, and many European countries made western films, including Germany and France. But Italy was the most enthusiastic and made the most western films of all European countries.¹² And while there were several Italian western filmmakers, Leone is

¹² For a more detailed discussion of Leone's role in Italian filmmaking, see Edward Buscombe's *100 Westerns*.

the most famous and influential (Buscombe, *100 Westerns* 52). *Fistful of Dollars* set off a rush of Italian westerns that lasted for several years. But it also started the trend of spaghetti westerns that would challenge the American film industry's grip on the western genre, and ultimately earn a spot in history as a vital chapter in the evolution of the genre. Leone's *Dollars* trilogy marks a significant stylistic shift for westerns. Those who find the films lacking in artistic quality scrutinize the gritty appearance and often-unattractive close-ups of Leone's characters marred by sweat and dirt. These stylistic choices gesture toward realism—they are more historically accurate than cleanly dressed heroes with unsullied white hats—but Leone's stylization of the grittiness marks a powerful shift away from realism and toward formalism. The characters' dirty clothes and clammy skin either exacerbate the repulsiveness of the villains' violent actions, or, conversely, their disheveled appearance makes victims of violence appear more pitiable.

Leone's move toward formalism is an important leap for film westerns because it begins the process of opening up the form to artistic innovations. By experimenting with the western's form, Leone's westerns accelerate the abstraction of the way the West was being imagined in film and the real history of the West. Before the 1960s, western films depicted the West in much the same way as did western literature. Both were deeply rooted in realism. Even the singing cowboys and sensationalized stories were bound by the real world challenges of frontier life. Leone took those repeated challenges and dilemmas and made the revolutionary shift toward playing with the expectations created by repeated realist narratives and conventional visuals—especially visual representations of death.

Lee Clark Mitchell's 1998 landmark study, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*, delves into the important shifts that were made from the classical western model to the postwestern beginning with Leone's trilogy. Just as I am attending to an increase in violence, Mitchell points out that the postwestern changes from alternating between bouts of violence to what he calls "violence as stasis" established in a landscape, to convincing the audience that "violence *is* stasis" (224). Since Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), the threat of violence has always brought death near to characters in western films. Leone's films, however, represent death in a new way. Leone replaces the blossoming western town of classical westerns with an empty town filled only with opposing factions in an otherwise empty landscape that itself embodies death (Mitchell 228). Even in Leone's few well-populated set pieces, such as the Langstone Bridge in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, the occupants are there only in anticipation of death—as a marker for death's potential scale. Such an emphasis on violence is in keeping with Leone's directorial vision, a vision that moved the genre away from its classical roots and toward a postmodern cinematic vision of the West that is abstracted from the region it purports to represent. Rather than a vision (even a fictionalized one) of the West, Leone moves the genre into mythic space through a combination of ahistorical settings and characters and formalist filmmaking. In the absence of vibrant wilderness and populous town centers, Leone's films are full of references to earlier western films (Nelson 73). These references exemplify what Christopher Frayling calls Leone's "neo-realist approach to 'decors and details,' ...the criticism of one (historical/cinematic) mythology, [and] the re-creation of another (cinematic) mythology" (170). Such an approach has the effect of rendering the West as a collection of set pieces and archetypal

characters in which “it does not matter if the details are wrong” so long as it looks good (Frayling 170). William Beard writes in *Persistence of Double Vision* that with the end of the studio system in the ‘60s, classical heroism was gradually replaced by neoclassical heroism, which is both cynical and self-mythologizing. Leone’s removal of history from the mythology is what I argue prompts the anxious reaction by western writers. After all, what does the West look like without the historical roots of regeneration and conquest? Leone’s answer is: bleak.

Beard argues that the move away from heroism, the “emphasis on dirt and violence may be read (though not correctly) as a stab at realism.” However, rather than realism, Leone is creating a mythic space that merely incorporates dirt and violence as set pieces. The gritty setting is devoid of the “social optimism and personal idealism of the classical genre” (17). Wilderness and civilization traditionally occupied binary positions in classical westerns. Leone, however, seems to bring the two together into one locale neither fully civilized nor offering the combination of danger and escape that the wilderness does, rendering the setting fully symbolic of a deterritorialized west transcribed fully into myth.¹³ Moreover, the town is vacant of townspeople except those who are there to provide some service related to death, or those who are there simply to suffer in the crossfire of the interfamilial war that has consumed the town. This vacant setting, often surrounded by unpeopled desert, offers little hope for regeneration even after violence. Rather, to exist in Leone’s western town is to exist violently.

¹³ For more on the role of landscape in Leone’s westerns, see Lee Clarke Mitchell’s *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*.

Moving beyond the abstraction of the landscape, the hero is also abstracted from any real identity. Of course, Eastwood's character famously lacks a name, but more than this mysterious aspect that adds to his menacing impression is his lack of a history or home. Just as the town has become myth, so has the hero in the new imagining of the western. Lacking an identity, No Name carries out deeds with the nihilistic purpose of making money while killing, and then killing in a way that surpasses what is possible. Specifically, he fires more bullets than his gun can hold and kills more men than the number of bullets he has fired (Mitchell 227). Ultimately, Mitchell argues, this mythic setting leads to a morality that is no longer based in right or wrong but is instead established by his degree of skill with a gun (Mitchell 225). This problematic self-interest coupled with the "transcendental heroic abilities" crucial to the western genre, along with the blankness with which Eastwood performs his character, adds to his perceived invincibility (Beard 24). Eastwood's performance as an emotionless agent of self-serving violence accentuates Leone's directorial style. By using cinematography that heightens the experience of screen violence and by portraying the western landscape as a vacant place for violence to erupt, Leone transcends the classical western genre and creates something new.

One of the more interesting aspects of studying Leone's contribution to the western genre comes from the long history of *Fistful of Dollars*' narrative. Leone admittedly drew from Akira Kurosawa's samurai film *Yojimbo* (1961) for his story about a hired fighter who plays two rival groups against one another for personal gain. For *Yojimbo* Kurosawa, likewise, took the essence of the narrative from Dashiell Hammett's 1929 novel *Red Harvest*. The international genealogy leading up to *Fistful of Dollars*

adds a level of complexity to arguments surrounding genre change and speaks to the use of film syntax as a group of characteristics that can be swapped out of a hard-boiled detective novel, replaced with samurai, and replaced yet again with cowboys.

Nevertheless, *Red Harvest*'s self-serving characters create narrative situations that add to the cinematic way Leone's films began changing the genre.

These later films may even serve as specifically postmodern or "demonic" sequels to classical western predecessors, such as *High Noon* (1952) and *Shane* (1953) (Slotkin *Gunfighter Nation* 628). Thus Leone's westerns represent an early foray into postmodernism for the genre and a remaking of previous narratives, a trend that would only grow with increasing genre diversity in films Richard Slotkin categorizes as "formalist (like Leone), neo-realist (of which he gives no examples), and countercultural (or the New Cult of the Indian)" (*Gunfighter Nation* 628). Though No Name (Clint Eastwood) is resurrected at the end of *Fistful of Dollars*, he is not immortal. Films following in Leone's formalist footsteps, specifically those starring and/or directed by Eastwood, do make that immortality real, though. Leone's changes to the genre proved to be popular, and they fundamentally changed the way people viewed and responded to the western, even those writing westerns after Leone's genre cycle.

While these changes to the western genre have been widely studied, we should keep in mind the way these genre changes subsequently altered the popular understanding of the West. It is that shift toward a more abstracted vision of the West that spurs the literary reaction I find in *True Grit*. Portis, no doubt, engages with some of the tropes

popularized by Leone and the professionalist westerns.¹⁴ And his response is not a clean opposition to these tropes. Rather, Portis's novel presents a valuable alternative to the vacant and abstract West used in formalist filmmaking and reaches back to some elements of the classic western while incorporating a new sense of place that renders the setting much more granular and specific. When it becomes abstract, it becomes contrasted with Mattie Ross's view of the West—a view that works to localize the challenges and morality in which she finds value and enables civilization building. So while we might think of *True Grit* as joining in the particular cultural moment leading up to its adaptation and theatrical release on Independence Day in 1969, the novel reflects anxiety about ongoing trends throughout the 1960s.

By using western genre conventions as a medium, playing with expectations and drawing on iconic imagery, Leone's films abstract the western genre and its accompanying national mythology beyond the region whose exploration germinated those myths. And American filmmakers rushed to answer the stylistic innovations he achieved. Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* was an important step in bringing Leone's fresh trends to American film. Peckinpah embraced Leone's formalist approach to filmmaking and incorporated the nihilism demonstrated by Leone's antiheroes through *The Wild Bunch*'s self-serving mission to rob the Mexican government, taking advantage of the distraction caused by war. By adopting Leone's style and thematics, Peckinpah brought a deterritorialized western genre home, perpetuating an abstracted western genre unmoored

¹⁴ Will Wright outlines the development of western "professionalist narratives" in *Sixguns and Society*. Andrew Patrick Nelson expands on Wright's analysis and articulates various ways the professionalist narrative has been revised.

from realism and reintegrating it into mainstream American cinema. So Leone's and Peckinpah's work exemplifies an important move into postmodern filmmaking focused on the American West. Their films are part of a subgenre of postwesterns that ignored revisionist efforts at correcting history and instead revised the genre structure and aesthetics. This kind of revision led to a quick response from western writers, specifically Portis, who adopted some of the increased violence and nihilistic philosophy while freely offering critiques of those characteristics.

Perhaps most importantly, spaghetti westerns drove a revival of the form, boosting Hollywood production from eleven western films in 1963 to twenty-two in 1965 (Mitchell 225). While that is still fewer than the numbers of westerns created in the 1940s and 50s, it is a notable increase that can be specifically attributed to spaghetti westerns' arrival in 1964. This boom in Hollywood western production follows the important revisions to the film-rating model and reflects the increasing confidence film companies had in westerns. Following Leone's model, many other directors, such as Peckinpah, and even Henry Hathaway when directing the film adaptation of *True Grit*, created westerns in which the heroes no longer sought justice but hired on as professionals to carry out violence for a paying clientele.

One could reconcile with this reading of postwesterns as simply westerns where heroes are more motivated by money than by right and wrong. However, Leone's antiheroes rarely hold on to their ill-gotten gains very long, often forfeiting them rather than relishing their prize. With money in question as a real motivator for such characters, they are left with only one alternative: the desire to practice their skill at killing (Mitchell 237). Mitchell's reading certainly captures the ethically questionable motivation

postwestern gunfighters display; it seems apt considering how compressed and vacant the *Dollars* trilogy setting really is. But my point in including it is to underscore that whether the characters' motivation emerges from the prospect of financial gain or a sadistic pleasure in violence, it is a motivation that has moved away from the sense of heroism that anchored traditional westerns.

Since westerns have always incorporated an element of violence, seeing death in a spaghetti western does not inherently strike viewers differently. The western violence before and after spaghetti westerns varies by degree. But there is more to Leone's cinematic style than simply more shooting, more deaths, and more blood. The "stylistic amplitude," as Steven Prince calls it, uses many cinematic elements to give the violence more impact. In *Fistful of Dollars* and *For a Few Dollars More* Leone relies heavily on camerawork (both angles and zoom), music, and performance to stylize the violence into the mythic ideal he imagines.

One example of Leone's innovative use of the camera extends the previous note about close-ups. Close-up shots play an integral role in the lead up to No Name's shootout with the Baxters near the beginning of *Fistful of Dollars*. No Name provokes a fight with the group as a way to prove his worth to the Rojos and set his scheme to defraud both groups for his personal gain in motion. For context, the Baxters had antagonized No Name earlier in the film as he rode into town, shooting near him and frightening his mule. In this scene he finds the same men sitting on the fence in front of the Baxter compound as they were in the initial confrontation. As the group and No Name trade tense words in the lead up to the shootout, the camera suddenly cuts to a close-up of No Name and remains in close-up as it cuts to each of the Baxters in front of

the house. This differs from conventional western shootouts in that it brings the focus in very close to each of the characters and elevates the tension already established by the previous confrontation. With each cut we expect violence to break out, and cutting repeatedly to a new face not only gives viewers a close look at who is about to die, but also spikes the anticipation as we realize the image is not yet a shootout but another face, each communicating different personality traits in the moment. Some appear cocksure, while others are angrily malevolent. These emotions are further contrasted with Eastwood's face, which communicates very little, lending him an air of cool determination as he looks at each adversary while clenching his cigarillo in his teeth.

As the camera work elevates the tension between the faces of the characters, Leone uses music to further amplify the moment leading up to the shootout. The sound bridge of an unbroken, high-pitched violin note suspends the tension across these multiple cuts. The note adds a sense of discomfort to the scene in a way that amplifies the camera work, and suggests an association with the violence that is about to break out. The note is very similar to the violin note use in Bernard Herrmann's score for Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). Rather than synchronizing a repeated high note, though, Leone uses the long note. The similar evocative nature of the two is striking, as Leone's scoring choices work in a similar way to elevate tension. This high violin note repeats in several scenes as No Name prepares to kill, and becomes a violent leitmotif or auditory queue over the course of the film. As the note becomes more recognizable as a sign of violence soon to erupt, its strength in prompting tension becomes increasingly effective over the course of the film.

While the camera angles and music magnify the tension leading up to violence, Leone films violence in ways that communicate a changing vision of the role violence plays in the film and, presumably, the genre. In the scene I've been describing, Leone films the shootout such that the perspective is abstracted. Rather than filming from No Name's point of view, putting the audience in the place of the character performing violence, or placing the camera so we identify with the Baxters who suffer No Name's violence (granted while trying to kill him at the same time), Leone situates that camera above and to the right of No Name's gun. In a shot that might place viewers looking over the shoulder of an actual character, we are instead placed in a low, wide shot that reveals all five of the Baxter men either standing in front of the fence or sitting on it. The shot is wide enough to include the holstered gun on No Name's hip.

Two important things happen because of this innovative camera angle. The first is that the shot is able to contain all of the most interesting visual information in a master shot rather than cutting between multiple shots to communicate all of the action. From this shot we can see No Name's draw, and his feathering of the gun's hammer as he quickly shoots all four Baxter men with five bullets. As the camera stays steady, the gun moves quickly among targets as No Name fires. Within the one camera shot there are a quick draw and four deaths, and though the killing is over in an instant, the camera lingers over the devastation. This longer take, in addition to being wide-angled, provides a gruesome resolution—though not necessarily relief— from the tension built by the cuts between close-ups and the high-pitched violin note. The sequence of shots and musical queues follows a progression of tension, then relief, followed by awe as we see the full

event contained in one shot followed by No Name's calm exit and his correction to "four coffins" needed from the carpenter.

This scene reveals some of the ways Leone changes heroic violence by incorporating tension and awe. However, when comparing Leone's depictions of violence to those of earlier westerns, we should keep in mind that violence in spaghetti westerns varies by type, not only degree. For example, the entire shootout between No Name and the Baxters is predicated on No Name's desire to join the Rojos, not out of loyalty to a set of values, but to use them as a way to make himself rich. While audience members identify with him as the protagonist and may simply like his character because of a quiet charisma, he is practicing the kind of self-serving violence that marks the beginning of the shift toward postwestern violence—the kind of violence that I argue western literature resists later in the decade.

The scene in which the Rojos finally attack the Baxters rather than playing subversive games with them behind the scenes is a more extreme example. While the earlier scene with No Name and the Baxters ramped up tension to have him coolly kill four men, this scene increases the violence depicted to an extreme level. As the Baxters go about their evening inside their house, the Rojos set up an ambush by dumping barrels of tequila around the front of the house. Ramon Rojo (Gian Maria Volontè) then causally walks up and throws a lamp into the flammable liquid. As the Baxters evacuate their house, the Rojos gun them down. While this scene is particularly brutal in its depiction of violence and is made more extreme by the choreography of the Baxters and the fiery background against which they die, the scene is transformed into a psychotic display of violence as the camera shifts focus from the Baxters as victims to the Rojos as killers.

The camera again moves to serial close-ups of the Rojos' faces as they each fire a shot and laugh maniacally. These repeated shots of the Rojos laughing then firing their guns, only to be replaced by another laughing face and gunshot, create a disturbing scene. And though the Rojos believe that the Baxters have kidnapped Ramon's captive love interest, this is nothing like an effort to recover a stolen woman, as in a classical western. The repeated maniacal laughter in close-ups accompanied by the image of the deaths all lit by towering flames reimagines the depiction of western violence to be increasingly psychotic.

From the evidence in these scenes, I argue that spaghetti westerns introduce two important changes to the western genre that prompt western literature's reaction: the degree of violence and the type of violence depicted. Though films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *The Wild Bunch* are most often credited with making ultraviolence part of the cinematic landscape, films like *Fistful of Dollars* and *For a Few Dollars More* were an important developmental step in increasing the intensity of film violence. The way Leone uses montage editing to piece together the violent scenes, especially using close-ups, heightens the tension to which long shots provide relief even when they show four characters being killed in an instant. Leone's technique of using close-ups is further amplified by his use of music and musical cues for anticipated violence. Finally, montage editing over the depictions of violence and accompanied by other elements of mise en scene, such as fire, intensifies the impact of the violence depicted. While these increases in the degree of violence are notable and important for the history of the genre, it is vital that these violent events are performed out of a sense of entitlement—an ambition No Name has to make himself wealthy—not simply a morally necessary act that will

establish law and order. These two developments in degree and type of violence are taken up in *True Grit* in way that resists their appeal to audiences and the consequent influence that kind of violence has on a vision of the West.

V. True Grit's Resistance of Spaghetti Western Tropes

Much like the *Dollars* trilogy and *The Wild Bunch*, a significant portion of Charles Portis's novel *True Grit*'s popularity was rooted in the hardline revenge-over-justice narrative and Rooster Cogburn's charismatic violence. The setting is darker and riskier than earlier westerns, as Mattie and her two guides (Rooster and the Texas Ranger LaBoeuf) cross into "Indian Nation," a frontier depicted as a space of lawless escape for criminals in much the same way Mexico is portrayed by Leone in the *Dollars* trilogy. More importantly, the way *True Grit* fits alongside these films provides further evidence of Leone's genre innovations being incorporated into western American literature. But *True Grit* is distinct in resisting some of those genre innovations—specifically the way Leone's depiction of violence abstracts the western genre from the West as a region. While Leone paints with a broad brush in his portrait of the West—plucking set-pieces and iconography out of their historical context in order to alter the conventions in service to his artistic vision—Portis narrows the scope to a classical frame and makes the western culture depicted in his novel much more specific. As the narrator, Mattie Ross consistently refers to people who live in specific places and have specific attitudes or flaws that are common to that area. By focusing and developing the story set in Arkansas and Oklahoma Territory, Portis lends an element of historical accuracy in the setting that builds on Mattie's voice as a narrator, references to specific people, and demonstration of

local cultural norms and attitudes. In her own elitist way, Mattie subscribes to a version of geographic determinism that reflects the local culture through the actions and words of the inhabitants.

This literary reaction is an excellent example of the ways critical regionalists have argued that various forms of culture interact with each other and challenge regionalist views of culture that might otherwise seek to insulate a region from external influences. Using the term “reaction” as I have implies some level of intentionality. Unfortunately, that level of conscious involvement cannot be proven. However, the trend toward including the kind of antihero typical of spaghetti westerns speaks to the cross-media changes influencing the way filmmakers and writers were imaging the West during this period. As Portis’s novel follows the trend toward cynical violence and its appeal for revenge narratives, *True Grit* reveals the rhizomatic connection between western genre film and western literature as two media vested in producing the region. It is worth noting that *True Grit*’s publication in the midst of the cinematic evolution shows that western writers can adapt to and incorporate trends very quickly. These adaptations are evidence of the regions’ openness to changes from the outside, and they make the study of such connections even more vital to understanding the West and the way its regional identities are formed. My way into this interaction begins with the distinctive way Mattie Ross’s narration conveys a conception of life on the frontier and the way things ought to be—yet rarely are. Hers is a critical narration. Her account of events is always accompanied by an evaluation of the merits of those events and the strength or weakness of character the actors in the events demonstrate. In other words, Mattie’s opinion of what happens in the novel is as important as what actually happens.

Although it is not an outright rejection of the violent trends of film westerns in the 1960s, *True Grit* does push back against a postwestern brand of deterritorialized violence. Beyond Mattie's depiction of characters embodying the moral failures of their homes, Mattie's own self-righteous morality is deeply rooted in Yell County, Arkansas. Mattie's place-based morality reveals her trepidation about traits Rooster Cogburn shares with postwestern anti-heroes found in the *Dollars* trilogy and *The Wild Bunch*. Despite being Mattie's chosen champion, Rooster is immediately depicted as a morally compromised man. His moral failings continue throughout the novel and add to Mattie's ambivalence toward him. Though Rooster repeatedly disgusts and disappoints her, Mattie sees him as her best hope of earning justice for her father. It is here, in the ambivalence Mattie feels toward Rooster, that I find grounds for questioning his heroic stature. Even if read as a classic antihero, Rooster's actions drive Mattie to narrate him in a way that reiterates her disapproval. Mattie's continued chastising shows that she finds his demeanor unsatisfactory. The narration itself becomes the text for my analysis of tension between the values of Mattie's home—her place-based morality—and the ruthlessness she takes advantage of in hiring Rooster. Mattie may think of Rooster as a necessary evil only to come around and care for him in a very meaningful way, but she takes advantage of Rooster's compromised character for her personal gain in the form of her own revenge quest.

Much of Mattie's narration of extra-narrative events in the novel suggests she is working to offer an historical account rather than merely tell a story. Because Mattie does not recount the events until she is thirty-nine, Kenneth Millard argues that her frequently didactic voice “does not appear to recognize its own complicity in the rhetoric of fiction”

(467). Millard's argument that Mattie's historicizing of her experience is valuable as evidence of a sense that westerners experience some alienation from their history, and he draws from Nathaniel Lewis to claim that "the idea of authenticity...can only exist in a culture that feels alienated from itself" (465). Such a reading of Mattie's recounting the events of the novel suggest a removal from what she knew as the West and an effort to reclaim it by cataloging historical figures associated with the events. Namely, readers encounter Judge Parker, Frank James, and Cole Younger, all historical figures who have transcended history and inspired stories of their own. These two authorial aspects, along with the fictive story, combine to create a "very subtle synthesis of history and fiction" (Millard 467). Portis includes several scenes that demonstrate Mattie's awareness that she is constructing the story for readers after the fact of the narrative events.

Moreover, on an authorial level, Portis includes the encounters with several historical figures that weigh heavily in the story and add to a sense of narrative realism. Millard takes as evidence the historical figures I've already pointed out, and he smartly highlights Mattie's aversion to any kind of "story," that word being synonymous for her (as it is for many children) with dishonesty. Mattie argues against accusations of being a runaway by claiming it is a "big story," leveling a similar defense of herself what she is captured by Cheney. As Millard points out, this close attention to history plays into the ambition of many western writers to create alternative narratives that are more historically accurate, but Mattie's clear distinction between what is "story" and what is an account makes clear that her bookkeeping carries over to her narration and suggests a sense that she believes her story is at risk of becoming another embellished work of fiction rather than the truth she wants to retell.

Issues of western authenticity call into question western authorial identity and the complex history of early western publication. Despite authenticity's relatively simple appearance, a closer examination of its importance within western literature led Lewis to define and parse the concept more fully in the context of western literary studies. Lewis's arrival at a broad definition—that “the authentic is, above all original and real,” speaks to the foundational nature of authenticity as a concept (5). Narrowing the definition seems unnecessary, yet the myriad uses of authenticity—rhetorical, political, and in marketing—might lead scholars studying cultures of the West to take authenticity for granted. Lewis also aligns his argument with Krista Comer's—that the defining generic feature of western literature is probably realism (Lewis 2). Western literature's general leaning toward realism, along with this seeming critical consensus, raises the question of how the region has been presented, or has presented itself, to the world.

I don't mean to imply that anyone should believe western films to be historically accurate, but their position on the mythical side of the history/myth binary raises questions for me about the role film may play as a foil to lived experiences in western literary authorship. Lewis has argued convincingly that authenticity has been used in western literature as a “quixotic rhetorical strategy [and] a form of authorial self-invention [that constitutes] a narrative of literary history” (9). So while we must qualify western literary authenticity as a complex position from which to launch a critique of the film industry's homogenous vision of the West, the tendency of western writers to strive for authenticity by using literary realism is a vital component as I work to articulate this new history between literary cinematic representations of the West. Realism's prevalence

in western literature suggests that western writers take a greater interest in representing the region than do film producers.

The difference between my impression of film companies' commitment to the region may be the result of a highbrow/lowbrow continuum. For example, nineteenth-century dime novel authors were often guilty of false representations of the West as they wrote for the entertainment of eastern audiences. Michael Denning has thoroughly explained the harsh view educated readers took of dime novels during their heyday. So poor was their reputation that literary scholars who study dime novels, such as Frank P. O'Brien, often refrained from even referring to the texts as dime novels in their analyses in hopes of circumventing the initial reaction readers often had toward them (Denning 13). And while cinema has assumed much of the mass entertainment role that dime novels once played, it is worth noting that the differences in perception of literature and film I am discussing are not solely reliant on the medium. Quality and prestige continue to play a role in people's perception of literary and cinematic texts. However, these differences in prestige do not account for an author's or a filmmaker's investment in the region. Taking this into consideration, even an attempt to parse a potential beneficial effect of one's artistic work complicates matters beyond what can be reconciled in support of my argument. For this reason, I rely on each medium's contribution to the cultural imaginary, the way we think about the West as a region marked by diverse cultures. Both of these media contribute to that imaginary, and when one, such as film, goes through significant changes as it did during the end of the studio system, the other medium is affected and will respond.

Keeping in mind this argument about what was popular and what has received critical attention, we can think of *True Grit* as a western that is inclusive of both traditional and postwestern themes. Mattie's quest for vengeance is consistent with manhunts as they have been depicted in western fiction. Moreover, the adventure into an unknown land typically embodies the traditional frontier quest. The novel is set at the turn of the twentieth century, but it retains much of the descriptive iconography that marks it as a western: horses, six-guns, outlaws, and the like. On the other hand, the novel expands the traditions of the western genre. Mattie is strong in many ways. She is smart, determined, and surprisingly wise in the ways of the world, especially commerce. Her maturity effaces the fact that she is a young girl who puts herself in great peril by going on the mission with Rooster and LaBoeuf. And we have already covered how Rooster as a character is similar to spaghetti western characters of the time the novel was published. These dueling personae in the novel present an interesting effect, as do many novels and films that incorporate both traditional and innovative elements. *True Grit* satisfies fans of the genre while offering critics fresh grist for their mills.

