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# Wallace Stegner's Wolf Willow and 1960s Critical Essays: Renarrativizing Western American Literature for the West and for America

Ruth Newberry

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WALLACE STEGNER'S WOLF WILLOW AND 1960S CRITICAL ESSAYS:  
RENARRATIVIZING WESTERN AMERICAN LITERATURE  
FOR THE WEST AND FOR AMERICA

A Dissertation

Submitted to McAnulty Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Ruth Newberry

December 2011

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Ruth Newberry

2011

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FOR THE WEST AND FOR AMERICA

By

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## ABSTRACT

WALLACE STEGNER'S WOLF WILLOW AND 1960S CRITICAL ESSAYS:  
RENARRATIVIZING WESTERN AMERICAN LITERATURE  
FOR THE WEST AND FOR AMERICA

By

Ruth Newberry

December 2011

Dissertation Supervised by Dr. Linda Arbaugh Kinnahan

As writer, essayist, environmentalist, and westerner, Wallace Earle Stegner (1909-1993) confronted what he understood to be an imagined and literal American West constructed by myths of frontier conquest, pioneer settlement in and transformation of the western landscape, and cowboy exceptionalism that erased an historical legacy of hardship, failure, and destruction of land and people, and also a West constructed by Eastern publishers and literary critics who diminished western American literature to local color writing. In Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier (1962), Stegner uses fiction, history, and memoir to engage the mythic West's silencing of his family's failed homesteading experiences in a specific western place and the relationship of his childhood and adult selves to this place, to its history, to experiences there, and to the cultural myths that characterize his western past and present and position the West as a symbolic container of hope, opportunity, and reward for the

individual and America. In an historicized western place and from childhood experiences, Stegner locates an Other western narrative and an authentic western voice that disrupts the monomythic voice and values that are out of touch not only with a modern, multicultural, urban West but also with a rural West.

Coming after Wolf Willow, a series of essays—“Born a Square” (1964), “On the Writing of History” (1965), and “History, Myth, and the Western Writer” (1967), reprinted in the popular The Sound of Mountain Water (1969)—present Stegner’s new theory of western American literature that re-visions the West’s literary heritage and reclaims the western story, what he called “another kind of western story-telling” that engages both the present and the past Wests, acknowledges past crimes against racial others and against western lands, promotes a sense of hope for a native western art, and raises America’s consciousness of the personal, environmental, and cultural costs of adhering to the metanarratives of the culturally dominant mythic West of formula fiction, Hollywood films, and television series of the 1940s through 1960s. While Stegner scholars have examined the essays independently and deem them important to Stegner’s works and to the trajectory of western American literature in the 1970s forward, no study has undertaken an extended analysis of these three essays in relation to Wolf Willow to argue, as this dissertation does, that Wolf Willow contains in germinal form the foundation of Stegner’s realist, place-based, and historicist theoretical construct for western American literature he advocated for in the 1960’s essays.

## DEDICATION

For their constant and unwavering encouragement to me to complete what became a very long journey, I dedicate this work to ...

My children, Laurel Anne and Darren McCaslin, who waited patiently for two decades for this journey to end and were always and foremost my inspiration;

My husband, Frederick, a respected and well-versed scholar of American literature who refused respectfully to interject his insights, understood the struggles of the journey, and helped me most by keeping our house and home intact;

My parents, Don and Shirley, and my siblings, Linda and Glenn, who also have waited patiently;

My late grandmother, Doranna, who, along with my mother, told me the stories about family in western places that nurtured my love for the West and for the value of story;

My committee chair, Linda, who never gave up hope even when life and job put this project into long, silent spells;

My good friends and colleagues Jacquelyn, Sheryl, Melissa, Eileen, and Joannie whose encouragement never flagged; and

My very dear and close friend, mentor, and “dissertation compatriot,” Roberta, who listened to unformed ideas, offered endless support and wisdom, and never let me waver from the goal.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Like Wallace Stegner, I too am a westerner and I love the West. My West is not Wallace Stegner's Rocky Mountains of Utah, the Great Plains of Montana and Saskatchewan, or the Palo Alto foothills of California where he built his home. My West is the sagebrush filled mountains and deserts of northern Nevada, the scenic mountains of fir and pine trees and lakes in central Oregon, and the rainy, river-filled Willamette Valley of Oregon—the places of my childhood in the 1960s and 1970s. Like Stegner's West of the 1960s, my West also has a strong component of myth and nostalgia. And, like Stegner's, it has been populated by stories; in my case, the "stories" of my mother, Shirley Ruth Rizzi Woolery, and my grandmother, Doranna Ellen Womack Rizzi. I grew up listening to their richly detailed and interwoven narratives about family, neighbors, and acquaintances who homesteaded and ranched in the "wilderness" areas of northern Nevada from the 1880s to the present. Through their stories, I learned about the endless obligations of ranch work and the toll it takes on the bodies and souls of men and women, the insularity and narrow-mindedness such a life can breed, as well as the fun and raucousness of brandings and dances and the freedom that comes with wide-open spaces. A pragmatic meliorism, often coated by humor and vivid description, inundated their narratives to reveal their awareness of the constrictive effects of the mythic West's gender roles; the fierce and often times destructive and exclusionary nature of its silent, independent hero motif; the lingering tensions between the native Indians and the intruding white settlers; and an anti-intellectualism inherent in the mythic West's promotion of self-reliance and individualism. Whether the story-teller is my



grandmother, my mother, or Wallace Stegner, I am intrigued by how these western stories connect place and people, past and present, history and myth, and the values by which people and communities live.

In 1992 I began my journey toward a doctorate in English with a specialization in modern American literature. I never dreamt the journey would not conclude until December 2011. Nor did I realize that I would encounter, as I worked on this project and simultaneously built a career not in teaching as I had originally planned but in the application of technology in teaching and learning, that so many wonderful and encouraging people would sustain me on this mostly solitary journey. Nor did I imagine this project would accompany me to family gatherings in Oregon, Colorado, and Nevada; to conferences across the country; and overseas in Galway, Rome, and Capri! Now that it has ended, I have many people to thank for my success and from whom I have drawn inspiration, strength, and determination to bring this journey to its appropriate close.

First and foremost, I must thank my committee members, Dr. Linda Kinnahan, this dissertation's director, Dr. Magali Cornier Michael, first reader, and Dr. Michael C. Cahall, second reader. Without their patience and on-going encouragement, especially during the long periods between chapter drafts, this dissertation may never have been completed. To Michael, thank you for your insightful comments and gentle reminders that not everyone is a literary scholar. To Magali, thank you for the close reading and textual comments that helped me focus and conceptualize my argument for the dissertation and what might come later. To Linda, I am forever grateful for your insights, guidance, and encouragement (and your patience) as this study evolved, shifted, reoriented, and came to be. Thank you.

Special thank yous must also be given to several colleagues at Duquesne University who sustained me with support and good wishes for this dissertation's completion: in Nursing, Drs. Joan Such Lockhart, Lenore Resick (a special thank you for the 'rocks'), and Dean Eileen Zungolo; in Pharmacy, Drs. Bruce Livengood, Marsha McFalls, and Dean J. Douglas Bricker; in Business, Drs. Kenneth Saban, William Spangler, Mary Ellen Kelly, and Jennifer Nightingale; in Music, Sr. Carole Riley and Dr. Judith Bowman; in the Sciences, Drs. Jeffry Madura and Howard "Skip" Kingston, as well as Lalitha Rajakumar; in Education, Drs. David Carbonara and Misook Heo; in Health Sciences, Drs. Patricia Crist and Mikeal Kimelman; in Leadership, Dr. Michael Forlenza, Sally Allen, and the late Sean Gearing; in Law, Professors Jan Levine and Nancy Perkins; in Arts, Dr. Evan Stoddard and in the English Department, Dr. Daniel Watkins; in the Gumberg Library, Diana Sasso, David Nolfi, Dr. Laverna Saunders, and Kathryn Fowler who has since moved on; and in Mission and Identity, past Executive Director, Timothy J. Hickey, CSSp., and current Vice President, James P. McCloskey, CSSp., both of whom extended their friendship and encouragement and represent in all ways the spirit and meaning of Duquesne's mission.

In the division of Management and Business, I would like to thank Vice-President Stephen S. Schillo who could present challenges in my profession but never roadblocks and was always supportive. I must especially thank my colleagues in Computing and Technology Services, whose dedication, hard work, and efforts I very much appreciated and furthered my determination to succeed in this project and in my role as Director of Educational Technology. Special appreciation goes to my staff in the Educational Technology group who observed my anxieties and shared in my joys as I crossed the

many milestones on this long journey. To those still with me, Lauren Turin, Ron D’Amico, Ken Santucci, Todd Russell, Andy Beasom, Joe Knupsky, Nola Coulson, Jeanette Clement, Amy Wargo, Patricia Heilman, and Amy Kearney—thank you! To those who have moved on, Mark Vehec, Jamie Yoder, Michael Shotter, Stephen Hardesty, and Steve Cooney—thank you as well!

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In addition to those in the Duquesne Community, I must also express my appreciation to several outside Duquesne who have been supportive colleagues and friends: Sister Rita Yeasted, La Roche College, who gave my me first adjunct teaching position in Pittsburgh; Dr. Sue Allen, Robert Morris University, who invited me to join their committee on teaching writing and further deepened my commitment to remain a part of academia; to Jem Págan, who taught me so much about technology, leadership,

and perseverance; and Dr. Tracey Mitrano of Cornell University with whom I could discuss for hours the position of women in American history and literature, experiences growing up with parents who owned restaurants, and our obligations as educators to assist today's student with navigating an ever-evolving digital and global community.

Most importantly, I must thank all of the working adults who were my students from 1992 to 2000 in the accelerated Bachelors degree program offered first through the Continuing Education unit and then the School of Leadership and Professional Advancement at Duquesne University. Of all my teaching experiences to date, these were the most challenging and by far the most rewarding. During this project, I often thought of these adults students who struggled to balance school, work, and family and the sacrifices they made to obtain their degree. From their determination to achieve their goals, I drew my fortitude, and now I share with them as they shared with me, the joy and celebration of achieving one's goal.

Without the assistance of friends and neighbors, this dissertation would not have been possible. Therefore, I am deeply indebted to the following friends who gave me time to study, research, and write when my children were young: Pam and Albert Vernacchio and Renee and Dave Stockey. I hope I can come close to repaying your kindness. And to Janet Fox-Manela, my dear friend in Oregon who has been with me through all my degrees, thank you for always listening, always asking, and always understanding.

Finally, without the support of family and their understanding of the importance of this project to me, this long journey would have been very difficult indeed. To Richard and Christine Wren, Joan and Bill Ellis, my parents, Don and Shirley Woolery,

my sister Linda and my brother Glenn, I am very thankful for your support. To my husband, Fred, my son, Darren, and his wife, Elizabeth, and their daughter, Claire, and to my daughter, Laurel, I am especially grateful for your understanding and encouragement for a project, I am sure, you thought would never end!

Now, I am done!

Ruth Newberry

November 2011

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BS	“Born a Square”
HMWW	“History, Myth, and the Western Writer”
OWH	“On the Writing of History”
WS	<u>Wallace Stegner: His Life and His Work</u>
WW	<u>Wolf Willow: a History, a Story, and a Memoir of the Last Plains Frontier</u>

# Chapter 1: Introduction

*My parents were pioneers in Nevada. Father's name was James Patrick Byrne. Born in Ireland, January 1829, he crossed the ocean with his parents who settled in Massachusetts when he was about four years old. When he was 20 he crossed the plains by wagon train at the time of the gold rush to California in 1849. He was one of the scouts for the train, riding a mule and looking ahead for good camping grounds while keeping an eye peeled for Indian attack. When he arrived in California he settled near Jackson and started a small dairy herd.*

*Mother's name was Amanda Jane Rader. She was born in Indiana on May 31, 1844. In 1855, she traveled with her parents by wagon train and settled in Buckeye Valley near Sacramento.*

*Papa and Mama were married in 1866. After their marriage they moved cattle to the mountains in summer and back in winter until they decided to go to Nevada with their small outfit.*

*My family moved to Carson Valley in 1870. With my parents was my oldest sister, Annie, who had been born in April, 1868 in Amador County, California. My second sister, Belle, was born October 8, 1870 in Nevada....*

*The folks left Carson Valley in July, 1871 and settled in Independence Valley, about fifty miles north of Elko.*

*My father and a man named Emery Boles had previously come through the valley where grass was up to their horses' bellies. Everything, including the streams, was an invitation to my father who was looking for a place to run cattle and raise a garden. He went back to Carson Valley, accompanied by Boles, and brought the family to their home in Elko County.*

*There was only one white man in the valley proper at that time. His name was Joe Jerrett; he had settled on land near a warm spring that fed a stream that my father settled on farther down Niagara Creek. Land had not been surveyed as yet, so he held the ground under what was called "squatters' rights."*



.... *The year we moved to the valley was the same year that silver was discovered at Tuscarora. There wasn't a real town there then.*

*My mother was the first white woman in Independence Valley and I was the first white child born there. I was born on December 30, 1871 in a tent way out in that wilderness. My father was doctor, nurse, and everything.*

*The first winter was a hard one. Papa had gotten logs out of the mountains for a house, but hadn't gotten it built. That's why I was born in a tent. Although there was lots of grass in the summer, Papa was not prepared with feed for the cattle during the hard winter. Not having shelter and feed enough, he lost heavily. The snow and cold were severe, cattle got into drifts and couldn't get out.*

*We got through the winter although it seems I have been cold ever since. The folks, having come from California, had never thought about how severe the winters could be in the valley....*

--Eva Edna Byrne Rizzi Smith  
Independence Valley Pioneer: An Autobiography

*The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman.*

--Willa Cather  
O'Pioneers

*It [the West] looks different, depending on whether you encounter it as a bizarre cultural artifact on a Montana railroad platform, or whether you see it as a young Ivan Doig saw the face of his dependable, skilled, likable, rootless shepherd father. Whether, that is, you see it from outside the culture, or from inside.*

--Wallace Stegner  
The American West as Living Space

Each excerpt above reflects the perspective of the “insider” or one who has used his or her experiences of living in a specific western place to tell stories about the American West. The first excerpt is from the autobiography of my maternal great-grandmother written late in life at the urging of her children to document for them and their children and grand-children the experiences of growing up as part of an early pioneer family settling in northeastern Nevada. The story of Eva Rizzi (1871-1949) and the experiences she had growing up near what would become briefly one of Nevada’s major silver mining boom-towns, Tuscarora, and close to where her youngest son, my grandfather, Raymond “Budge” Rizzi, would locate his ranch just south of Mountain City was told to me by her daughter-in-law, Doranna Rizzi, my grandmother, and more frequently by my mother, Shirley Rizzi Woolery. Eventually Eva’s life narrative became part of the historical record of Nevada’s settlement when her autobiography was published by The Northeastern Nevada Historical Society Quarterly in spring 1983.<sup>1</sup>

Eva Rizzi’s childhood experiences, which occupy three-quarters of her life narrative, contain all the elements of the romanticized Wild West—the encounters with threatening Indians, the lure of a better life in the lush spring valleys of northern Nevada, the struggles of pioneer life, the town’s rough patrons and gun-fights, and the powerful role of nature. Her narrative also contains stories not often found in the mythic, heroic western narrative, such as the deprivation and hardship in which she and her family lived, the presence of the family unit on the frontier, and the necessity of men and women doing both domestic (traditionally

deemed feminine) and outdoor (masculine) work in order to survive. The experience of this western place never left her: the coldness she always felt and the determined and hopeful outlook she had on life despite the hardships she encountered. When told to me by my grandmother and mother Eva's life story involved the history of the many families who pioneered, settled, lived, and died in and around the northeastern Nevada area of Tuscarora, Mountain City, and Elko where I was born. These stories covered not only Eva Rizzi's life but also the known white, Indian, and Basque history of the region; the relationships among the red, brown, and white people who lived there; and the many events that occurred there and are still visible (though increasingly less so) in the dilapidated buildings and fences, the half buried arrowheads, roads, and the traces of roads and trails still evident on this mountain desert landscape.

