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The myth of the American frontier developed from exaggerated or fictionalized performances and literature about the West, and violence became a celebrated and traditional element of the metanarrative of the West. Expectations for violence in the Western novel continue as the metanarrative of the West enables a violent national mythology and identity. Western literature from Louis L'Amour, Cormac McCarthy and Larry McMurtry carries on American origin myths of violence as they pit evil Indians against civilization-seeking whites. This myth of a demonized and 'othered' Indian distinctly separates a national imagined community by race. Such selective and biased myths of the American West are unhealthy. It is important to interrogate the metanarrative (myths) of the West in order to see their social construction and to counterbalance those stories with different modes of understanding that promote healthier ecopsychological attitudes towards the environment and humanity.

DECONSTRUCTING THE MYTH OF THE AMERICAN WEST: McMURTRY, VIOLENCE, ECOPSYCHOLOGY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

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Table of Contents

Introduction – The Metanarrative of the American Frontier

The European race to conquer, settle, and expand into the New World sparked a public interest in the adventures and violence associated with *savage* yet *virgin* American lands. The myth of the American frontier begins with the journal accounts and media hype of naval exploration as early as the 15th century. From the post-Gutenberg pages of history, the adventure/quest stories of the American frontier captured the attention of a world-wide audience. People who had never even seen America formed an ideal, and an ideology, about the place. Even before the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776, an identity of the New World was projected through various print media. Advanced printing presses and rising literacy enabled mass production of written entertainment and print culture, including accounts and stories of New World exploration. James Fenimore Cooper's The Leatherstocking Tales, published between 1827 and 1841, are recognized by many as the quintessence of a savage-ridden America struggling toward civilization. This theme seems to be the basis of the popular Western genre and has become a thread that unites a metanarrative of the myth of the American frontier.

The metanarrative of the west (the cumulative story) began during the 19th century because of an affordable print and entertainment culture. The dime novel Western, a catch-all term for several forms of late 19th century and early 20th century U.S. popular fiction, enabled the myth-making of the American frontier. Stories featured cowboy heroes battling savage and threatening Indians, daring rescues of endangered female beauties, and the quest to establish civilization. A public fascination with the 'wild' America continued in other modes of entertainment like the World's Fair and theatre performances. Between 1872 and 1917 *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* show traveled the

world as a living spectacle of frontier life. Paul Fees, curator at the Buffalo Bill Historical Society in Cody, Wyoming, has commented that "the myth of the West was first of all a myth of accomplishment shared by all Americans, hence a myth of unity."[1] Buffalo Bill Cody's show enacted this myth in performances from California to New York, and from London to Rome. Many historians and Buffalo Bill aficionados would agree that he did not merely represent the west, but he became the west, in his own mind and in the minds of others. Cody's portrayal of his beloved region is nonetheless a troubling one.

> The presentation of the west in the features of the show and in the proliferation of marketing and advertising surrounding it demonstrates difficulties in accurately rendering the history and culture of the west, sorting out the complicated relationship between the settlers and the Native Americans, and making distinctions between the fact and fiction of Buffalo Bill himself. (Smith, 12)

Cody's legacy is his presentation and advertisement of the American frontier. Yet, a close look at his Wild West show, especially as it was a key player in the myth-making of America, reveals it is well-advertised fiction – a show of demonized Indians that proliferates violence. While Buffalo Bill's rendition of the west does present some historical reality, its exaggeration of frontier violence leads viewers to expect and demand such violence in the narrative of the west.

Even with a base component of violence, a romanticized version of the Western grew in the 20th century with Owen Wister's The Virginian, Zane Grey's Riders of the Purple Sage, and a mass production of novels from Louis L'Amour. Television and film also contributed to the revival of the Western and were romanticized insofar as they created a rose-tinted and idealized reflection of societal expectations – the white male hero always wins in the end as he conquers and saves weak females and/or Indians. Iconic actors like John Wayne and Clint Eastwood embodied the stereotypical and

romanticized Western hero. Both film and literature feature a gendered storyline. Unfaltering white men favoring solitude and freedom campaign for justice and civilization; they face dangerous Indians, survive nature's forces with ingenuity, engage in violence, save the weak and vulnerable female, and provide order and stability. This popular version of the Western grew from societal expectations of a pre-civil rights America – when the 'other' was always the enemy and the female was restricted to the home. As the Western reflected the popular ideology of America, a national identity in that ideology was formed. Reader and viewer beliefs were reassured with the repeated concepts of heroic white males and successful democracy.

Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West startled the world of Western literature in 1985 with its graphic and relentless presentation of frontier violence. McCarthy continued the Western's tradition of a storyline that enables civilization and democracy, yet violence is stressed as the only means to that end. Some praise McCarthy's work as it shows regeneration through violence – the story of necessary evil that enabled the west to be won. Yet, it is this approach toward historical violence – and the American myth rooted in violence – that justifies an unhealthy contemporary support of violence.

Working from the premise that popular perceptions and reproductions of the American frontier are socially constructed representations that embody a national mythology and identity, it is necessary to understand that the American myth of itself may not be accurate or healthy. It is important to interrogate the metanarrative (myths) of the West in order to see their social construction and to counterbalance those stories with

different modes of understanding that promote healthier attitudes towards the environment and humanity.

Larry McMurtry, a prominent author of Western fiction has taken an active role to challenge the traditional myth of the American frontier. The arch of McMurtry's writing shows a continued questioning of traditional Western myths with independent and strong female and Indian protagonists, fallible white men and new plots and perspectives of frontier life. His 1985 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel Lonesome Dove put him on the map of canonical Western writers. While it does include some traditional elements of the Western, the Lonesome Dove series provides a contemporary readjustment of the American origin myth as it resituates western heroes and adds complexity to women and Indians in the frontier. McMurtry's recent tetralogy, The Berrybender Narratives, published 2002-2003, continues to reinvent the frontier story, especially since it seems to serve as a revision of The Leatherstocking Tales. The frontiersman half-breed Sin Killer is confronted with encroaching civilization and falls in love with the English beauty Tasmin Berrybender. McMurtry challenges the traditional Natty Bumppo plot by making Tasmin the powerful protagonist. Tasmin's character is sexually aware and intelligent yet aggressively violent. Her physical and verbal rage intimidates all other characters and enables her to gain her every whim. While McMurtry seems to incorporate a new spin to the traditional metanarrative of the West by changing the feminine role, he cannot escape or exclude violence.

Even though McMurtry provides a revision with strong female and Indian characters, the Western continues to perpetuate an exaggerated violence in the frontier. While his gender changes to the traditional Western story may simply be a response to

changing societal expectations – the American woman is now a physically powerful and self-sustaining part of the workforce and intellectual community – McMurtry continues to fulfill the metanarrative expectation of violence.

The problem with such perpetuation of violence through myth and metanarrative is its ability to desensitize a vulnerable public. Through Western literature (and film) Americans understand the origin of the nation to be deeply rooted in violence which may serve to justify continued national violence. McMurtry makes good strides to provide a holistic and untold perspective of race and gender in the American frontier; however, his realistic writing style includes incredibly graphic presentations of violence.

This thesis will examine the myth of the west with a specific interest in representations of violence. I will consider McMurtry's recent inclusion of graphic violence and torture scenes as a response to a social construction and desire for such violence. I will briefly outline the psychological craving for and social construction of such narratives with ecopsychology theories. I will also preview the social creation (and re-creation) of myths and the literary responses to a social psyche from a national consciousness (and unconscious) that asserts a dangerous national identity because of its root in violence. I will be drawing on Theodore Roszak's Voice of the Earth, Rinda West's Out of the Shadow, Carl Jung's Memories, Dreams, Reflections, Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities, Ernest Gellner's Nations and Nationalism, and Homi Bhabha's 'Nation and Narration', as primary theoretical sources to show the accepted violence in the metanarrative of the American frontier and the potential negative impact it may have. The overarching goal of my thesis is to confront Western stories of violence

and understand their socio-historical place in order to approach an ecopsychological renewal and healthier, myth-conscious America.