Specifically, the novel includes traditional attention to authenticity as a narrative device, and it inherits this changing representation of the West from film. Such an inheritance speaks to Stephen Tatum's work on spectrality and the ways multiple levels of culture, such as infrastructure, labor, and identity, are influenced by global capital. Spectrality is a useful way to describe how powerful global demand for western products such as beef changes the region. By tracing the roots of culture, what Tatum calls an "ethnoscape," back through the investments of capital by transnational groups of investors, or the "finanscape," Tatum makes the case that all local culture is inherently

also global, and he uses this opportunity to coin the term “glocalization” (9). In other words, cowboy culture, as a facilitator of the beef industry, is maintained in the twenty-first century only by outside investment in cattle. Tatum’s sketch of western culture’s formation through transnational investment mirrors the large-scale investment in film projects and their subsequent shaping of the western imagination. Given the emphasis on authenticity in western writing, it follows that large-scale investment from groups outside the region which influence western literature would cause considerable anxiety for writers like Portis. One major contributor to those anxieties is the end of the studio system in the American film industry, which helped spur greater change just as international filmmakers like Leone were rising to popularity.

From the outset of *True Grit*, it is clear that the world Mattie visits is much darker than what she is accustomed to. Her description of her father as a “gallant knight of old,” invoking the moral purity of the chivalric code, is quickly contrasted with the senseless nature of his murder (14). Mattie’s decision to seek revenge is likewise less morally upright than her character would otherwise demand, and that change speaks to her shift in character as she moves into the darker frontier world. Jessica Parker convincingly describes Mattie’s journey into the Indian nation as a journey of “catabasis,” a spiritual descent into the underworld. Mattie’s journey with Rooster and LaBoeuf does embody corrupting experiences associated with a coming of age story. And while journeys into the wilderness often carry such subtextual meaning, the view of the West as an underworld with the capacity to corrupt a young girl is a setting not unlike Leone’s amoral, stark town in *A Fistful of Dollars*. Though Mattie is certainly responsible for her fair share of animosity, she is not fully incorporated into the violent landscape that

surrounds her. Rather, she responds to “shootings, stabbings, and public hangings... flatly and frankly, and with... less warmth than [her] personal opinions” (Tartt 347). The spiritual contrasts between Mattie and the Oklahoma Territory align with the alien sense of exclusion, a sense wrought by moving the narrative setting from the U.S. to Mexico in spaghetti westerns, a move that presents cultural challenges in addition to those posed by an inhospitable wilderness (Mitchell 226). So, while Mattie’s journey could be read as one of spiritual descent, or one in which she is simply disgusted by what she sees beyond the protection of civilization (where her true skills lie), it is clear that the West, for Mattie, has been darkened and bears the marks of abstraction caused by trends sprouting out of the western film genre.

Mattie’s judgmental attitude may be in protest of an amoral West, but that attitude promotes an idea of the West that is still open for capitalist gains for upstanding, if economically ruthless, citizens. Lloyd M. Daigrepoint points out that Mattie’s judgment follows one of the great contradictions of American Puritanism: “a fierce will to power that coexists with a surrender to God’s plan” (112). Furthermore, Mattie’s choice to hire Rooster demonstrates her conviction her quest for righteous justice, allows her to ignore the “demands of law and order.” Daigrepoint’s claim interestingly counters Fletcher’s argument for reading Mattie’s journey as a catabasis delivering her both physically and symbolically into the underworld (Daigreprt 112). Mattie is, therefore, not a benign regionalist sticking up for a pure vision of her home. Rather, she advances a particular vision of the West and morality rooted in a particular place, but it is a problematic morality that is not lacking in its own cruelty. Mattie wants revenge, not justice, and hers

is a quest driven by a sense that one cannot simply get away with treating her father—a member of the upper class—as Cheney does.

Thinking beyond the mere presence of violence to what function that violence serves as part of a cinematic evolution, some have argued that *True Grit* joins the postwestern movement to challenge western norms by overlaying realism—that *True Grit*'s violence is useful for detailing the difficult lives of frontier dwellers. I, on the other hand, read Rooster Cogburn's relationship with violence as problematic for the positive goals taken up by postwesterns, specifically the claim that postwesterns employ realism to create a more accurate version of history. *True Grit* gradually reveals that not only is Cogburn a ruthless marshal, he is guilty of inciting or participating in self-serving violence. His checkered past as a confederate, specifically riding with captain Quantrill, his dubious arrest of Odus Wharton (which costs two of Wharton's sons their lives) and his role in the Johnson County War (ironically another tale of hegemonic takeover of a region by those with wealth and influence), which takes place after the primary narrative, reveal Cogburn as a cynical hero.

Rather than contributing to a realist portrait of the West, Cogburn's checkered history instead paints him as one of Beard's neoclassical heroes, which Beard describes as "lethal agent[s] of a generalized regressive anger masquerading as law enforcement... which evade skepticism by a tacit acknowledgment of its own separateness from realist ideology, its deliberate self-mythification" (8). Cogburn's brand of violence is typical of Leone's *Dollars* trilogy, and is what caused much of *A Fistful of Dollars*' hostile critical reception—the "unusually graphic and cynical violence, ambivalent relationship to the historical and generic 'realism' and their relationship to the

western genre as a whole was seen as a threat to the western genre...because critics found echoes and perhaps causes of deeply disturbing trends in domestic film culture, trends that would later culminate in what would be dubbed ‘the new Hollywood’” (McClain 52).

The difference between Mattie’s descriptions of Rooster and Tom Cheney is telling. To her, Cheney is trash and offends her upper-class sensibilities. She describes him as riding an old gray horse and carrying a rifle slung over his shoulder with an old piece of plow line, writing: “He could have taken an old harness and made a nice leather strap for it. That would have been too much trouble” (Portis 14). The powder burn on his cheek suffered when a man fired a pistol in his face marks Cheney’s “trashy” presentation. Such a wound would not be suffered by an upstanding citizen, and it marks him figuratively as an outsider capable of wanton violence.

The essence of Cheney’s description is laziness—a failure to maintain the Puritan work ethic vital to capitalist ventures. Cheney contrasts sharply with Mattie’s final view of her father, riding a tall brown horse in his nice clothes that communicate his financial power overtly and covertly (he carries two gold pieces in the waste band of his trousers). She writes: “He looked as if a night of old,” invoking the chivalric code in her elegiac description of her father (14). Mattie’s description may be embellished, or her memory may have bolstered her father’s stature because her final description of Frank Ross leaving for Fort Smith is somewhat at odds with her account of his business deals and moneymaking schemes. In any event, she remembers him fondly and makes clear that he was a first-order gentleman. The contrast between Frank Ross and Tom Cheney is apparent. Far from allowing readers to think that Cheney is simply a product of frontier

hardship, Mattie highlights his character flaws as manifested in his disheveled appearance.

Mattie's description of Rooster strikes a middle ground between the condemnatory and idealized. She initially describes Rooster as a "jasper" wearing a dusty suit of clothes. She describes him as looking much like Grover Cleveland, presumably based on his growth of facial hair. He also lacks the competence to roll a decent cigarette, something that reveals his ignorance. Instead, Rooster seems too practical, and he is unconcerned when the cigarette Mattie rolls for him flares up, and half of it burns away like paper. This small exchange with Rooster reveals Mattie's opinion of Rooster in hindsight (again, she narrates the novel several years after the fact). Rather than judging him incompetent or ignorant, Mattie sees Rooster as being similar to a child in need, perhaps revealing her retroactive desire to help him in some way. Despite these shortcomings, Mattie spares Rooster the harsh criticism she directs at Cheney. The difference is marked by their respective classes, which are not entirely disparate except in their subtle markings of sporadic honor and impulsivity.

Morals play an important role for Mattie and, consequently, for readers. Her morality reinforces the superiority of affluent white Protestant settlers. Her staunch adherence to the protestant ideals and affluent decorum resists Rooster's version of western heroism. Rooster's alignment with cinematic antiheroes causes problems for Mattie even as she seeks revenge on Tom Cheney. Rooster's admission that "You will sometimes let money interfere with what you think is right" underscores the events that reveal his character as one that is temporarily useful for Mattie, but is ultimately not the kind of heroism that should be idealized as a standard for heroic behavior (Portis 84).

Rooster never fails to be an entertaining character. He is quotable, and his actions satisfy reactionary impulses of witnessing injustice. But Rooster's morals are as malleable as his methods are hard, and that makes him a dangerous character to lionize as a hero. This tension between the satisfying use of violence and the ease of lax morals is precisely the problem I see western writers reacting to, beginning with *True Grit*. It is a problem that smacks of an older highbrow/lowbrow dissonance in depictions of the West, but it opens up literature as a medium whose analysis yields revelations stemming from critical regionalism's insight into the film industry.

Mattie's dominance and clear-headedness prime *True Grit* for gender studies investigations. While Mattie lacks the physical strength and skill with violence possessed her counterparts, she wields significant power over them in her ability to reason, form arguments, and, when necessary, force them to carry out her will under threat of legal action from her repeatedly named lawyer, J. Noble Daggett. The way Mattie wields her lawyer's name signals a changing West in which skill with violence has begun to yield to skill with the law and within the social order. This transition favors the upper classes, of which Mattie is a member, and she settles into this powerful role quickly, even as she acknowledges the necessity of violent force for her ends.

Beyond, and at times because of, Rooster's cynical violence, the novel is replete with grotesque injuries. Even for the serious, tough, and at times formidable character Mattie is, the violent scenes she witnesses are gruesome for a child's eyes. As evidence, take Tom Cheney's identifying facial powder burn, Lucky Ned Pepper's lip, which has been partially shot off, Quincy's chopped off fingers, and the hanging near the novel's beginning, which leaves one of the condemned alive but shaking in agony and killed

mercifully by his friends pulling on his legs, presumably to strangle him faster or break his neck. Consider also Le Boeuf's almost fatally dented skull, and the two bleeding holes in Rooster's face from a shotgun blast suffered in the final shootout. Recounting all of these images at once makes the novel seem quite violent, but these scars and injuries are belied by Portis's expertly executed comedy. They might make more of an impression if we weren't laughing. Hyperreal violence has the potential to remove the gloss of western stories that accept violence as a foregone conclusion undeserving of critical consideration. By depicting serious injuries as real possibilities, *True Grit* notably raises the possibility that the West is not as hospitable as myths might suggest. However, that meaningful step is undercut by comic depictions of violence that reduce the potential for critical consideration to a gimmick only included to prompt laughter.

Despite the humor, these grotesque descriptions are in keeping with the harsh realism *True Grit* employs and the type of rough justice Mattie seeks. She memorably ignores a deputy's recommendation for the *best* marshal, L.T. Quinn, described as "strait as a string... a good peace officer and a lay preacher to boot" (25). Mattie instead opts for Cogburn, who "loves to pull a cork" and is described as "the meanest [of the marshals]... a pitiless man, double tough" and fearless. Her terse reply to the glowing endorsement of Quinn is to ask "Where can I find this Rooster?" Mattie's immediate dismissal of Quinn, coupled with her interest in Cogburn, verifies her preference for extralegal vengeance over justice in the courtroom. Despite Mattie's desire for vengeance rather than justice, she retains much of her upper class condescension when dealing with Rooster.

The lengthy process by which Mattie convinces Rooster to accept her offer leads to a telling exchange when Rooster kills a rat in his quarters. After gambling late into the night, Rooster drunkenly wakes Mattie up pointing at a rat eating cornmeal from a torn bag in the storeroom where he lives. After jokingly announcing his intention to serve a “writ for a rat,” he fires on the animal with Mattie’s dragoon pistol.¹⁵ As Rooster holds the revolver “down at his left side and he fired twice without aiming. The noise filled up that little room and made the curtains jump. My ears rang. There was a good deal of smoke” (Portis 65). This scene is comically absurd, but the way Rooster wakes Mattie only to kill a rat serves a purpose. Rooster’s reckless behavior is surprising, despite the clues readers are given to his personality. The thunderous noise and the messy remains of the rat add a sense of danger and disgust to the otherwise comic scene that is driven by his defense when store owner, Lee, chides Rooster that he should shoot outside. Rooster responds by saying “I was serving some papers,” a defense that reveals his quick progression to killing when the subject of the papers fails to comply with his orders. If this is how Rooster serves papers, the trial in which he is being investigated for wrongful death may, in fact, be necessary. Ultimately, Rooster’s impulsive outburst prompts a short rant about the nature of crime and Rooster’s opinion that “you can’t serve papers on a rat” (Portis 65). Presumably, Rooster is implying that criminals are like rats and they should not be granted due process under the law. In Rooster’s eyes, criminals deserve to be killed just as quickly as they would be arrested were they unwilling to go quietly.

¹⁵ A pistol used by cavalry, usually large caliber and heavily weighted. Mattie is warned several times that the pistol is too powerful for her to wield, but she craves the resolution of killing Cheney with her father’s pistol.

It is in the lead-up to the final shootout that Mattie renders her harshest judgment. While Rooster and Le Boeuf feign cooperation with Ned Pepper's demand that they leave Mattie behind lest she be killed rather than held hostage, Mattie laments her situation as she observes Rooster ride over a distant hill:

The drunken gabbing fool had made a mistake of four miles and led us directly into the robbers' lair. A keen detective! Yes, and in an earlier state of drunkenness, he had placed faulty caps in my revolver causing it to fail me in a time of need. That was not enough; now he had abandoned me in this howling wilderness to a gang of cutthroats who cared not a rap for blood of their own companions and how much less for that of a helpless unwanted youngster! Was this what they called grit in Fort Smith? We call it something else in Yell County.

(Portis 190)

Although this outburst is followed by Rooster's moment of classical heroism, Mattie's fear reveals an aspect of her character, a specific morality and idea of grit that is rooted in her home in Yell County. This place-based morality works in direct opposition to the postwestern influence the novel bears in Rooster's character and the grotesque injuries, which I read as evidence of capital's homogenizing forces at work in the genre's violent change. Mattie's quarrel with what we learn is only her perception of Rooster's "grit" seems resolved in the shootout that follows, though I maintain the grotesque descriptions of the injuries sustained therein are telling about cinematic influence. However, before accepting Rooster's violent redemption as one that might revalidate his character, we should consider how Rooster ends up in the novel.

Many westerns have taken as their subject the Johnson County War because it is a particularly dark chapter in America's frontier history. Mattie's acceptance of the stain it causes on Rooster's legacy speaks to her ultimate admiration for him. Nevertheless, she includes it as yet another of the unsavory choices he has made. Essentially a conflict between feudal lords and settlers, the Johnson County War was one of the later chapters in the West's violent history. Settlers in Wyoming took up the same practices of illegally branding unbranded cattle and rebranding already-branded cattle in order to build their herds. Other settlers were perhaps more troublesome in the landlord's eyes because they didn't steal cattle, which could be replaced, but occupied grazing land with their farms. Neither side appears moral, but the methods the wealthy ranchers employed in order to quash the upstarts grabbed headlines. Led by Major Frank Canton, the armed "Death Squad" headed out to round up the rustlers, settlers, and anyone else unfortunate enough to end up on the "Death List." It should be noted that the men hired for this job were promised generous wages for their dirty work.¹⁶ As interesting as this is, it paints an important picture of the motivation behind those who carried out the Johnson County War and whom Cogburn joins after the events of *True Grit*'s narrative. In short, this conflict was about the money rather than a moral belief or sense of justice. And the fact that Cogburn would join up with such an amoral, profit-driven, violent enterprise further confirms his character as nihilistic. It is more fitting that Mattie, despite her affection for Rooster, tinges her description of him at the end with some disappointment, even if it is less condemning than her earlier criticisms of him.

¹⁶ For a thorough history of the Johnson County War, see John W. Davis's *Wyoming Range War: The Infamous Invasion of Johnson County*.

Once Mattie is safely returned home, she keeps tabs on Rooster through sporadic correspondence with Chen Lee. It is through Lee that she learns of Rooster's later romance, his abandonment of his new wife along with "her brood" to go fight in the Johnson County War, where he was "hired to terrorize thieves and people called nesters and grangers" (Portis 220). Lest this small reference seem like the latest exploit of a man making his living from violence, it speaks to Rooster's character in serious ways, just as his abandonment of his new wife does for Mattie. This description is rather nostalgic, and hints at what might even be romantic admiration Mattie has for Rooster (she points out that her brother is poking fun at her and, rather than denying, she pivots to her familial appreciation for jokes and her lack of bitterness for having been left to care for her mother), but the section is telling in that Mattie, despite her admiration for Rooster, uses the words "terrorize" and "sorry business" to describe his latest work, ultimately added that she "fears [he] did himself no credit" by engaging in it (220). These judgments are in keeping with how Mattie has judged Rooster throughout the novel. His actions continue to fall short of her ethical standards as formed in Yell County.

VI. Conclusion

This is where I find tension between two different understandings of the West in *True Grit*—tension between a vision of the West as multifaceted, or "rhizomatic," and another that is situated from a position of authenticity. These two terms are not mutually exclusive—being rhizomatic does not exclude efforts toward authentic representation, and attempts to be authentic are not static. However, the rhizomatic perspective on the West—that which is engaged with the popular impression of the West and the global

vision of it—is what enables the sensationalized violent impression of the West I see western writers resisting. The postwestern elements of *True Grit*—its attempts at realism through hardship and brutality, along with its subversion of gender norms through Mattie’s narration and tenuous position as the boss—clash with the hyperreal and comic violence.

Part of the challenge of that tension comes from the difficulty in defining what we mean by “postwestern.” As Campbell argues in *Postwesterns: Cinema, Region, West*, the prefix “post” is not only tied to a temporal surpassing, but to a critical one as well. There is a simultaneous sense of an “after” and a “going beyond” and a “reconfiguration” of a field that generates new discussion about what came before and what had been previously understood. *True Grit*’s embrace of the postwestern elements listed above highlights the problematic hyper-violence that co-developed alongside a critical examination of genre within postwestern cinema. So while there are advances in the novel, particularly concerning gender roles in the western, there is also a sense of disapproval in the novel regarding Rooster Cogburn’s behavior and character. This tension speaks to my argument regarding the literary reactions to violence in 1960s films and opens the door for an exploration of the mutual influence of film and literature.

Mattie’s place-based resistance works in opposition to Rooster’s worst tendencies, those that make him cynically violent, rather than heroically violent. That kind of resistance speaks to a literary anxiety about the way western genre film portrayed the West in the 1960s. I argue that this anxiety is born out of the western literary preoccupation with authenticity as described by Lewis. Mattie presents a different perspective on the region from what has been depicted in films leading up to the time of

the novel's publication. That her perspective is rooted in a particular place suggests an authentic western perspective. However, Mattie's perspective must be qualified as one among many potential authentic western perspectives while acknowledging Mattie's awareness of the rhetorical power she wields as a narrator with strong opinions about what is right and proper on the frontier. Moreover, it constitutes a resistance to economic factors transcribed from film production. That kind of carryover provides an important new topic for work tracing the "rhizomatic lines of flight" in order to more fully understand how the West has been constructed by film and literature.

Chapter 3: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and the Trauma of War Westerns

I. Introduction

Thus far, this dissertation has examined how Hollywood has controlled popular conceptions of the West in a way that diminishes local people's power to represent themselves to the world through their own cultural production. Charles Portis's *True Grit* makes headway toward bringing that focus back to local experiences by offering a critique of sensationalized violence and western settings that are abstracted from actual places. This is an important maneuver for westerners descended from white settlers whose move into the region inspired the local narratives that have fueled the western genre. However, any discussion of changing stories and the importance of local identities that have been appropriated for the sake of entertainment must address the impact western films have had on Native Americans.

The Western has many variations that depict a variety of villains, but Native Americans occupy a special place in the western genre as the original adversaries to white settlers. Despite the multitude of races that came to occupy the West, in "the popular imagination," Patricia Limerick writes, "the frontier froze as a biracial confrontation between 'whites' and 'Indians'" (259).¹⁷ Native Americans have thus come up against a double bind in the popular imagination: they are portrayed either as a savage enemy or as sympathetic characters who function allegorically as stand-ins for other non-white groups in violent confrontation with whites. Both of these representations foreclose

¹⁷ For more on the complex relations between many races in the West, see Patricia Nelson Limerick's *The Legacy of Conquest*.

understanding Native American culture or the challenges faced by indigenous peoples in the region. However, just as white western writers began writing back against Hollywood depictions, Native American writers addressed their position in the cinematic imaginary in the 1970s. Keeping this in mind, Native American literature offers a valuable perspective in the effort to reclaim regional authority from the simplistic way the West has been represented in film.

Leslie Marmon Silko's landmark novel *Ceremony* (1977) followed a period of American engagement with war trauma following the Vietnam War. As the Vietnam conflict dragged on, Americans became increasingly uneasy about America's standing in the world and the country's position as a global superpower. "Containment," the doctrine of confronting communism wherever it cropped up, contributed to the anxiety Americans felt, as the doctrine inherently committed the country to wars in places many Americans had never heard of.¹⁸ As had frequently happened over the course of the twentieth century, national anxiety was met with an influx of western films that comforted Americans by retelling stories of American exceptionalism, and reaffirming American cultural power by conflating it with righteousness. However, the stories and footage that emerged from Vietnam, along with the challenges they represented to America's belief in its inherent moral superiority, shook the foundations that western stories had long supported, causing a trauma from which American culture would be slow to recover.

Ceremony is set on the Laguna Pueblo after World War II. Though it is set post WWII, the novel resonates with many of the concerns that came about after the Vietnam

¹⁸ Many Americans were unable to identify Vietnam on a map at the outset of the war. Vietnam's lack of familiarity drove a disconnect with an already unclear and controversial mission in the conflict.

War. *Ceremony* follows Tayo, a young Laguna man, who returns from the war suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder. Tayo's wartime trauma is intimately tied up with his mixed race identity. Being half white and half Laguna raises several additional issues for Tayo's recovery and reintegration into his community. Through his multiple efforts to recover from trauma, Tayo discovers the importance of storytelling and the ways stories should and should not evolve over time. Moreover, the novel's anticlimax serves as an important rebuke of western genre expectations regarding violence. At times, it can seem as though violence is the only action available to western heroes; thus, violence as a means of narrative resolution in westerns is often a given.

By rejecting violence—even preemptive or preventative violence—*Ceremony* charts a rare path away from western genre conventions. The novel also engages film trends that emerge in the 1970s as part of a nation wide effort to process the trauma of the Vietnam War. After the war, many American films—such as *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Five Easy Pieces* (1970), and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971)—conveyed the cultural confusion of the time by interfering with montage forms that communicate the protagonists' logic leading up to an action in what Christian Keathley calls the “post-traumatic cycle in American cinema” (293). By interrupting the formal sequence of film shots that normally leads to a character's action, films from the post-traumatic cycle invoked America's sense of helplessness after the war. In much the same way, Tayo confronts his own inability to act after experiencing wartime trauma.

In the wake of Vietnam, American cinema saw a number of allegorical examinations of the U.S.'s role in the conflict starring Native Americans in the role of the Vietnamese. The problematic reversion to supporting colonialism out of loyalty to our

democratic allies in France became a focal point, as did the perceived savagery of the war. The Viet Cong guerilla tactics, often used to strike fear as much as to injure or kill, drew parallels to America's violent history with Native Americans. America's capacity for savagery likewise drew condemnation. Events such as the My Lai Massacre of 1968 exacerbated the reservations many Americans already had about the war. The question of why Americans were involved in the conflict became more pressing with evidence that the war was leading Americans to commit the very atrocities we had always condemned. Coming to grips with the reality that American decency was fragile and not to be taken for granted was a difficult transition in an already unpopular war.

Thus, the wartime specter of savagery captured popular attention, and films following the My Lai Massacre in 1968 quickly incorporated historical events into popular culture. The western genre proved a fitting vehicle for an examination of savagery through a revival of antiquated attitudes toward Native Americans. The publication of Richard Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation* in 1992 was a watershed moment in articulating the way the Cold War played out in American cinema, namely the allegorical conflation of Indian hating with hatred for "red" communists. But this phenomenon was not new. As early as the 1950s, films explored the classic frontier conflict between cowboys and Indians in the context of Cold War defense of democracy. Communism, America's greatest adversary, took center stage cloaked in the red bodies of America's first adversary in a ritualistic return to our founding stories. These stories, Slotkin writes, demonstrate "how racist structures of thought produce a 'logic' which, if we accept and pursue it, traps us in cycles of violence and retribution without limit and beyond all reason" (462). Such a cycle continued to play out in films of the 1960s when inspired by

the complex psychology of the Cold War and when granted the freedom to depict such cycles of violence after the end of the studio system.

So too did American savagery fall under the spotlight of revisionist westerns seeking to rectify the historical record by depicting “what it was really like” when American soldiers raided Indian villages. Some of these allegorical stories proved useful in offering commentary on the Vietnam War and processing American ambivalence and frustration. Others renewed interest in savagery in ways that unfortunately revitalized antiquated clichés about Native Americans and the myth of regeneration through violence.¹⁹ Films such as *Soldier Blue* (1970), *Ulzana’s Raid* (1972), along with classic cinematic achievements like *The Searchers* (1956), used Native Americans as stand-ins for modern-day anxieties such as miscegenation and American wartime ruthlessness.

Soldier Blue and *Ulzana’s Raid* both followed the trend set by *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Wild Bunch*, and the spaghetti westerns in bringing on-screen violence to new levels of brutality. *Soldier Blue* used violence as part of its claim to realism in its marketing, presumably in an effort to skirt the criticisms leveled at *The Wild Bunch*.²⁰ While the films follow a cinematic trend of using violence to attract audiences, and filmmakers offered a moral explanation for their use of violence, they also reified Native Americans, using them in ways that tied them to perpetual violence either visited upon them to elicit guilt for American wars, or performed by them to reaffirm the glory of American conquest. Indeed, as Edward Buscombe writes in *Injuns!: Native Americans in the*

¹⁹ The myth that violence was a means to regenerating colonists’ “fortunes, their spirits, and their church and nation” (5). For more on the role of violence in American mythogenesis, see Richard Slotkin’s *Regeneration through Violence*.