The second excerpt is from novelist Willa Cather (1873-1947) who returned often to her pioneer childhood in the mid-West. In these early experiences, she found narratives for her fiction that involved experiences and observations she had growing up from age nine to seventeen in Red Cloud, Nebraska, when the town was still part of a relatively undeveloped frontier. In what is considered her pioneer trilogy—O'Pioneers (1913) from which the excerpt comes, The Song of the Lark (1915) and My Ántonia (1918)—Cather wrote about families who settled the Great Plains and other western locales, most notably in A Lost Lady (1923) and Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927). These works drawn from her childhood experiences depict an awareness of the Plains' expansive environment and dramatic weather and the relationships among the various American and immigrant families who settled the area. Like Eva's life narrative of being a pioneer's child, Cather's fictional accounts of pioneer life on the Plains contain

many of the elements that define the mythic Wild West: the struggle to survive an often devastating nature, the pursuit of opportunities the western frontier held for those who ventured West, and the presence of native people. Cather's stories, however, undercut the supposed conquest and exceptionalism of the pioneer over the western frontier landscape by showing how more often than not nature's indifference triumphs over individual will, how survival and sustainability are found in the communities and families, how the West was populated by various ethnicities, and how a sense of respect for the environment emerges from those who depend on the land for their livelihood. Unlike the mythic West's singular story of the solitary white-male's conquest over the western frontier, Eva Rizzi and Willa Cather tell a multi-vocal, gendered, realist, and historicized story of white settlement of the West that involves failure and futility as much as success and triumph.

The final excerpt is from another pioneer child, Wallace Earle Stegner (1909-1993), who is the focus of this dissertation. Like Cather, he grew up on the Great Plains and claimed throughout his life the deeply formative experiences he had from age six to twelve living on a "belated frontier" in Cypress Hills in Saskatchewan, Canada, from 1914 to 1920. A prolific writer, Stegner crossed many literary and genre boundaries during his long career, acting as a journalist for popular magazines, a literary critic, a west coast editor for Houghton-Mifflin, an environmental essayist and Sierra Club board member, a biographer, an historian, a short story writer and novelist, a teacher of many major twentieth-century western writers, and an early theorist of western American literature. In

the “Introduction” to his last collection of essays, Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West (1992), Stegner reiterated that he “was shaped by the West” and that his life’s oeuvre was dedicated to investigating, exposing, and critiquing America’s and the American’s relationship to western lands and to the historical as well as mythic West (xv).

The relationship Americans and America have with the American West was a central concern throughout Stegner’s work. He believed in the shaping influence of western places on the individual’s world view, character, and values, and he drew heavily from his experiences in western places and relationships with others who lived in the West for the novels and short stories he wrote and that are mostly set in the modern urban West. His fiction and non-fiction narratives about the West often present a West in opposition to America’s cultural myths of the Frontier, the Cowboy, the Pioneer, and Garden West. These cultural narratives represent a singular story of the exceptional, white-male conquering a virginal, free, and untamed western frontier inhabited by savage Indians who must be removed so that the western environment can be transformed from wild to civilized and America’s ideals of progress, expansion, and democracy can be advanced and the pioneer-cowboy rewarded with the resources yielded by the West’s lands. Against this mythic narrative that has, he says, oversold “the West as the Garden of the World, the flowing well of opportunity, the stamping ground of the self-reliant,” Stegner presents a grittier, unsentimental, and more realistic Other West, like that of westerners Eva Rizzi and Willa Cather (Introduction Bluebird xix). His West, like theirs, is diverse in its ethnicity, includes the family and western woman’s story, and tells about the hardships and failures as well as the collaboration, compassion, and compromise that

were also a part of white settlement of the West but have been obscured by a romantic, heroic, and nostalgic mythic West that dominated America's cultural view of the West until the historical, literary, and cultural revisionism of the 1970s.

In contrast to the vastly popular formulaic westerns of Zane Grey, Max Brand, and others and the more literary westerns of his contemporaries like A. B. Guthrie Jr., Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Vardis Fisher, and Frank Waters in the 1930s through 1960s that are set predominantly in a past West, Stegner's fictional West is modern and urban and focused on the challenges facing the westerner living in the present West.<sup>2</sup> The primary obstacle he believed western regionalist writers confronted was a mythic West that continued to define how the West as a geographic region, as a culture, and as a literature was to be perceived and represented. In his fiction, histories, and environmental essays, Stegner wrote against the grain of what he saw as the mythic West's values, such as rugged individualism, stoicism, exceptionalism, necessary violence, and exploitation of western lands, showing how these values were damaging to America, the West, and the westerner. From living on both East and West coasts and from his research for the histories, essays, articles, and fiction he composed, Stegner was well-aware of the West's problematic historical legacy of violence, destruction, prejudice, and white conquest and domination. But, as he often noted, this legacy was too often viewed by insiders (westerners) and outsiders (all others) alike through the rose-colored glasses of the West's myths that glorified white settlement of the West as heroic, independent, masculine, and triumphant while it

overlooked the costs of America's western expansion in the hardships, loss, and failure of the pioneer and the near extermination of fauna, native flora, and Native Americans. He meant for his works to unseat America's mythic West as the dominant discourse for all things western.

In what most scholars view as a minor or anachronistic work of his, Wolf Willow: A History, A Story, and A Memory of the Last Plains Frontier (1962), Stegner investigates what it means to be western through what was viewed in the 1960s as an unorthodox blending of history, memoir, and fiction in a singular text. Wolf Willow tells a linear history of the western place that was Stegner's childhood home in the Cypress Hills area of Saskatchewan, Canada from 1914 to 1920. Relying on his experiences as a pioneer's child living on the Saskatchewan and Montana border and the history he discovers about his childhood home, Stegner constructs in Wolf Willow a challenging Other West to contest the culturally accepted values and attitudes the mythic West promotes. In his questioning of the western metanarrative, Stegner foreshadows the revisionism to come in the histories and literature of the American West in the 1970s.

As this dissertation will show, Stegner presents to the reader of Wolf Willow the American West as a spatiality dominated by the elements of the mythic West into which he creates a space for the history, memories, and stories he discovers in his search to understand his family's historical experiences in the place that was his childhood home. The mythic American West spatiality he confronts is home to a timeless frontier of white settlement; to the West as a bountiful and virginal garden; to Indians, cowboys, settlers, and outlaws; and to a recognizable western landscape that is, states Stegner, a "country suitable for 'cutting them off at the pass'" (HMWW 192). In his thinking about this

literal place and imaginative space called the American West, a space containing the actual and historical West as well as the fictional and mythic West, Stegner uses experience, place, history, memory, and story to locate an Other and challenging western narrative that elicits some hope for altering the current perception America and the westerner have of the West's land, its peoples, and its past. Unaware of the local history of his childhood home when he lived there as a youth and when he returned as a middle-aged adult, Stegner seeks in Wolf Willow a "knowledge of the past, a knowledge of place" (28) that will help him understand his family's role in America's narrative of white western settlement and his own "westernness" that he claims was shaped by his experiences in and the landscape of his childhood home. In this western place and his experiences there, Stegner locates a source for his creative writerly self. And he situates the West as an actual place with a non-mythologized past and present with which western regionalist writers can engage.

Through discovery of his childhood home's history and the inclusion of this history in his own and a larger cultural memory, Stegner's Wolf Willow becomes a textual space within which he constructs an Other, non-mythic narrative for the West and where he posits what is and was "western" for the modern westerner, for western American literature, and for America's national identity. Stegner's tripartite text—a history, a story, and a memory of the last Plains frontier—relates an historical narrative of white settlement along the Canadian and American border that counters and broadens the singular narrative of white conquest found in the Frontier, Pioneer, Cowboy, and Garden West



myths of the American West. Intertwined with this unknown but recovered past of his western childhood home are the only two “cowboy” stories he ever published, a discussion of the challenges facing the western artist, and the recollections of selected childhood activities that are the threads that connect the memories, the history, the stories, and the western artist’s challenges to the larger context of Canada’s and America’s white-European settlement of their western frontiers and to his present adult-self in a contemporary American West of the 1950s and 1960s. In the history and landscape of his own experiences in the western place of his childhood, Stegner grounds his western identity and writerly self. Indeed, the notion of “place” he expresses in Wolf Willow—a physical and geographic space shaped by certain conditions (natural, historical, geographical, and cultural)—defines his thinking about the American West as a subject of inquiry for western writers and as a creative home for their art.

Shortly after the publication of Wolf Willow in 1962, Stegner wrote three critical essays that taken together have come to represent his informal theorizing on the western writer, the literary western, and a western American literary tradition. These three essays—“Born a Square” (in January 1964 Atlantic); “On the Writing of History” (in 1965 journal American West); and his most often quoted essay, “History, Myth, and the Western Writer” (in 1967 American West and reprinted the same year as the “Introduction” to Great Western Short Stories)—were anthologized in Stegner’s first collection of essays, The Sound of Mountain Water (1969), which gave them a significant readership and critical attention. Written from the perspective of the “insider” like the earlier Wolf Willow, or in this instance from the point of view of a western regionalist writer, Stegner challenges America’s cultural approval of the mythic West as

defining the West as a region, dictating how the West's past is to be interpreted, and demanding how the West should be portrayed in literature. In his analysis of the current state of western American literature in the early 1960s, he criticizes his contemporary western regionalist writers for too easily accepting the western myths' nostalgic, romanticized, and heroic presentation of white settlement of the West that, he argues, renders their literature voiceless and irrelevant to a modern, mostly urban audience. In these essays, Stegner offers a set of "personal, family, and cultural chores" (HMWW 201) that urges his contemporary western regionalist writers to discover the problems within western American literary historiography and challenges them to make corrections so they can reclaim the western narrative from the mythic West and renarrativize it so their literary western can grow beyond its current marginalization by the reading public and the academy.

This dissertation will explore the relationship between Stegner's Wolf Willow and the three 1960's critical essays and argue that the theoretical model for western American literature Stegner develops in the 1960's essays emerges from the narrative approaches, unconventional form, and thematic issues present in the earlier Wolf Willow. Specifically, this dissertation will illustrate how the theoretical paradigm for western American literature that the critical essays advance is constructed from Stegner's personal response to and experiences with his childhood home; his historical understanding of the West's white settlement history; and his knowledge and participation in the West's literary tradition and understanding of the challenges facing the modern western artist—each of which

is a topic in the earlier Wolf Willow. As a multi-layered, textual response to the importance of the western landscape, to lived and sensory experiences, to history, to the land, and to the culturally powerful western metanarratives held in the American cultural imaginary, Wolf Willow is, as its sub-title suggests, partly a “history” of the Last Plains Frontier in Stegner’s telling of the mostly unacknowledged history of his childhood place; a “story” of the Last Plains Frontier in his fictional appraisal of the traits and role of the West’s mythic heroes—the pioneer and the cowboy—in western settlement; and a “memory” of the Last Plains Frontier in the recounting of his experiences as “a pioneer’s child” (15) who engaged as a “sensuous little savage” (19) with a “belated, almost symbolic frontier” (20) on the Canadian Plains from 1914 to 1920.

In each of the parts and in the whole of Wolf Willow, Stegner suggests that the frontier context of his childhood was shaped by the western myths of the cowboy and pioneer, the notion of western exceptionalism, and the conquest and exploitation of the West as a virgin garden. Even though he contests America’s culturally defining western myths, Stegner does so from an insider’s perspective as it is his “place,” his home, and his culturally shaping “narratives” about which he writes. Stegner’s insider perspective influences and complicates his response to and engagement with the place, ideas, history, and cultural narratives of the American West, revealing certain predilections and assumptions that shape his engagement with the various meanings of the American West and sometimes trap him within the very mythical structures and assumptions he is contesting.

An untidy, sometimes messy, multifaceted text, Wolf Willow is a textual playground of sorts where Stegner practiced many of the strategies he will identify as

“personal, familial, and cultural chores” in the 1960’s essays. From the journey he takes in Wolf Willow to reclaim his personal western past from a mythic West, Stegner found the narrative strategies he needed to construct a realist, experiential, and historicized oppositional Other West to ground his western identity, locate the imaginative source of a western art in the westerner’s response to western lands, and offer a guarded hope for the modern West as home for the western artist. In the three 1960’s critical essays, most of the same strategies he used in Wolf Willow to reclaim his personal, historicized, western narrative appear as “chores” his contemporary western writers must employ to reclaim the literary western from the monomythic West’s. In the essays, Stegner theorizes the literary western, or the “small-w western,” as “another kind of western story-telling” (HMWW 187) that is also oppositional to the narratives of the mythic West that the culturally popular, formulaic capital-W western advances. Stegner’s “chores” challenge western regionalist writers to move beyond the traps of previous conceptions of the West in order to explore their western experiences and past as he did in Wolf Willow and to create a new western subjectivity and western literature that engages both the present and the past Wests, acknowledges past crimes against racial others and against western lands, promotes a sense of hope for a native western art, and raises America’s consciousness of the personal, environmental, and cultural costs of adhering to the metanarratives of the mythic West.