Chapter One – The Mythmaking of the West: Manifest Destiny, Authenticity, and Social Constructions of the American Frontier

Myth Creation and the American Origin Story

The frontier myth is significant in American history because it is both shaped by a social understanding of our past while acting as a shaping force of our future. Richard Slotkin's Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America addresses the impact the myth of the American frontier has had on the development of America. He begins by explaining that "the myth of the frontier is the triumph of civilization over savagery" (15). He also points out that "the work of myth-making exists for the culture it serves, and we therefore speak of it as if it were somehow the property or production of the culture as a whole. But the actual work of making and transmitting myths is done by particular classes of persons" (8). White America, the expansionists, politicians and supporters of Northeastern progressivism, were the myth-makers during the era of Western migration. Their myths created an ostensible national support of civilization over savagery and enabled further expansion into Western America.

Slotkin's work of examining the Frontier myth presents a premise of myth and its function that equally applies to the study in this thesis. "Myths are stories drawn from a society's history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society's ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness" (5). Thus, the myth-makers set in motion a national ideology and morale. Slotkin further defines the essential terms "ideology," "myth," and "genre": which will be relevant later in my investigation.

> The concepts of ideology, myth, and genre highlight three different but closely related aspects of the culture-making process. Ideology is the basic system of concepts, beliefs, and values that defines a society's history. As used by anthropologists and social historians the term refers to the

> dominant conceptual categories that inform the society's words and practices, abstracted by analysis as a set of propositions, formulas, or rules. In any given society certain expressive forms or genres –like the credo, sermon, or manifesto – provide ways of articulating ideological concepts directly and explicitly. But most of the time the assumptions of value inherent in a culture's ideology are tacitly accepted as 'givens.' Their meaning is expressed in the symbolic narrative of mythology and is transmitted to the society through various genres of mythic expression. (5)

The stories and myths of the American frontier, as expressed in the Western genre of literature, are a means through which American values are expressed and taught. The fight of good vs. evil, savagery vs. civilization, acceptance of change, respect for elders, ingenuity and bravery have all found a home in the Western novel. Yet, the mythic aspects of a Western story seem to be descriptions of open spaces or wilderness lands and the people who struggle to survive in them without established civilization. The human spirit for good deeds and perseverance is attractively epitomized in many Western fiction stories; the wide audience for such stories is likely due to the non-existence of frontier areas. The essayist Frank Norris summarizes his sadness of a degenerated American West in his 1986 essay "The Frontier Gone at Last":

> Lament it though we may, the frontier is gone, an idiosyncrasy that has been with us for thousands of years, the one peculiar picturesqueness of our life is no more. We may keep alive for many years yet the idea of a Wild West, but the hired cowboys and paid rough riders of Mr. William Cody are more like the 'real thing' than can be found today in Arizona, New Mexico or Idaho. The frontier has become conscious of itself, acts the part for the Eastern visitor; and this self-consciousness is a sign, surer than all others, of the decadence of a type, the passing of an epoch.[2]

The nation's understanding of the West exists as a frontier myth, as a creation by a specific class of privileged white America. Norris's allusion to the frontier's consciousness is not far from fact. Ideas about the American west and unconquered lands seem to generate strength and significance only when considered in the broader context

of their current non-existence; perceptions and ideas of the Frontier, in this sense, do have a self-consciousness that propels the existence of their metanarrative.

A Definition of Frontier: Turner's Thesis and an Imagined Frontier

In 1893, historian Fredrick Jackson Turner presented his thesis, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," at the Chicago World's Fair. According to Turner, "American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the great west. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development" (par. 1). While Turner's thesis acknowledges continuing American development of "free" land, he quotes the 1890 Superintendent of the Census to show the nation's official stance toward a disappeared frontier.

> Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line...it cannot, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports.

Turner further points out that the frontier, as it was pre-1890s, was considered a "line between settled and Indian lands" and explains that a Census consideration of a fully settled America leaves no room for "free" and wild lands or people. He also points out that the process of becoming a fully civilized America leaves little room for original landscapes and people to maintain in unchanged state.

> The peculiarity of American institutions is the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people, the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life. (par. 2)