²⁰ For more on the role of Native Americans’ role in *Soldier Blue* and *Ulzana’s Raid*, see Andrew Patrick Nelson’s *Still in the Saddle*.

Movies (2006), American cinema rarely portrays Native Americans without delineating some kind of relationship to white people, whereas “whites in westerns can comfortably exist without Indians being present” (28). Thus, even in western films claiming support for Native American perspectives, the inherent flaw of ignoring experiences outside interactions with whites maintains the centrality of the white experience in western films.

Into this renewed problematic focus on making Native Americans clichéd proxies for modern-day savagery and victimhood comes Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977), a novel deeply interested in attending to the changing nature of stories and the vital efforts to maintain their power, even as the forces of evil seek to corrupt traditional stories in order to weaken the people to whom they belong. *Ceremony* is likewise concerned with the unstoppable cycles of violence to which Native Americans have been subjected, and the novel centers on Tayo’s ceremony to break free of the cycle of violence that began in the Pacific theater of World War II. This ceremony is intimately connected to place. The Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico proves more than a mere setting. It is instead the place where “all things converge” for Tayo’s healing ritual. Silko’s focus on place and breaking a cycle of violence demonstrate the western literary reaction to the ongoing trends in film leading up to *Ceremony*’s publication. More specifically, Silko confronts the problem of inaction caused by a sense of powerlessness. In this way, Silko, much like Portis, has created a western text that is informed by the film industry but works in opposition to cinema’s abstract settings and nihilistic violence.

Early in the novel, Silko includes a poem spoken by the medicine man who first tries to help heal Tayo:

Their [the witches] evil is mighty

But it can't stand up to our stories
 So they try to destroy the stories
 Let the stories be confused or forgotten.
 They would like that
 They would be happy
 Because we would be defenseless then.

The similarities between the opening poem, also titled “Ceremony,” and Slotkin’s concern about racial structures and violence without limits are striking, which is why *Ceremony* deserves more attention here. The important of role place in helping break cycles of violence carries on the western literary response to cinematic trends and shifts the context to Native American literature. In doing so, the novel encourages readers to identify with Tayo as a way for them to experience the healing associated with the ceremony.

Silko’s novel has inspired a vast scholarship with interests ranging from Native American symbolism, to oral traditions, to hybridized culture. Silko’s work as a Native American writer began quite near the beginning of what would later be recognized as Native American literature.²¹ Her work, along with that of such authors as Simon Ortiz and N. Scott Momaday helped establish Native American literature within American letters. While Native American literature had beginnings in the nineteenth century, Ortiz’s, Momaday’s, and Silko’s talent finally attracted the attention Native American literature richly deserved. Each in their own way, these writers began the process of articulating the Native American experience for the benefit of mainstream readers.

²¹ See Frederick Turner’s *Spirit of Place*.

Ceremony garnered attention for its focus on hybridity and the ongoing evolution of sacred stories that might otherwise be conceived as static.

Among these considerations, there is little discussion of the relationship the novel has to films. A few articles and book chapters have examined *Ceremony*'s relationship to western literature, and some of these mention films in passing.²² However, none of these has focused specifically on cinematic trends in the years leading up to the novel's publication and the role films have played in helping to shape the novel. In this chapter, I argue that *Ceremony* engages with the shifting stories of the 1970s in order to preserve those stories' cultural power. The novel's explicit rejection of savagery not only provides the narrative resolution as Tayo, the protagonist, turns away from violence presented as an opportunity for heroism, it rejects the ongoing trends in western films in the 1970s that were contributing to a regressive view of Native Americans as savages. In order to contextualize this argument, I examine several films from the late 1960s and early 70s that participate in the renewal of savagery in American cinema. From these films, I establish themes, visual effects, and other markers of savagery that I see *Ceremony* engaging with in an effort to preserve the vitality and positive power of stories. In this chapter, I break new ground in scholarship on this novel by highlighting the way Silko's ongoing construction of cultural history—her practice of critical regionalism—engages post-traumatic film cycles.

²² Take as examples Lydia R. Cooper's "'The Sterility of Their Art': Masculinity and the Western in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*," and Sara Spurgeon's chapter "Decolonizing Imperialism: Captivity Myths and the Postmodern World in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*" in *Exploding the Western*.

II. War Westerns

Before digging into textual analysis of *Ceremony*, it is worth pausing to contextualize the cultural moment, especially the cinematic trends, of the novel's publication. As mentioned, western films tend to experience a boom in production around times of national insecurity. It is not a coincidence that cycles of westerns have often followed wars, conflicts, and other contentious periods—whether that contention has been primarily domestic or directed at a foreign power. All of this is to say that westerns share an important relationship with war. And while some westerns are explicitly about war, others deal with long-standing concerns on the frontier, such as miscegenation in John Ford's *The Searchers*. Many westerns have explored the problems of fascism around WWII, communism throughout the Cold War, and insurgencies during Vietnam. During Vietnam, for example, the Indian hating tropes of westerns like *The Searchers* became more common as part of an American fantasy of repaying perceived indignities at the hands of enemies. Films such as *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) and *The Professionals* (1966) brought the idea of small but elite groups of heroes working to oust major threats to communities in much the same narrative told about Special Forces units protecting Vietnamese allies from the Viet Cong.

While these films did not make use of Native Americans as props or plot devices, they racialized the enemy even while putting forth an image of the “Americans” as a diverse group of heroes.²³ This insurgent or professionalist type of western simplified the moral grey areas of warfare and revitalized attitudes toward racial others as savages.

²³ For a further discussion of the clichés surrounding depictions of Native Americans in films and the invention of new clichés through films released in the 1990s, see Andrew Patrick Nelson's *Still in the Saddle*.

Slotkin's warning about the racialized order perpetuating violence is perhaps best demonstrated in films in which anger about the atrocities of war suffered by American troops is translated into hatred for a racialized enemy, whether Japanese or Vietnamese, and performed as a savage versus civilization narrative in which the Special Forces become a twentieth-century version of "men who know Indians" and can better combat the racialized enemy because of their capacity to match the enemy's savagery. On screen, filmmakers such as Sam Peckinpah found this subject matter ripe for exploration. With recently found freedom for depicting violence, inspiration from Sergio Leone's Italian westerns, and new technologies for depicting violence (such as slow motion and squibs), Peckinpah brought savagery to the screen as no American filmmaker had done before. Likewise, films such as *Soldier Blue* skirted the retrospective use of savagery as an introspective lens for American moviegoers and instead reverted to depicting Native Americans as savages.

The trend toward using Native Americans as analogs for modern-day concerns accelerated with the release of *The Searchers* in 1956 (Nelson 82). The film is often cited as John Ford's masterpiece, and with good reason. *The Searchers* helped define the genre visually, stars John Wayne, and tells an epic tale of redemption. It explores the psychology of Indian hating in complex ways that provoke deeper thought about American attitudes toward Native Americans. *The Searchers* is an important example of the ways filmmakers increasingly used Native Americans to comment on the issues of the day. Ethan Edwards's (John Wayne) quest to rescue his niece from her native captors draws from the well-established genre of the captivity narrative, which helped define the classic western genre. Much like earlier captivity narratives, the film explores the

existential danger experienced by a young white woman when threatened with sexual advances of a racial other. For Ethan, his niece must either be saved before being tainted by native blood—or becoming “comanch,” as Edwards often says—or she must die. As the film concludes, the dark question of whether Ethan will bring his niece home or kill her in order to destroy the product of miscegenation hangs over the narrative. Ultimately, Ethan accepts his niece back into the family, “capturing” her in a warm embrace after lifting her playfully over his head.

Many scholars have explored the obvious social commentary made by *The Searchers*. The superficial tale of a years-long quest to recover a family member on the frontier is undergirded by sharp criticism of American attitudes about race, especially during the Civil Rights movement. In the case of *The Searchers*, racial anxiety that has informed the western since the days of James Fenimore Cooper are again taken up and explored as part of narrative drama. And, much as in Cooper’s time, the issue of racial miscegenation brings up both feelings of dread among the characters, and awareness that a depiction of that dread can expose frustration with social attitudes about race mixing. Both of these, however, ignore the actual experiences of Native Americans, except as threats to whiteness and reintroduce regressive attitudes toward Native Americans by situating them in the distant past while denying them present-day political power through equal rights and accurate cultural representation.

Two subgenres of westerns deal closely with Native Americans. The first is what Andrew Patrick Nelson calls the “sympathetic variant” of the western, which takes the Native American perspective in order to elicit more nuanced feelings about American conquest and natives. Edward Buscombe calls this “the liberal western,” and cites, in

addition to more empathetic attitudes toward Native American, efforts by directors such as John Ford to set the historical record straight about how the U.S. government treated Native Americans, or efforts to show tribal life in more detail (*Injuns!* 133-34). *Broken Arrow* (1950) and *Little Big Man* (1970) are two representative examples of the sympathetic or liberal western from different eras of Hollywood. But another variant, the cavalry western, made famous by Ford, is vital to explorations of the relationship between natives and the American government. *The Wild Bunch* draws from the cavalry western aesthetically, ironically using the military uniform as a marker of heroism only to subvert Pike's and his men's appearance as heroes (Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 595).

More important to my analysis are films such as *Rio Grande* (1950), in which the cavalry is sent to finish off a group of natives. *Rio Grande* follows Lt. Col. Kirby Yorke (John Wayne) as he leads his troops into Mexico to recover some kidnapped white children and finally end this particular band of Apaches' reign of terror. The mission is politically complicated but ultimately successful, and another John Ford/John Wayne pairing continues the story of American conquest at the cost of Native American lives. This cost is justified in the films with the unimpeachable motive of saving innocent children. Despite this film's success and its pedigree as another highly praised Ford film, it was not long before other films took up the issue of cavalry raids on Native Americans and flipped the script in a way that made the cavalry out to be the villains. *Soldier Blue* is one such film that depicts the brutality of American soldiers rather than glorifying it.

After the classical era of John Ford, and especially after the Vietnam conflict, American cinema underwent what Christian Keathley calls a "post-traumatic cycle" from 1970 to roughly 1976, in which film conventions came into question as "the crisis of the

action-image” (293). Keathley draws this term from Deleuze in *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*.²⁴ The crisis of the action-image comes out of a film convention called the Kuleshovian montage which consists of three components: “1) we see a person looking; 2) we see what a person is looking at (perception image); 3) we see his or her reaction (affection-image); and this reaction leads him or her to take some action (action-image)” (Keathley 294). In the post-traumatic cycle, Keathley sees an absence of action being engaged as a means to resolve whatever crisis is experienced in the affection-image in films following the Vietnam War. This lack of action toward a resolution reflects Americans’ sense of helplessness felt by many after the war. Indeed, Keathley writes that “the perception to which these characters in these films are unable to respond is always the same, for the films of the post-traumatic cycle repeatedly lead their protagonists to the same end: the realization of total powerlessness” (296). Keathley’s argument illuminates an important truth for this chapter. Although depictions of Native Americans have historically been problematic in the ways described above, and the sympathetic/savage double bind presents new problems, those depictions are not the only elements of cinematic Indians that are at work in the post-studio westerns. The helplessness experienced by both Native American characters and white settlers depicted as the victims of Indian savagery speaks to the post-Vietnam anxiety felt through American culture, and it is manifest in their engagement with the film trends of the period.

²⁴ For a more detailed explanation of how Keathley uses Deleuze’s terms, see “Trapped in the Affection Image: Hollywood’s Post-traumatic Cycle (1970-1976)” in *The Last Great American Picture Show*, edited by Thomas Elsaesser, Alexander Horwath, and Noel King.

The action-image crisis in 1970s films is particularly important for the western genre. In most westerns, violence is the action most called upon for narrative resolution—either as retribution, protection, or regeneration. And this raises a question about the problem of violence as the affection-image—that to which characters (and viewers) are called upon to act in response. *Soldier Blue* is perhaps the best example of filmmakers using Native Americans as props intended to condemn American actions in Vietnam while taking advantage of the cinematic setting and historical events to produce violent images on screen. The film is generally known more for the climactic scene at the end, in which an American army unit slaughters an Indian tribe, raping women, killing children and essentially going on an all-out spree of every kind of violence imaginable. The film used the violence as part of the marketing campaign in order to make claims about its realism (Nelson 87).

The problem of this type of revision is that, despite being well-intentioned and carrying out an important goal—to expose American imperialism and the lengths to which our government has gone to in order to protect its empire—it relies on the appeal of cinematic violence to draw audiences. As such, the film's claims to progressive revision are tainted by its regressive attitudes toward violence. The problem with these depictions, and especially with claims that this violence is realistic, is that it actually hinders Native American cultural power. *Soldier Blue* is an allegory for American behavior in Vietnam, so it is meant to evoke anger at America's then-active imperialist endeavors by reaching back to the original sins of Manifest Destiny. But by using Native Americans as a prop in this story, one that is not really about them, *Soldier Blue* denies

Native Americans the voice that would grant them some of the political power they have been historically denied.

Technological advances in special effects made depictions of violence much more graphic in the late 1960s, leading to some of the first ultraviolent films such as *The Wild Bunch* and *Bonnie and Clyde*. Both films made use of squibs and other makeup effects to show exit wounds and the horrifying aftermath of violent encounters. In films like *Soldier Blue* and *Ulzana's Raid*, which investigate savagery and the complex racial, religious, and philosophical facets of savagery, the special effects play a vital role in presenting the images that the filmmakers wield as part of their respective arguments. These effects and the visuals they enable stand in stark contrast to classical western depictions of savagery in, say, John Ford films such as *The Searchers* and *Rio Grande*. Both of these Ford films deal with groups of Native Americans who are reportedly on the prowl for easy targets to raid or rob. Homesteaders find themselves precariously placed between a hostile Native American force and the promise of a settled western region.

In Ford's films, brutal acts of savagery happen off screen, as characters react to the mutilated bodies left behind after Indian raids. In both *The Searchers* and *Rio Grande*, loved ones of the deceased are restrained from seeing the atrocities carried out by Indian attackers. The absence of a clear view (or even indication) of what injuries the victims sustain leaves the atrocities to viewers' imaginations. Nelson argues *Soldier Blue* and *Ulzana's Raid* work to counter the depictions of Native Americans in films like those directed by Ford, and retell history in ways that offer some sympathy for the Native American perspective. Much like John Ford films, these films use violence as an extreme way of eliciting responses to violence. But by the 1970s when *Soldier Blue* and *Ulzana's*

Raid were released, filmmakers had moved beyond the implication of atrocities and had begun depicting them in as much detail as possible. Using special effects such as makeup, squibs, prosthetics, and actors with amputated limbs to simulate dismemberment, ultraviolent films tried to shock viewers into caring more about the historical atrocities carried out against Native Americans. This shock is fitting in that it follows the post-traumatic western trend and shifts violence out of the action-image and into the affection-image: rather than performing violence when prompted, films begin making violence the prompt to which there is no action to perform.

Soldier Blue is the more extreme of these two examples, and its use of violence as *real* in that it is true to historical events makes it particularly shocking. Following a young Army private named Honus Gent (Peter Strauss), the film begins with an Indian attack on a wagon and its military escort across country. After the attack, Cresta (Candice Bergen) leads Honus through the wilderness in hopes of avoiding the Apache. Through their wanderings in search of white settlement, Honus learns that Cresta was once kidnapped and married to Spotted Wolf (Jorge Rivero), the Apache leader. Through learning about Cresta's experience with the Apache and her continued empathy for them, Honus begins to question the clearly demarcated racially based binary oppositions between good and evil. Honus's name marks him as one for whom the *onus* of protecting Cresta and carrying out his duty of fighting the Indians honorably, or as a gentleman, is called into question with the realization that Cresta, either because of her time with the Apache or because of some innate strength, is far better equipped to survive in the wilderness than he. Through Honus's questioning of his understanding of the conflict between whites and Native Americans, the audience is exposed to the ugly truth that

whites are capable of just as much savagery as the Indians they fear so much. This gradual realization sets up viewers psychologically for the on-screen violence to come.

The film's climax is a spectacle of violence carried out against Native Americans, and the effects used are shocking in their graphic brutality. *Soldier Blue* relies less on montage editing and more on effects to communicate the violence. For example, the film uses prostheses to depict torn flesh as people suffer bullet wounds. In order to depict dismemberment, the film employs amputees as actors whose missing limbs create a realistic depiction of Native Americans suffering sabre wounds from cavalymen riding them down. Aside from these gruesome injuries, the film includes a graphic depiction of Army men raping an Apache woman and killing her when she resists their assault. All of these violent images presumably serve to shock white viewers out of their complacency regarding American historical treatment of Native Americans, and they provide a valuable glimpse into the past that resembles their present at the historical moment of the My Lai Massacre. The conclusion to be drawn is that events such as the My Lai Massacre are not a new sign of American degeneration, but instead fit into a historical pattern of violence. This climactic scene, in which Honus repeatedly tries to stop the violence from happening, follows the trend of the crisis of the action-image. The entire sequence functions as an extended cycle of affection-images—the images affect Honus, Cresta, and the audience—and the conclusion leaves little room for anything to be done other than try to reconcile the grim reality of imperialist violence on the part of the United States. This point is driven home by the discovery that at some point during the raid, the cavalymen found the children hiding and killed them all. Looking out over the dozens of murdered children, Cresta asks angrily, “Got a prayer, Solider Blue? A nice poem? Say something

pretty.” Cresta’s angry response punctuates the action by drawing attention to the ineffectual nature of words to rectify their situation.

Ulzana’s Raid is oriented in the opposite direction of *Soldier Blue* in that it focuses more on the savagery of Native Americans than on the brutality of U.S. Cavalry. The film has two primary perspectives: that of the commanding officer in the cavalry, Lt. Garnet DeBuin (Bruce Davison), and the wizened scout McIntosh (Burt Lancaster). On multiple occasions the two discuss the savagery they encounter while in pursuit of the group of Apaches led by Ulzana after they leave a reservation. In multiple scenes over the course of the film, DeBuin and his men find homesteaders killed and mutilated. These scenes use various special effects to depict bodies burned in specific areas—feet, faces, genitals—as a way of torturing them for sport. These violent discovery scenes are notable in their relative lack of action. Stephen Prince writes that one of the reasons for increasing levels of violence in post-studio era films is that violence normally generates motion, and this motion works well aesthetically for filmmakers seeking to capture moving images. By depicting violence as a still scene found by the cavalrymen, *Ulzana’s Raid* marks a notable shift away from violence-as-motion. These screened images could just as easily be still photos, were it not for the visceral reactions of the characters that find them.

One scene near the beginning of the film does depict graphic violence in motion. As one of the army scouts leads a woman and her young boy to the fort, they are ambushed by the Apache. Rather than fighting, the scout shoots the woman in the head and then kills himself. Both the woman’s and the scout’s head wounds are depicted graphically. Although these two violent images are shown in motion, rather than as an

aftermath—as is the majority of violence is depicted in the film—these are self-defeating actions. Rather than facing what treatment the scout and the woman face, he kills them in order to escape torture and prevent the woman from being raped.

In this way, *Ulzana's Raid* engages in the action-image crisis and conveys the sense of hopelessness of war trauma. Rather than a scene in which violence is being carried out, DeBuin and his men are caught in a pattern in which they cannot catch up to the Apache to stop them from killing. Although they are a larger force and would greatly overmatch the small group of Apaches in a fight, they are left helpless by the pace of the pursuit. Moreover, Lt. DeBuin's determination to reconcile the savagery he has witnessed with his Christian worldview accentuates the cinematic communication of helplessness in the face of extreme violence. Throughout the film, he asks multiple characters why the Apache are so savage even though they are "children of God" just like the white settlers. DeBuin finds no answer. McIntosh, on the other hand, is content to simply understand savagery as the Apache's natural state. For McIntosh, to be angry at the Apache for being savage would "be like getting mad at the desert for having no water," it is simply the state of things, and he is content with simply being afraid of them. Both experience the powerlessness of trauma in different ways. DeBuin is not satisfied with this answer, and persists in his desire to understand the reason behind the violent scenes he has discovered while tracking the Apache. When he cannot reconcile Apache savagery with Christianity, he instinctively begins hating the Apache out of misplaced anger. As Nelson argues, both of these films, despite their progressive aims at presenting a more accurate version of history that revises the way white viewers think of Native Americans, offer renderings of

Native Americans that keeps them in one of two powerless situations, either as savage aggressors, or as passive recipients of violence at the hands of U.S. soldiers.

With renewed screen depictions of Native Americans as villains—and even those that did not depict Native Americans but drew from the long literary history of racialized others as villains—Native Americans faced renewed skepticism regarding their history as victims of genocide experienced a repositioning as analogues for more recent casualties of American imperialism. Rather than recognizing the serious challenges posed by reservation life, impetuses for some to leave tribal lands, and the natural hybridity that all races come to experience, Native Americans continued to either be used as props in westerns needing allegorical power, such as *The Searchers* and *Soldier Blue*, or they continued to be imagined as the savage villains in need of killing in such films as *Ulzana's Raid*.²⁵ Because of this, a novel like *Ceremony* is significant because it not only examines the constraints of reservation life and challenges of cultural hybridity, but it also breaks the cycle of violence so common to the western film genre. In this way the ceremony at the novel's heart reaches out just as the center of everything reaches out for Tayo in order to resist an increasingly violent vision of the West detached from real places—the same vision perpetuated by Hollywood cinema of the era.

III. Place, Hybridity, and Violence in *Ceremony*

²⁵ Later depictions of Native Americans, in such films as *Dances with Wolves*, and Disney's *Pocahontas* romanticized the spiritual connection to nature and a more equitable social structure with the ultimate goal of assimilating such beliefs into white culture (Nelson 92).

There are many facets to the scholarship on *Ceremony*, but the three most important for this chapter are *Ceremony*'s engagement with place, how the novel is situated within western literature, and masculinity and trauma as they pertain to the role of violence in the novel. As important as *Ceremony* is for representing the Native American experience, it is also important for its powerful invocation of place. The novel engages place through its storytelling tradition, which Frederick Turner writes in *Spirit of Place* was strong "among the Laguna Pueblo even as late as Silko's childhood in the 1950s" (329). Place is tied to Pueblo stories not only as the foundational understanding of the people's culture, but literally as a "presiding force," since "Pueblo peoples commonly understand themselves to have emerged out of the land" (Turner 330). Thus Tayo's healing ceremony is closely tied to the land, as he must assemble the pattern of items from Betonie's vision, which include a mountain and a stellar constellation. These two pieces of the vision, a landmark and a constellation, are signposts that would be used for navigation, so in Tayo's quest he must locate the cattle and, consequently, locate himself both on the land and within the universe.

Turner's emphasis on the role of place in Silko's writing—as a presiding force—mirrors Douglass Reichert Powell's central conception of region not as a "thing" but a "cultural history, an ongoing rhetorical and poetic construction" (6). Thus, *Ceremony* practices critical regionalism by establishing a cultural history tied to a place and then uses that starting point to extend the focus outward. Rather than "diverting attention from the political to the personal," Joanne Lipson Freed writes, "these depictions of trauma lend added force to political critiques by demonstrating the profoundly personal impact of structural inequality" (220). By bringing together the struggles of the Laguna people with

the importance of their homeland Silko emphasizes the foundations of Laguna culture while illuminating the changes it is undergoing at the time of the novel's setting. This way of imagining the region achieves precisely what Powell argues critical regionalism should: "deliberately [define] the region to create new, potentially revelatory perspectives on it" (7). As Silko "trac[es] a path across the disciplines as well as the dimensions of place under consideration," she highlights the ways Native American trauma is engaged with the national trauma reflected in the post-traumatic film cycle (Powell 7).

Silko's novel not only acknowledges that Pueblo ceremonies and cultural practices change over time, but it establishes far-reaching connections to white culture via nearby cities (Gallup and Albuquerque) and a connection to Japan and Tayo's initial trauma through the uranium in the mine on Pueblo land. Silko thus situates Tayo and his trauma in the world and between cultures. These outward-reaching connections are mirrored by the prevalent cultural hybridity Silko weaves into the narrative in order to challenge the prevalent concern with "cultural preservation within Native communities...that frequently takes the form of racial purity and social conservatism" (Freed 220). The hybrid ceremony guided by Betonie is one example, but Tayo's position as a mixed-race person living on the reservation complicates any suggestion of a pure culture, as does Tayo and his friends' history as soldiers in the U.S. Army. Tayo's former occupation as a soldier inverts many western trends of dealing with Native Americans as either deserving subjects of slaughter or sympathetic victims of it. In this way, the novel engages with specific western literary history and western films.

One alternative to the double bind of villain or stand-in for victims occurs when Native Americans are pushed toward assimilation. On the one hand, the "promise" of

assimilation is an end to conflict and a mutually beneficial new relationship with white settlers. Enforced education was often used as a tool to assimilate young Native Americans, and the impact of schools organized by the Bureau of Indian Affairs hangs over the novel. Silko, like Tayo and several of his family members, was educated at the BIA school, and this connection to the characters builds the sense of realism in the novel (Akins 4). Forced assimilation through education is a rhetorically complicated policy. American belief in education as the key to a prosperous and fulfilling life runs up against the tribal traditions foundational to Native American culture. The contrast between knowledge disseminated by whites and the lived experience of the Laguna Pueblo is made apparent when Tayo's uncle Josiah plans to raise cattle and finds the literature on the subject lacking: "I guess we'll have to get along without these books....Maybe we'll even write our own book, *Cattle Raising on Indian Land*, or how to raise cattle that don't eat grass or drink water" (Silko 75). Rocky's assertion that the books are written by people who know everything there is to know about raising cattle shows the insidious division between ways of knowing that schooling outside of the Pueblo can bring.

Although Tayo begins the novel with many friends, their varying levels of spiritual separation from Pueblo culture come to challenge the group's cohesion. Emo's passing sarcastic comment about the relative scarcity of resources on the Laguna Pueblo is an essential example of such spiritual separation. Emo comments, "Look what is here for us. Look. Here is the Indians' mother earth! Old dried up thing" (Silko 25). Emo's disregard for Pueblo land angers Tayo as it betrays Emo's denial of Laguna beliefs. Tayo's anger at Emo erupts as Tayo works instead to continue revering the reservation culture while experiencing the hybridity he was born with. Later, as they all drink

together, Tayo's frustration builds to the point that he unravels the lies he and his friends have been telling themselves after returning from the war. "I'm half-breed. I'll be the first to say it. I speak for both sides. First time you walked down the street in Gallup or Albuquerque, you knew. Don't lie" (Silko 42). Tayo goes on to point out the many injustices he and the others have experienced once they are no longer in uniform, and consequently he ruins the good time they have all been having in the interest of an honest accounting of the way the world views them.