While Stegner scholars have examined the essays independently and deem them important and significant not only to Stegner’s works but also to the

trajectory of western American literature in the 1970s forward, no study has undertaken an extended analysis of these three essays in relation to Wolf Willow to show, as this dissertation will, that Wolf Willow contains in germinal form the foundation of Stegner's realist, place-based, historicist, and humanist theoretical construct for western American literature that he advocated in the 1960's essays. According to Krista Comer's Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women's Writing (1999), Stegner was "one of the few comprehensive theorists of western regional culture and literature" when "the principal assumptions" of this field were often "unarticulated.... His various critical writings from 1963 to 1993 mapped and remapped western literary culture to make sense of the various other spatial imaginations coming to the fore in the postmodern period" (39).<sup>3</sup> From her perspective, Stegner offered "more influentially than has any other individual in contemporary times" a "new" western literary historiography that argued for a literary western significantly removed from the mythic constructions of the West and for a tradition of writers more western, diverse, and deeper than previous critics and the reading public had considered (40). While western literary scholarship was practically non-existent until the 1920s because of academic cultural attitudes that privileged Eastern literature, particularly the New England writers, according to Richard Etulain in "The American Literary West and Its Interpreters: The Rise of a New Historiography," by the 1940s, Stegner was one of its early advocates.<sup>4</sup>

Other scholars agree with Comer and Etulain's estimation of Stegner's role in an evolving regionalist literature of the American West. In Wallace Stegner and the Continental Vision: Essays on Literature, History, and Landscape (1997), Curt Meine believes Stegner's "untiring efforts to shape and reshape our understanding of the West

may very well stand as one of twentieth-century American literatures greatest accomplishments” (xix). Agreeing with Meine is Robert Vitalis who states that Stegner is seen as the “destroyer of American Western myths and a forerunner of the social and environmental turn in western history” (qtd in Fradkin 124).<sup>5</sup> In Kerry Ahearn’s view, “the West is the home of popular mythology, and Stegner has sought to function there as a serious artist, finding his materials from among the faded mythic props and settings, and trying to present them with the clear vision of traditional realism so that they seem ‘true,’ and able to convey Stegner’s themes without being confused with the old stereotypes” (13).

However, against the favorable assessments of Stegner’s contribution to western American literary historiography, one must consider Jennifer Ladino’s recent observation that a hagiography has developed around Stegner given his “phenomenal contributions to environmentalism, creative writing, and western literature [that] have rendered him somewhat untouchable” (226).<sup>6</sup> This dissertation participates in current efforts to assess Stegner’s role in shaping western American literary historiography by examining his attempts to reshape the westerners’, the western regionalist writers’, and America’s view of the West in the 1960s by arguing that his 1960’s essays and its antecedent Wolf Willow not only anticipate the revision of the literary western to come in the 1970s but also foreshadow many of the strategies western regionalist writers will employ to push western regionalist literature beyond its marginal status.

As the “seedbed” for the ideas and strategies he draws upon to construct his theoretical model for western American literature in the essays, Wolf Willow

shows Stegner renarrativizing his personal western story from within a western spatiality infused by a mythic West that is hierarchical and exclusionary, is masculinist and predominantly white, and has narratives of conquest and subjugation. Through his acquisition of the historical past of his childhood place and an examination of former experiences in this place—a past and experiences that the mythic West either romanticizes or glosses—Stegner articulates the problems and concerns he finds in the present West, the very ones, faced by 1960's western regionalist writers, which he wants to correct. In Wolf Willow, Stegner practices and anticipates the very strategies he will identify in the 1960's essays as “correctives” and “chores” in his retrieval through history, memory, and story of what the myths have erased: the role of the western woman and racial Other, the failure of pioneers like his family, and the values of adaptability, community, social responsibility, and compassion. In both Wolf Willow and the 1960's essays Stegner attempts to reclaim the historical western narrative from the culturally dominant mythic West so that it can be renarrativized to present to America and the westerner a story that more accurately reflects the West's destructive past and used by those in the present to make corrections for a better future.

This dissertation takes into account what Comer describes as the “Stegnerian Legacy” while participating in its assessment to determine how Stegner's confrontation in Wolf Willow with the mythic West shaped his theory of western American literature appearing in the three critical essays and then in adjusted versions until his death in 1993. A product of his time, Stegner reflects the assumptions and limitations of the 1950s and 1960s in terms of how the West, especially its historical past, was perceived and how western writers were considered that make his challenges to America's cultural Myths

and his theory appear limited and anachronistic by today's critical standards. At the same time, Stegner's attempt to create a space for an Other historical and literary West is for his period quite prescient and innovative in its suggestion of new ways to understand the West.

This introductory chapter will conclude with a brief biography of Stegner's career to elucidate the major issues he pursued as a writer, conservationist, academic, and Director of Stanford's Creative Writing Program in relation to relevant critical scholarship in western American literature. Chapter two, "Wallace Stegner: Inheritor of America's Myths of the West," furthers the context of this study by providing a somewhat detailed overview of America's cultural myths of the Frontier, Pioneer, and Cowboy that Stegner inherited as a child, a westerner, and a western writer. In Wolf Willow and the 1960's essays, he challenges how these cultural myths have defined western culture, western American literature, America's attitudes toward western lands, and America's sense of national identity. The remaining chapters in this dissertation analyze the strategies Stegner uses in Wolf Willow to reclaim his personal past and return the historical past of his childhood home to cultural memory and to argue that Wolf Willow evidences in germinal form the "personal, family, and cultural chores" he will present in the 1960's critical essays as strategies western regionalist writers can use to reclaim and renarrativize the literary western for a modern West and America.

Chapter three, "Wallace Stegner's Wolf Willow and Questions of Western Identity," examines the structure of Wolf Willow, the various narrative personas



Stegner adopts, and his notions about western identity as they relate to his use of history, memory, and story as strategies for reclaiming his personal story within the historical past of his childhood home and the use of this history and memory to construct a challenging Other West analogous to the “another kind of western story-telling” he advocates in the 1960’s essays. In Wolf Willow, Stegner constructs a personal history through the process of recovering the past of his western childhood home and analyzing how this place and this past shaped his adult self into the “westerner” he claims to be. This chapter establishes how Stegner transports his definition of self to that of the western writer he will theorize in the 1960’s essays by discussing his notion of how place shapes identity and how history is contextual that then establishes the emphases he pursues and the methodology he uses in the following four sections of Wolf Willow.

In chapter four, “‘The Capital of an Unremembered Past’: Stegner’s Bridging of an ‘Uncrossable Discontinuity,’” the concerns of history and what history Stegner recovers and chooses to present in Section II of Wolf Willow are analyzed. Writing primarily from the perspective of the historian, Stegner uncovers lost historical voices and narratives he uses to construct a challenging Other West to the mythic West. How these strategies are similar to the “chores” he identifies in the essays and how he positions history, a western place, and his experience as the source of his writerly self are of particular importance in chapter three. Chapter five, “Cowboys and Cowhands: Stegner’s Revisioning of the Mythic West’s Classic Narrative,” focuses on Section III of Wolf Willow, a section that contains an autobiographical essay and the two works of fiction Stegner included in the text. This chapter analyzes how Stegner’s challenging Other West comes to include a revisioned narrative that rejects the exceptionalism and

hierarchy of the cowboy culture for one of social responsibility and community, two themes that continue for the remainder of Wolf Willow and are important to the theory of western American literature he later proposes in the essays. This chapter investigates how Stegner's revisioned cowboy narrative challenges Owen Wister's and Theodore Roosevelt's vision of the cowboy and the values they associated with this cultural icon, as well as how Stegner situates the western woman and her struggle for identity within this male myth. The realist, place-based fiction he includes in Wolf Willow is not only a part of his strategy for countering the mythic West, but it also previews Stegner's gendered response to the West that anticipates some of the concerns of western women regionalist writers in the 1970s.

Chapter six, "The Pioneer Story: 'Understanding the Shape and Intensity of the Dream that Peopled the Continent,'" analyzes Section IV and the Epilogue of Wolf Willow. In Section IV, Stegner's personal history of his family's homesteading experiences merges with the history of his childhood home as he confronts Frederick Jackson Turner's Pioneer and Garden West myths. In this chapter, discussion focuses on what Stegner reveals as his "understanding of the dream" that drew pioneers West, an understanding that is historical-geographical-cultural and experiential, or the cornerstones of his theory of western American literature as voiced in the 1960's essays. His examination of the western artist, particularly the challenges facing the western artist, in the Epilogue foreshadows his description of the western American writer and the regionalist writer's situation in a modern America and his theorizing a western American literature

that can emerge from the methodology and strategies he has used in Wolf Willow to recover and reclaim his historical and personal past from the mythic West and to construct a challenging Other West to counter the values and objectives espoused in the Frontier, Pioneer, Cowboy, and Garden West myths.

Chapter seven, “The 1960’s Critical Essays: Rescuing Western American Literature from the Mythic West,” analyzes Stegner’s three critical essays in terms of the strategies and content presented in the earlier Wolf Willow to illustrate the degree to which Wolf Willow is a “seedbed” for the ideas and “chores” he puts forth in the essays to revision western American literature and a western subjectivity. The essays reveal Stegner’s efforts to rescue the literary western from America’s mythic West by revisioning western American literature to account for the West’s geographic regional diversity, which provides him with a geographic West that is not one singular spatiality as the myths claim, but “many Wests,” thus containing space for multiple voices and especially “another kind of western storytelling” (HMWW 188). Stegner’s reconceptualization of western American literary historiography prefigures the challenges to come in the 1970s to the western metanarrative as well as other previously accepted cultural narratives.

The conclusion, “The End of the Beginning,” ends the dissertation with a discussion of the various directions western American literature has taken since Stegner developed his theory, focusing especially on those genres within western American literature that can count Stegner’s Wolf Willow as their literary ancestor.

## Wallace Stegner – Advocate for America’s West

According to Wendell Berry, a graduate of Stegner’s Creative Writing program at Stanford, Stegner “was perhaps the [western] region’s greatest teacher: its greatest storyteller, historian, critic, conservator, and loyal citizen” (qtd in Fradkin, 10). He was a prolific writer of many genres, having at his death in April 1993 written thirteen novels (translated into seven languages), nine works of nonfiction, 242 nonfiction articles, and fifty-seven short stories, along with numerous edited collections of writings by other authors.<sup>7</sup> During his tenure as Director of the Stanford Creative Program from 1946 to 1971, Stegner taught a virtual list of who’s who of American authors (such as Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Ken Kesey, Larry McMurtry, and Thomas McGuane to name a few) and in retirement informally advised a host of others (most notably Ivan Doig, Barry Lopez, and Terry Tempest Williams). Along with his roles as writer, teacher, and academic, Stegner was very involved in national conservation and social issues. He also participated in racial integration efforts in his local community and supported anti-Vietnam War sentiment at Stanford until protests turned violent and destructive.

Over the course of his life, among the many awards he received was a Pulitzer Prize, a National Book Award, two Guggenheim fellowships, a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship, the Robert Kirsch Award for lifetime achievement from the Los Angeles Times, several Fulbrights, and a nomination

for the Nobel Peace Prize. In 1992, he declined President George H. W. Bush's nomination for a National Medal for the Arts in protest to changes made to the National Endowment for the Arts, a foundation he assisted in forming, along with the National Endowment for the Humanities, when appointed by the Kennedy administration in the 1960s to participate in talks to develop opportunities for American artists. During the 1980s, Stegner's contributions to western literature was recognized with a PEN USA West Body of Work lifetime achievement and Freedom-to-Write awards.<sup>8</sup> He also received eight honorary degrees and had endowed chairs named after him at two western universities. During his life, he lived and taught on both coasts: in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Greensboro, Vermont, while at Harvard in the early 1940s and in the Los Altos Hills in California while at Stanford from 1945 to his retirement in 1970. Most summers he drove cross country with his family to the home in Vermont he had owned since the mid-1940s. Finally, he traveled extensively abroad and encouraged other western colleagues to step beyond their region so they too could see the West within a broader context.

Concerned with how people live and interact with others and how the place in which they live (particularly the American West) influences their lives, Stegner grounded his fiction in the authorial "I's" knowability of that world. According to his biographer Philip L. Fradkin in Wallace Stegner and the American West (2008), Stegner's colleagues, students, friends, and family described him as "immensely attractive, articulate, and intelligent" (11-12). Literary critic Robert Thacker observes that Stegner was a man of "wit" with "many deep and thoughtful connections," as well as "strong-willed, at times cranky, and [who] often sees slights and bears a grudge. In short, a

human being of deep commitments, clear-sight, and considerable fervor” who “worked hard, habitually and persistently, his entire life to define, articulate, and animate a relation to the physical world through words” (74).<sup>9</sup> In Comer’s estimation, Stegner was for most of his life “a diehard humanist, . . . a believer in the knowability and holism of the individual, the efficacy of individual action, the reliability of meaning, the transcendentalism of art, the progressive nature of history” and one who positioned western writing and the West as the locale for hope for a better world, calling it in 1960 “a geography of hope” in “Wilderness Letter to David Pesone” (Landscapes 45). In “Wallace Stegner’s West, Wilderness, and History,” Elliot West states that Stegner was an author who “refused to recognize any border between the author and his work; his novels as well as his nonfiction commentaries are woven together tightly with his personal beliefs” (85). It is not uncommon, as Jennifer Ladino suggests, to read recent Stegner scholarship and find words “like *truth*, *integrity*, and *authenticity* [used] to describe his works or terms like *sane* and *realistic* in regards to the West he depicts” (226).<sup>10</sup> For Thacker, Stegner is a “figure who will attract a succession of biographies . . . as he should” and critical reappraisals, which have already begun, “because of his involvements” as a scholar of the West and his contributions to western literature, its literary historiography, and to the critical categories of history, race, gender, ethnicity, identity, wilderness, cultural metanarratives, and literary regionalism (73). His is “one of the most powerful legacies in place in the early 1970s” and remains so, according to Comer, and must be reckoned with when writing about the West (Landscapes 39).

In regard to his perspective on writing, especially western writing, Stegner remained a realist, suggesting that realism was the method for combating the mythic West. In Fradkin's view, "Stegner maintained a blind insistence to the end of his life that there was only one kind of fiction writing. It came from the writer's own life and experiences" (292). As he told historian Richard Etulain in 1979 for Conversations with Wallace Stegner on Western History and Literature (1983, revised in 1990), "Fiction ought to reflect the society out of which it arises"; it "derives from relationships among people rather than from the exposition of some anguish of soul in an individual—some private hell" (131). He did not waver from this perspective. For Stegner, "reality as the basis for fictional projections" describes his approach to fiction because, as he claimed to Etulain, "I have to deal with the real world as I have known it" (130). His fiction, he said, depicted "the perception of truth, the attempt to get at the concerns of the heart. [Fiction] has to do with human relations, and human feelings, and human character" (172). In West's view, Stegner aimed for "the more accurate and realistic telling of western history, and through that truer telling a western society more fully connected, in identity and obligation, to western places" (91). Even though a staunch advocate for the concerns and culture of the West through his fiction, histories, and environmental activism, Stegner never saw the West as an isolated entity, apart from the larger concerns of American culture and history. While he rejected the West's adoption of what he calls in Wolf Willow America's "cult of progress" in its continued destruction and exploitation of western lands, Stegner sought instead a sense of "belonging" and "stewardship" over "ownership." He remained an avowed "westerner" shaped, he said, by the western

landscapes and climates of the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, and the deserts of Utah and the peoples, histories, and cultures that shaped the places in which he lived.