By choosing truth over delusion, Tayo incurs Emo's wrath, and "he saw how much Emo hated him. Because he had spoiled it for them" (42). Emo's lack of respect for the reservation carries over into his violent actions at the end of the novel. Having suffered a failed attempt at assimilation, first through school and then through the military, only to be saddled with second-class status, Emo cannot recover in the same way Tayo can. Rather than finding a redemptive way to identify with the land and his local culture, Emo becomes evil and takes on the role of Tayo's foil in his efforts to heal. As such, Emo's rejection of his local culture removes his understanding from the place he inhabits; without the connection to place, he is left untethered to the kind of understanding that can help him heal as it does Tayo.

The double trauma of the death of his friend Rocky and his own belief that his uncle was among a group of Japanese soldiers Tayo's platoon killed prove difficult for the traditional pueblo medicine man to heal. Silko gives the impression that because Tayo's trauma came from an event unrelated to the Laguna Pueblo, Tayo requires a culturally hybrid healing ceremony rather than the old culturally pure Laguna ceremony. This is an important rejection of the instinctive reaction many native tribes have to an

increasingly culturally hybrid world. Rather than reverting to a focus on racial purity, Silko allows something as sacred as a healing ceremony to become hybridized as a practical response to a hybridized world. As Tayo tries to heal under Ku'oosh guidance, he and his medicine man question the efficacy of the old ceremonies on new forms of trauma. That kind of interrogation of local practices exemplified by the healing process, in regard to global event the war trauma Tayo experienced, mirrors the dialogic nature of post-regional inquiry. Tayo's need is for a ceremony that incorporates artifacts from outside his local culture rather than a ceremony that would have him retreat into a protected realm of purely indigenous and regional identity. Silko's writing about the acceptance of various outside influences within a cultural practice embraces a post-regional identity by acknowledging that efforts to maintain "pure" cultural practices ultimately fail. These culturally hybridized practices are no less sacred for Silko, though.

When the initial ceremony performed by Ku'oosh, Tayo's local medicine man, fails, Tayo goes to see Betonie, a Navajo medicine man who has traveled the country and consequently knows more about the kind of trauma Tayo is suffering from. Betonie is different from Tayo's medicine man because he embraces multicultural artifacts in order to heal Tayo. Rather than functioning as a site of pure culture, Betonie's hogan is decorated with multiple artifacts from both native and white culture, including several symbols of a post-regional world—phonebooks from multiple cities, calendars from the Santa-Fe Railroad depot, and Coca-Cola bottles. As Louis Owens writes, "The central lesson of this novel is that through the dynamism, adaptability, and syncretism inherent in Native American cultures, both individuals and cultures within which individuals find significance and identity are able to survive, grow, and evade the deadly traps of sterility

and stasis” (92). Owens is right to highlight the empowering nature of hybridity in the novel, and Betonie’s hut is one of the clearest examples of the power one can find through interconnected cultures. On the other hand, as Reed Way Dasenbrok writes, *Ceremony*, as a part of Southwestern literature, is “a literature of cultures still in contact which evolves into conflict” (73). Owens and Dasenbrok present two crucial sides to the novel’s engagement with hybridity. True, there is conflict, as Dasenbrok points out—Tayo’s trauma comes out of a conflict between cultures, but there is strength that comes from engaging with and learning from other cultures, as Owens argues, and that strength can be seen in Betonie’s hogan.

In Betonie’s hogan Tayo sees “barricading piles of telephone books with the years scattered among cities—St. Louis, Seattle, New York, Oakland—and he began to feel another dimension to the old man’s room.” He sees sunlight making “paths through the thick bluish green glass of the Coke bottles” alongside the “things he can understand” like “shrunken skin pouches and black leather purses with hammered silver buttons.” Betonie is not uprooted from his cultural history in that he retains the paraphernalia of the medicine man that Tayo can recognize—the pouches and purses—but he has also incorporated modern artifacts from multiple locations and time periods. Among the multitude of various artifacts, Tayo encounters a new powerful aesthetic as the “bundles and stacks were plainly part of the pattern: they followed the concentric shadows of the room” (Silko 120). Betonie’s hogan is notably different to Tayo because the artifacts it contains suggest a flow of cultures rather than a pure or static one. The phone books from multiple cities invoke telecommunication as a modern invention that enables long-distance cultural contact. Their inclusion in the pattern of the hogan suggests that even

within the locally ordered pattern of the medicine-man hogan, there are connections flowing outward into the world. Moreover, even though Coca-Cola is an American company, I read the bottles as representative of the global market in that Coke has incorporated its international popularity as part of its brand. Much like the phone books, the Coke bottles represent shared cultural experiences across multiple regions rather than purely exclusive or authentic ones.²⁶ In this hybrid setting, Tayo is able to begin the process of healing from his trauma. These small items serve as reminders that the world is a wide place and there are a multitude of experiences to be had outside of the pueblo.

Ceremony's engagement with hybridity makes some headway toward extracting Native Americans from the primitive past continually imposed upon it by popular culture, and it engages with the western genre in ways that subvert the trends that mischaracterized them in the first place. Sara Spurgeon argues that the novel invokes the captivity narrative, a predecessor to the western genre, as a way to re-characterize Native Americans for readers. The parallels Spurgeon draws between Tayo's trauma and his inability to heal do resemble the dilemmas in captivity narratives, in which kidnapped victims struggle to recover from their exposure to savagery and fear for their lives. But, as Spurgeon points out, Silko cleverly reverses this trend by granting Tayo power over his trauma. This power is what leads Lydia R. Cooper to disagree with Spurgeon about what type of character Tayo is. While Spurgeon claims Tayo is a redeemed and empowered victim of captivity, Cooper argues instead that Tayo's power aligns him with more traditional western heroes. I argue that there is room between Spurgeon's and

²⁶ Coca-Cola's marketing at this time emphasized multiculturalism, perhaps best exemplified by their use of The New Seekers' "I'd like to Teach the World to Sing" in a 1971 commercial.

Cooper's readings for an understanding of Tayo as more than a victim of captivity since his quest for spiritual healing is largely self-guided. Furthermore, Tayo's persistent weakness up until his healing, and his ultimate rejection of violence place him too far from western genre norms to call him a traditional western hero. Either way, rather than remaining a victim, Tayo is able to become proactive and thus "subvert the paradigm of the helpless victim or enraged killer so central to previous versions of the myth" (Spurgeon, *Exploding* 97). This subversion works against the western preconception of violence as the primary action available to characters.

Just as Tayo is no longer helpless as a captive, he finds power in that rejection in a way that moves *Ceremony* out of the action-image crisis. Tayo is able to take action while still avoiding violence—a powerful reimagining of narrative (and cinematic) trauma. Violence is so over determined in the western genre, that it can seem as if violence is the only action to be cued by the affection-image in western films. How often does the shot/counter shot convention lead the protagonist to identify a threat or and injustice to which he or she must confront with violence? Despite this convention, *Ceremony* succeeds in finding an escape from this destructive cycle of violence. Moreover, by rearticulating the human race as "one tribe" after the witchery takes over, Silko is able to offer "an altered vision of a decolonizing subject and a new story for how America might begin to live with itself and its history" (Spurgeon, *Exploding* 101).

Whether or not Silko is successful in helping unite humanity, or at least break down some of the barriers between white culture and Native Americans is debatable. It is, however, notable that because Silko "privileges revision as a source of transformation [she invites] us to identify with [the] protagonist and embrace the healing narrative that

he adopts” (Freed 234). In other words, not only is *Ceremony* able to revise Native American ways of relating to the world, ways that have often been dismissed by white culture, but it allows non-native readers to begin reconsidering Native American culture as Native American writers reconsider it for themselves. This kind of thinking has the power to revise the way white Americans think about Native Americans and how they fit into the western genre by removing them from the circumscribed roles of either victims or savages.

Silko’s work to remove Native Americans from the victim/savage cycle also engages with the post-traumatic cinema of the 1970s. Through the ceremony, Silko not only invites readers to participate in the healing and works around the cycle of repeated violence disguised as redemptive, but subverts the cinematic action-image altogether. Because of how over determined violence is in westerns, we expect Tayo to engage in some kind of violence at the end of the novel. Failing to vanquish his enemies, either as Harley or as the witchery, leaves Tayo stuck, just as many cinematic heroes of the era were when they were confronted with an affection-image which they had no power to rectify. Silko turns this idea on its head by instead making the argument that inaction is not powerlessness. At the end of *Ceremony*, inaction—when it means not engaging in violence—is instead very powerful. Rejecting violence, even in a western, is a redemptive form of action.

IV. Regeneration through Rejecting Violence

The core struggle in *Ceremony* stems from Tayo’s ongoing war trauma, a trauma he cannot move past in part because of its multicultural roots. As the source of Tayo’s

trauma, World War II also carries implications for post-regional critique. Tayo's belief that he saw his Uncle Josiah among the enemies he and his group fired upon speaks to a global shared culture and challenges divisions between cultures in the same way post-regionalism does. Even though the Japanese man Tayo sees is not his Uncle Josiah, the fact that he identifies so strongly with the Japanese man with the "skin that was not much different from his own" and his eyes "squinting as though about to smile at Tayo" communicates a connection between the two cultures despite their distance and their conflict in the war. This scene demonstrates how Silko repeatedly draws the lines of convergence between Tayo's trauma and place. Rather than one particular place, such as Japan, Tayo realizes that his trauma comes from the place between his home on the Pueblo and his experience in Japan. This figurative space consisting of Tayo's experience is symbolized by the uranium mine on the Laguna Pueblo. The connection between Japan and New Mexico is taken up again at the end of the novel when Tayo realizes that his ceremony will end at the abandoned mine.

The uranium mine is another significant post-regional element in Tayo's ceremony in that it provided the uranium that was essential to the construction of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan.²⁷ Tayo begins to see the connections between the Laguna and the Japanese as he not only experienced trauma in Japan, but Japan experienced trauma that originated in Tayo's regional culture. Describing the mine, Tayo finally becomes aware of the connections both he and his region share with Japan:

²⁷ "Silko chose the immediate aftermath of World War II 'because of the atomic bomb....' The other two wars in Asia, Korea, and Vietnam, Silko says, were just "part of the big slide—the human race's slide into the big abyss" (Johnston 403).

[I]t knew no boundaries; and he had arrived at the point of convergence where the fate of all living things...had been laid...[H]e recognized why the Japanese voices had merged with Laguna voices, with Josiah's voice and with Rocky's voice; the lines of cultures and worlds were drawn in flat dark lines on fine light sand.... From that time on, human beings were one clan again united by the fate the destroyers planned... united by a circle of death that devoured people in cities twelve thousand miles away, victims who had never known these mesas, who had never seen the delicate colors of the rocks which boiled up their slaughter. (246)

Tayo's recognition of the global impact the invention and use of the atomic bomb had and the connection his culture shares with Japan—the culture that had traumatized him so severely—is important in establishing cross-cultural connections within the context of the war. Just as Betonie's adoption of modern everyday artifacts represents cultural exchange, Tayo begins to recognize the cultural exchange that takes place in war, transcending his personal experiences of violence and trauma. This passage includes line after line connecting New Mexico and Japan as being unified under the threat of nuclear war. That threat has roots in Tayo's culture, and the effects have been felt concretely in Japan. More importantly, though, the uranium mined in New Mexico has influenced the entire world as it ushers in the nuclear age. Moreover, the connections between the Laguna Pueblo and Japan run through the war, Tayo, and the uranium that makes the atomic bomb possible.

Like many revisionist literary westerns, *Ceremony* engages violence as a literary subject and builds a narrative that rejects that violence. Not all revisionist westerns

succeed in rejecting the violence they take as their subject matter. Often, violent films like *Soldier Blue* and *The Wild Bunch* want to use extreme violence as a way to expose its tragedy rather than glorify it. To accomplish this, films frequently either elicit a sense of guilt about raiding Indian villages, or deglamorize the use of violence for personal gain. In many ways, Tayo's trauma mirrors the Native American trauma at being trapped in a system of violence. Breaking the cycle of violence not only frees Tayo from his PTSD and can help free Native Americans from the cycle of being repeatedly used as stand-ins for modern-day concerns, be they miscegenation, racial violence, American war practices, or something else.

The novel's climax begins with a foreboding sense that a truck, "blinking as the vehicle bounded over the road" might contain Tayo's friends now out to hurt him, acting as "the destroyers" (248). Tayo instinctively runs behind the boulders near the mine opening to hide, and from there he watches the scene unfold. As the fire, built by the people in the car, flares up, Tayo sees Leroy, Pinkie, and Emo, and he notes Harley's absence. Tayo sees that the men are "feeding dry tumble weeds to the fire, holding them high over their heads and circling the fire before they let go and the tumbleweeds exploded into fiery balls." The three "had a bottle they passed between them" and "Pinkie pounded on the hood of the car, and the metallic booming echoed against the sandstone across the narrow valley" (249).

The beginning of this scene sees the men perform a ceremony antithetical to Tayo's. The flaring fire as they throw in the tumbleweeds, shared communion of a bottle, and the metallic drumming on the car's hood all create a chaotic and threatening ceremony opposite to what Tayo has come to perform. Their ceremony, consisting of

burning and banging a car with a tire iron, is undercut by its destructive nature, though it is fitting with their label as “destroyers” in service to the witchery, the evil force believed to be behind all Pueblo suffering. Their threatening behavior foreshadows the violence to come. The actions all speak to a perverse reimaging of ceremonial dances. Tayo recognizes that “the witchery would be at work all night” and that “he would be lucky just to make it home” (249).

Soon, the perverse ceremony turns more violent as they pull Harley from the trunk of the car and begin torturing him. As they torture Harley, Tayo considers fighting them. He finds a screwdriver in his pocket and “squeezed it until it was part of his hand.” And as he hears Harley’s screams, he becomes convinced “his own sanity would be destroyed if he did not stop them....He was not strong enough to stand by and watch anymore, he would rather die himself” (Silko 252). In this scene, Tayo comes dangerously close to embracing violence as a means of resolving the conflict. His fear of losing his sanity and the screwdriver becoming part of his hand reveal the beginning of a transformation into a violent would-be hero. Tayo is essentially confronted with the same dilemma that Honus and DeBuin are confronted with in *Soldier Blue* and *Ulzana’s Raid*. Knowing that he will be killed if he intervenes, Tayo has to consider what he can do to stop the violence being performed.

Unlike revisionist westerns, which often claim to demystify violence only to then use and profit from it, *Ceremony* actually follows through and does not have its protagonist engage in violence. Instead, Tayo simply accepts that violence is in the world and the only thing he can do to stop it is to decline to participate in it. Even as he listens to his friend being tortured, Tayo resists the urge to engage in redemptive violence

because he recognizes that violence is never truly redemptive. His refusal is so antithetical to the violent action taken by the conventional western hero that it is shockingly anticlimactic for a western. But it is also effective, as Tayo leaves and is able to complete his healing process.

Even more notable as a conclusion, Tayo's rejection of violence leads him away from a culture with ready explanations for violent behaviors. Had he tried to rescue Harley and killed Emo, he would have been labeled another "drunk Indian war veteran settling an old feud, and the army doctors would say that the indications of this end had been there all along" (Silko 235). In some ways, when Tayo successfully completes the ceremony, he begins healing those around him by refusing to become another example of a "drunk Indian war veteran" who would only perpetuate harmful stereotypes about Native Americans. Tayo's resolution at the end of the novel breaks multiple cycles: his own cycle of trauma, the cycle of violence perpetuated by the witchery, and the cycle of clichéd depictions of Native Americans. This regeneration moves outside the book itself and "invites the engagement of its white readers...[by allowing them] to align themselves with Tayo as fellow victims of the pernicious effects of witchery" (Freed 228). As Turner observes, Silko ultimately "saves her readers from their own violent fantasies and the evil of endless retribution can be avoided" (337). In this way, *Ceremony* not only reaches out from the Laguna Pueblo in order to establish connections with other places into the world of the novel, it reaches out from the novel and engages with readers who have been sold violent fantasies in the form of film westerns that radically limited ways of reckoning the cultural conception of Native Americans with historical violence.

V. Conclusion

Despite popular conceptions of Native American culture as being insular, *Ceremony* makes significant headway toward reintegrating white and native cultures in a way that does not force either to abandon their identity. The similarities between how both cultures have experienced violence and have been trapped in a cycle of violence, both in reality and in fiction, provide common ground on which to build stronger relationships that more accurately articulate western experiences. Just as white western writers, as I've argued, have written back against depictions of the West in order to more accurately depict the region, Native American writers like Silko have likewise written back against stereotypical representations of Native Americans, and against the post-traumatic sense of helplessness in the action-image crisis.

Ceremony intervenes crucially in the western genre by rejecting violence. Just as cycles of violence play an important role for Native Americans and the ways they are depicted in film, *Ceremony's* revisionist engagement with western genre tropes of heroism, male trauma, violence, and captivity tie the rejection of violence as a resolution to the western genre in such a way that subverts the over determined nature of violence characteristic of the genre. This kind of intervention is crucial to finally accomplishing the sort of critical commentary on violence that many postwesterns claim. Because *Ceremony* avoids the temptation to slip back into the violent norms it spent much of its narrative questioning, it succeeds in condemning violence where other westerns fail. As a result, *Ceremony* effectively reclaims authority over the Native American experience and the depiction of the West in the popular imaginary.

Silko's engagement with the same kinds of dilemmas that American cinema wrestled with in the years following the Vietnam conflict represents an important intervention in American cultural attitudes. Moreover, Silko's novel accomplishes what many films of the time could not by offering a solution to the action-image crisis not by finding some new action, but by making a case for the power of abstaining from violent action altogether. Most importantly, *Ceremony shares* this resolution by allowing readers of all races to identify with Tayo's healing and in so doing heal themselves from the efforts to destroy the stories that are important to their respective cultures—including the way western films had destroyed western stories by overemphasizing and glamorizing violence. This is a valuable carryover between fiction as cultural production and our actual lived experience within a culture.

This kind of direct engagement with western literary tropes has the potential to continue reshaping the popular conception of the West. However, Silko's clever inversion of western genre tropes and her protagonist's rejection of violence is what makes *Ceremony* so powerful. This raises the question: what if a western author attempted to confront the problematic way cinema imagines the West, but failed to fully subvert the tropes associated with the genre? In Larry McMurtry's case, the answer is that the novel becomes a critical and popular success. In the following chapter, I examine the ways McMurtry attempted to follow in Silko's footsteps and demystify violence within the context of a western focused on white culture, rather than Native American. This transition between cultures, especially in the context of the cult of the cowboy, poses interesting new problems that complicate McMurtry's effort to subvert an obsession with cowboy life and to de-romanticize the western genre.

Chapter 4: Hollywood's Effect on Larry McMurry's *Lonesome Dove*

I don't think films have shaped my vision as a writer at all.

—Larry McMurry

I. Introduction

At the time of its publication, *Lonesome Dove* was highly anticipated because of McMurry's return to Texas and to the western genre on which his earlier work, *Horseman, Pass By*, made such an impact. Along with McMurry's return to Texas and the western, rumors that he was working on a cattle drive story stoked readers' anticipation. While westerns have long held an important place in the American popular imagination, westerns dealing with cattle drives are especially significant in representing the country symbolically and perpetuating myths about how the West was settled.

In his 1985 review of *Lonesome Dove* for the *New York Times*, Necholas Lemann observes that "At its beginning, *Lonesome Dove* seems to be an antiwestern, the literary equivalent of movies like 'Cat Ballou' and 'McCabe and Mrs. Miller.' By the end, however, all of Mr. McMurry's antimythic groundwork—his refusal to glorify the West—works to reinforce the strength of the traditionally mythic parts of 'Lonesome Dove,' by making it far more credible than the old familiar horse operas. These are real people, and they are *still* larger than life." Lemann adds,

Whether this response is justified by the grandeur of their mission to tame the frontier, or conditioned by popular culture, it is there and cannot be denied....The potential of the open range as material for fiction seems unavoidably tied to presenting it as fundamentally heroic and mythic, even though not to any real purpose. If there is a novel to be written about trail-driving that will be lasting and

deep without being about brave men—and about an endless, harsh, lovely country where life is short but rich—it is still to be written. For now, for the Great Cowboy Novel, *Lonesome Dove* will do. (Lemann pars. 10-11)

Lemann's review captures the overwhelmingly positive reception *Lonesome Dove* received. However, the review—and indeed the popular regard for the novel—does not fit with McMurtry's own comments on *Lonesome Dove* and its reception. In an interview with Sara Spurgeon in 2015, McMurtry said his goal in writing *Lonesome Dove* was to demystify the legend of the cowboy ("Talking" 75). Instead, McMurtry says, "It becomes myth under your hands. It speaks to a lot of people" (75). He goes on to speculate that *Lonesome Dove* may actually have been an effort to understand his father, a man he reports was quite similar to Woodrow F. Call: disciplined, intolerant, but also well-respected and competent. McMurtry's description of his father speaks to the idealized view of masculinity that, for much of the twentieth century, had been represented in films and had become part of the culture in western states. It is, of course, difficult to know what an author set out to do, but an effort to demystify the cowboy legend is fitting with McMurtry's personal and professional history.

At their core, McMurtry's reflections about his home consist of deep affection for his familial ranching heritage in rural Texas accompanied by a clear view that romanticizing such a lifestyle valorizes a type of masculinity that severely limits the possibilities for interpersonal relationships. By contributing to a skewed worldview marked by a problematic understanding of masculinity, the legend of the cowboy, for McMurtry, is an uncannily popular and pervasive myth that does not teach the cultural values a myth is supposed to. These feelings have been well documented by biographers,

interviewers and scholars of McMurtry's work. In McMurtry's writing, John Reilly finds that McMurtry attempts to "expose the concealed underside," of the western genre (17). In a similar evaluation, Susan Kollin argues that McMurtry tries to "play off of conventions of the genre, featuring the region and its characters as fully exhausted" (qtd. in Madsen 188). That Reilly and Kollin both mention genre as one of McMurtry's subversive tools suggests a need to further attend to his engagement with western conventions. Because McMurtry is known for deploying the clichés and archetypal characters common to the western genre, his claims to antiwestern subversion are intriguing, and exist at an intersection of his home, his intentions as an author, and the film genre that has garnered popularity while working its way toward exhaustion.

McMurtry is bound up with ambivalent feelings about his home, is intimately involved in the film industry, and is the author of an acclaimed book that nevertheless seems to him to be a partial misfire. If, as McMurtry claims, his goal was to demystify the legend of the cowboy, his goal is aligned with antiwestern films that aim to do the same thing, and it begs the question of why *Lonesome Dove* is not read as one. The methods used by antiwestern films to demystify the West often depict the region as a place that fails to offer the opportunities the myth of the West supposes. As previous chapters of this dissertation have argued, violence is one of the ways postwestern films work to subvert idealized depictions of the West, or perform what Neil Campbell calls "the 'shock' of an uncanny intervention that presents the audience with uncertain and unfamiliar images and ideas that thwart conventional understanding" (*Post-Westerns* 352). In many ways, McMurtry uses those methods. His characters are killed by snakes, speared while helping children, captured and raped, and suffer injuries and amputations,

all while experiencing profound heartache at the loss of love interests, and unexpressed sentiment stifled by a flawed sense of self. In addition to these personal failings, the cattle drive arrives at Montana only to be abandoned by its only remaining leaders in an anticlimax that questions the venture's purpose. All of this hardship, or the "uncertain and unfamiliar images" seem, at least on the surface, to be precisely the kind of interventions an antiwestern novel or film would make in an effort to demystify the West.

Beyond the personal traumas and the structural changes to the cattle drive narrative, McMurtry further subverts conventions by blending history with his fiction to create a sense of historical accuracy, what scholars like Mark Busby and John M. Reilly have called an alternative western history that resists compounding western mythmaking. This use of history problematizes the often-idealized western past. McMurtry alters the form of the cattle drive western in such a way ends the line of succession so prevalent in cattle drive westerns. By putting to an end the narrative conventions that perpetuate idealized views of cowboy life—in this case by preventing Newt from fully inheriting the mantle as ranch owner from Call—McMurtry further resists the tendency toward romanticizing that life.

While earlier chapters of this dissertation assert the ways in which western writers resist a homogenously violent vision of the West by highlighting their unique corners of the region, this chapter sets out to tease apart the conflicting reasons McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove* has been widely characterized more as a more classical western than as the postwestern he sought to create. Drawing from Rick Altman's Semantic/Syntactic approach to film genre, I argue that cattle drive westerns carry with them inherent obstacles to the kind of critical reflectiveness McMurtry might have otherwise prompted.

Because the borders between genres break down so readily, Altman's conception of genre as a set of semantics—or what otherwise might be called iconography, and syntax, or narrative structure—is helpful for examining precisely how McMurtry attempts to reimagine the cattle drive narrative into a novel that interrogates rather than affirms the cowboy legend. I also draw from the work of Neil Campbell and John Cawelti. Campbell's and Cawelti's similar claims about the tension between a text's readability and its interventions in genre conventions help me articulate the ways McMurtry's anti-mythic efforts failed to fully connect with the *Lonesome Dove*'s readers. In other words, I argue that classical cattle drive western films established a set of expectations that *Lonesome Dove* was not able to overcome. In this chapter, I thus move from reading a place-based morality resisting a homogenously violent vision of the West in film, to the role genre played in the surprisingly nostalgic reception of *Lonesome Dove*. My analysis reveals the some of the challenges western writers face as they attempt to resist the homogenizing forces of cinema by confronting conventional cinematic representations of western life.

II. Biographical Context

McMurtry's ambivalence toward his home state of Texas has been thoroughly documented. Most studies of McMurtry or his work mention his ambivalence about the cowboy culture that pervades Texas, and many focus on ambivalence as a theme over the course of his career. For example, Mark Busby's *Larry McMurtry and the West: An Ambivalent Relationship* delves deeply into the recurring theme of escape and return in McMurtry's work, a theme Busby argues mirrors McMurtry's own life experiences. To

an author so keenly aware of both the trouble the cowboy legend causes and the vital role that legend plays in Texan identity (and other western identities), attempting to undo that legend is noble but daunting undertaking. In fact, as Busby writes, “McMurtry was surprised by the powerful romantic reaction to *Lonesome Dove*...” to the point that “perhaps acknowledging the misreadings of [the novel, he] takes a swipe at readers who misinterpret an author’s intentions” in *Anything for Billy* (239-41).

To demystify the cowboy legend would begin a painful transition for many who have absorbed it. However, demystifying the legend would also jolt those readers out of what McMurtry sees as destructive patterns caused by impetuous business decisions when investing in cattle, along with the fundamental misunderstanding of the world caused by the type of masculinity cowboy culture engenders. For McMurtry, the cattle business was never a genuine opportunity; “It hadn’t been a good business ever; the wrong animal and the wrong place...too slow a method and too much capital necessary,” he comments (Spurgeon, “Talking” 63). That a business perceived as promising but ultimately fraudulent spawned a culture so widely popular is unfortunate for McMurtry. Moreover, the romantic way we often look back at frontier figures causes us to “fail to see the fullness and complexity of their humanity” in a way that “shuts almost everything out except nature and work” (Busby 183).

From this there are two errors to be made, according to McMurtry. One is that people can live misguided lives by seeking to emulate the idealized cowboy life. The second is that we can miss out on fully understanding historical figures by confining our understanding to a specific western framework. Thus, McMurtry’s motivation for subverting western myths is less related to a homogenized view of the region than to

something more personal. Rather than wishing to create more realistic or regionally accurate depictions to those viewing the region from outside (though he does do this as well), McMurtry's primary concern is for the people who live in the region and have subscribed to a lifestyle that is untenable in the modern world.

Such a concern with the personal supports Ernestine Sewell's argument that McMurtry is concerned with "texture, not structures" (220). McMurtry seeks to intervene in the genre not by overhauling the structure but at the smaller scale of characters' experiences and reactions. His attention to the smaller details does create a different texture than other westerns. Unfortunately, McMurtry's attention to texture caused him to neglect the novel's structure enough that it undercut his antimythic efforts. McMurtry's antimythic efforts are similar to the postwestern method of highlighting the real struggles that settlers faced on the frontier. By highlighting these struggles as postwesterns do, McMurtry's focus on the individual characters' personal experience, especially trauma, intervenes in the myth that would idealize frontier life. However, the trauma McMurtry's characters have to overcome fails as intervention because, as Busby writes, "crossing obstacles has traditionally been the major element of the trail drive novel" (194). Despite these setbacks for McMurtry's antimythic efforts, or perhaps because they were not so clearly defined, the novel arrived to much fanfare and continues to occupy an important place in the history of the genre.

III. Cattle Drive Westerns

Despite the personal investment or any other psychological reason readers consistently read subversive westerns as a reinforcement of myths, several other factors

are readily identifiable as potential causes of a radical misreading of *Lonesome Dove* and its unintended renewal of the cowboy legend. One potential reason posited by scholars is that McMurtry consistently uses stock character types from the western genre. As readers, we sense that we've seen his characters before. Stock characters like Gus and Call (competent cowboys capable of violence), Lorena (the whore with a heart of gold), Dish Bogett (the capable cowhand eager to prove himself an equal to the ranch owners), and Newt (the adolescent boy who idolizes the cowboys he works with) are fleshed out into believable, well-rounded individuals. We can read them as actual characters, not simply as archetypes as, for example, characters in Leone's film westerns were often presented. Nevertheless, their generic genealogy contributes to a sense that because we have met these characters before, we have heard this story before, and, in fact, we *have* heard this story before.

Cattle drive films have been a part of the western genre since the early 20th century. The first film listed by IMDB with the tag of "cattle drive" is *North of 36* (1924), directed by Irvin Willat, but it was Howard Hawkes's *Red River* (1948) that truly made the cattle drive an iconic narrative structure within the western genre. Unlike other kinds of westerns, cattle drive westerns went relatively unchallenged by the upheaval of the film industry in the mid-twentieth century. Neil Campbell points to the end of World War II as the beginning of the postwestern, an era in which filmmakers reconsidered the assumptions and conventions of the western genre. The struggle between law and lawlessness exploded into schemes for personal gain. Frontier conquest had been revised to acknowledge Native American experiences, questioning the divine right claimed in Manifest Destiny. Interestingly, before *Lonesome Dove* the cattle drive narrative had

been relatively unchallenged by the interrogatory approach of postwesterns. Cattle drives remained classically heroic—they could not be subversive, nihilistic, or self-serving in the way post-westerns were. Instead of challenging western genre conventions, they continued bringing their herds to market, both on screen and in theaters, as westerns had done since the beginning of the twentieth century.

Of the myriad westerns produced in the twentieth century, over forty have focused on cattle drives, including the successful TV miniseries adapted from *Lonesome Dove*. Some of the more notable cattle drive westerns are: *Red River* (1948), *The Cariboo Trail* (1950), *Cattle Drive* (1951), *The Far Country* (1954), *Cattle Empire* (1958), *The Last Sunset* (1961), *The Cowboys* (1972), *The Culpepper Cattle Company* (1972), *Lonesome Dove* (1989-90), *City Slickers* (1991), and *Open Range* (2003). Before 1960, cattle drive films were produced at a steady pace of one or two per year. They slowly fizzled out during the 60s, and by the 1970s, cattle drive films were virtually non-existent. Out of the full decade of the 70s, only *The Culpepper Cattle Company* and *The Cowboys*, both from 1972, and *The Quest: The Longest Drive*—a 1976 T.V. movie starring Kurt Russell—were produced before *Lonesome Dove*'s publication in 1985. The cattle drive western's steep decline in the post-studio, New Hollywood era is stark evidence that cattle drives fit with neither the cultural climate nor the aesthetic concerns of the revisionist period. By the 1970s, filmmakers had begun the process of interrogating and exposing the deep and often troubling connections between western myths and American exceptionalism and capitalism.

In *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel*, John Cawelti argues that the western's transformation into a more critical, self-reflexive genre began with comedic lampooning

in novels such as Ishmael Reed's *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down*. Reed's novel was an important precursor to films like *Blazing Saddles* (1974), which sought to expose the problematic genre conventions of the western (102). Comedy proved a useful vehicle for postwesterns as the shock that accompanied breaking down western genre norms worked well for generating laughs. These comedic westerns heralded the breakdown of genre lines that maintained the genre formulas for decades. Lee Clark Mitchell argues that such genre bending was a sign of the western's declining popularity—that more than losing faith in the ideology represented by western films, the viewing public sought fresh perspectives on the western genre that had become too comfortable in an uncomfortable social climate (258). Despite the success of early comedic postwesterns, questioning the western genre conventions so deeply ingrained in American culture proved to be serious business, too.

After a cycle of comical-and-critical reimaginings of the western formula, filmmakers working in the genre shifted back to more serious visions of the West that extended the self-reflexive approach of western lampoons. Antiwesterns that were also serious in tone addressed a multitude of western conventions, from glorified violence to strict gender norms. By depicting violence in ways that exposed its reality, and by empowering women characters that had traditionally been marginalized in the genre, antiwesterns exposed the ways the western had perpetuated a problematic perception of the historical West by depicting it in simplistic ways. However, the quest for a reimagined western genre was fraught with financial risk. Just as more socially conscious westerns arrived on the scene, so to did new boundaries become apparent as filmmakers broke down western clichés. The box-office failure of films like *The Ballad of Little Jo*

(1993), Cawelti writes, proved the high cost for films that too deeply probed the absurdity of traditional western stereotypes (112).

Just as Cawelti suggests the risk for films that push genre boundaries too far, Neil Campbell draws from Jaques Rancière to theorize the way post-westerns disrupt formerly imagined possibilities of the genre and offer “alternative counterfictions to challenge any authoritative distribution of the sensible with regard to the American West” (*Post-Westerns* 352). Campbell writes, “This is achieved through a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused” by the intervention made as an alternative to convention (*Post-Westerns* 352). Campbell’s argument for the inverse poles of “readability” and “shock” suggests the oppositional relationship between box office success and the power of a film to effectively probe the contradictions within the western genre.

Cawelti’s, Campbell’s, and Mitchell’s arguments reveal a narrow scope for the kind of reflexiveness that enables meaningful critique of the genre. Mild critique was a viable way for filmmakers to refresh the genre, but too much could prove costly at the box office, thus limiting the social impact critically oriented films could have. Likewise, making a film too readable—or directed too much toward the mainstream—could adversely affect what Campbell calls the “literarity” produced by a “productive dissensus” within a postwestern film. Because of the balancing act required for postwesterns to be successful, critical and financial successes, such as Clint Eastwood’s *Unforgiven*, often reverted to the old patterns despite raising serious questions about the genre. Thus, western subgenres like the cattle drive western proved even more difficult to navigate through the narrow window of critique and success.

One reason for this complication, I argue, is that cattle drive westerns' narrative structure is not well suited for antiwestern or revisionist treatment. To be more specific, the syntax of cattle drive westerns—the iconography of self-assured masculine protagonists willingly confronting adversity in a rural, at times primitive setting while imposing their will on animals and the landscape alike—did not fit well with antiwestern methods used by filmmakers in the 1960s. Narrative events such as the search for water, the river crossing, defense against cattle rustlers, stampedes, and a young person's coming of age on the trail make up a set of conventional dilemmas in cattle drive films. There is, of course, variance in which types of crises are used—not all cattle drive films include all of these narrative elements, but most feature more than one of them. The cattle drive's narrative syntax is essentially a set of trials that the cowboys encounter and whose conflict and resolution build the narrative. That fundamental makeup causes problems for antiwestern methodology seeking to overwhelm readers or viewers with adversity in order to challenge the myth of the West. This is the problem that *Lonesome Dove* encountered, and which I argue brought its reception more in line with western conventions than McMurtry intended.

Of course, cattle drives take on the challenges presented by the landscape they must cross in order to deliver the herd to market. This is manifest in two syntactic markers. The first is the search for water. Because cattle drives span great distances, the likelihood is high for encountering daunting challenges posed by the West's characteristic aridity. The search for water after having gone days without it takes a toll on the cowboys and poses a risk to the herd, thereby incorporating both personal challenges to characters' toughness, commitment to the endeavor, and the risk of losing

the product that will enable their pay. This is used at times as a way to bring cattle drives into conflict with landowners who are unwilling to share their water and grass, even when offered fair payment.²⁸

The second way the landscape challenges cattle drives is in an obligatory river-crossing scene. These scenes often are used to highlight a fear that one of the young cowboys has kept hidden.²⁹ The most common fear is of drowning because the cowboy is unable to swim. However, the challenge of crossing the river may expose an inexperienced cowboy's lack of confidence in riding a horse, or a persistent fear of the cattle themselves. Most often the river itself poses the biggest risk. Deep, fast moving water forces the cattlemen to drift as best they can toward a particular landing, and quicksand often complicates the precarious footing they find on the riverbed.

Two other related challenges pose a consistent danger to the herd. The first is the consistent threat of rustlers. Confrontations with rustlers often serve as a way to introduce a villain into the narrative. Not all cattle drive westerns have a persistent villain, but those that do often use the villain as a threat to ownership of the herd. Rustlers work as a foil to the group leader's position as a capitalist—as a manager of a source of centralized capital under the threat of dispersal by undeserving outsiders. That threat of dispersed capital can become a threat from within the group once the hardships of the drive become clear to some of the members who signed up for it. A dwindling workforce causes the second danger to the herd as characters abandon the drive. Conflict between the trail boss and the cowboys often amounts to a labor dispute, in which holdouts try to drive up their wages.

²⁸ This is a major source of conflict in *The Culpepper Cattle Company*.

²⁹ Mark Rydell's *The Cowboys* (1972) and *Lonesome Dove* both employ this dilemma.

Some films, such as *Red River*, twist this type of conflict between the men and the boss to the point that the dispute turns into a mutiny. *Red River* is somewhat a special case in that the mutiny serves as an assertion of manhood for Matt, who begins the film as a tenderfoot and eventually takes ownership of the company. When the threat of losing the herd is from without, the conflict often requires a greenhorn to kill a man for the first time. This is especially true if the rustlers are a minority group, most often Mexicans.

Westerns have traditionally treated minority groups with little concern, often taking advantage of racial markers as an easy way to delineate insiders from outsiders, and, in the worst cases, good from evil. In much the same way as westerns doubly bound Native Americans as either savage enemies of whites or sympathetic victims of them, westerns—especially cattle drive films—used Mexican characters as easily dispensable antagonists of cowboys confronting their true adversary: the wilderness. Depicted as unsavory company or unscrupulous thieves, Mexican characters did little to empower a people dispossessed of a claim to the land being crossed by cattle drives. Just as Native Americans found a degree of power in postwesterns' corrective depictions of them, Mexicans would have benefitted from similar sympathetic depictions. *Lonesome Dove* depicts two Mexican characters in nuanced ways, which suggests McMurtry's desire to move beyond genre-driven negative depictions of Mexicans. However, from their position as outsiders, Mexican characters such as Bolivar and Po Campo can do little to change the larger narrative.

Native Americans are likewise marginalized in cattle drive westerns, often coming onto conflict with ranchers seeking to avoid the perils of established trails. By venturing onto lesser-known routes and into unsettled country, cattle drives often come

into conflict with the remaining groups of Indians on the frontier. In *Red River*, Thomas Dunson (John Wayne) fights an Indian in the Red River—the river marking the northeastern border of Texas. As the men fight, Dunson is first pushed backward into the river, only to rise up and over the Indian and stab him repeatedly. This river fight serves as a double baptism into Texas ranch owner identity. Dunson's presence in the river and his shedding of Indian blood mark his induction into Texas legend. Soon after, Dunson claims ownership of former Mexican territory, justifying his imperialist move with the logic that the land's owner, Don Diego, took the land from someone else. By this logic, violation begets violation, and thus Dunson is able to justify seizing whatever property he wants.

The most common event in a trail drive western is a stampede, which is the second potential way of losing a herd. Often stampedes serve as primary trials of a cattle drive, and the threat of them often builds considerable suspense. The rustler and stampede tropes at times overlap. Rather than stealing the herd outright, rustlers employ various methods of spooking the cattle—often overnight so that the cattle will run from some unseen threat. Whether caused by rustlers or not, stampedes often result in death, reducing the cowboy's numbers and providing a sobering counterpoint and emotional nadir for the drive. This is frequently followed by a trail burial in which the deceased is placed in a hastily marked grave in anticipation of a more fitting marker that will come later.

Possibly the most prevalent, and most important aspect of the cattle drive narratives is incorporating young, inexperienced, and naïve cowboys into the drive. These younger members of the drive represent the possibility of perpetuating the romanticized

idea of the cattle drive and ensure that the cowboy myth will carry on to a new generation. Although cattle drive narratives do not normally follow the bildungsroman structure, the young characters do establish some “coming of age” elements of the narrative. They are often the ones who shoot a rustler, thus killing their first man, and it is presumed that they will kill again. Younger characters frequently have sex for the first time after having established some rapport with the other cowboys, who initially look down on them. They will go as part of a group to a saloon and either through their own curiosity or through peer pressure will have sex with a prostitute at the saloon or in a nearby establishment. Once they come of age through killing and/or having sex, they often take on more responsibility within the group of cowboys, possibly becoming a leader of a small group or developing a closer relationship with the leader of the drive. Some films, such as *The Culpepper Cattle Company* and *The Cowboys* focus on the perspective of a child and the moral struggles he faces along with the physical ones. When the film’s perspective shifts to that of the youngsters, it begins to resemble masculine propaganda by depicting a traditionally hypermasculinist way of life that young men should emulate.

For example, *The Cowboys* makes use of the young boys to assume the responsibility not only of completing the drive once their leader is killed, but they also take the cook prisoner so that he will not prevent their effort to reclaim the herd from rustlers and subsequently take revenge on the man who killed their boss and symbolic father figure. *The Cowboys* establishes a positive take on the worldview of cowboys on a drive. Its violent ending, in which the children take on the characteristics of their deceased leader, is a sign that they have grown into young men and will live honorable

lives based on his teachings. In other words, the cowboy myth will live on with them and we presume, through their children.

On the other hand, *The Culpepper Cattle Company*'s narrative perspective is primarily that of its young protagonist, Ben (Gary Grimes). The film follows his idealized view of cowboy life through his initiation via sexual activities, drinking, and killing. Unlike the young men in *The Cowboys*, Ben ultimately rejects the cowboy life when he sees many of his friends killed in a dispute with an offended landowner. Ben comes to view life as a cowboy as a forced choice between a thankless death in service to others or a selfish neglect of anything other than getting the cattle to market. *The Culpepper Cattle Company* essentially takes the opposite stance of *The Cowboys*. While the young men in *The Cowboys* fully integrate the cowboy myth into their identities and ultimately replace Anderson (John Wayne) after his death, Ben sees through the hypermasculine façade and leaves Culpepper to his fate, a fate that is left unresolved within the film's narrative.

The threat of death pervades cattle drive westerns. Almost invariably, one of the cowboys dies on the drive. While these deaths are often emotional, they are accepted as a risk of all cattle drives, and part of why going on a drive is considered serious business. Being able to accept and move on from the loss of a friend is vital to the maturation young men experience as part of the cowboy myth in cattle drives. Young characters that sign on and complete a cattle drive are often considered men by the time it concludes. The men in charge—most often the owner of the company, but sometimes a top hand—are often reviled at some point during the drive for their harsh demeanor. This was an early trope among cattle drive films, and forms the central conflict in *Red River*, in which Dunson loses control of his herd and his men to Matt (Montgomery Clift). At the end of

the drive, more often than not, the leader who set out on the drive is admired by both the men who worked for him and by outsiders awestruck by the achievement.

For the reasons outlined above, the cattle drive is a special case when considering the potential for revision of the western myth and the challenge of changing the genre's conventions. The two primary methods postwesterns use for critiquing conventions—extreme violence and acknowledging different perspectives—come into conflict with the conventions of the cattle drive movie. Extreme violence only serves as a greater obstacle to be overcome by “admirable” men who set out on a drive, ultimately aggrandizing their achievement. And acknowledging other perspectives, such as those of Native Americans or Mexican Americans, comes into conflict with the history of conquest in the vast land that made up free-range cattle territory.

Like many John Wayne westerns, *The Cowboys* is a romantic throwback to films like *Red River*. Wayne's Wil Andersen, in many ways, resembles Thomas Dunson (*Red River*)—in that the two characters share a tendency toward tyranny. *The Cowboys* takes on the added twist that the boys on the drive not only come of age, but fully take control of the cattle drive in their boss's absence, even mounting a plot to avenge his death and reclaim his cattle. *The Cowboys* fully adheres to conventional cattle drive syntax and conventions, relying on the coming of age element. The film's adherence to convention carries over to the cinematography. Very little about the way the film is shot stands out for its artistic intervention. Instead, the movie does as little as possible to divert attention away from the narrative and Wayne's performance. In Campbell's terms, the film is very readable and lacks the kind of “literarity” that would signal an effort to challenge the genre's boundaries. The scene in which Andersen is killed stands out as one that uses

camerawork to accentuate the screen violence. But rather than question Andersen's choices in a way that would subvert the genre, the camera emphasizes Andersen's cowboy stoicism in contrast with the villain Long Hair's (Bruce Dern) depravity.

As Andersen and Long Hair fight, the camera shifts to continually show Andersen's face in a medium shot that leaves his torso visible as he is shot in the arm, then in the back. After Long Hair shoots him once, Andersen turns to walk away, at which point the shot cuts to remain face-on with Andersen while revealing Long Hair's bloodied face and shaking hands as he repeatedly cocks the pistol and fires until Andersen falls. This relatively short scene is a pivotal moment in the film as the bandits steal the cattle from the young men and leave them without their leader. The way the scene is filmed is important in that it maintains the genre conventions by lionizing Andersen in death, rather than making his enterprise seem foolhardy or greedy. By emphasizing Long Hair's lack of character in shooting Andersen in the back, along with depicting him as pathetically beaten, *The Cowboys* reifies the ideology of the cowboy myth. Rather than a postwestern that mourns the death of the frontier, *The Cowboys* offers renewed hope for those who subscribe to the myth as the young men all rise to the occasion, reclaiming Andersen's cattle and killing the bandits in the process.

The Culpepper Cattle Company is more of an antiwestern, as it subverts many of the conventions *The Cowboys* works to reinforce. It follows a young man, Ben, as he tries to carve out a place in a group of cowhands on a drive for Frank Culpepper (Billy Green Bush). Ben's naiveté is made clear near the film's beginning. The scene in which he begs Culpepper to hire him for any job alternates between high angle shots of Ben skipping sideways alongside Culpepper's horse with low angle shots of Culpepper looking down

in amusement. The alternating high and low angle shots follow their physical positioning—Ben on foot and Culpepper on horseback—and the shots convey the power dynamic between the two. Moreover, Ben’s appearance in contrast to Culpepper’s reinforces the power dynamic communicated through the camera work. Ben is wide-eyed and baby-faced, which accentuates his youth and inexperience. Contrasted with Culpepper’s long beard and narrowed eyes, Ben seems completely unprepared for what awaits him. Nevertheless, Ben claims that he “wants to be a cowboy more than anything” and that he “will work *real* hard” to the point that Culpepper hires him as the “Little Mary,” an emasculating slang term for the cook’s helper. Ben’s coming of age story is interrupted when he rejects the violent life he finds as a cowboy.

The way *The Culpepper Cattle Company* depicts violence through gritty composition and quick cuts communicates a realist style of filmmaking that conveys Ben’s overwhelmed reaction to violence. The final scene, in which Ben and several of Culpepper’s men decide to defend a group of settlers, exemplifies *The Culpepper Cattle Company*’s antiwestern orientation. As a greedy landowner and his men come to kill everyone remaining on their land, Ben and his group take cover in a semicircle of wagons. As the attack unfolds, the camera cuts to different men as they are killed one by one. Reaction shots of Ben’s face as he watches his friends die undercut the scene’s optimistic, even cavalier, buildup. The men are depicted being shot with shotguns and pistols, and the film uses squibs to depict the gruesome nature of their wounds. After all the experiences that would lead him to maturity and a willingness to use violence to carry out his will, Ben instead suddenly breaks down. After burying the men, he takes off his

gun belt and drops it to the ground in an obvious rejection of the life he initially craved so desperately.

The Cowboys and *The Culpepper Cattle Company* provide valuable context for my analysis of *Lonesome Dove* for several reasons. Because they have the closest release dates to *Lonesome Dove*'s publication, they are the closest examples of how the cattle drive was being imagined cinematically leading up to *Lonesome Dove*'s publication. Interestingly, this most recent cycle of cattle drive films is more focused on the coming of age element in the genre than the empire building of 1940s and 50s cattle drive westerns. I argue that this reveals some anxiety about the time the films were produced. In these two examples, filmmakers working in the cattle drive subgenre tried to offer some direction, whether restoring old values from before the turbulent decade of the 1960s, or moving in a new direction that condemned those old values for leading to conflicts such as Vietnam and racial violence, just as other types of westerns had done throughout the 1960s.

***Lonesome Dove*'s Semantic Changes**

McMurtry's effort to demystify the cowboy legend employed both approaches, making syntactic and semantic changes to the cattle drive structure. While *Lonesome Dove* incorporates all of these syntactic characteristics into its narrative, McMurtry includes episodes of extreme violence, especially in the kidnapping of Lorena and the deeds performed by the Suggs Gang when Jake Spoon joins as he crosses the country. Both examples include graphic violence in which shocking images challenge a conventional understanding of the novel. As such, I read these violent episodes as

evidence of McMurtry's attempted intervention into the cattle drive film's semantics. By making these events powerful and brutally meaningful, McMurtry's novel intensifies the hardship to a level that would normally remove the appeal of the cowboy lifestyle.

Ultimately, the widespread positive reaction to *Lonesome Dove* regarded the novel as another story of characters overcoming obstacles and, at times, suffering in the cause of westward expansion, rather than as a cautionary tale warning about the danger of idealizing the cowboy lifestyle. Some read *Lonesome Dove* as a western novel that continues to "understand the advance of civilization as a positive achievement," thus romanticizing frontier narratives (Willbern 82). I argue that this shift in tone is tied to the way cattle drives force characters to face difficult challenges, and once they overcome those challenges, they are admired all the more. This organizational structure inherent to the cattle drive western contributes to readers overlooking the narrative events that could have worked to subvert the legend of the cowboy. Ironically, the failure of McMurtry's postwestern critique brought him commercial and critical success beyond anything he had achieved in an already successful career: "sales of 300,000 copies in hardcover and [ascension] into the realm of serious American novelists who make the bestseller list" (Busby 200).

McMurtry would later say that the myth cannot be undone, that the historical West "pale[s] in the nation's imagination next to the West that even the most accurate scholarship can't do a thing about" (Purrenhage 75). In many instances, this has proven true for western authors who seek to sterilize the toxic power dynamics of cowboy narratives by exposing them to sunlight. Films such as Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992) have made great strides toward exposing the myths behind western fiction, only to

be caught up in those myths and have a significant portion of their audience come away with an understanding of the text or film as fully participating in the myth it sought to challenge. Readers of western fiction are persistent in their belief that depictions of violence are admirable, even redemptive, when depicted in a historical western setting.

So we return to the problem of McMurtry's stated goal to subvert the cowboy myth. Although McMurtry is unclear about specifically *how* he set out to demystify the cowboy legend, there are a few aspects of *Lonesome Dove* that stand out as markers of his attempt. At times, McMurtry follows the postwestern method of challenging conventions—by including a level of violence that shocks an audience out of a romanticized vision of the narrative or setting. At other times, McMurtry deviates from western conventions in ways that offer pointed commentary on the assumptions that underlie western fiction. In genre grammar terms, excessive violence constitutes an alteration of the film's semantics—changing the imagery we encounter when reading, and McMurtry's efforts to pick at the assumptions behind the genre play with the western's syntax. Some of McMurtry's syntactical changes, such as the subtle way he challenges the beef industry and the novel's narrative structure that concludes with Call's return to Lonesome Dove, rather than a successful relocation to Montana, resist a homogenized vision of the West. Other methods, such as his emphasis on longing from unrequited romantic interests are less successful because they feed a romantic ideal that has long gone hand in hand with the western myth.