Born February 18, 1909, on his maternal grandparents' farm in Lake Mills, Iowa, Stegner's youth was characterized by movement, change, and rootlessness as his family crisscrossed the American West following his father, George Stegner, as he attempted to "strike it rich." Before he was sixteen, he had lived in Iowa, North Dakota, Washington, Saskatchewan, Montana, and Utah.<sup>11</sup> In "Finding the Place: A Migrant Childhood" (1989), Stegner says that "the village of Eastend at the edge of the Cypress Hills in Saskatchewan, Canada, and Salt Lake City, Utah" were the "places where we stayed long enough to put down roots and develop associations and memories" (4). The Cypress Hills, near the Montana border and the place where his family homesteaded from 1914 to 1920, is the place where his brother, Cecil, two years his senior, and Stegner from ages five to twelve spent their childhood. Because they could not "prove up" their homestead land, Stegner says he missed becoming a Canadian by one year. As he states in Wolf Willow, not only does he consider these childhood years very formative in their "shaping" him into a "westerner" (24), but he also makes it clear that "whatever was being done to us by our exposure to Canadian attitudes, traditions, and prejudices ... we never thought of ourselves as anything but American" (84).<sup>12</sup> His attitudes, manners, and values, he says, were always American.



Of his youth, Stegner has said: “I was born on wheels. I know the excitement of newness and the relief when responsibility has been left behind. But I also know the dissatisfaction and hunger that result from placelessness” (Sense 201). This issue of “placelessness,” or more specifically the importance Stegner assigns to “place” and one’s engagement with it, will be a continuing concern for him in his thoughts about the American West and its literature. Not until 1953, at age forty-four, would Stegner return to his childhood home in Saskatchewan, a trip that would result in the eventual publication of Wolf Willow in 1962. Along with Wolf Willow’s use of selected childhood memories, Stegner’s fifth novel, The Big Rock Candy Mountain (1943) drew heavily upon his early life. The semi-auto-biographical novel brought him national recognition and announced his life-long battle with how he saw America’s cultural myths of the Frontier, Pioneer, Garden West, and Cowboy adversely affecting the social, cultural, and environmental aspects of the modern westerners’ life. In Big Rock, Stegner detailed the movement of Bo and Elsa Mason and their two boys across the West as Bo seeks what the western myths promise: new beginnings with each new western frontier, the exceptionalism of the individual to overcome challenges presented by nature and men, and the rewards of ownership and transformation of the land. While Big Rock challenged the myths’ promises in the failure and troubles the Masons encounter, the novel also revealed Stegner’s love for the West’s geographic diversity evident in his descriptions of the various locations the Mason clan reside and his early awareness of how the West’s environment influenced his sense of self.

When the Stegner family left Saskatchewan in 1920, they spent one year in Great Falls, Montana, and then moved on to Salt Lake City, Utah, where Stegner lived from

1922 to 1930 (ages fourteen to twenty-one). While his father attempted to make a living from bootlegging, gambling, and casino holdings, Stegner finished his schooling and earned a Bachelor's degree from the University of Utah. In 1930, he headed east to the University of Iowa. Just after arriving in Iowa, he returned home briefly for the death of his brother Cecil at age twenty-three of pneumonia. After receiving his Masters in English from the University of Iowa in 1932, Stegner returned home for one year because of his mother's advanced cancer and enrolled in the University of California at Berkeley's doctoral program so as not to be too far away. Within the year, his mother died and he returned to the University of Iowa to enroll in its doctoral program in English where he continued to study under Norman Foerster, who was well-known for his scholarship on American Literature.<sup>13</sup> Through his relationship with Foerster, Stegner participated in the formation of what would become the well-known University of Iowa's Writing Program, a model Stegner would use for his writing program at Stanford.<sup>14</sup> Under Foerster's direction, Stegner earned one of the early PhDs in American Literature in 1935 by writing on the geologist and writer, Clarence Dutton, which exposed him to the explorer, ethnologist, and geologist, Major John Wesley Powell, for whom Dutton worked (Fradkin 59; Benson WS 52). Later, Stegner would write Powell's biography and a history of the American West in Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West (1954) that led to his greater understanding of the economic and environmental problems facing the West given the extensive research he conducted for the book (Fradkin 166).<sup>15</sup>

Stegner entered the study of American literature, specifically western American literature, at a time when very few doctorates were granted in this area. As James K. Folsom notes in his preface to The Western: A Collection of Critical Essays (1979) academic snobbery presented western American literature as an embarrassment to American letters and a sign of American cultural immaturity. The Eastern seaboard, particularly the Northeast with its ties to European culture, not the vast and untamed West, states Folsom, was for a long time the source of American cultural authority (13-14). This tension between East/West and civilized/uncivilized had been furthered thematically in the literature of both western and eastern writers from the seventeenth through twentieth century.

In the early decades of the twentieth century a few scholars did call attention to western American literature by adopting Turnerian notions of the West's significance to America's development. For instance, Etulain states that, in The American Mind (1912), Bliss Perry adopted Turner's notion of American exceptionalism when he suggested that the West as a place was a shaping force in American character and its literature warranted more attention for its role in American cultural development (Western 140) while Norman Foerster suggested in The Reinterpretation of American Literature (1925) that more study of "distinctly American" qualities in American literature was warranted. Two other important works in the early twentieth-century on American literature were completed by women: the first was Dorothy Dondore in The Prairie and the Making of Middle America: Four Centuries of Description (1926) who claimed that the mid-West's writers engagement with the frontier landscape influenced their themes (Western 146) and the second was by Lucy Lockwood Hazard who stated in The Frontier in American

Literature (1927) that the frontier had a strong influence on American character and that the frontier experience had contributed to the Gilded Age's production of a rampant individualism that the literature of the 1920s was addressing (Western 148). Despite these early urgings by scholars for more consideration, Etulain argues that western literature did not receive much critical attention in the early decades of the twentieth century, though Stegner would become one of its early proponents. If he was not aware of Turner's thesis during his doctoral preparations, Stegner encountered Turner's ideas when he joined Turner's institution, the University of Wisconsin, as a junior faculty member in 1937 only a few years after Turner's death and when Turner's ideas and reputation were very prominent in academia and popular culture. While it would take some thirty plus years before Turner's ideas became openly challenged and disputed by historians and others (Faragher 2), Stegner would challenge them in his Powell biography and western history in the mid-1950s and specifically in Wolf Willow in the early 1960s.

Just prior to completing his PhD, in 1934 Stegner met and married Mary Stuart Page, who was studying music at the University of Iowa. Though no studies have yet been done examining Mary's influence on Stegner's work, according to Fradkin, she often read his manuscripts and also served as an editor for publishing firms and helped to get western writers published. In 1937 the day after his first novelette, Remembering Laughter, won a Little, Brown best short novel contest, the Stegners' had their only child, a son they named Page after Mary's family. In this same year, Stegner accepted an instructorship at the

University of Wisconsin and encountered some embarrassment as a result of his dependence on real events for the story in Remembering Laughter, a story that exposed the tensions between two of Mary Stegner's aunts (Fradkin 121-122). He would encounter a similar fiasco with his sixth novel, Second Growth (1947), which he set in a present New Hampshire but actually covered social and ethnic tensions he observed in the small summer village of Greensboro, Vermont, where he summered,<sup>16</sup> and in his Pulitzer Prize winning novel, Angle of Repose (1971), in which he drew events from the memoir of Mary Hallock Foote, an illustrator and short-story writer in turn-of-the-century America. In each of these cases, fictional people and events too closely matched the real people and events he had observed.

Starting in 1938 Stegner began an eight year period in which he primarily lived in the East, taught at Harvard through the prestigious Briggs-Copeland Fellowship, and spent most summers at the Bread Loaf Writers Conference or his home in Greensboro, Vermont.<sup>17</sup> In 1940, Stegner's father, George, committed suicide in a run-down Reno hotel after killing a lady-friend, which took Stegner West to bury his father. According to his biographers, Stegner never forgave his father for the treatment he received as a child or for what he saw as his father's disregard for his family's welfare as he chased opportunities across the West (Benson WS 67; Fradkin 110-112). With his father's death, Stegner had no immediate family except his wife, Mary, and son, Page. In this period of his life, Stegner wrote three novels, of which only Big Rock was notable; began extensive research for the Powell book which would take nearly twelve years to complete; wrote a short history of the Mormon trail; and, toward the end of World War II, took on a project for the editors of Look that entailed traveling across the United

States with a photographer and writing a series of essays to articulate racial and ethnic tensions in post-World War II America.<sup>18</sup>

Until recently, the book One Nation (1945), the scaled back version of the original Look project, has been overlooked in Stegner studies (Selected Letters 394). However, as New Western historian Patricia Nelson Limerick has stated in “Precedents to Wisdom,” Stegner’s call for “full ethnic inclusiveness and demand for justice” (113) in One Nation was “remarkable and inspirational” for a “white writer *in 1945*” to make in a “very public arena” (110).<sup>19</sup> In Limerick’s view, Stegner should be acknowledged for the way in which he explored race relations across post-World War II America. Instead of focusing solely on the South, he examined prejudices and stereotypes in the Northeast and particularly in the West. Limerick claims Stegner did “not take the idea of ‘American race relations’ to mean a bipolar relationship between blacks and whites” and thus was “far ahead of his time” and is “still ahead of his time” in expressing the various social, race, ethnic, and religious tensions he found in his travels across America (112). Stegner’s awareness of the West’s racial and ethnic diversity is very much present in Wolf Willow, as he presents a multi-vocal past of Cypress Hills.

The 1940s saw a proliferation of western texts written by westerners like Stegner who had grown up and lived in the West and focused on aspects of the West other than the mythic Wild West. Moreover, these western texts were not popular formula westerns but literary westerns and serious fiction. These include John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath (1939), Walter Van Tilburg Clark’s The Ox-bow Incident (1940) and Track of the Cat (1949), Stegner’s The Big Rock

Candy Mountain (1943), Frank Waters' The Man Who Killed the Deer (1947), A. B. Guthrie, Jr.'s The Big Sky (1947), Jean Stafford's The Mountain Lion (1947), and Jack Schaefer's Shane (1948). While these realist texts were at odds with prevailing experimentalist strategies employed by Eastern and European writers, they were generally critical of the mythic West. They focused mostly on the activities of solitary white men except for Stafford's The Mountain Lion with its female protagonist and Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath and Stegner's Big Rock that were about families. Along with these western novels, literary historian Franklin Walker drew attention to the influence of place and western culture on western writers in several critical studies on Frank Norris, Jack London, and the San Francisco literary milieu. Finally, literary-critic Leslie Fiedler published in 1948 his ground-breaking essay, "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!" in Partisan Review in which he argued for an unspoken homoerotic relationship existing between Huck Finn and the slave Jim that was but one example of men and boys running away to the wilderness and West to escape the civilizing tendencies of women evident, he claimed, in American literature from James Fenimore Cooper to his present. With this essay, Fiedler introduced the critical categories of race, class, and gender to the critical assessment of American literature that very few other critics were considering at the time but would become significant issues to later scholars in discussions of American and western American literature.

In 1948 the three-volume Literary History of the United States appeared and attempted to provide an historical-cultural-intellectual presentation of America's literary production thus far.<sup>20</sup> While Literary History presented a fairly unified, Anglo white-male vision of American literature that focused primarily on already dominant literary

groups and regions, the literature of the West was absent. Stegner, however, was asked to contribute a chapter on local color artists of the West, a task that introduced him to Mary Hallock Foote and other unknown western writers who would appear in his expanded western literary tradition in the 1960's essays. Additionally, the 1940s witnessed the emergence of American Studies programs at the university level that adopted the methodology of combining literary criticism, historical research, and social-cultural studies as employed by University of Washington literary critic, Vernon L. Parrington in Main Currents in American Thought (1927). In Main Currents, Parrington argued for investigating the "broad path of our political, economic, and social development" as it related to American literature and culture (Preface x).<sup>21</sup> By the late 1960s, American Studies programs were appearing in universities across the nation and drawing attention to the West's history and regionalist literature. In Wolf Willow, Stegner adopts a multi-disciplinary approach similar to Parrington's as he attempts to understand his western past through an examination of the place Cypress Hills through geography, history, sociology, memory, and story.

While living in the East in the 1930s and 1940s, Stegner began two lasting and influential relationships with poet Robert Frost and Harvard historian and fellow Utahan, Bernard DeVoto, both of whom he met in 1938 when he was invited to teach at the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference. In Frost, a transplanted westerner, Stegner found another who was sympathetic to his realist approach, advocated for the vernacular, and had a strong sense of place (Fradkin 89). However, it was his friendship with DeVoto during these years that John L.



Thomas argues in A Country in the Mind: Wallace Stegner, Bernard DeVoto, History and the American Land (2000) helped shape Stegner's evolving sense of the West's environmental problems, the cultural dominance of the West's myths, land stewardship and protection of the wild, and the socially prevalent tensions between East and West. In his histories, essays, and especially in his monthly column for Harpers, "The Easy Chair," DeVoto made overt America's love affair with the mythic West and challenged these myths through facts and history.<sup>22</sup> Thomas claims DeVoto strongly encouraged Stegner to get involved in the West's environmental issues, which he did by becoming a member of the Sierra Club in 1948 that led to his friendship with another Sierra Club member, Ansel Adams (Fradkin 218-219). Through DeVoto's encouragement for his work on Powell, Thomas suggests Stegner grew increasingly aware of the West's problem of aridity, a problem Stegner helped popularize through the Powell book and his fiction and non-fiction (59). According to Fradkin, Stegner must be praised for raising the awareness of the "general public and the policy makers in government to the essential issues of the American West. Those issues were—and remain to this day—the aridity that breeds sparseness and the denial of that condition, which leads to overdevelopment" (167). Moreover, Thomas claims, DeVoto and Stegner shared the belief that a post-World War II West could be protected and held together through cooperative values, social responsibility, participatory ceremonies, and a collective purpose to protect its lands (202). Several of these beliefs, particularly the notion of social responsibility and collective purpose, appear in Wolf Willow as part of the Other West Stegner constructs to challenge America's myth-shaped cultural views of the West.