Before delving into McMurtry's use of violence and romance, it is worth examining a secondary character, Po Campo, the second cook to join the drive. Although Campo does not venture away from the herd as Gus and Call frequently do, he

consistently provides noteworthy scenes that question the cowboys' assumptions. As members of a cattle drive, the men are inherently bound up with the beef industry. At its core, the long drive to Montana is an enterprise to bring a supply of beef to a market that is underserved. At the time of the drive, the army is the primary group driving demand, but the impending progress westward promises to make a ranch in Montana increasingly valuable in the years to come. There are other landmarks that motivate Call, such as the desire to be the first to drive cattle across the Yellowstone River, but these goals offer notoriety. Financial success in the beef market is what will sustain the ranch. Into this venture comes Po Campo, who doubles as an oracle and a Mexican cook with a penchant for pushing the boundaries of the cowboy palate. Naturally, most of the cowboys prefer beef as their main fare, but Po Campo is known for carrying a bag and gathering food along the trail. Most notably, he fries grasshoppers and dips them in molasses for the men to try. Reluctantly, many of them do and ultimately like the taste of the insects.

This scene is humorous and serves to introduce Po to the rest of the cowboys, and it offers an interesting note on the beef industry. Many cattle drive films note the importance of providing beef in the service of building the nation. Dunston makes such a claim as he declares most of Texas as his ranch in *Red River*. "Good beef for good men," he says with an eye toward the future. But the sustainability of the beef industry has long been in question for the amount of resources it consumes in raising the food and the issue of humane treatment of the animals. These concerns, along with the health risks of eating red meat too often challenge the efficacy of the beef industry as a primary contributor to the natural food supply. Po Campo's use of grasshoppers foreshadows the growing interest in using insects as an alternative protein source that is both more sustainable and

more nutrient dense than beef. Although the idea of eating insects remains largely unappealing to Americans, that McMurtry includes Po's use of alternative foods tempers the grandiosity of the cattle enterprise.

Po's habit of gathering food off of the ground as he walks is another way his character challenges the beef industry's centrality in the narrative. Rather than using the ample supply of beef on the drive, Po gathers food for the men to eat, constantly placing items he finds into his knapsack for later use. Some of these are ingredients he uses in recipes, and others are primary food items. In one scene, he feeds all of the men with omelets made from plover's eggs he finds on the prairie. Although the men are initially skeptical, they all come to praise Po's cooking and are astonished at the meals he can make from the food he simply picks up along the way. Po's use of food that he gathers rather than slaughters highlights the way that agriculture has grown from an important evolutionary landmark for society to an industry perverted by overproduction. That he gathers food for the men who are facilitating that overproduction is a subtly challenges cattle drives as viable economic enterprises.

If Po's cooking presents a neglected perspective in western fiction, Lorena's story is similarly enlightening. There have been many stories of kidnapped women whose rescue drives the story. Tales like Lorena's are common in westerns, drawing from the captivity narrative conventions of early frontier tales like James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*. While death and dishonor are common threats for men, the threat of kidnap and rape by Native Americans is pervasive as the most severe threat women face on the frontier, despite evidence that rape was not a common practice Native

Americans carried out on their captives.³⁰ Lorena is repeatedly raped, beaten, and traded like stock. Her trauma extends to the point that she becomes mute for much of the novel after Gus rescues her and returns her to safety at a ranch owned by his former love interest, Clara Allen. What is most notable about Lorena's kidnapping is not that she is treated so harshly—her story is a familiar one in western fiction. What is notable, though, is that the events are narrated from her perspective. The voices of kidnapped women have often been lost as western films instead focused on the men who rescued them.³¹

McMurtry's decision to narrate from Lorena's point of view further lends a sense of realism to the story as she describes the events of her captivity. Her voice, along with that of other women like Clara Allen, broadens the significance of *Lonesome Dove* and helps to make it epic in scope. However, in a novel primarily about two aging Indian fighters who take up ranching, Lorena's voice as she experiences trauma challenges the conventions at work in *Lonesome Dove* and, as a result, helps challenge the legend of the cowboy in a way that fits with what McMurtry claims to have hoped his novel would accomplish.

Lorena's and Po Campo's contributions to the narrative broaden the spectrum of perspectives in a way that makes the novel realistic and challenges a homogenous view of

³⁰ This point also begs the question about whether or not we should count Blue Duck and his band of thieves as representative of Native Americans. Certainly he has a storied history fighting Call and Gus in their backstory as Texas Rangers, but he is never affiliated with a specific tribe, and therefore is better considered as an individual killer, even though his Native American heritage cannot be ignored as he carries on the long tradition of racial animus falling in line with moral divides in the western genre.

³¹ I would note that Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* and Mary Rowlandson's *A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682) both do present the kidnapped women's perspectives, as did many nineteenth-century captivity narratives. As the western film genre grew out of western literature, including captivity narrative such as these, that perspective began to diminish.

the West. These diverse perspectives are crucial to the novel's realism, but McMurtry uses other methods to strengthen the impact of narrative events. As he narrates both Newt and Deets, McMurtry subtly portrays them as naïve. Newt is young and fittingly his voice sounds childlike, but so too does Deets, a seasoned ranger and compatriot to Gus and Call for decades. Two scenes demonstrate this technique: Deets's death and the scene in which Shaun O'Brien is killed by water moccasins. Each of these scenes deals with gruesome violence, but they are even more notable because of the way they are narrated by these two characters, who experience the violence. Each of these events is tragic and shocking when read, and each marks a semantic decision to include violence that will work to counter an idealized view of the West.

Deets's role in the drive is one of the most important because he is responsible for finding water for the cattle along the way, and for navigating safe passage across the land and the multiple rivers that must be crossed. In many ways, Deets makes Call's "hell of a vision" possible. He is unfailingly kind and intelligent, but his concerns are simple, which makes him a very competent character and earns him Call's respect. This makes his death all the more shocking because he is always prepared and aware of his surroundings. After finding that several horses have gone missing in the night, Deets accompanies Call and Gus on the mission to retrieve them. When the group finds the horses have been stolen by a very poor Indian tribe who plan to eat the horses rather than ride them, they decide that they will simply scare off the Indians and leave a few horses for the tribe to eat.

However, when Call fires his gun in the air and the tribe runs away, a helpless blind toddler is left behind. Seeing that the toddler is terrified, Deets rushes to help the boy, prompting a panicked attack from a young Indian man. "Only then he saw it was too

late—the young man couldn't stop coming and couldn't stop hating either. His eyes were wild with hatred. Deets felt a deep regret that he should be hated so by this thin boy when he meant no harm" (McMurtry 698). That Deets regrets being hated so much by the boy, rather than being caught or being unprepared for a fight, is telling in the context of westward expansion. Even in the intensity of the encounter, Deets regrets being in the position that someone would be so furious toward him without knowing him personally. The boy "cannot stop hating" because of the larger events of westward expansion and the conflict between Native Americans. At first glance, Deets's death is tragic in that he is trying to help and makes no aggressive move toward the young man. Deets is a clear victim of hatred brought on by the larger scale conflict, but this point ignores that Deets, along with Gus and Call, was largely responsible for exterminating the Comanche and Apache from Texas. While Deets seems an innocent victim of circumstance here, he and his group are largely responsible for those circumstances.

Despite the irony, Deets's death is emotionally powerful, and it is made more so by the seeming pointlessness of it. It is through Deets's innocent tone and simple-minded way of viewing his own death that he is made to seem a victim. As he dies, Deets sees the boy after Gus and Call shoot him and thinks it "is a sad thing, that the boy had to die just because he couldn't see that they were friendly. [Then] he looked at the captain sadly. He hoped that now the Captain would see that he had been right to feel worried about leaving Texas" (696). As Deets dies, his thoughts return to Texas and that "It would have been so much better to stay where they had lived, by the old river" (696). Of all the dangers Deets has encountered, that he would be killed by a malnourished young boy does little except

highlight the inherent dangers of the West in a way that calls into question the glorious nature of what the men set out to do.

While Deets's death is both poignant and ironic, it highlights the dangers of simply being on the frontier with hostile Native Americans. However, indigenous peoples were not the only danger on the cattle drive. Other scenes portray the simple danger of wilderness. The river crossing in which the young Irishman, Sean is killed is one such scene. Here, McMurtry employs Newt's perspective to add emotional impact to the scene through shock accentuated by Newt's naiveté.

It was just as Newt turned to watch the last of the cattle cross that a scream cut the air, so terrible that it almost made him faint. Before he could even look toward the scream, Pea Eye went racing past him, with the Captain just behind him....Then his eyes found Sean, who was screaming again and again, in a way that made Newt want to cover his ears. He saw that Sean was barely clinging to his horse, and that a lot of brown things were wiggling around him and over him. At first, with the screaming going on, Newt couldn't figure out what the brown things were—they seemed like giant worms. His mind took a moment to work out what his eyes were seeing. The giant worms were snakes—water moccasins. Then the screams stopped abruptly as Sean slipped under the water—his voice was replaced almost at once by the frenzied neighing of the horse, which began to thrash in the water and soon turned back toward the far bank. As he gained a footing and rose out of the water he shook three snakes from his body, one slithering off his neck. (McMurtry 262)

Sean's death is described in vivid detail that prompts a visceral reaction. The multiple references to screams, the writhing of the snakes, and the shared agony with the terrified horse combine multiple senses to produce an overwhelming experience in the scene. Sean's death made more powerful by the childlike way Newt describes the scene. That Newt wants to "cover his ears" to escape Sean's screams demonstrates Newt's childlike reaction. Moreover, the confusion as he tries to figure out what the brown things are wiggling around and over Sean further demonstrates Newt's inexperience since the adult cowboys readily recognize them as snakes.

As powerful as this scene is, it is a rare departure from realism for McMurtry. F.E. Abernathy points out that "Moccasins are never in a nest...the mother carries the eggs within her. As soon as the eggs are passed, the infant breaks out of the sack fully fanged and... very independent. Water Moccasins are not social creatures hanging out in swarms of twenty (Call's count)" (qtd in Busby 199). That McMurtry exaggerates the water moccasin attack beyond what is natural reveals his effort to intensify this scene for effect. Just as Deet's tragic death ignores his own role in making native tribes hostile to groups of settlers, so does Newt's narration ignore the real nature of water moccasins (possibly too the nature of young men to recognize snakes as a danger in the wild).

These events as experienced by Lorena, Deets, and Newt carry with them a sense of innocence, and that innocence makes the events seem all the more tragic as each of these characters is helpless to stop them. All three events are examples of the way innocent people can either die or be traumatized by life on the frontier, and the violence of all three exemplifies the way McMurtry tries to demystify the cowboy legend by revealing a life that lacks glamor and carries inherent risk. Although the events do

provoke strong emotional reactions ranging from horror to pity, they do not fully dissolve the appeal and seeming triumph of the cattle drive once the group does reach Montana. Were they successful, the novel would carry an air of futility that would effectively challenge the cowboy legend in the way that McMurtry claims to have intended. Instead, and in spite of the ending in which Call leaves to bury Gus in Texas, the novel retains a romantic appeal. I argue that the appeal remains, at least in part, because of the way cattle drive narratives make use of hardship. In other words, there is a structural element in this western subgenre that renders McMurtry's subversive efforts ineffective because they ultimately serve as simply one more obstacle to overcome in order to complete the drive.

Another important instance of violent events in *Lonesome Dove* involves Jake Spoon and his decision to ride with the Suggs gang in order to more safely cross the frontier. The Suggs gang causes more extreme violence that is meant to be shocking. David Willbern has argued that the Suggs Gang's brutality is somehow too conventional to be subversive and is therefore another example of McMurtry's failed attempt at antimythic writing (91). Willbern may be correct, but it is worth noting that the Suggs' violence was increasingly random and extreme, culminating in not only murder but burning the already-dead bodies for "fun." When Dan Suggs proposes burning the bodies after shooting them, his brothers chuckle and dismiss the insane idea as simply a day of Dan "feeling bloody." Instead, Jake's moral failings finally catch up to him in the way Gus and Call speculated would eventually happen. Jake is a cowardly reprobate, and his unwillingness to stand up to the Suggs Gang once he realizes their capacity for senseless violence earns him a spot next to them when Gus and Call execute them for murder and stealing horses.

Sewell calls Jake the “id” of a tripartite cowboy god in *Lonesome Dove* (224). For Sewell, Jake is a character who bends to the will of those around him and simultaneously is governed by his own impulses. Freudian readings aside, Jake’s competence as a Ranger and his role in settling Texas during the transition of the territory from Mexican to Texan is all he shares in common with Woodrow Call, who Sewell calls the novel’s superego (227). Although Jake hesitates to join in the violence, he ultimately participates enough to become guilty by more than association. Despite Jake’s hesitation, the men carry out the killings, burning the bodies and the homestead. The event is essentially one of warfare between romanticized lifestyles. The homesteaders killed in the scene are carrying out the promise of civilization that settling the West has invited easterners to take part in. Their settlement comes at the cost of grazing land for cattle. The cowboy and the farmer are thus placed at odds, and the farmer’s fate is decided by Dan Suggs even though he is not himself a cowboy. Instead, he seeks the prestige of the cowboy class and attempts to assume that prestige by adopting an unfounded hatred of “sodbusters.” Although he kills white settlers, his deeds are rooted in the same faulty logic of racism—seeking a group to look down upon in order to elevate himself.

Gus and Call find the aftermath of the group’s murders and, adhering to their historical moral code, set out to find the killers. Once they locate the group, including Jake, they face and carry out the uneasy and morally complex issue that they all must hang, including Jake. The murders themselves are shocking and fitting as an example of increased violence—self-serving violence that can be used as an example of risking a venture on the frontier. However, Jake’s hanging serves as an interesting fit with the cattle drive trope of having an iron will. Jake’s situation is complex in that he did join the

group and stand by as they killed and burned homesteaders. However, he is most certainly not as guilty as the maniacal leader of the gang. Nevertheless, Jake is killed according to the rigid cowboy code. Without the scale of grey in which Jake's transgressions fall, he is judged to be guilty and therefore must be killed in retribution. His hanging eliminates his part of the tripartite cowboy god Ernestine Sewell observes in her reading of the novel. Jake's death leaves Gus and Call as the two remaining members of the id-ego-superego triad.

Lonesome Dove's Syntactical Changes

Postwesterns challenge genre conventions by changing the genre's syntax while maintaining its semantics. Set in the late 1870s, McMurtry's novel retains western semantics—the cowboy hats, horses, and six-guns, obviously mark the film as a western—but he changes the classic western structure in two ways. The first structural change McMurtry makes undermines Gus's and Call's claims to a moral high ground by reconstructing them as the rustlers they would traditionally have to fight off. The second way he changes the structure of the cattle drive is by having Call retrace the ground he has covered in order to return to Texas and bury Gus. Just as the semantic changes McMurtry makes are limited by the cattle drive western's conventions, the syntactic changes he makes are limited by established conventions.

One example of McMurtry's use of structure to subvert genre conventions is that Gus and Call set out for Montana with a herd of cattle and horses stolen from Pedro Flores, a Mexican rancher with whom they have a long history of stealing cattle back and forth. This is notable because the cattle drive narrative is one that carries with it a sense

of integrity about hard work and dedication that indicate the morality that is bound up with the economic venture. The U.S.-Mexican borderlands have long served as a place of escape—one flees to Mexico out of necessity to hide from legal retribution. But, as John Miller-Purrenhage points out, Gus and Call “use the convenience of the border to hide from the laws of their nation and their own consciences” (78). Somehow in their reckoning, crimes committed in Mexico do not count, either because their Mexican rivals have committed the same crimes on the U.S. side of the border, or because, as Mexicans, their rights do not deserve the same consideration as those of Americans. This possibility reveals the racism so often ignored in westerns dealing with both the border and new territories being claimed by ranchers for raising cattle. “If famous Texas Rangers do not exemplify the values of the ‘civilization’ they fought to protect,” Purrenhage asks, “how can anyone?” (78). From the beginning, the drive is tinged with a sense of racial injustice that contradicts the principles Gus and Call are supposed to stand for. That contradiction is one of the ways McMurtry tries to subvert the genre, but that kind of subversion relies on readers to recognize Gus and Call’s actions as a crime. Part of the reason I argue their cattle theft is not viewed as a crime is because either the Mexicans they steal from are equally guilty, or because it is simply acceptable to steal from Mexicans in westerns.

The contradiction is not lost on Newt, who, on his first trip into Mexico, suddenly questions the morality of their actions noting that “in Texas stealing horses was a hanging crime...[but] evidently if you crossed the river to do it, it stopped being a crime and became a game” (McMurtry 128). Newt’s recognition of the flawed logic the group follows is rooted in McMurtry’s criticism of the Texas Rangers. As Ernestine Sewell writes, in 1965 McMurtry condemned the “glaring whitewash” of history in Walter

Prescott Webb's 1935 book *The Texas Rangers* (220). McMurtry pointed out that the events reported in Webb's history patently countered the image Webb presented of the rangers as "quiet, deliberate, gentle men" (Birchfield 48). McMurtry's criticism of the Rangers as "violent, ruthless men who thought all non-whites to be subhuman" seems to be carried on in Gus and Call's amoral opportunism (Sewell 220). Unfortunately for McMurtry, racial violence as an aspect of the genre's conventions remains simultaneously morally problematic and largely overlooked within cattle drive narratives.

Syntactically, *Lonesome Dove* is not so different from earlier cattle drive westerns. Beginning the drive with a stolen herd of cattle pales in comparison to the imperialist confrontation by which Thomas Dunson establishes his ranch in *Red River*. Rather than buying the land, he claims it, killing one of the rightful owner's men and daring the other to fight too. After burying the man and branding his cattle in a double ceremony, the film fades to a shot of seven graves of men Dunson has killed defending his newly claimed land. In other words, cattle drive narratives have a long history of illegally divesting racial others of property in order to launch the enterprise. As a consequence, Call and Gus beginning the drive as thieves—McMurtry's syntactic changes—are rendered ineffective as agents of subversion. This may account for the decline in cattle drive westerns after 1961. As western films became increasingly introspective, resistant to tired conventions, and aware of problematic worldviews, the cattle drive narrative was no longer a good fit for new film projects.

As the Hatcreek Cattle Company's resident youngster, Newt follows a consistent development as one who will eventually inherit either the ranch, the mantle of leader, or some set of values that will ensure the cowboy legacy's continued reproduction. Newt

begins the narrative digging a well alongside some of the more seasoned, but obviously second-order hands. Call's decision to include him in the raid across the border to steal cattle represents the first in a line of increasing responsibilities Newt and other cattle drive youngsters take on in trail drive narratives. However, Newt's continued life as a fatherless child makes him a subversive character in that he represents an end to the genealogy that trail drives normally represent. He is an example of the unrealistic standards that Call-as-cowboy-god adheres to. Moreover, his denial of any family, being "kin to nobody in this world," drives home the point that this cycle will end, despite his inheritance of Call's horse and gun upon Call's departure for Texas (801).

This moment of effective subversion is further illuminated by Newt's confusion over the morals he would inherit as part of Call's outfit. Newt's ultimate recognition of the flawed logic the group follows is rooted in McMurtry's criticism of the Texas Rangers and the ways his criticism manifests in the novel. In a classic western, the heroic cowboys would set out on the drive with cattle they had purchased or bred over time. Such is the case in *Red River*, where Dunson's bull and Matt's cow build up a herd over several years before they set out to drive them to market. In *Lonesome Dove*, though, the group sets out with a herd built up through morally equivocal raids in Mexico.

McMurtry's second change to the genre is Gus's death and Call's return to Texas. Gus's death follows in a gruesome way that works both as a violent event that should sour readers on the appeal of the cowboy lifestyle. He is shot by Indian arrows in the leg, and, after a long wait, followed by hobbling across the plains then a horseback ride, he loses one leg to amputation and refuses to have the other removed. His refusal leads to his death via blood poisoning and sets forth the final stage of the novel, in which Call will

return him to Texas for burial. Gus is the most admired and relatable character in the novel and so his death is emotionally powerful. Within the context of McMurtry's effort to demystify the West, Gus's death is shocking and represents the potentially fatal risk of the enterprise. Portraying real consequences for grand ventures seems a fitting way to demystify the cowboy legend in the way that McMurtry set out to do. If we consider Gus's death from the perspective of the Freudian reading posited by Sewell, Gus's death represents the end of the ego, the moderating force between id and superego. His death thus leaves only Call as the sole surviving member of the tripartite cowboy god.

Call, as the superego, represents the most unattainable standards and impulses toward tight-gripped control that can be represented in the cowboy figure. I argue that Call's rigidity, while definitely characteristic of cattle drive narratives' trail boss, typifies a set of principles that is both impractical and meant to be unattainable. Instead, much like the superego, Call's principles exist as a mythic ideal.—one that is admirable for its sheer will to accomplish a task, but one that ultimately loses what matters most. In other words, Call is an idealized vision of the cowboy values of hard work, deeply rooted principles, and an adherence to the highest honor. Call's horse is another important symbol of his power. The horse is a storied mare, one that Call claims is the most intelligent he has ever seen. Her intelligence breeds an orneriness that makes her difficult to break and control. These traits earn her the name "the hell bitch," a humorous name that carries important meaning. Just as Call has attained a status above the other characters in the novel, placing him in the pantheon of cowboy figures, the hell bitch serves as his otherworldly steed, a marriage of man and animal of superhuman stature.

Call's problematic dependence on his own honor to the point that he is unable to acknowledge Newt as his son establishes him as being solely committed to his life as a Texas Ranger, and his unrelenting principles elevate him above other characters in the novel as a mythic figure. Call is tragically stuck in a situation in which he either admits to a failing perceived only by him, or admits to the failing viewed by others: his continued denial of Newt. In Call's warped understanding, finally claiming Newt and consequently his own sexuality would undo his personal failing while creating after the fact a long-standing wrong of his denial.

Conclusion: Head 'Em Up, Move 'Em Out

Although McMurtry established himself as an important American novelist with a history of being critical of Texas history, his effort to challenge the cowboy myth was hindered by the conventions of the cattle drive narrative. Trying to pin down an exact cause is difficult, but the methods that have worked in other anti-mythic westerns, such as the use of history, and violence depicted in such a way that it is no longer glamorized, are subsumed by the cattle drive structure. This problematic relationship between McMurtry's goals as a writer and the challenges associated with the genre speaks to the importance of further exploring the connections between the Hollywood film industry and western American literature.

There are many examples of McMurtry turning the semantic and syntactic dials, making subtle changes that would ideally foster more critical understanding of the cowboy legend. But McMurtry's efforts are hamstrung by the specific genre he employs. While cattle drives are fraught with the same challenges of lawlessness in the wilderness

as are other types of westerns, they also acutely represent the will to economic independence—the power that drives the western myth and ties it to capitalist enterprise. As part of an enterprise, cattle drive narratives carry a set of expectations that affirm the value of capitalist ventures on the frontier. Chief among these is the expectation that characters demonstrate an iron will to accomplish what they set out to do. Such persistence in the face of long odds poses a problem for subverting the cowboy legend in the way McMurtry intends. His effort to make semantic changes by depicting a brutal experience on the frontier may give readers pause when they think romantically about the cowboy life. But because cattle drive narratives are fundamentally about boldly taking risks and overcoming outrageous challenges, the subversive nature of *Lonesome Dove*'s brutality is washed out every time the characters overcome another obstacle. Despite these failed efforts at subversion, *Lonesome Dove* remains one of the great western novels. McMurtry's rendering of his characters is one of the richest in western American literature. At the same time, it is useful for understanding how the cattle drive narrative places a semantic and syntactic bind on authors who use the form.

Just as I argue that cattle drive narratives place a particular bind on authors and filmmakers, they also expose the ways that Campbell and Cawelti have argued postwesterns can struggle between the poles of “readable” and “shocking.” Most importantly, I have tried in this chapter to highlight the ways genre conventions in subgenres like the cattle drive narrative pose particular problems and lead to reversion into the threadbare expressions of their genre forebears. This problem complicates the postregional effort to reclaim a regional identity in some way that counters the ways Hollywood has used the region's identity for the western genre. Despite McMurtry's

intent to undermine the cowboy legend, the “readerly pleasures” that make the novel accessible despite its brutality contribute to the preexisting challenge that cattle drives have for subversive narrative interventions. Thus, *Lonesome Dove* has become a novel with recognizable interventions in the genre that should prompt one of Campbell’s “productive dissensuses” between the genre expectations and the shock of reading McMurtry’s interventions. Instead, the novel’s accessibility and reinforcing of enough genre conventions contribute to an overly romantic reception of the novel and lead to McMurtry’s sense that the myth cannot be undone.

This sense of defeat, I argue, is what led McMurtry to continue writing around *Lonesome Dove*. The novel has two prequels and a sequel, *Streets of Laredo*, which was the first novel surrounding *Lonesome Dove* McMurtry wrote. I bring up *Streets of Laredo* because of the striking way McMurtry reimagined the main characters from *Lonesome Dove*. In this novel, Call is an elderly man, still seeking adventure as a bounty hunter. His role protecting the railroad becomes a clear example of the way the cowboy myth serves capitalist interests. Call’s work to track down the killer Joey Garza, a criminal wanted by the railroad more explicitly frames him as a defender of civilization—not for the sake of townspeople, but for the benefit of businessmen who need civilization to ensure their profits. Ironically, Call is quite diminished in this role, but carries on nonetheless. Moreover, Lorena is reimagined as a school marm—a radical move between two conventional roles for women in the western. She is married to Pea Eye, the slow-witted comrade of Gus and Call. Pea Eye, depicted as more of a fool than a hero in *Lonesome Dove* becomes the hero by killing Joey Garza after Call is incapacitated. These brief examples suggest, I argue, McMurtry’s effort to full strip away all vestiges of the myth

and expose its construction. The conspicuous disruption of the characters' continuity draws attention to their fabrication and their role in mythmaking. Just as Busby points out McMurtry's frustration with misreadings of *Lonesome Dove*, I argue that in the sequel, he works to eliminate that possibility.

These ways of reworking what might otherwise be read as a conventional yet well-written western novel put McMurtry in the same postwestern conversation as Cormac McCarthy. McCarthy's magnum opus *Blood Meridian* was also published in 1985, and though the events of these two novels differ, both employ history and extreme violence as methods of problematizing the idealized way many readers view the nineteenth-century West. Although postwesterns take many shapes and offer many types of critique of classical western narratives, in general terms what sets postwesterns apart from classical westerns is a critical reflectiveness that prompts a more thoughtful response to the text (Campbell, *Post-Westerns* 7). McCarthy's work has been included in this critical conversation since *Blood Meridian*'s publication. Interestingly, McMurtry's has not. The disparity between how these two novels were received may be attributable to their differences in literary style. While McCarthy's dense prose lends itself to the kind of critical thought anti-mythic writing requires, McMurtry's novel offers "readerly pleasures, inviting passive reception," which may have the ironic effect of being too accessible to be effective as anti-myth (Willbern 85).