This tension between East and West that Stegner confronted as a writer and academic from the West contributes to his perception of western literature and the challenges facing the western artist. According to Etulain, in his “Easy Chair” columns, DeVoto claimed the West’s literature was overlooked, reiterating the East-West dichotomy Foerster introduced Stegner to at Iowa (Western 166). Having inherited a western literary history defined primarily by easterners—James Fenimore Cooper, Mark Twain, and Owen Wister—Stegner saw other “western” writers—Jack London, Frank Norris, Willa Cather, Mary Austin, Jean Stafford, and John Steinbeck for example—not being viewed as “western” in the major literary studies of the 1940s and 1950s. In the 1960’s essays, he leverages this East – West tension to illustrate how western American literary historiography has been constructed by Easterners and thus ignores western concerns and regionalist writers who were writing significant and noteworthy literature and deserved recognition (Fradkin 110-111). Overall, the 1940s were a very productive and invigorating decade for Stegner that prepared him for what he produced and did in the 1950s. In terms of literary production, he published The Women on the Wall (1950), his first collection of short stories; the historical novel, Joe Hill (1950) about the Wobblies hero; a history of the American West and a biography in Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West (1954); the editing of and an Introduction for This is Dinosaur: Echo Park and Its Rivers (1955) for the Sierra Club; and The City of the Living (1956), a second collection of short stories.

In 1945, Stegner left Harvard and the East to move West to begin his job at Stanford University as the Director of its new creative writing program and a professor of American literature. In 1948, Stegner purchased ten acres of land in the Los Altos Hills, only a few miles from the Stanford campus but still relatively wild and undeveloped to build a house. At the end of summer 1949, the Stegner family moved in and except for excursions east nearly every summer to the home in Greensboro, Vermont, and frequent travels abroad, Stegner called this place home for the remainder of his life. He and his wife joined local conservation and racial activists groups to fight against land zoning and community exclusion rules and began traveling extensively across the West so he could write articles on western life, landscapes, and culture for western magazines to supplement his teaching income.

With his reputation as a novelist intact but still emerging, Stegner's academic efforts at Stanford furthered his understanding of the literary tradition to which he belonged.<sup>23</sup> From teaching courses on American literature from 1880 to 1960, Stegner became familiar with a range of narratives outside of what was considered the tradition of western literature (or those writers considered classic western writers like Cooper, Twain, and Wister who were eastern born and wrote for an Eastern market). As he located western born writers in this period, he started to redefine western American literary history so that it included westerners, such as Ina Coolbrith, Mary Hallock Foote, Mary Austin, Eugene Manlove Rhodes, Willa Cather, O.E. Rolvagg, Conrad Richter, Harvey Fergusson, Vardis Fisher, Mari Sandoz, A. B. Guthrie, Frank Waters, Dorothy Marie Johnson, Virginia Sorenson, Walter Van Tilburg Clark, and himself (Fradkin 116). In the introductions he wrote for academic anthologies, Stegner pushed this notion of a broader

western literary tradition.<sup>24</sup> According to Comer, Stegner provided for “the inclusion of many serious western writers who were not finding their way into the American literary canon” in his day (Landscapes 41).

Others in academia were also looking at the role of the mythic West in America’s history and literature and expanding the western literary tradition beyond the traditional writers Cooper, Twain, Wister, Bret Harte, Ambrose Bierce, Frank Norris, and Willa Cather. While Stegner was including more writers who were “western” into this tradition, Henry Nash Smith’s The Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (1950; rpt. 1970) was expanding the field for critical study. Into the discussion of the role of the mythic West in American thought and literature, Smith brought eastern-based dime novelists, journalists, and newspapermen who he claimed helped to develop the idea that the literal and historic West was distinctly tied to a disappearing Wild West and the notion that the frontier was a special place that they exploited through portrayal of the West’s Indian fighter heroes in the nineteenth-century. Coming from a Harvard professor, Smith’s study brought a new legitimacy to western American literature as he situated the “West” as symbol and myth within American national identity instead of focusing on the West’s literature as a regional expression, which was what Stegner would argue and formulate in the 1960’s essays. Straying from the strictly historical or literary approach and adopting instead a multidisciplinary approach to his topic, Smith claimed that the “pull of a vacant continent beyond the frontier” was a persistent generalization in the national consciousness and as such had shaped American life and character (3-4). He

showed that historical facts did not displace popular conceptions held by nineteenth-century Americans when they thought about the West. Instead, in response to particular historical conditions and events, Smith claimed America developed myths, symbols, and images (most often shaped by or expressing Eastern assumptions) to address these events.<sup>25</sup> In his exploration of his pioneer family's failed homesteading experiences in Wolf Willow, Stegner returns to cultural and personal memory the historical facts of settlement that the Pioneer myth obscures.

Another significant work from this 1950s period, though not specifically focused on the West or western literature, but important to the study of western literature, was R.W.B. Lewis's The American Adam (1955). Lewis argued for the influence of the imaginative idea, not the literal place, that the "frontier" had on American (white male) writers and the importance of the frontier hero who emerged and was then used by writers, critics, and others to define national and cultural narratives. In his study, Lewis traces the development of the male hero in American literature through the evolution of the frontier hero's traits from Puritan times to the mid-twentieth century. He outlined the development of the frontier hero from Cooper's Natty Bumppo to Twain's Huck to Faulkner's Ike McCaslin, demonstrating how their narratives represented tensions and ideas associated with the American West within American culture. Even though Stegner avoids focusing on his child-self's maturation in Wolf Willow to examine instead how the pioneer and cowboy myths influenced his response to the land and to others, in the 1970s feminists and other critics will dismantle this white male narrative of individuation in American literature.

In the 1950s both studies, but particularly Smith's, helped to legitimize focus on the West and its literature by demonstrating how an imaginative West contributed to an evolving American national identity.<sup>26</sup> Both Smith and Lewis came under attack in the 1970s for not analyzing their own assumptions, with Smith stating that he did not acknowledge the "tragic dimensions of westward movement" or the role of women in the mythic West as have more recent historians, literary scholars, and writers (qtd in Georgi-Findlay 2).<sup>27</sup> With Smith's and Lewis' works in the 1950s drawing critical attention to the idea of the West and the frontier in American literature and with American Studies departments infiltrating the academy, the 1960s saw a boom of critical activity primarily by male scholars on western literature that highlighted the role of nature and the Indian in western American literature, furthering the dichotomies of wild / tame, civilized / savage, white / red within the western spatiality.<sup>28</sup> In both Wolf Willow and the 1960's essays, Stegner also failed to fully explore his assumptions in regard to minorities and women, although he advocates, as did Smith, for a multidisciplinary approach to the literary West and, like Smith and Lewis, is especially interested in the role these western myths have had in shaping American attitudes toward the West.

In American history, westerner and historian Earl Pomeroy was also attempting to re-orient his contemporaries to their approach to the history of the American West.<sup>29</sup> His first book, The Territories and the United States, 1861–1890: Studies in Colonial Administration (1947) was one of the first post-Turnerian historical studies that attempted to focus historians on the present,

urban West; on the West as a region, which Turner also did to some degree, but as a place and not a process; and on the influence of minorities in the development of the modern West. As Michael P. Malone observes in "Earl Pomeroy and the Reorientation of Western American History," Pomeroy was asking his contemporary historians, as Stegner was to do in the 1960's essays with contemporary western writers, that they take a less romantic and more rigorous look at the West in terms of its regional history and to focus on the modern era not the rural past so that the West's history is part of the American historical experience.

During the 1950s through the 1960s, Stegner fully participated in the exploration and questioning of America's culturally dominant western myths that connected the West, western culture, and western literature to a lost nineteenth-century frontier, to the themes of popular western formula fiction, and to the glories and values espoused in Hollywood and television westerns. He was extremely busy during this time traveling abroad, building the Stanford Creative Writing program, and participating in local and national initiatives as an environmentalist.<sup>30</sup> Having become disillusioned with his novel writing since his novels after Big Rock had not been received well, Stegner wrote short stories and several works of non-fiction instead.<sup>31</sup> According to his critics, Stegner struggled with finding a mature "voice," which would come later with the Joe Allston protagonist in his short stories and the novel All the Little Live Things (1967) in which he presented the generational conflict of the tumultuous 1960s. In June 1953, Stegner visited his childhood home to learn what he could about the place where he grew up.<sup>32</sup> His return was prompted by what he described to Etulain in Conversations as a "half-assed notion that I wanted to do a study in village democracy, focusing on three very

different places. One was Saskatchewan, where I had spent my boyhood. Another was Vermont, which had been a village democracy for two hundred years at least. There's one from scratch and one two hundred years old, and so I went back to Denmark to find one that was ten thousand years old. But I never made a book of it. What it finally came down to was concentrated on the Saskatchewan—the one from scratch—because that was obviously the one that interested me most” (73). Much of 1953 was spent writing “most of Wolf Willow, including the three pieces of fiction” that were originally intended for the book, dropping one when he returned in 1961 to finish the book (73).<sup>33</sup>

Stegner's Wolf Willow (1962) slipped under the radar of most critics and reviewers to become one of his lesser known works until a reassessment of his career began after his death in 1993. An early reviewer, Claude Simpson wrote that Wolf Willow was as “keenly observant as ‘Walden.’ It expresses more knowingly than Thoreau could have expressed it, the twentieth century problem of individuality as each must try to define it” (qtd in Benson WS 283). Others such as Robert Harlow in his 1963 review noted the presence of “nostalgia, sometimes sentimentality and melodrama, but they serve a purpose,” which is to critique a mythic West (25). In personal correspondence, fellow western writer, Walter Van Tilburg Clark complimented Stegner on “a beautiful book, a memorable one, and, needless to say, it reaches out and touches so many memories and concerns of mine” while A. B. Guthrie, Jr., said “You’ve beat me to the punch.... A good many of our experiences were similar, as are a good many now, of our reflections. I was particularly interested, since it’s a point I’ve



hammered, in your observations about the isolation of minds from the surrounding history” (qtd in Benson WS 283). Scholars seemed to divide between the opinion of Robert Canzoneri, who noted in 1973 that Wolf Willow “is a remarkable book which has not received the recognition it deserves partly because nobody knows how to label it” (67) and that of Frederick G. and Margaret G. Robertson who call Wolf Willow structurally complicated and messy in its production. The book, they claimed, almost works as a whole in its presentation of a mostly chronological, sometime nostalgic, history of Stegner’s childhood home, a history that is also critical of what made that home (65).

Today’s historians and literary scholars have generally praised Wolf Willow for suggesting new approaches to western American and Canadian histories and for its contributions to western regionalist autobiography. According to New Western historian Patricia Nelson Limerick, Wolf Willow opened new ways of thinking about the historical West in its “put[ing] the great ethnic diversity of the West permanently on record” (Precedents 113) and Stegner’s articulation of a “place-centered history” anticipated by twenty-years the “core of New Western History” (114). For Canadian Dick Harrison, Wolf Willow “has been particularly influential” for Canadian writers, serving as “a historical and geographical justification of their claim to a distinctive local culture or worldview” (184-85). While Native American Elizabeth Lynn-Cook is highly critical of Stegner’s portrayal and assumptions about Native Americans in Wolf Willow, historian Rob Williams argues that, even though Stegner’s Wolf Willow is often “problematic” in its presentation of history and minorities, his work “leaves a great deal for historians to think about ... as we try to make historical sense of our” history (141). In “Courage

without Illusion,” Robert Maxwell Brown suggests that Stegner is the forefather for “a new western autobiography” that like Wolf Willow is “as much family history as it is individual autobiography” that is “giving us a new emotional history of the West” (56).<sup>34</sup> And Elliot West in “Wallace Stegner’s West, Wilderness, and History” (1997) suggests that Wolf Willow, though not as critically informed as is today’s literature about self and identity, attempts to reconstruct and heal the “deep fracture” between the present and the historical past because of a mythic, “imagined West of the nineteenth-century frontier” (85). This dissertation participates in this re-evaluation of Wolf Willow in its analysis of how Stegner redirects the narrative objective from a representation of self to an analysis of a self within the context of lived experiences within an historicized western place that was his childhood home, a home shaped by a specific geographic-cultural history and by the mythic West of the Frontier, the Pioneer, the Garden, and the Cowboy that positions the West as a symbolic container of hope, opportunity, and reward for the individual and America.

Even though he would not be pronounced the “dean of American western writers” until the 1970s, Stegner was developing at Stanford an impressive program and list of students who would become prominent voices in western American literature. Once he secured financial support for the program, Stegner instituted rigorous admittance standards, presented an encouraging workshop atmosphere, and provided Stegner Fellowships in Creative Writing to give students time to write, free of financial obligations (Fradkin 112-113).<sup>35</sup> As the Director of the self-shaped Stanford Creative Writing program, Stegner created

what Comer, among others, regards as “one of the most powerful legacies” in western American literature (Landscapes 39). Students who studied under Stegner during his tenure as Director include in alphabetical order: Edward Abbey, Peter S. Beagle, Wendell Berry, Eugene Burdick, Raymond Carver, Evan S. Connell, Ernest Gaines, Hannah Green, George V. Higgins, James D. Houston, Ken Kesey, Thomas McGuane, Edward McClanahan, Larry McMurtry, Sandra Day O’Connor, Tillie Olsen, Gurney Norman, Nancy Packer, Robert Stone, Scott Turow, and Al Young (Fradkin 113). There were poets Thomas Gunn, Robert Hass, Donald Justice, Philip Levine, N. Scott Momaday, and Robert Pinsky who were in Stanford’s Creative Writing Program but they were supervised by Yvor Winters who ran the poetry side of Stegner’s Program. From this group of poets, Hass and Momaday sought out Stegner for assistance with fiction (Fradkin 151).<sup>36</sup> According to Fradkin, Stegner’s approach in the workshops was modeled after his experiences at Iowa and Breadloaf and was intended to give “students the impression that they were pulling their own teeth or filling their own cavities—under a heavy dose of novocaine, meaning a protective environment—while the teacher gently guided the operation from a distance. Guidance, said Stegner, was the key” (127). While Stegner tolerated various styles of writing (some less than others, such as the experimentalism of the 1960s), Fradkin claims “Stegner was a realist, meaning, as he defined it, that ‘any good writing is created out of reality’ . . . . He is concerned with people, places, actions, feelings, and sensations” (129). According to some of his students, Stegner’s own predilections as a writer influenced his teaching of writing, an approach he outlined in Wallace Stegner: On Teaching and Writing Fiction (1988).<sup>37</sup>

After his retirement from Stanford, Stegner's influence with western writers continued. Of today's writers who corresponded with the retired Stegner and credit his influence are Barry Lopez, Ivan Doig, Terry Tempest Williams, William Kittredge, Harriet Doerr, Richard Bass, and David Rains Wallace (Fradkin 114). Others who knew him by reputation but have publically proclaimed their debt to him are Gretel Ehrlich and Maxine Hong Kingston and New Western historians Richard Etulain, Patricia Nelson Limerick, and Donald Worster (114, 150). While it is hard to judge the level of influence he may have had on these individuals, many have acknowledged Stegner's contribution whether they write with or against his view of the West.<sup>38</sup>

The 1960s saw western writers and western literary scholars announce their presence. In 1962, John R. Milton established The South Dakota Review, declaring the journal's primary interest to be western literature, thus providing scholars a place for critical appraisals of western authors. And in 1965 the Western Literature Association (WLA) formed, bringing with it an association-sponsored journal, Western American Literature, in 1966. The articles in these journals were written primarily by men and brought attention to western authors heretofore neglected by the academy—such as Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Vardis Fisher, Frank Waters, and A. B. Guthrie—but they failed to offer a holistic view of western regionalist writing.<sup>39</sup> Instead of adopting an imaginative stance to define the West as had others, Stegner's 1960's essays tied his theory of western American literature to the diversity of the West's geography and regional cultures and to notions of the West as America's "geography of hope" that retained the

imaginative and literal West in the same position as the Myths—as a place of opportunity, second chances, and new beginnings (Wilderness 153).

At the same time, Stegner's emphasis on the geographic diversity of the West brought an environmental consciousness and a new notion of regionalism to western literature and literary criticism that had been missing previously (Landscapes 41).<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the 1960s witnessed Stegner actively involved in national and local environmental issues. As Special Assistant to Secretary of Interior Stewart Udall, Stegner was named to the National Parks Advisory board from 1962 to 1967 and assisted at Udall's request in the research and preparation for what became the 1964 Wilderness Act. As a Sierra Club member since 1948 and later board member from 1964 to 1968, he participated in the defeat of the Bureau of Reclamation's attempts to dam the Yampa and Green Rivers and flood Dinosaur National Park. Locally, he founded and led the Committee for Green Foothills in 1962, a group dedicated to preservation of the Coast Range above the San Francisco Bay area. At the end of the decade, Stegner published The Sound of Mountain Water (1969), a collection of essays that included the three previously published essays theorizing western writing—"Born a Square" (1964), "On the Writing of History" (1965), and "History, Myth and the Western Writer" (1967)—and "Wilderness Letter to David Pesone" (1960) that claimed the West as a "geography of hope" for American culture.

In the 1960's essays, Stegner attempts to create a western writers' literary manifesto by revisioning western American literary historiography and by suggesting practices and approaches he and his contemporaries were to take when writing about the West. He claimed that western regionalist writers had as their common theme the

overarching presence and dominance of the mythic West, and he faulted his contemporaries for contributing to the marginalization of their literature by remaining tied to a nostalgic, romanticized, and heroic West. He also encouraged them to look beyond the mythic West's representation of the West's past to locate a more historically authentic West, as Pomeroy was doing with historians, so that they could connect the issues and problems they faced living in a complex, urban, and modern West to a historic, non-mythic past that would explain how they arrived at a present contrary to that claimed by America's cultural narratives. Stegner's aim was to "enlarge" western American literature so it could be included in the larger canon of American literature. According to Comer in Updating the Literary West (1997), Stegner's collection provided a "critical blueprint" for scholars because he suggested that the West should be thought of as an area of sub-regions, each with its own climate, landscape, and culture (18). Stegner's breaking apart of the mythic West and its emphasis on a singular place and narrative to represent, as Comer states, "different economies, development histories, topographies, climates, and particular ethnic mix of peoples combined into a whole defined not by similarity but by diversity" enabled him and others to include a wide range of writers in the West's literary tradition (Landscapes 40). However, not until the 1970s when multicultural initiatives challenge his spectrum did Stegner acknowledge minorities in his tradition, though he had included N. Scott Momaday in his revised tradition.<sup>41</sup>

In the argument he made in the 1960's essays for a diverse, many cultured West and for "another kind of western story-telling" (HMWW 187), Stegner

created a space for western regionalist writers to move beyond the predominantly white-male, rural, and realist-humanist bias he brought to his revisioned West in the 1960s. By the 1970s, however, Stegner was re-thinking the regionalist label. In “Coming of Age: the End of the Beginning” (1990), Stegner explained that “like most of my fellows in the 1930s and 1940s, I was to some extent a regional patriot” because we had a “colonial complex, ...[a] feeling of inferiority” that an “indignant assertion of equality” assuaged (137). By the 1970s, however, Stegner was acknowledging the limitations of regionalism, telling Etulain in their 1979 conversations that “regionalism” could be a “limiting term, a pejorative term like ‘local colorist’” and that he wished to be known as an American writer or a writer from the West because the term “‘western writer’ is likely to make you sound like Louis L’Amour” (132). By the 1990s he felt this regionalist defense was no longer needed for the literary western, as it had come of age with a tradition that reflected the many voices of a diverse West.

The debate on the importance of “westernness” as a critical category for western American literature continues today. Western scholars and writers debate the significance of this distinction to western fiction and whether regionalist motivations exclude rather than include the literary western in the larger canon of American literature. According to Michael Kowalewski in his preface to Reading the West: New Essays on the Literature of the American West (1996), the academy legitimizes western literature only when it comes under the aegis of other categories, such as race, gender, cultural studies, Asian-American, Chicana/o studies, women’s studies, Native American, or environmental studies; thus he argues western writers must remain regionalists to have their “western” voices heard (9). In “Old West, New West, Postwest, Real West” (2006)

Nina Baym rejects this view in her review of recent scholarship on western literature and its lingering regionalist defense. Baym states that, “when western American literature first showed up in eastern periodicals, it offered itself as a different kind of writing from the national norm” (814). Western scholars displayed a “kind of jaunty impertinence—simultaneously grandiose and defensive as they attempted first to gain admittance to the canon and then to distinguish themselves”—as they declared their literature as “western, a thing unto itself” (827). They continue to be “out of step with the rest of literary academia” (814), she argues, because instead of recognizing connections, shared concerns, and the relationship of their narratives to a larger American literature, they continue to argue for difference. Therefore, she states, “as American literary study strives to become more global, it relegates western American literature to the place it has long occupied—on the margins, away from the center” (827). In his lifetime, Stegner argued both ways: that western writing is shaped by the writer’s “western” experience but that their writing was also very much connected to the larger whole of America and to American literature.

In the last two decades of his life, Stegner remained busy as a writer of fiction. The 1970s began with Stegner finally able to retire comfortably from his positions at Stanford as Professor and Director. He left frustrated with campus politics and departmental in-fighting, bitter and disgusted from experiences teaching the younger generation, and especially disenchanted by the destructive campus riots over the Vietnam War.<sup>42</sup> Even though he fully supported the students’ sentiments, he could not abide their tactics. As Wendell Berry notes,



Stegner “had grown up deprived of everything these people were taking for granted. And they were very ostentatiously despising it all, and he had a most exquisite sense of the worth of it” (qtd in Fradkin 158). With time to devote to his writing, Stegner’s literary output increased significantly, even as he continued to travel abroad extensively. He published five novels between 1971 and 1987: Angle of Repose (1971) that explored the tensions between the western past and present, East and West; The Spectator Bird (1976) that delved into issues of family and environment; Recapitulation (1979) that completed the story of the Masons begun in Big Rock; and Crossing to Safety (1987) that bridged East / West tensions through the bonds of friendship. In terms of nonfiction, Stegner published The Uneasy Chair: A Biography of Bernard DeVoto (1974), edited DeVoto’s letters (1975), and put out his second collection of essays on the environment, travel, and literary issues in One Way to Spell Man (1982). He joined his son, Page Stegner, for American Places (1981), a travelogue that further identified his notions of placed-ness and the community’s relationship to place that is also evident in an earlier “Foreword” to his good friend Ansel Adams’ Images (1973) and in the new foreword to the reissue of This is Dinosaur (1985). Plus, he agreed to discuss the major ideas, themes, and concerns that permeated his thinking about the West with Etulain for Conversations with Wallace Stegner on Western History and Literature (1983, revised in 1990) and prepared the monograph The American West as Living Space (1987) from a series of lectures he delivered at the University of Michigan in 1986 on historical, literary, environmental, and social issues facing America and westerners. These last decades saw Stegner’s reputation grow significantly, as he won a Pulitzer for Angle of Repose in 1972, a National Book Award in 1977 for The Spectator Bird, the John Muir Award for service to the

environment from the Sierra Club in 1982, and several Life Achievement awards for his literature and environmental activism.

This 1970s and 1980s also brought challenges. The first major challenge came in 1972 in regard to Angle of Repose and Stegner's use of the letters and memoir of Mary Hallock Foote, western author and illustrator in the 1890s.<sup>43</sup> While the novel has been called one of the best ever written about and by an author from the West and garnered Stegner a Pulitzer, coming with these recognitions were charges of plagiarism for his incorporation of Foote's materials into his novel (Fradkin 226). While this event goes beyond the scope of this dissertation, it sheds some light on Stegner's method of turning fact-into-fiction that had plagued him very early in his career with Remembering Laughter (1937) and Second Growth (1947) and speaks somewhat to the limits of his realist approach and his struggles as a writer to incorporate some of the approaches he advocates in the 1960's essays.<sup>44</sup>

Angle of Repose is a novel about the American West at the turn of the century as represented through the experiences of a married couple, the easterner Susan Burling and the westerner Oliver Ward, with their lives interpreted by their grandson, Lyman Ward, a crippled, divorced, and bitter historian living in the late 1960s.<sup>45</sup> Susan and Oliver's story exposes in their struggles to make a living and a life in the early West the tensions of East and West, misperceptions and expectations due to the influence of the mythic West, and the economic and environmental realities of western life from the region's defining aridity. Stegner used the generational tensions between Susan and Oliver and their narrator-

grandson Lyman Ward and Ward's young assistant to reveal the continued dominance and affect of the West's myths, the disjunction between past and present, and the role of the western artist—or those themes and issues Wolf Willow and the 1960's essays had addressed. While the story, its setting and its themes and conflicts, all speak to the life-long concerns and issues Stegner pursued, the charges he faced stemmed from his use of the lives of real, recognizable people—Mary Hallock Foote and Arthur D. Foote—without providing either the proper warping of reality to ensure the anonymity the family desired for his use of their grandparents' lives or the overt acknowledgement on his copyrights page that he not only used facts from their lives but also quoted extensively from her letters and memoir.<sup>46</sup> Although he and the family exchanged correspondence and visits during his writing and he offered them the opportunity to read the manuscript prior to its publication and they did not, Stegner's extensive incorporation of the Foote materials, despite some alteration of events in her life to meet his fictional ends, put him and his most successful and renowned novel into the critical hot-seat and led to a feminist resurgence in Foote scholarship.<sup>47</sup> While nothing formal occurred, Stegner's reputation and novel have been tainted. When Stegner came to publish his last novel, Crossing to Safety (1987), a moving tribute to his long-time friendship with easterners Phil and Peg Grey, Stegner asked all six children to approve the manuscript before it went to publication—all did (Fradkin 272).

Seen as somewhat old-fashioned in his adherence to a realist and historicist view of writing, Stegner watched his positions on realism, race, gender, subjectivity, and the literary western be applauded as well as questioned until his death in 1993, as the 1970s through 1990s brought significant re-examination of western American literature and

western history in general. With the challenges to established social norms that anti-war protests, the civil rights movement, and feminism started in the 1960s and the academy's turn to critical theories that contested the assumptions and structures of totalizing narratives, literary scholars and historians began questioning how western American history and literature were represented. Two very important studies in the 1970s that had significant influence on western American literature were those by cultural historian Richard Slotkin and literary scholar Annette Kolodny, as each dug deep into the history and the narratives used to tell the western story to expose and explain how they functioned in American culture of the past and present and, particularly in Kolodny's case, to recover narratives previously silenced.

For literary studies, Slotkin contextualized Lewis's study of the "American Adam" and Smith's notion of popular culture constructing an "idea of the West" to show how both related to and were influenced by various aspects of American culture, popular culture, history, politics, and literature. In Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier in Twentieth-Century America (1973), Slotkin undertook an in-depth survey of frontier mythology within the context of America's cultural, political, and historical development that delineated the role of the "West" in terms of its literary and mythic representations in American literature, a developing American national identity, and emergent American cultural imaginary and political consciousness from the colonial period to the 1960s. He continued his analysis of the West's myths in The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age

of Industrialization, 1800-1890 (1985) and Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America (1992). In all three works, Slotkin tied American culture's "idea of the West" to a "moving borderland," as new events occurred and the frontier lands receded with America's westward progress, which indicated how the current popular conception of the West held by American culture was modified. Slotkin provided scholars with a historical and spatial locus for investigating how the "idea of the West" was constructed by culture. Although better informed by poststructuralist, cultural, and feminist theories than those scholars before him and praised for exposing metanarratives of American western history that have essentially masked the economic, ecological, and cultural consequences of westward expansion, Slotkin has been faulted for being overly simplistic and given to promoting overarching generalizations, for minimizing the role of women in frontier myth-making, and for making the historical and literary men he discusses the normative standards of the era.<sup>48</sup> Two other cultural critics following Slotkin's path were Russell B. Nye in The Unembarrassed Muse: The Popular Arts in America (1970) and John Cawelti in The Six-Gun Mystique (1971) who focused specifically on the popular formulaic western to show how the popular western reflects the tensions existing in the society and culture that produced them and are a significant form of American popular culture that contributes to the dominance of western mythologies in the American consciousness.

Stegner had pursued somewhat similar concerns regarding the shaping influence of accepted western myths on popular culture and America's actions and attitudes as they impact the present West and the future West in his challenges to the influence of the mythic West on western writing. As this dissertation will illustrate, Wolf Willow and the

essays become Stegner's textual site to identify and challenge the role and power of a dominant western discourse that shapes the western self, a western literary tradition, and an American national identity. While he specifically addresses the cultural prominence of the formulaic western in the 1960's essays, Stegner considered it a losing battle to fight this form of the western narrative directly. As he stated in a 1983 essay, "Variations on a Theme by Crèvecoeur," the mythic cowboy hero had "irritated" him his entire life, and he "would obviously like to bury him. But I know I can't. He is a faster gun than I am. He is too attractive to the daydreaming imagination. It gets me nowhere to object to the self-righteous, limited, violent code that governs him" (111). As he acknowledged the popularity and dominance of the formulaic western in the 1960's essays, Stegner's concern at the time was to make sure the literary western did not become its mirror or step-child. In Wolf Willow, Stegner confronted the cowboy story, exposing the distance between the mythic cowboy and the actual cowhand and introduced into the male-dominated myth the western woman as a source of critique to the classic western story of western exceptionalism. Slotkin, Cawelti, and Nye continued at much greater depth and focus than either Stegner or Nash before them the analysis of how popular culture understands, depicts, and employs the western narrative in mass-media forms, literature, and politics. More recent studies by Lee Clark Mitchell, Forrest Robinson, Jane Tompkins, Richard Etulain, Carlton Smith, and John Dorst have significantly furthered what Stegner avoided—the analysis of the formulaic western as an expression of social and cultural critique,

its relation to the literary western, and its place in the canon of western American literature.