Chapter 5: Wrestling Violent Authority: Cormac McCarthy's Unfilmable Western

"His origins are become as remote as is his destiny and not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his heart is not another kind of clay."

—Blood Meridian

I. Introduction

In 1985, Cormac McCarthy published his fifth novel, *Blood Meridian, or, the Evening Redness in the West*. Having previously published four novels in the Southern Gothic tradition, *Blood Meridian* was a significant development for McCarthy in that he moved the site of his fiction from the South to the Southwest. At the same time McCarthy moved his literary focus to the Mexico border, he moved his home to El Paso, Texas from Knoxville, Tennessee before finally settling in Santa Fe, New Mexico. *Blood Meridian* was the culmination of several years of research McCarthy performed with the help of a MacArthur grant he received in 1981. As part of his research, McCarthy used Samuel Chamberlain's *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue*, which details the historical Glanton gang's exploits as scalp hunters in Northern Mexico in the 1840s. Thus, unsurprisingly, the novel is shockingly violent in several scenes. Moreover, McCarthy renders his literary violence in uncanny prose that moves between the archaic and the sacramental while maintaining an air of objectivity toward his characters' suffering by avoiding the sentimental. Rather than taking a postwestern rhetorical stance that emphasizes characters' experiences in order to elicit sympathy, McCarthy rarely communicates what characters feel—physically or emotionally. Instead, he relies on the ethos of history and horror at the logical appeal of Judge Holden's amoral proselytizing.

I turn to *Blood Meridian* in this chapter for several reasons. The novel's violent vision of the West comes under the scope of my project's effort to further explain the mutually influential relationship between western films and western literature. McCarthy's work as a *regional* author further suits my effort in this dissertation to connect the relationship between film and literature through the way each of these media deals with place. Finally, because McCarthy draws from history in order to structure *Blood Meridian*, the novel foregrounds the impulse in western literature to render authentic representations of the West, even when claims to authenticity inherently raise new complications³². Much of McCarthy's depiction of the landscape reads as strikingly alien, and the cosmic grandeur of the judge's monologues render the text otherworldly, but the core of the narrative follows a historical framework. This confluence of violent subject matter, meticulous literary craft, and regional history allows for my intervention into the robust scholarship on McCarthy and *Blood Meridian*.

Much of what scholars have written about *Blood Meridian* focuses on the facets I've described. McCarthy's stature as a western author has reinvigorated discussions of western literature's relationship to the literary canon. Some regard McCarthy as the greatest living American author, and his position in the canon helped raise the stature of western letters within American literary studies. The same can be said for violence. After McCarthy, literary studies saw a boom in attention to literary violence, especially as it is conceived in canonical literature. Both of these factors played a crucial role in the study

³² Nathaniel Lewis highlights the complexity of authenticity in western literary studies and qualifies that "the struggle for authenticity" is more important in western American literature than an actual authenticity. For more on the complex nature of authenticity in western literature, see his *Unsettling the Literary West*.

of literary depictions of landscape and American imperialism. Simultaneously, *Blood Meridian*'s intertextuality opened up western literature and violent literature to postmodernist scholarship and the dialogic nature of literature. Lee Clark Mitchell quotes Judge Holden when he writes that *Blood Meridian* is a "book made out of books," but I argue that McCarthy's novel is also made out of films. Within these discussions, many scholars mention film violence and the role of Vietnam in the same breath without fully examining the ways film and literature have mutually influenced each other. Paul Sheehan, Sara Spurgeon, and Susan Kollin have all made convincing comparisons between *Blood Meridian* and Vietnam War films, but these comparisons remain limited by the lack of full elaboration of the novel's cinematic qualities, or what implications McCarthy's engagement with film holds for literary studies.

Blood Meridian follows the exploits of a group of killers known as the Glanton Gang as they embark on a scalp-hunting mission in northern Mexico. The group is hired by various Mexican provincials to eradicate the Native American population and clear the way for Mexican settlements. As proof of their work, the group takes scalps, which they turn over to the Mexican officials who employ them. It does not take long for the group to realize they can pass off scalps of Mexican villagers as Native American scalps, and their mission soon devolves into an indiscriminate killing spree tinged with philosophical ramblings from the mysterious Judge Holden, who manipulates the group into increasingly violent actions while consistently arguing that man was born to wage war. Man and war, according to Holden, are history's perfect match. Just as "war was waiting" for man at his creation, man is war's "ultimate practitioner," and the judge does all he can to see to it that the men continue waging war (McCarthy 248). Thus a group of

indiscriminate killers sets out on their quest under heavy philosophical reflections about the nature of violence.

Blood Meridian shares a critical attitude with Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove*, also published in 1985, in its undertaking as a historical novel that questions several myths of the West, such as the myth of the sacred hunter, myths about Indian fighters, and the legacy of Manifest Destiny. Just as McMurtry's novel seeks to remove the lustrous appeal of cowboy culture within western literature, *Blood Meridian* works to correct mistaken assumptions about the West that have emerged from western stories. Both novels are composed of quests that employ violence to demystify the mythic West. McMurtry used the cattle drive narrative and, as I argued in the previous chapter, was sidetracked by the subgenre's romantic components. McCarthy, on the other hand, cuts to the bone of American myths in an effort to fully rearticulate the history of the U.S.-Mexico border. McCarthy's novel contains no romance to undercut his revisionist aims. Instead, there is an excess of brutality that disturbed early reviewers of the novel even as many praised McCarthy's craft. It was with Harold Bloom's analysis of the novel in *How to Read and Why* that *Blood Meridian* vaulted into the upper echelon of American letters and was widely considered a great American novel. But even Bloom, one of McCarthy's most strident champions, confessed that he initially "flinched at the brutality" in McCarthy's novel to the point that he had to try three times to complete it. Ultimately, Bloom concluded that the violence was not gratuitous, but rather "belonged to the Mexico-Texas borderlands in 1849-50," and thus deserved to be depicted in literature (255). Here Bloom has grasped three vital components of McCarthy's novel: violence, history, and place.

Blood Meridian's success gave rise to calls for a film adaptation, and fans of the novel hoped to see its powerful story brought to life on the screen. These hopes were soon dashed, as filmmakers quickly decided that the novel is too brutally violent to be properly adapted to film. Rather than discouraging fans of the novel, filmmakers' retreat from *Blood Meridian*'s adaptation only bolstered the novel's appeal as "the unfilmable western," a label that supports Stephen Prince's assertion of the appeal of violence in regard to film's financial success³³. It would seem that the appeal of violence for films remains true for literature. The mystique of *Blood Meridian*'s violence has only grown because of its "unfilmable" label, and constant rumors of a new director trying to secure the rights to film *Blood Meridian* never fail to pique readers' interest.

This chapter begins with several questions: Given the preponderance of violence in the western genre, what is it that makes *Blood Meridian* unfilmable? And what does the conception of a western as being unfilmable do for the relationship between film and literature as two media vested in imagining the West? In this chapter, I answer these questions by comparing *Blood Meridian*'s intense violence with cinematic violence that preceded the novel and some of what has come after it. Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* has figured heavily in this dissertation, and that remains true for this chapter. *The Wild Bunch*'s reputation as a simultaneously cinematically innovative and ultraviolent film that predates *Blood Meridian*'s publication by almost twenty years is useful for my argument about precisely why *Blood Meridian* would be difficult to film. Other films from the 1970s that I've referred to in this dissertation also help me to examine this issue. I refer to

³³ See Prince, *Classical Film Violence and Savage Cinema*.

later films as examples of what has become possible to depict cinematically since *Blood Meridian*'s publication.

In this chapter, I examine McCarthy's writing in search of textual methods that further complicate the possibility of an accurate film adaptation. In other words, the nature of the violent events McCarthy depicts is not the only challenge to a cinematic adaptation; the weight of McCarthy's linguistic choices is largely responsible for the aesthetic weight the novel carries. A strictly visual depiction of violence would be hollow without the heft of the language that conveys that violence. Rather than merely detailing acts of violence that are too gruesome to film, I argue that *Blood Meridian* wrests control over violent depictions of the West from film by containing that violence in language. Thus, the novel upends western literature's resistance to film violence. This movement of violence away from film and toward literary depictions of the West signals a significant development in the way western literature works within critical regionalism. Rather than guarding against homogenization by violent films, *Blood Meridian* changes the script, opening up new possibilities for imagining the West. There are many facets to consider when examining McCarthy's work and its relationship to the larger cultures of literature and film, but this chapter remains primarily focused on McCarthy's writing as a new source of power within critical regionalist discourse.

II. McCarthy, Genre, and Vietnam

McCarthy's writing has been described by many as cinematic due to its sweep over the landscape combined with a zooming focus on intimate details, especially when depicting violence. It is not surprising that after writing *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy took

on more screenwriting projects.³⁴ Within the discussion of McCarthy's cinematic style, Paul Sheehan has argued that *Blood Meridian* actually shares more in common with film genres other than the western, specifically the war film. Sheehan argues that *Blood Meridian* is actually more engaged with the Vietnam War than with the western genre and that the novel tries to make sense of the United States' role in the conflict. Sheehan's and other scholars' perception that the novel engages with the popular conception of the Vietnam conflict follows a pattern of connecting very violent texts, especially westerns, to the complex and problematic understanding Americans have overall of the war and the U.S.'s role in it. This increasingly common association between westerns and war, especially Vietnam, reinforces the idea that American conceptions of heroism in relation to national myths shifted significantly after the Vietnam War and the troubling revelations about American conduct during the conflict.

In a similar way to *Soldier Blue*, *Blood Meridian*'s depiction of a group of Americans as bloodthirsty scalp hunters may be read as a text engaged with the fallout of the My Lai Massacre. While *Soldier Blue* works as a condemnation of the massacre, *Blood Meridian* is far less engaged in moralizing the tragedy. Certainly, the novel's extreme violence is fertile ground for analyses of violence in western texts, and many scholars have taken that perspective in arguments about the novel. However, I argue that *Blood Meridian* is less about moralizing than presenting the violence simply as a fact of humanity. For McCarthy, moralizing violence involves a philosophical question that is better relegated to secondary status while the more anthropologically scientific

³⁴ McCarthy began *No Country for Old Men* as a screenplay before converting it into novel form, and in 2012 he completed his first original screenplay for *The Counselor*.

perspective takes primacy. David Willbern articulates the sense of authorial distance from a subject under study by drawing a comparison to Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove*. As Willbern argues, "*Lonesome Dove* is a realistic, psychological novel that invites readers into the characters [whereas] *Blood Meridian* is a surrealistic, anthropological work that keeps readers outside the central figures, witnessing instead a saga that resembles epic or myth" (89). Instead of moralizing, the novel takes advantage of the violence as an opportunity to use a vocabulary that describes violence. The broad linguistic possibilities enabled by violent encounters seems to be of more interest for McCarthy than the question of who is justified in violence—a question many other western genre writers have explored. So while *Blood Meridian* does take violence as a topic of exploration, it is less engaged with the cultural reckoning after the Vietnam War. In a more nuanced reading, I argue that *Blood Meridian* is engaged with *texts* about war—including the Vietnam War.

Other scholars have made similar connections between *Blood Meridian* and Vietnam. Susan Kollin and Sara Spurgeon make convincing connections between Holden and Colonel Kurtz in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Both large, bald, and equal parts mad and articulate, Holden and Kurtz share a philosophical approach to violence that places them between civilization and savagery.³⁵ Other western films such as *The Wild Bunch*, *The Professionals*, and *The Magnificent Seven* have also engaged

³⁵ See Spurgeon, *Exploding the Western*, and Kollin, "Genre and the Geographies of Violence: Cormac McCarthy and the Contemporary Western."

with themes emerging from the Vietnam War, which raises the question of how and why the western genre is useful as a vehicle for examining the conflict.³⁶

The simple answer, I argue, is that when creating a text with a critical stance toward Vietnam as an example of American imperialism, it is valuable to keep in mind America's roots in that very endeavor, which began with Manifest Destiny. As a genre devoted to exploring stories inspired by American expansion into the West, the western is ripe with possibility for artistic resonance between the dual purpose of correcting the historical record and critiquing foreign policies. Even when films do not treat Vietnam allegorically, the deeply engrained cultural attitudes stemming from western stories add a layer of significance to films that invoke the western as part of their critique of Vietnam. Moreover, this type of critical reflection prompted by films examining either the events or the cultural attitudes surrounding the Vietnam War work reciprocally. Just as filmmakers expose the myths about heroism so often used in western films in order to critique historical events like Vietnam, those distasteful historical events can shed light on the unexamined, faulty assumptions proliferated by western myths. *The Wild Bunch*, *The Professionals*, and *The Magnificent Seven* all follow small groups of men as they undertake a mission that brings them into conflict with a much larger force, and this consistent scenario echoes the situations many American servicemen faced in Vietnam. But the scenario serves as a crucible from which some higher truth is forged. In *The Magnificent Seven*, the higher truth is that self-sacrifice is a worthy undertaking when done in service of a good cause like protecting innocent villagers from lawless tyranny.

³⁶ The "tourist image" of Mexico portrayed in *The Professionals* was one Peckinpah deliberately sought to undermine in *The Wild Bunch* (Prince, *Classical* 17).

Such a higher truth is difficult to locate in *The Wild Bunch* because the men are all guided by greed. Such selfish motivations echo the kind of nihilistic violence William Beard critiques in spaghetti westerns and which, as I argued in chapter two, Charles Portis draws from when developing the character Rooster Cogburn in *True Grit*. Using violence out of selfish motivation or for nihilistic purposes, Beard writes, causes characters to revert “to a regressive, even primitive, anti-rationalism regarding the nature of transcendent-violent masculinity...with its origins lying in unknowable subconscious mastery rather than the discredited rationalist structures of social harmony” (8). Such a nihilistic approach to violence is borne out in *The Wild Bunch* as the characters are killed off one by one until the remaining five attempt a foolhardy rescue attempt they know is doomed to fail. Despite their knowledge of the impending failure, the bunch proceeds to kill as many of their enemies as possible before facing their own deaths. This thematic breakdown supports my view that the film, much like *Blood Meridian*, is more concerned with carrying out scenes that will produce violence for aesthetic purposes than it is to articulating an altruistic message.

The closest thing to a social benefit made possible by *The Wild Bunch*'s narrative is the establishment of male comradery. Over the course of the film, loyalty emerges as the most sacred characteristic the men can display. When comrades die in *The Wild Bunch*, their deaths are mourned, raged at, and then marked by scenes of raucous laughter. Such scenes occur twice in the film—once near the beginning and again near the end. These post-loss laughing scenes might be taken as a suggestion that the men are laughing in the face of death, having once again escaped with their lives. I would argue that the laughter instead serves to cement a revitalized comradery. After the final

shootout, when Pike and Dutch and all of the other men are killed and only the bounty hunter Deke Thornton and Freddie Sykes, the bunch's support man, have survived, the two join up to support the Mexican revolutionaries. Despite having been on opposing sides of the conflict, Thornton and Sykes share a scene of hearty laughter while flashbacks to the original bunch fade in with their own laughter. Once enemies, the two now trust each other as fellow members in a newly formed group bonded by the shared value of loyalty. These two scenes are surprising because they both follow brutal shootouts in which several members of the bunch are killed. Thus, these scenes oddly punctuate the film's violence by reinforcing the theme of masculine comradery. Most important for this chapter are Peckinpah's visual techniques for depicting violence.

III. *The Wild Bunch* and Innovations in On-Screen Violence

Of the many westerns that incorporate violence, *Blood Meridian* is most often compared to *The Wild Bunch*. However, the scenes of comradery I've just described stand out as a reason to question this comparison. Before examining this comparison, it is worth noting what the two texts have in common. As Prince writes in *Savage Cinema*:

Peckinpah...was not simply taking full advantage of the new alignments within the film industry....The exceptional brutality of *The Wild Bunch* cannot be separated from the social climate in which it was made.... [To] understand the film fully, we must view it synchronically as well as diachronically....For those living through the era, the violence of the Vietnam War and the disintegration of U.S. society—emblemized by the political assassinations, urban riots, antiwar violence, and rising street crime—represented what Sarte would call the

untranscendable horizon of lived experience. It was an inescapable crucible shaping thought and perception. (27)

William Beard likewise credits the social unrest of the 1960s and the sociopolitical complexity of Vietnam in creating the violent films released during the 1960s. According to Beard, “The classical hero’s prosocial stance has been made impossible by the climate of moral chaos, and the sense that the timeless ideological truths...have actually collapsed under the weight of assassinations, Vietnam, social disharmony, Watergate, and all the rest” (6). Thus, for Beard, heroism became cynical in the 1960s—marked by disdain rather than goodwill.

In regard to classical male heroism, Beard writes: “What a *smart* man, a *strong* man, must do is not play by the rules and not be taken in by the charade of official morality.” This kind of heroic figure “appealed to audiences in the 1960s and ‘70s, and was [a] precise symptom of the death of classicism” (7). From Beard’s and Prince’s arguments, it is clear that the Vietnam War and social unrest played an important role in shaping films of the 1960s and ‘70s. If *Blood Meridian* is a novel more concerned with Vietnam than with the western genre, as Sheehan argues, then it too will have been shaped by the social shifts of those decades. Both *Blood Meridian* and *The Wild Bunch* are texts of their time and mark the kind of shifts Prince and Beard describe in the culture that is imagining the myths surrounding western heroism. Thus, the themes surrounding the violence in both *The Wild Bunch* and *Blood Meridian* play an important role in how the violence is depicted and how viewers receive it. At the same time, a close examination of the visual techniques is vital to a full understanding of the impact of *The Wild Bunch*’s continued influence in American cinema throughout 1980s to the point that

McCarthy would engage with that kind of violence and reopen the debate about what is necessary, justifiable, or acceptable in depictions of violence. Understanding both sides of the violent depictions clarifies these texts' shared aesthetics while leaving room for the textual analysis that helps me set *Blood Meridian* apart from cinematic depictions of violence as part of my argument that the novel wrests control of violent images from cinema. While the two do share violent aesthetics and themes related to the Vietnam War, McCarthy's novel represents an important move beyond the cinematic violence *The Wild Bunch* established in the 1960s.

It seems only natural that *Blood Meridian*'s reputation as a novel too violent to film would draw comparisons to *The Wild Bunch*, a film widely regarded as among the most violent ever made. This comparison may not be as fitting as it first appears, though. From the beginning of *The Wild Bunch*, Peckinpah gestures toward the spaghetti westerns that were responsible for pioneering developments in the western genre. This is most obvious in the alternating silhouette/photo real cuts in the opening credits. This calls to mind the opening credits of *Fistful of Dollars*, in which Eastwood and his horse are silhouetted in white against a red background. From this opening sequence, close readers can infer that the film will share a genealogy with Leone's films. Just as Leone used filmmaking techniques that abstracted the violence for the sake of his artistic vision, Peckinpah uses screen violence as an artistic medium, manipulating it to suit his directorial vision.

Although Peckinpah's visual techniques are as innovative as Leone's and serve to heighten the experience of the violence on screen, he opens the film with a visual metaphor: a group of children watching gleefully as a hill of ants they have contained

attacks three or four scorpions the children have presumably dropped into the enclosure. As the ants slowly overwhelm the scorpions and the scorpions writhe in a helpless death, the children laugh and are silhouetted in the same style as Pike's men's introduction. The ants overwhelming the scorpions signals the oncoming violence in which Pike and his men will be overwhelmed by the townspeople and the bounty hunters waiting for them, but some have also argued that the children serve as a metaphor for us, the audience, eagerly awaiting the bloodshed we know is coming.

This visual metaphor makes clear the self-reflexive way Peckinpah uses violence. And while the brutality of his work may serve as an indictment of violence in culture and viewers' fascination with it, his visual techniques remain cinematically innovative and become part of the cinematic toolbox for future filmmakers—as well as playing a crucial role in the film's financial success. While the film became infamous for the level of violence depicted, it was actually toned down from what the original script planned. The early scene in which Pike kills Buck, one of the bunch who was shot in the face by a child wielding a shotgun, is one such scene modified after feedback from the production board. Buck's initial injury was also graphic, but the scene in the arroyo as the bunch escapes was planned to show more of the carnage as a reaction shot of Buck's face. Since *The Wild Bunch* was being filmed as the production code was being revised, not all changes the board requested were made. But Peckinpah did change Buck's death so as to reveal his facial injuries only with “quick, oblique views of his bloodied face” (Prince, *Savage* 23). So too did Peckinpah revise the scene in which Mapache kills Angel by cutting his throat. In the final version, Peckinpah eliminates a camera angle that focused more on the wound and included blood flowing (Prince 23). Despite these “concessions,”

the film aggressively pushed the limit of what had been depicted on screen. Among the visual techniques that have earned Peckinpah recognition over the years, using fast cuts between two violent events, intercutting slow motion, and early use of squibs are three that are most important.

In moments of cinematic action, Peckinpah often uses quick cuts between events that capture the fast-paced action. To use Prince's term, this fast cutting increases the "stylistic amplitude" of Peckinpah's filmmaking. The quick cuts, many of which are less than half a second, allow more violence to be depicted in each minute of a scene while keeping the overall length of the scene relatively short. The film does contain protracted shootouts that carry on for several minutes of screen time, but in sequences where Peckinpah packs in many shots that are quickly cut to other shots, viewers are immersed in the scene to the point that it becomes difficult to conceive all of the violence happening at once. In general, Peckinpah cuts together shootout scenes by marking each short camera shot with the sound of a single gunshot. The rapid succession of camera shots marked by the rapid gunfire overwhelms the audience with visual and auditory information.

This rapid-fire editing technique harkens back to Leone and his cuts to the Rojos' faces as they gun down the Baxters in *Fistful of Dollars*. But in *The Wild Bunch*, the violence is on a more expansive scale. In the opening shootout, for example, the entire town is embroiled in the violence, with each citizen being either a perpetrator or a victim. The townspeople going about their business already make the streets busy, but the march of the temperance union the men use to aid their escape makes the scene even more crowded as the ambush commences. This chaos serves the bunch's purpose,

providing them cover. But it also presents obstacles they must navigate while escaping. This crowded scene makes the jump cuts even more overwhelming than in Leone's film.

Rather than cutting to new faces and occasionally showing victims dying, as Leone does, Peckinpah has many more actors on screen to shoot. Beyond the sheer number of people in the scene, he includes a greater variety of images in the quick cuts. One shot might be a bounty hunter shooting from the roof of a building, and that shot might be followed with a reaction shot of someone taking that bullet and expressing anguish, a format consistent with the shot/counter shot convention of continuity editing. Other counter shots do not follow the conventional pattern, but instead show a horse rearing up to escape the chaos. A different shot might be partially obscured by a woman's dress and reveal little more than the scrambling feet and legs of those caught in the shootout.

Peckinpah takes advantage of audience expectations about gender to intensify the overwhelming sense of violence. Whereas the conventions for western violence usually restricts violence to men, Peckinpah intercuts shots of the bunch using elderly women as body shields, a conspicuous break with the western's adherence to a chivalric code. Moreover, the scene depicts women being shot and used as body shields; some are even killed accidentally. For example, a frightened horse tramples one temperance union woman. Women have been the victims of violence in many western films, but their inclusion in a shootout of this magnitude, along with their suffering, is a notable deviation from general conventions. Even so, these women's violent experiences as victims are intercut with the rest of the shots as if they were a normal part of the convention they subvert.

Peckinpah's innovation is driven by the variety of shots he includes—especially those depicting violence against women—and make the scene important in film history. But aside from these developments, the actual work of the camera is innovative in the way it conveys the violence and keeps audiences off balance. Leone's use of close-ups helped audiences identify (and possibly identify with) the Rojos gang as they kill the Baxters, but just as Peckinpah films a greater variety of subjects, he also uses a greater variety of shots in this scene. Because the scene is chaotic and people are running in all directions, Peckinpah is able to include such a variety of camera shots that his quick cuts are even more effective than a scene shot on a single plane between two points of interest. In other words, the shot/counter shot format is exploded into many different camera angles. Some shots are straight on, while others are shot from the ground, revealing the flurry of feet, hooves, and dust as people scramble for escape. Yet other shots are from a high angle—the bounty hunters' perspective as they spring the ambush. This shot angle diversity adds to the overwhelming experience of this opening scene even more than the chaotic set piece can do on its own.

This fast cutting between a wide variety of shots is a notable innovation Peckinpah developed from the work of earlier directors. However, the technique that critics continue to discuss is his use of slow-motion shots mixed in with the regular, fast-paced action. While the scene is overwhelmingly busy and shot from a multitude of camera angles, the unusual pacing of the violent scenes further disorients viewers as characters are filmed in slow motion as they die. By cutting in slow motion, Peckinpah is able to make the most of his actors' facial expressions and choreography. And the use of slow motion and fast cutting *together* and in juxtaposition intensifies the effect. While the

fast-paced action makes an impact, the slow realization that a character has been shot and is dying lingers just a bit longer, only to be replaced by another quick cut. But these slow motion shots draw our attention to the experience of those being killed in ways we would otherwise miss in the sweep of the action. The grimacing faces and crumpling bodies add intimacy to the frenetic pace of the violence. It also makes the most of new effects, especially squibs. So while the shootout is intensely chaotic and fast-paced, there are glimpses of bullet exit wounds that had rarely been seen in cinema before.³⁷

From all of these techniques, it is clear that *The Wild Bunch* deserves its reputation as an extremely violent film and one that made important innovations in cinematic techniques. Peckinpah's use of quick cuts, various angles and zooms, sound effects, and alternating speeds all work to disorient the viewer even as they witness violence depicted in graphic ways it simply wasn't possible to depict previously. As such, Peckinpah's filmmaking is an interesting marriage of directorial innovation and film technology coming together at the right time. The question remains as to what impact *The Wild Bunch* had on western literature, considering the way he revolutionized depictions of the West. The violence in the film certainly made an indelible mark on film history, and this impact again raises the question: if Peckinpah could break new ground and open cinema up to this level of violence, how then can we maintain that *Blood Meridian* is unfilmable?

The answer lies beyond the mere actions depicted in either text and has more to do with what literature and film are capable of as media. Having closely examined

³⁷ This had been done the previous year in *Bonnie and Clyde*, but it was a very new film effect that earned *The Wild Bunch* more attention.