The 1970s and 1980s saw feminist scholars attack the western narrative as a patriarchal story that expressed an Euro-American totalizing perspective that subsumed all human experience under the category of “man,” thus masking the economic, ecological, and cultural consequences of westward expansion in America’s Frontier and Pioneer myths of national and cultural progress.<sup>49</sup> Feminist scholars argued that most western women fell into a critical vacuum because they received little critical attention in the major western studies, as most were done by male scholars.<sup>50</sup> In both Wolf Willow and the 1960’s essays, Stegner discussed the dynamics of men and women in the western metanarrative, thus bringing women into the previously exclusive male domain. Women populate the landscape of his childhood and often represent the values of community, family, care, compromise, and respect for the land he uses to challenge the rugged individualism, stoicism, exceptionalism, and violence the western narrative promotes. In Wolf Willow, Stegner presented women as historicized subjects in the settlement of the West to show, as he commented in Conversations, that not all women coming West “in poke bonnets were ... housewives with a third grade education” (91). By including women in the western literary tradition and fiction, Stegner helped open the door for others to pursue deeper gender issues in the West’s metanarratives.

One of the first major critical studies to promote gender as a critical category in western literary scholarship was Annette Kolodny’s The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters (1975), followed by The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860 (1984). Both

works focused on the personal narratives of pioneer women, their journals, letters, and diaries to reveal the much neglected role of women in the pioneer and frontier movement and their relationship to the mythologies of the West that mostly coded them as Other and oppositional or excluded them all together. Kolodny's study critiqued through feminist concerns the assumptions behind the masculinist myths of the West and their feminization of the land and nature. She added the critical category of gender to investigations of class and race Slotkin had used, and, in her recovery of women and minorities in America's cultural narrative of progress through male adventure and conquest of western lands, she initiated a recovery and exploration of material typically considered non-literary and more within the purview of the historian—memoirs, journals, letters, and diaries—that extended, as Smith had done earlier, what had been considered the realm of western American literature. Kolodny invigorated a significant field of study within western American literature that targeted the recovery of women and their role within the western narrative. This recovery of women expanded quickly to include the voices of Native American, Hispanic, and Asian women and adopted not only feminist forms of critical inquiry but also postmodernist and post-colonialist strategies that challenged the mythic West's singular story of white-male conquest of the land and racial others.<sup>51</sup>

Along with recovering lost voices in the western story, Nina Baym's "The Melodrama of Beset Manhood" (1981) explored the role of women in what she considered the quintessential American narrative that has been used to define the male self and America's nationhood—the young, innocent male's escape from



civilization to the wilderness to become a man, a story she argues is grounded in the narrative of America's westward expansion and national progress. This male plot of individuation evident in the narrative of the frontier hero represents, in her view, the key defining traits for what constitutes the "American-ness" of American literature and is based on a rigid dichotomy of sex roles in which the male is the subject and the female is the object of the story. By making women representative of the constraints of tradition and authority, or the rules, responsibilities, and obligations of family and community in white civilization and culture, these myths position women as obstacles to male freedom, independence, and adventure. In one of Wolf Willow's two stories, "Carrion Spring," Stegner explores the resistance of the western woman to the western landscape and male desire for freedom to show that this resistance is tied to a loss of self-identity rather than cultural associations of domesticity.

Melody Graulich's "O Beautiful for Spacious Guys: On the Legitimate Inclination of the Sexes" (1989) reiterated Baym's point on the centrality of the Frontier myth in American literature and its exclusion of the other, especially the feminine, in formulations of American self-hood in American literature in her nod to Stegner's comment in the 1960's essays that men and women act according to "legitimate inclinations of the sexes" (HMWW 195). According to Graulich, the frontier narrative not only eliminates from the American literary canon "women writers, whose works it could not adequately interpret, and minority writers but also male writers who did not respond to the call of the wild" (188). Graulich suggests that women writers, and particularly western women, such as Maria Sandoz, Mary Austin, Jean Stafford, and others, recognized that to fulfill a desire for the male role of freedom and independence

offered by the male narrative would come at the cost of “denigrating traditional female values, the ‘warmth of the hearth,’ simply because they have been reduced and stereotyped within the masculine myth” (195). In her view, writers and scholars alike will come to recognize that there “were two Wests: a female and a male” and that with more attention to women’s lives, historians and literary scholars will be led to a “major reinterpretation of western history” (196).<sup>52</sup> One conclusion, she posits, will be that those narratives presented as male fantasies of freedom and self-determination are universally human, not just male, and what have been presented as female concerns—human interdependence and obligation—are also human and not just female and have been significantly undervalued (196).

Throughout his career, Stegner drew women into the western narrative by expanding the western literary tradition or the western story to include the voices of women. According to Comer, “on the level of simple acknowledgment that women writers indeed existed and influenced the spatial field, Stegner exceeds by every measure any other male rendering of the literary past.... In a Stegnerian spatial field, women are historical subjects with integrity, legitimate needs and desires, agency. Like men, they influence the course of history”; however, Comer makes clear that “Stegner was not a feminist” because he “did not hold the fundamental feminist conviction that women are oppressed” (Landscapes 46). Instead, he saw them as mistreated, but not oppressed in the same way as were racial others. Graulich argues that Stegner offers (white) women writers a usable past in his claim in the 1960’s essays that western men and women responded to

the western frontier spatiality according to what he called “the legitimate inclination of the sexes” (HMWW 195).<sup>53</sup> While Stegner brought women more prominently into the western spatiality, he did not get beyond his own Victorian sensibilities, or a personal sense of male honor, virtue, and duty. As Comer and others agree, these sensibilities prevented him from seeing gender relations in the same way as he saw race relations. In terms of race, Stegner said “real prejudices” existed instead of the mere “cultural blindness” that pervaded gender relations (qtd in Landscapes 47). As Comer notes, in “Letter, Much Too Late” (1989) written to his deceased mother, Stegner does register some acknowledgement of how a male-dominated society could mistreat and subjugate women (Landscapes 47). In Wolf Willow, Stegner explores the different ways in which women understand their relationship to their western situation through the presence of pioneer women, like his mother, and the fictional pioneer woman, Molly Henry, to show the demands and limitations of the western environment on women as well as men.

Another influential feminist text in western American literary studies was Vera Norwood and Janice Monk’s The Desert Is No Lady: Southwestern Landscapes in Women’s Writing and Art (1987). Norwood and Monk continued to pursue feminist concerns in western literature through a series of essays that deconstructed the gendered bias of western literature through examination of Southwestern women artists of various ethnic backgrounds and their representations of the western landscape. Their essays suggested that women figured the land as domestic gardens in order to subvert male possession of a land and nature that had been represented as a virginal female body. Their study began a path of investigation into gendered representations of space and land within the western region by western (women) writers. The issues of place and

landscape, specifically western ones, and men's and women's responses to them were a critical component of Stegner's conception of the American West. In Wolf Willow, he locates in the discovery of a non-mythic history of his childhood and in the recovery of his and his family's experiences there culturally and historically defined relationships with western lands that are destructive and possessive. His aim is to correct these culturally defined attitudes by locating other relationships, like belonging and stewardship, in the history of this place and his own personal experiences.

A more recent study that furthers the above mentioned feminist concerns within the study of western American literature and specifically acknowledges Stegner's role and contributions to western American literature is Krista Comer's Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women's Writing (1999). Comer argues for a new literary western regionalism that is feminist and postmodern in its focus and theoretical grounding, noting that "it is the feminist component of the new movement, even, that dominates its 'new story'" (8).<sup>54</sup> Sounding at times like a female Stegnerian "regional patriot," Comer wishes to remove the perception that western literature is racialized white, gendered male, and only about cowboys and the past, and thus has relatively the same objectives Stegner had previously. Taking on the cultural and academic assumptions about western writing (as did Stegner), Comer "desires to 'remap' or 'respatialize' the West, this time with a feminist, antiracist, and often postnationalist logic" to make this new feminist western discourse politically meaningful to contemporary audiences, particularly women and minorities (9).

She claims this feminist movement in western American literature creates a space in western literature for discussions of misogyny, male privilege, divisions of labor, and institutional structures that enforce gender differences that the western metanarrative and Stegner's theories of western literature do not. Like Stegner, Comer has been faulted for pushing "place-based critical formations" because they are constructed on the "foundations of regional authenticity," while also praised for "lay[ing] the ground work for a western literary criticism committed to progressive social change" through its "resistance-oriented regionalism" (Herman 65, 67).<sup>55</sup> She argues, as did Stegner, for a western literature capable of cutting a broader swath and therefore capable of addressing the complexity of the West's problems.

By revealing the anthropocentric bias of the western metanarrative, feminist scholars have exposed how gender, race, class, and sexuality in the West's narratives of the frontier-pioneer-cowboy hero and the nation's westward expansion are critical categories in thinking about how individual, western, and national identities are constituted through this western narrative. According to Bridgette Georgi-Findlay in The Frontiers of Women's Writing: Women's Narratives and the Rhetoric of Westward Expansion (1996), these previous studies helped illustrate how women's secondary presence within the Frontier myth can be attributed to the "patriarchal impulse in 19<sup>th</sup> Century American culture and to the exclusion of women's texts in early, formative studies of American Literature and cultural criticism" (9). This feminist concern in western literary studies has led to recovering heretofore omitted writing (fiction and non-fiction) by women and minorities, to locating alternative narratives within western American literature, and to having a western American literary scholarship that is no

longer, according to Comer, “conceived without attention to feminist concerns or gendered analysis (of men or women) or to influences upon men by women writers or female literary traditions” (Landscapes 248). For instance, Graulich claims in “O Beautiful for Spacious Guys” that while he mentions Mary Austin in his essays, Stegner does not discuss her to any detail. She suggests that Stegner’s emphasis on the diversity of peoples, geographies, and regions in the West as the basis for a theory of western American literature is similar to what Austin presented in her autobiography Earth Horizon (1932), where she grounded her writing in the diversity of landscapes and native and non-native peoples that surrounded her. Though Austin’s description is similar to Stegner’s, Graulich suggests that Austin’s expression did not achieve the range of influence necessary to be taken as a western literary manifesto (191,195).<sup>56</sup>

In the 1980s and 1990s, Native Americans, Asian-Americans, and Hispanics argued against the exclusionary practices not only of the mythic West’s singular metanarrative that relegated them to the position of Other but also the scholarship associated with western American Literature that had marginalized their voices. While his fiction rarely draws in minorities in its focus on the urban, western present, Stegner’s histories and especially Wolf Willow do acknowledge the presence of Native Americans and other minorities who are a part of the historical West. Native American Elizabeth Lynn-Cook claims in Why I Can’t Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays (1996) that “no American fiction writer ... has been more successful in serving the interests of a nation’s fantasy about itself than Wallace Stegner” (29). While she takes issue with Stegner’s

presentation of Native Americans in Wolf Willow, suggesting that his interpretation of cultural attitudes and habits reduces them to “cliché” (34), Lynn-Cook uses Stegner to symbolize those western writers and a western literary tradition that “claim possession of the American West” and “offer only a narrowness of vision and a confused history” (32). Thus she “argues with Stegner’s reality” and “call[s] for a shift in attitude concerning the history and literature of the West” (32), which is for “Americans . . . to come face to face with the loathsome idea that their invasion of the New World was . . . a pseudoreligious and corrupt socioeconomic movement for the possession of resources” (33). Comer suggests that, while the Stegnerian spatial field does not overtly account for minorities, his vision of “another kind of western story-telling” and notion of “many Wests” does (HMWW 195, 188) and that minorities are using this oppositional strategy to create a space in the western narrative and literary tradition for their voices (Landscapes 43). In regard to literary criticism, Craig Womack’s Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism (1999) is a particularly good example of how Stegner’s revisioning of western literature from an “insider’s” perspective can be used, as Womack suggests that a model of literary criticism for Native American literature could be based on tribal models and values instead of the dominant (white) models of poststructural and postcolonial approaches. In The American West as Living Space (1987), Stegner shows clear signs of accounting for Native Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and Native Americans in his western literary historiography, even differentiating their contributions to the West’s literary tradition.

While neither Wolf Willow nor the 1960’s essays were informed by present critical theories, this dissertation will illustrate and argue for Stegner’s sensitivity toward

the limited role of women, Native Americans, and other minorities within the traditional white-male myths of the West. He evidences in Wolf Willow a recognition of the complexity of gendered relationships that go beyond the “roving man” and “civilizing woman” paradigm he will identify in the 1960’s essays to suggest that the categories of “woman” and “West” are not necessarily oppositional and may perhaps be closer to Graulich’s notion that women’s response to the western landscape reflects human inclinations that are not exclusively female.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, his recovery of silenced alternative voices in the people and places of his “belated” frontier past to contest the culturally dominant, male mythic tradition of the American frontier and Turner’s thesis of westward expansion and national progress anticipates the work of later literary critics and historians who will question and dismantle the western metanarrative and western American literary tradition in order to “enlarge” this metanarrative and tradition as Stegner had hoped to do in the 1960’s essays.

Like their contemporary literary counterparts, New Western historians have been informed by an awareness of recent critical theories regarding the study of history and cultural representations of an historicized American West. According to James H. Maguire in “Encountering the West” (1997), Stegner’s influence is present in the critique of western mythologies and view of the West as a region of great diversity given its varying topographies in the emergence of this regionalist and revisionist historical movement (75).<sup>58</sup> While he was not a trained historian and faulted by historians for not being as “nuanced” and “circumspect” as he might have been about his topics, as careful as he should



have been with sources and documentation, and as having too much of an authorial presence, Stegner's critical engagement with the historical and mythical West in his non-fiction and fiction is generally applauded for laying important ground work for recent historical revision of the American West (Fradkin 180).<sup>59</sup> Like Stegner, these revisionist New Western historians see the American West as a geographical and historical place and seek to tell its local stories rather than a unified national narrative like Turner did. Engaged in the recovery of an oral tradition from western natives, settlers, and immigrants; Native American, Asian, Mexican, and Spanish autobiographies; pioneer and immigrant testimonies; the journals of explorers, military wives, and soldiers; and the documentation of military exploits, New Western historians offer a revisionist history of the West that is polyphonic, regional, and ethnically diverse. Their studies deepen and broaden the social, cultural, historical, and present "historical landscape" of the American West by demonstrating that alongside the historical narrative of conquest, individualism, and dominance there existed efforts toward community, communication, and integration.