Peckinpah's techniques for depicting violence using camerawork, sound effects, and makeup in ways that maximize the stylistic amplitude of his violent scenes, I now turn to *Blood Meridian* to explain precisely how McCarthy uses various literary devices, sentence structures, and linguistic choices to create his own literary stylistic amplitude that depicts violence in a way that Peckinpah and other filmmakers simply cannot replicate on film.

IV. *Blood Meridian* and Depictions of Western Violence

Blood Meridian occupies an interesting place in American literary culture. The novel ranges between the mythic and anti-mythic, historical and fictional, metaphysically symbolic and realist, esoteric and popular. These multiple facets working in tension with each other mark *Blood Meridian* as a postmodern text inextricably dialogic or, once again, a “book ‘made out of books’” (Mitchell 260). As an anti-mythic novel, or one that is at best ambivalent about the role of myths, *Blood Meridian* begins by using history as a guiding structure in the novel—especially the historical facts McCarthy drew from Chamberlain's *My Confession*.³⁸ Many scholars have taken McCarthy's use of history as an indication that the novel serves the same function as a revisionist western—setting the historical record straight in an effort to dispel faulty myths about the region. Indeed, Stephen Tatum argues that “what counts in McCarthy's fiction is the necessity of confronting the real, which is to say the world as it is, as it presents itself rudely and mysteriously and contingently to human consciousness” (476). While using the historical

³⁸ See Gareth Cornwell, “Ambivalent National Epic: Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*.”

record is not the same as other western writers' claims to authenticity, the fact that we as readers can read such striking events as those depicted in *Blood Meridian* with the knowledge that they are rooted in actual events takes the novel to a new level, especially when it is rendered as McCarthy does on the page.

Lee Clark Mitchell counters Tatum's claim, instead privileging McCarthy's language as a shaping force on our experience of reality. Mitchell writes, "Yet given the mediated state of our relation to the world, it might be more accurate to invert [Tatum's] claim, countering that the response of human consciousness ...itself transforms 'the real' into one of myriad forms it can take" ("Book Made Out of Books" 277). While it is true that McCarthy uses history in a way that counters the myths about the region by pointing to historical fact rather than idealized narratives, it is important to keep in mind the way that history is articulated, especially when dealing with a writer like McCarthy. Rather than being distinguished by its attention to the real, Mitchell contends that McCarthy's writing contains a "persistent strain...of skepticism about realist verisimilitude" illustrated by the violent scenes of the novel "just as they also offer a testament to the self sustaining capacity of prose style" (265). McCarthy's prose style, as Lydia R. Cooper writes, "displays a temporal immediacy achieved through a high density of active verbs and through parataxis, numerous clauses strung together with 'and' conjunctions [coupled with] a breathless and ruthless pace" (*No More Heroes* 67). Like Mitchell, Cooper argues that McCarthy's "syntactic transformations have a direct impact upon the reader's interpretation of [the] text" (68).

This power to shape described by both Cooper and Mitchell is part of the point of McCarthy's writing. Mitchell continues his argument, writing that "McCarthy takes the

debased facts of history and transforms them through a narrative eye that...registers a rhetorical violence everywhere...[that] enhances ethical and aesthetic possibilities that otherwise seem flattened out” (“Book Made Out of Books” 261). The debate between McCarthy’s attention to realism, as Tatum argues, and the more powerful use of language as a way to put pressure on realism, as Mitchell argues, begs the question of McCarthy’s engagement with the landscape, the real land on which the conflicts in the novel take place, and the wilderness McCarthy toils to describe linguistically. The narrative of *Blood Meridian* is indeed rich with engagements with history and myth, but the landscape plays a vital role in placing the narrative within an epic scope among other great works of literature. The characters and their actions are rendered powerfully in evocative language, but the setting in which they act resonates with meaning, too. Paul Sheehan describes McCarthy’s landscape as part “nature documentary, part science fiction dystopia [that] demonstrates McCarthy’s cinematic vision routinely exceeds the protocols of Western movie aesthetics, making the alien landscape more vivid and strange with each subsequent detail” (184).

McCarthy’s descriptions render the arid landscape otherworldly, imbued with supernatural meaning. For Tatum, the things of the world, such as the “stones and trees and bones of things” through which God speaks (according to the judge) “are sufficient materially unto themselves and [are] repositories of profound mysteries” (476).

McCarthy fashions this mysterious and alien landscape into a “felt ‘world’ said to be both lying in wait and not truly seen by humans as a result of death’s presence” (Tatum 479).

That Tatum and Sheehan both read McCarthy’s landscapes in terms that unsettle it for both the novel’s characters and its readers indicates the way the novel moves beyond the

depictions of violence in western films and highlights the vital contributions landscape makes to western literature. Instead, I argue that McCarthy's narrative and his landscape work to undo the myth, the framework undergirding these scholars' claims.

The landscape in *Blood Meridian* is at once threatening, as Tatum and Sheehan argue, but it is also feminized, according to Sara Spurgeon, as part of the "myth of the sacred hunter" (*Exploding* 20).^{39, 40} This treatment of the land as something to be conquered by man is one of the earliest myths about the wilderness that American literature inherited from European literature. However, in the American reimagining, rather than representing a union between man and nature that facilitates "a parallel renewal of self and community," the hunter myth saw the process of exploiting the wilderness through "heroic male adventure commodified by...proofs of the hunter's heroic stature, and [subsequent] rightful...triumph over his prey" (Spurgeon, *Exploding* 21). For Spurgeon, McCarthy's treatment of nature and Native Americans in *Blood Meridian* constitutes a perversion of this foundational myth into what she calls "a sort of anti-myth of the West, illuminating especially the roots of the modern American relationships between Anglos and non-Anglos and between humans and the natural world" in which "the symbol of divine nature" is reduced to "that which deserves to fall before [man]" (20, 22). Spurgeon's argument about the role of landscape in the myth of the sacred hunter along with the "alien" way Sheehan describes that landscape are perfect examples of the way McCarthy's writing takes on the mythical and uses it to extract

³⁹ See Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land*.

⁴⁰ See Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence*.

something more from the landscape's description though the added pressure of his linguistic choices.

This inversion of the myth of the sacred hunter is important for understanding *Blood Meridian's* anti-mythic work because of how the novel frames the role of humans. McCarthy's frequent references to geological time situate humanity in a small and relatively insignificant period that will eventually dissolve into time. Without a healthy respect for humanity, *Blood Meridian's* reimagining of the myth of the sacred hunter easily turns on humans themselves, thus justifying the graphic examples of violence in the novel. As Spurgeon writes, "Once the prey of the sacred hunter becomes human, imperialism itself becomes a sacred act, mythically justified by the very narrative on which it depends" (*Exploding* 27). Indeed, the way McCarthy investigates American imperialism exposes "the eradication (sometimes undifferentiated in the execution and more so in the results) of both the American bison and the American Indians [as] coeval," writes Jay Ellis. However, Ellis continues, it would be a mistake to suggest that McCarthy's novel is intended to evoke pity" (94). McCarthy's novel instead undoes the myth that props up an inaccurate view of history. Or, as Spurgeon writes, "national identity as the product of myth [cannot] be viewed as essential in any way. Rather identity must be seen as fragile, tenuous, and unfixed as McCarthy suggests all empires of man are" (*Exploding* 40). McCarthy's writing thus exemplifies the unsentimental critique of American imperialism. Without relying on emotional appeals to "pity," as Ellis says, McCarthy renders a world in which white American identities are just as vulnerable as the identities of the non-white others Glanton's men treat with such disdain.

This shift in the national mythology is significant for more than *Blood Meridian's* narrative. Drawing from Slotkin, Spurgeon argues that such significant developments in a national mythology reflect serious changes in the culture that imagined that mythology (*Exploding* 28). In *Persistence of Double Vision*, William Beard points to the rise of nihilistic violence as a marker of a greater cultural shift in the 1960s. Beard writes, "The classical heroes' prosocial stance has been made more or less impossible by the climate of moral chaos, and the sense that the timeless ideological truths...have actually collapsed" (6). I argue that McCarthy follows this shift in the 1960s, which renders changes to the national myth in the way Beard describes, with a second revision of his own. For 1960s cinema, the shift might be described as violence without reason, but for McCarthy in 1985, violence is the reason for creating the world articulated in such poetically ornate yet essentializing language.

Spurgeon's and Ellis's arguments about the nature of McCarthy's revisionism are important for this chapter because they expose the specific ways *Blood Meridian* works as a critical regionalist text. Douglass Reichert Powell imagines region as "not a thing so much as a cultural history, an ongoing rhetorical and poetic construction" in which scholars must be aware that "writing about a region creates and sustains a definition of a region and, in so doing, deliberately defines a region to create new, potentially revelatory perspectives on it" (6, 7). McCarthy's inversion of the myth of the sacred hunter quite literally accomplishes the objectives Powell describes by more fully integrating his work with earlier literary traditions. Just as I argued in chapter three that Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* embraces the fluid nature of cultural practices, McCarthy accomplishes a greater task than eliciting an emotional reaction such as "pity" as Ellis argues by

inverting the myth of the sacred hunter. By laying bare the bones of the myth of the West and rearticulating it in language that evokes new experiences of the region, McCarthy's novel offers a perspective that is engaged with history as well as myth, including the cinematic contributions to both of those perspectives on the region.

Literary scholars writing about McCarthy's cinematic style frequently point to the "legion of horrors" scene in *Blood Meridian* without fully breaking down the ways that scene resembles cinema. I agree that this scene is cinematic, and I argue that the comparison to cinema goes further than merely the broad sweep of action. McCarthy uses a variety of techniques to communicate violence in a way that resembles Peckinpah's visual techniques for increasing the stylistic amplitude of his violent scenes which, in the paragraphs that follow, I will examine in order to more fully explain McCarthy's engagement with film. McCarthy foregrounds the impending threat through physical description of the Native Americans in a way that raises the tension. He also maintains that tension in the description of the natives and the depictions of violence by stretching his sentences out to great length, as Cooper pointed out, with conjunctions. While employing these techniques, McCarthy oscillates between minute details and a broad scope over the field of battle. In such scenes as the legion of horrors, the kid disappears from the action and becomes a mere vehicle through which readers take in the atrocities. The times when the kid ceases to act work cinematically to suspend the action-image just as films of the New Hollywood did.⁴¹ That McCarthy uses these cinematic techniques in his literary depiction of violence exemplifies the ways in which his writing is engaged with cinema at a technical level beyond sharing an interest in violence as subject matter.

⁴¹ See my discussion of the action-image crisis in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

Although McCarthy often relies on the shock of sporadic violence, there are times, as in the legion of horrors scene, in which he takes the time to build tension that adds to the overall effect of his depictions of violence. Here McCarthy continues using conjunctions to stretch sentences out, only instead of describing violence he describes uncanny depictions of the attacking Native Americans that add a sense of weirdness to the scene. As the horde bears down on the men, they are “wardrobed out of a fevered dream with the skin of animals and silk finery and pieces of uniform still tracked with the blood of prior owners” (52). This sentence contains the stark contrast McCarthy frequently uses to make the impending attack seem not only threatening, but strange. That McCarthy writes “skins of animals” rather than “hides” or “buckskins” tellingly draws attention to the “animal” part of the costume in a way that evokes an even more primitive vision of savagery. He then contrasts that primitive vision with “silk finery” that is both odd in such a costume and simultaneously hints at a history of conflict with wealthy and civilized groups who would once have worn such “finery.” McCarthy then confirms that hint regarding conflict in the “pieces of uniform still tracked with blood,” leaving no question that the horde being described is intent on violence and experienced in its practice. All of this information, conveyed in part of one sentence, builds the suspense as the horde charges the men. The narrator describes the horde in the same way the characters experience seeing them—as an overwhelming experience that is difficult to conceive. McCarthy maintains this tension by using conjunctions to add image after image to his sentences in a relentless description that delays the relief of a new sentence.

McCarthy repeats this method for prompting suspense even as he describes the action of his scenes. His sentence breaks in this passage follow an undulation between

zooming in on individual injury and then zooming out to place that one small image within the context of the whole scene. For example, McCarthy describes what the kid sees as he sits reloading his rifle:

A man near him [who] sat with an arrow hanging out of his neck. He was bent slightly as if in prayer. The kid would have reached for the bloody hoop-iron point but then he saw that the man wore another arrow in his breast to the fletching and he was dead. Everywhere there were horses down and men scrambling and he saw a man who sat charging his rifle while blood ran from his ears.... (53)

Here McCarthy moves from the intimate image of the dead man bent as if in prayer to the broad image “everywhere” with fallen horses, only to return to another close image of a man recharging his rifle while bleeding from his ears. This is one example of a technique McCarthy uses multiple times in this passage. This zooming in and out technique further exemplifies McCarthy’s use of the cinematic in his description of this violent scene. The chaos he renders on the page resembles the chaotic opening shootout in *The Wild Bunch* as the townspeople are killed and viewers are so overwhelmed by violent imagery that they find it difficult take it all in.

Beyond these techniques for increasing suspense and zooming in and away from action, McCarthy follows the New Hollywood trend of the action-image crisis Christian Keathley describes in “Trapped in the Affection Image: Hollywood’s Post-traumatic Cycle (1970-1976).”⁴² Rather than following the traditional cinematic three-shot

⁴² For more on the action-image crisis, or the post-traumatic cycle, see Keathley, pp 293-296.

perception, affection, action sequence, New Hollywood directors in the early seventies would stop short of the action-image, leaving characters to observe and be affected by images or events, but not able to act. By reformulating the sequence this way, New Hollywood directors conveyed protagonists' powerlessness. McCarthy does something similar in this scene as he presents image after image of violence in both broad and narrow scopes. In some sentences, such as when he wishes to help the man with an arrow in his neck, the kid intends to help only to find that it would be useless. In others, the kid's experiences are narrated in such a way that omits the kid's experience, locking him to the mere ability to perceive the hostility. For example, in one sentence in the legion of horrors passage, the kid witnesses men being scalped. Then "a little whitefaced pony with one clouded eye leaned out of the murk and snapped at him like a dog and was gone" (53). Here the scene is simultaneously clear enough to see the scalping but "murky" enough to obscure a horse to the point that it is only an instant threat and then gone again. Consequently, the kid cannot react and, indeed, any reaction he might have is not described. Instead, the reader experiences the violent images without having them mediated by the kid's reaction.

I mention these scenes to show that McCarthy uses visual techniques similar to those used by filmmakers. Thus, the frequent comparison to Peckinpah is more apt considering the similar visual techniques he and McCarthy use when depicting violent scenes. All of this would support the argument that *Blood Meridian* could be made into a film were the problem posed by scenes like the legion of horrors passage. But I would add the caveat that some images of violence might remain too controversial for audiences. The massacre scene I've drawn from contains images, such as the sodomy of

corpses, which might only be suggested in a film, rather than explicitly depicted. Images from other scenes, such as the tree decorated with dead infants or the bag of puppies the judge throws into the river, may prove too shocking for cinema.⁴³ However, over time, cinematic depictions of violence push the boundaries, so it is possible that the violent images McCarthy describes will at some point become acceptable to modern audiences and critics.

Even if the kind of violence McCarthy writes about could be made acceptable to modern audiences, the film would face the added challenge of its prestige potentially coming into conflict with the perceived lowbrow nature of ultraviolent films. That problem is an important one, because it indicates the more serious underlying issue: what makes McCarthy's novel memorable is not only the violence, but the remarkable language used to deliver that violence. The legion of horrors are "wardrobed out of a fevered dream," a description that is somewhat vague, but nonetheless understandable, but they are also "clad in costumes attic or biblical" which is less clear. Passages such as this one raise questions for readers rather than merely conveying information. Left wondering what a "biblical" costume might look like, and trying to discern the use of "attic" in reference to ancient Athens, McCarthy's readers are required to either look up the words they find unfamiliar or read over them, taking in only the words' phonological aesthetics.

⁴³ On the other hand, the rise of "gore porn" films such as the *Saw* (2004-2010) franchise and *Human Centipede* (2009) may have made such depictions possible. Moreover, the kind of ultra-primitive savagery depicted in the legion of horrors scene shares some characteristics with scenes of mutilation in *Bone Tomahawk* (2015).

Writing of McCarthy's prose style, David Willbern argues that the novel "demand[s] active participation" (85). This impression made by McCarthy's language is what cannot be filmed, and it would be a precious loss in any cinematic adaptation of the novel. Because the power of the language is so vital to the novel's impact, I argue that McCarthy wrests control over violent depictions from cinema. This kind of violent reclamation is oddly fitting with McCarthy's postwestern task of exposing western literature's history of obscuring the violence that drives it. This new perspective opens up new possibilities for understanding the West, but I will stop short of claiming that these new possibilities amount to a new hope for the region. In fact, McCarthy's depictions of morality among his characters leaves little hope for anything but a brutally honest look at a region fraught with violence.

V. Morality in *Blood Meridian*

Just as *Blood Meridian* upends the myth of the West in a way that is not meant to evoke pity, McCarthy imagines his characters in such a way that makes it difficult to discern what the characters think about their own actions. Cooper has argued that *Blood Meridian* is marked by a significant absence of interiority that differs from McCarthy's earlier work.⁴⁴ Instead, the "omniscient narrator remains so far removed from the individual characters that there are never shifts into the perspective of any single character" (*No More Heroes* 66). While it is true that *Blood Meridian* does not provide interiority by revealing the inner dialogue of its characters, I find McCarthy's focus on

⁴⁴ In contrast to the kid's lack of interiority, "Suttree makes specific and vital use of the protagonist's internal world—his thoughts, intentions, fears, and despair" (Cooper, *No More Heroes* 55).

the characters' action telling enough at times to counter Cooper's claim that "the presence or absence of penitence must play a significant role in determining readers' interpretations" (*No More Heroes* 55).

That the kid "breaks with the body" committed to violence he previously joined, and begins carrying a Bible despite not being able to read, speaks to some level of penitence. In fact, the lack of interiority expands, at times to constitute anonymity within the group. As Erik Hage writes, "Because the kid fades into the background and becomes anonymous at times, the reader is not sure to what extent the protagonist participates in the more atrocious violent episodes" (48). This absence from the depictions of violence raises the question of how much the kid needs to repent in the first place. Although the kid lives several years before seeing the judge again, his turn away from violence remains sufficient cause for the judge to murder him at the end of the novel. However, I will concede that the kid's death after "breaking from the body" quashes any sense of hope for redemption teased by his rejection of the judge and the remaining scalp hunters. That lack of hope may be as significant in reimagining the myth of the West as a lack of penitence, but it is tellingly different.

The kid's lack of interiority is an issue that McCarthy's narration in *Blood Meridian* shares with cinematic storytelling. While some of the character's internal motivations can be revealed either through voice-over or flashback, in general articulating the interiority of laconic western heroes is left to the action on screen. As such, I read the kid's abandonment and refusal to kill the judge, or his wanderings with a Bible at hand, as a moral turn, albeit a hopeless one in the end. In *Blood Meridian*, two

passages in the final pages suggest that the kid makes a turn toward a morality that is significant enough to redeem him from the violent path he led until that point.

The first of these passages communicates his rejection of the judge after Holden's final attempt to argue that their actions were inevitable, that they were somehow predetermined to carry out the violent deeds:

You, said the kid. It was you.

It was never me, said the judge. Listen to me. Do you think Glanton was a fool?

Don't you know he'd have killed you?

Lies, the kid said. Lies by god lies.

Think again said the judge.

He never took part in your craziness. (McCarthy 307)

This scene demonstrates the lack of interiority McCarthy grants his characters in *Blood Meridian*. In this scene, the kid obviously comes to an important realization about the judge and the time they have spent together, but the scene is rendered in dialogue only. Even so, that the kid blames the judge, using the accusatory "you" repeatedly and identifying the judge's widespread use of violence as "craziness," indicates that he has changed in a significant way. If the kid did not feel some regret about what he did under the judge's guidance, he would behave differently, even if we, as readers, are not granted access to his thoughts.

The second revealing scene about the kid comes near the end of the novel, when he believes he has found an elderly woman hiding under a rock outcropping in the desert. "He spoke to her in a low voice...He told her he would convey her to a safe place, some party of her countrypeople who would welcome her and that she should join them for he

could not leave her in this place or she would surely die.” The kid’s concern that if he leaves the woman she will die, and his reassuring promise to “convey her to a safe place,” paint a picture of the kid as a new and more kindhearted person. Some might read the revelation that the old woman is dead and “had been dead in that place for years” leaving her body “light and ridged” as a sign of the pointlessness of the kid’s efforts at kindness (315). Nonetheless, the kid tries to help the woman. That his effort is wasted does not change the fact that he makes it. He would, no doubt, appear more heroic if he were to save her from a lonely death, but his actions indicate altruism, and that is what matters most in the argument over the kid’s morality—not his instrumentality.

These two passages focus primarily on what the kid says without offering any internal dialogue or shifting the narrative perspective to his, but both reveal the kid’s significant character development from the beginning of the novel, and his rejection of the judge coupled with his offer of aid to the old woman constitute a morality that should temper arguments claiming *Blood Meridian*’s unrepentant depravity. As such, acknowledging even a minor moral turn for the kid allows more room for my argument that *Blood Meridian*, while brutal, does open up new possibilities for understanding the West. *Blood Meridian* is more than a novel that brings forth the ugly truth; for it is an unflinching look at the ugliness rendered in beautiful prose.

VI. Conclusion: The Barrel Organ Groaning

McCarthy’s stylistic choices set his novel apart from films like *The Wild Bunch*. As violent as the film is, as violent as more recent films have become, and despite the developments in film technology that enable graphic depictions of violence on par with

what McCarthy describes, a visual adaptation simply could not carry the language and narrative context that make the novel so memorable. In this way, McCarthy has taken violence as a subject and wrested authority over it from film, reclaiming it for literature. This is not necessarily a mantle that literature wants, needs, or has a claim to, but it does alter the dynamic between film and literature in a way that reformulates the impact of cinematic violence on literature and begins the process of ending a literary resistance to cinematic homogenization through violence. The ongoing discussion of violence and its effects on western literature has ultimately led to ultraviolence being incorporated into western literature.

One of the reasons postwesterns have risen out of the western genre is that the genre was not an honest one. As the myth of regeneration through violence spawned more myths about the righteousness of European settlement in the Americas and Americans' westward expansion, the western, the genre most directly engaged with these stories, privileged white settlement over native and, arguably Mexican, rights to the land. As the U.S. and Mexico both grew as countries, deeper racial divides opened up between the two countries and, as McCarthy writes, both engaged in atrocities against Native Americans. Rather than invoking guilt for American atrocities, as *Soldier Blue* does, or alleviating the American conscience by sharing guilt over treatment of Native Americans with Mexico, *Blood Meridian* unsentimentally exposes the violent nature of conquest—not an imagined conquest depicted on film in such a way that glorifies a nationalistic impulse as classical westerns did, nor a conquest over inhabitants of a vacant landscape present there only as a set piece in a formalist reimagining of the region that abstracts the

imagined West from the real region where people live as they interact with and contribute to a complex culture.

This kind of brutal literary honesty works as a corrective for the western genre, which failed to fully reckon with the cost of American conquest. At the same time, by avoiding a sense of guilt over the events and presenting them alongside the tectonic movements of the earth, *Blood Meridian* leaves open the potential of an even more unnerving possibility than the violence he so painstakingly describes. If violent conquest is simply part of human nature, and not something that, in the pervue of postwestern studies, Americans hold exclusive rights to the need for historical rectification, then Americans are just as vulnerable to the same atrocities they have carried out in the long view of history. Such reasoning is a grim view to take of a region so vibrant with possibility. However, McCarthy's unsentimental use of history allows for a reckoning that would incorporate the West's past into the way westerners conceive of their homes and offers a resolution to the problems caused by cinema's idealized vision of the region that has been manipulated in order to generate interest at the box office. Such a reckoning—by continuing to acknowledge history and by regaining control over violent depictions of the West—only strengthens the region's identity through self-awareness and the vitality of using the region's voice to articulate the West's identity to the world rather than having an identity imposed upon the region based on what film companies believe will grab the world's attention.

In this dissertation, I've covered the use of local sensibilities to resist self-serving violence, reimagining native myths in order to resist disempowering depictions of Native Americans, and the ways western genre conventions have inhibited western literature

from effectively subverting the western myth. Each of these topics has exposed a facet of the relationship between film and literature as both media imagine the West in different ways. The difference between the ways Hollywood films have imagined the West and the ways western writers have resisted the cinematic vision of the West reveals the complex ways that the West functions as what Edward Soja calls a thirdspace—a region that is both real and imagined. My effort in this dissertation has been to expose the competing visions of the West in film and literature. By exposing the tension between these two media, I have tried to highlight the ways that they influence each other, or behave rhizomatically, as Neil Campbell writes. The lines of flight between cinematic developments in depicting violence in films and the western literary impulse to offer competing visions of the West that more accurately represent the region and its inhabitants.

Although I have argued in favor of a western literary resistance to the way films of the 1960s depicted the West, postwestern films are not, in fact, entirely wrong in their depictions of the West. In the context of this dissertation, postwesterns' use of violence has largely met with condemnation for inaccurately depicting the West as a region overrun with violence. While that cinematic trend has contributed to a popular misconception of the region, drawing attention to violence has granted the West the benefit of exposing its complicated violent history. Despite sensationalizing that violence to the point that it appeared to be the most salient feature of the region and perpetuating that depiction in order to sell movie tickets, there is some merit in drawing attention to such a violent history so that it can be reflected upon and reconsidered by westerners who continue to benefit from the violence of conquest.

I have concluded this dissertation with an analysis of ultraviolent literature, something that in the first few chapters might have seemed to be an oxymoron given the rhetorical position from which I deployed examples of literary resistance to ultraviolence. *Blood Meridian* signals the changing relationship between film and literature. Rather than answering the question of whether or not a changing conception of violence was changing the popular conception of the West that inspired western writers to offer a corrective, *Blood Meridian* collapses the discussion into one that acknowledges the violent historical record, uses realism and history in such a way that carries on the western struggle with authenticity and moves the discussion beyond the false binary of acceptable conquest in the cause of nationalism and a faulty assumption that the United States exclusively practice genocide on Native Americans. Acknowledging the violent history that enabled the western culture writers were defending reframes the discussion in a productive way.

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