Following upon the earlier work by Pomeroy in the late 1940s, Patricia Nelson Limerick's The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West (1987) is a study credited with having as significant an impact on American historical studies as did Smith's The Virgin Land (1950) in its challenge to the hegemonic narrative of the American West as a source of American exceptionalism (Eutlain, Telling 119).

Following Stegner's emphases on place and local history, Limerick presents a West and frontier story that is regional, geographic, historic, and a cultural place of contact, competition, conflict, and conquest between various groups at the local level. Her West is characterized by destructive capitalism, environmental devastation, and ethnocentric

attitudes that have led to the modern West's environmental, racial, and ethnic tensions. With Turner's "closing of the frontier" separating the past from the present, today's West inherited the burdens of the western past that when left unacknowledged, Limerick states, continue to shape the westerners' present. In "Precedents to Wisdom," she claims Stegner had "the jump on the New Western History... in the method and the content of his story in Wolf Willow" in its "place-centered history," its examination of regional areas, and the portrayal of the ethnic diversity of his western childhood place. She suggests he anticipates the cultural representations of western history and the constructedness of "history" and "myth" within the context of specific socio-cultural-historical eras (113). In Stegner's "telling the full story of the complicated events and maneuverings—of Indians, métis, Hudson's Bay Company traders, and Mounties—that had preceded the arrival of white Americans" and acknowledging the "tragedy and failure" in the narrative of western settlement in Wolf Willow, she claims Stegner highlighted the individual's relationship to a specific western place and emphasized, as New Western historians do, the West as region and place rather than the process Turner claimed it was (113).

Even though he was not very accepting of experimentation in literature in the 1970s, remaining committed to the precept that writers "write what they know," and even as his brand of western literature ran head on into that of feminists, minorities, multiculturalists, and a variety of other theoretical constructs, Stegner lived to see many of the objectives he outlined in the 1960's essays come to fruition. At the same time, Stegner's attitudes changed toward the

West and toward western literature over the course of his life. As he described his life in the late 1980s, he said “My first fifteen years were migrant and deprived. My next fifteen were aspiring and academic and literary and deprived. My last fifty have been academic and literary and not quite so deprived. It is progress of a sort. But I am still the person my first fifteen years made me” (as qtd in Fradkin 289). Perhaps with the onset of age and its ailments, but most likely due to the continual misuse of western resources he witnessed around him, by the end of his life Stegner had far less “faith in the future” for better treatment of the West than he did for its literature because he considered that battle mostly won (WW 255).

While he had claimed in the 1960s that the West was America’s “geography of hope” in his “Wilderness Letter” (1960) and expressed cautious optimism in Wolf Willow (1962) for what the West could offer America and the western writer because he saw the western region as still developing in comparison to a staid eastern America and because he believed in the early 1960s that westerners could reject their need to own and exploit the West for a sense of belonging and stewardship, by the 1990s Stegner was not so hopeful and very concerned about how American’s failed to acknowledge what was happening to western lands.<sup>60</sup> In preparation for a new foreword for a 1992 release of the “Wilderness Letter” (1960), Stegner wrote: “We have already lost a good deal; the further [wilderness] goes, the more we lose. Trying to think of ways to prevent further losses of this kind, all I can think of is acceptance, acknowledgement, and restraint—acceptance of the limitations of the country, acknowledgement of the incompatibility of solitude and resort activities, and restraint of our devouring greed” (qtd in Fradkin 289). Even though he was less hopeful that values could be changed, he did not consider the

situation hopeless. In the Introduction to his last collection of essays, The Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs (1991), Stegner asks the reader to not see “western hopefulness as a cynical joke” for, “against probability, some sort of indigenous, recognizable culture has been growing on western ranches and in western towns and even in western cities.... the product ... of the stickers” for change and adaptation (xxii). While he had fought many environmental battles, winning some but losing most, Stegner maintained some hope that America would come to change its attitudes of possession and profit toward western lands to ones of stewardship and belonging.

In regard to the position western American literature had garnered since the 1930s in the public and academy’s view, Stegner was far more pleased by its advances than those made on environmental issues. In fact, in 1991 he stated that he felt “the surge of the inextinguishable western hope” in western writers and especially in all the “new ones, the Ivan Doigs and Bill Kittredges and James Welches, the Greta Ehrlichs and Rudolfo Anayas and John Daniels, the Scott Momadays and Louise Erdrichs and many more” (Bluebird xxii). In the essay, “Coming of Age: The Beginning of the End” (1990), Stegner said his wish for the West had always been “to have not only writers—it has had those from the very beginning—but all the infrastructure of the literary life: a book-publishing industry, a range of literary and critical magazines, good bookstores, a reviewing corps independent of eastern and foreign opinion, support organizations such as PEN USA, an alert reading public, and all the rest” (135). After some fifty-five years working to have western American literature acknowledged as vital,

important, and a part of the American literary canon, he believed the fight had been successful, claiming “The West doesn’t need to wish for good writers. It has them” (141). These writers, he acknowledges, represent an extension of the geographic-regional-cultural diversity he claimed for the West in his 1960’s critical essays. What remains to be done, he argues, is for the West to develop “an audience that will appreciate them” and “critics capable, by experience or intuition, of evaluating western literature in terms of western life.... Such critics will come” (141). In this projection, he retained the “hope, or faith in the future” he says in Wolf Willow his pioneer upbringing gave him (255), wishing only that “I am around to see it fully arrive” (Introduction Bluebird xxiii). Only two years later, on April 13, 1993, two and half weeks after a car crash in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and at age eighty-four Wallace Stegner died. Surviving him was his wife of fifty-nine years, Mary Stegner, his son, Page, two daughters-in-law, two grandchildren, and a significant legacy of advocacy for the value of western American literature, for the “westernness” of the western writer, and for the need at the regional, national, and global level for humans to change their attitudes toward the world in which they lived.

Instead of having his remains scattered in the West he had called home, Stegner had his ashes scattered at his Vermont summer home. As he told his biographer Jackson L. Benson in June 1989, Vermont was a place in which he found “family and tradition and history.” His western home in Los Altos was now a part of Silicon Valley, and he said it “had no sense of history, no regard for history.... What you have to pay attention to is what is on the screen of your computer. That’s where the competition is; that’s where the challenge is” (qtd in Fradkin 293). Toward the end of his life, he saw the West

of the 1980s and 1990s re-enacting the myths' boom-and-bust cycles in its dot com industry and continued overdevelopment and re-engineering of its arid landscapes, in its emphasis on the present and future and view of "history as bunk," and thus repeating or not learning from its past, a past he had tried to elucidate in his fiction and histories. As he wrote in American Places (1983), "there is something in Vermont—in its climate, people, history, laws—that wins people to it in love and loyalty, and does not welcome speculation and the unearned increment and the treatment of land and water as commodities. Here, if anywhere in the United States, land is a heritage as well as a resource, and ownership suggests stewardship, not exploitation" (49). Stegner's papers are housed at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, where he lived as a teenager and where the University has a renowned environmental center named after him (Fradkin 10-11).

Stegner dedicated his life to describing a present, urban, emerging West and the problems it faced in his fiction, histories, and essays. He articulated the problems of the present through his knowledge of an unmythicized past in order to offer corrections for the present. In the 1960's critical essays, he developed a theory of western American literature grounded in the strategies he used in Wolf Willow to challenge a culturally dominant mythic West and resulting from his assessment of the status of western American literature in 1960s. While he acknowledged that the westerner's and America's cultural inheritance includes the Frontier, Pioneer, Cowboy, and Garden West myths and their promises of progress, opportunity, regeneration, and democracy, Stegner argued that this

mythic West kept the modern West trapped in a fantasy version of its past and present. Thus he sought to recover an “unmythologized” historical past in Wolf Willow to contest these defining western myths, and in the 1960’s essays he assigned his contemporary western writers a series of “chores” to prevent their literary westerns from becoming like the mythic, formulaic westerns that promoted the myths that defined what was “western.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See also Gregory Martin's Mountain City in which he presents a history of Mountain City, Nevada, a small town west of Tuscarora and north of Elko, Nevada, that is part of the region Eva Rizzi's family lived and where my mother grew up on her parents' ranch. Through his focus on his Basque grandparents, the Tremewans, whose store was the hub of this small community that is now almost a ghost town, Martin's text is an descendant of Stegner's own Wolf Willow in its blending of family and western history to inform others about the modern and past West.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, his student Edward Abbey was challenging and rejecting the past West for a modern West in The Brave Cowboy (1956) and would continue to do so in his later works as Stegner's essays suggested they should.

<sup>3</sup> Comer as well as others consider the following as Stegner's theoretical writings: the essays, "Born a Square" (1964) and "History Myth and the Western Writer" (1967). See also Stegner and Richard Etulain's, Stegner: Conversations on Western Literature and History, in particular the chapters "The Literary West" from the 1979 edition and "Ten Years After" in the 1989 edition; Stegner's The American West as Living Space (1987) and Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs (1992). I have also included the essay, "On the Writing of History" (1965) in The Sound of Mountain Water (1969, rpt. 1980) for Stegner's definition of historical writing. Finally, Comer provides one of the best analyses of Stegner's theorizing about western American literature and the importance of his suppositions to the development of western scholarship and literature



from the 1970s to the present. This dissertation is indebted to her groundbreaking exegesis of Stegner's thinking about western writers, western literature, and the West.

<sup>4</sup> For more on Eastern critical views and influences on western literature see Robert Edson Lee's From East to West: Studies in the Literature of the American West, G. Edward White's The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience: The West of Frederic Remington, Theodore Roosevelt, and Owen Wister, and Comer's Landscapes of the New West .

<sup>5</sup> Vitalis's comments are from a working paper, "Wallace Stegner's Arabian Discovery: The Imperial Entailments of a Continental Vision" (2003), for New York University's International Center for Advanced Study and later incorporated into this book, America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier (Palo Alto, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Comer also has an excellent and must read section on what she calls the Stegnerian legacy that is balanced and well-informed, critical and analytical. See Comer's Landscapes of the New West, 38-49.

<sup>7</sup> For the most complete bibliography of Stegner's works to date, see Nancy Colberg's Wallace Stegner: A Descriptive Bibliography.

<sup>8</sup> Established in 1982, PEN USA WEST is a unique, regional competition that recognizes literary excellence in ten categories: fiction, creative nonfiction, research nonfiction, poetry, children's literature, translation, journalism, drama, teleplay, and screenplay.

<sup>9</sup> Thacker made these comments in his review essay on works related to Stegner's Saskatchewan home that included The Selected Letters of Wallace Stegner (2007) edited

by his son, Page Stegner, and Philip L. Fradkin's new biography, Wallace Stegner and the American West (2008). Fradkin's is Stegner's second biography, Jackson J.

Benson's Wallace Stegner: His Life and Work (1996) was the first.

<sup>10</sup> Ladino is referring to Wilkinson 8, Ahearn 13, and Butula 21.

<sup>11</sup> Leaving his family in Seattle just after Wallace's birth, the one place George Stegner traveled to that his family did not follow was Alaska. His mother eventually left Seattle to return home to Iowa until George beckoned them to join him in Eastend in 1914.

Stegner will change the name of Eastend to Whitemud in Wolf Willow.

<sup>12</sup> In Wolf Willow, see the chapter, "History Is a Pontoon Bridge." Stegner also comments on how place shaped him in Conversations, chapters one through three; in the Introduction to The Sound of Mountain Water (9); and throughout The American West as Living Space.

<sup>13</sup> Stegner's biographer, Jackson Benson, calls Foerster an "unusual teacher of literature" when Stegner studied under him because he "specialized in the not entirely legitimate discipline of American literature (most teachers of English literature doubted there was any such thing until well into this century)" (51). An advocate of an American art, Foerster had already written these works when Stegner encountered him in the 1930s: Nature in American Literature (1923), American Criticism (1928), The Reinterpretation of American Literature (1928), and The American Scholar (1929). And he was in the process of editing the 1934, American Poetry and Prose, which according to Benson became "one of the most influential college textbook anthologies for several decades" (51). Additionally, Foerster was a leading advocate of the New Humanism, a philosophy

concerned with the history of ideas, the evolution of ideals, and the expression of values and beliefs in literature (Benson 51-52; Fradkin 57-60). Foerster would become something of a model for the character Lyman Ward in Angle of Repose, as Foerster retired to California and was afflicted with a crippling disease similar to what Stegner gives Lyman (Benson 345; Fradkin 229,258). Foerster's influence on the young and maturing Stegner has not been studied yet.

<sup>14</sup> Under Foerster, Stegner and other graduate students developed the foundation for the now famous University of Iowa writing program. Stegner carried many of these founding principles on to Bread Loaf and to his program at Stanford.

<sup>15</sup> See also John Thomas's A Country in the Mind: Wallace Stegner, Bernard DeVoto, History and the American Land for an excellent discussion of those who influenced him and the research Stegner did for the Powell book.

<sup>16</sup> See Fradkin 121-122.

<sup>17</sup> During his time at Bread Loaf, which he started in 1938 and to which he returned until 1953, Stegner worked as a writing instructor with fellow instructors Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, John Ciardi, Robert Frost, Bernard De Voto, and Edith Merrieles—the last three with whom he formed lasting friendships. He also came to know Alfred Knopf from Bread Loaf and would work with Knopf when he joined the Sierra Club and edited This is Dinosaur (1950). And, according to Fradkin, he found support for “the idea that writing could be taught,” an important caveat for his work at Stanford (53).

<sup>18</sup> The three novels are The Potter's House (1938), On a Darkling Plain (1940) and Fire and Ice (1940) and the history is Mormon Country (1942). According to the Robinsons

in Wallace Stegner, these novels and this period in Stegner's development as a writer show him struggling to find his voice.

<sup>19</sup> One Nation won the Houghton-Mifflin Life-In-America award in 1945 and was a co-winner in 1946 of the Anisfield-Wolf Award. The Anisfield-Wolf Award website declares that, "A decade before the wider white society had begun to think seriously about race relations, Stegner's work targeted racial prejudice as one of the country's most profound ills. The Anisfield-Wolf award was started in 1935 by "Cleveland poet and philanthropist Edith Anisfield Wolf who established the book prizes in honor of her father, John Anisfield, and husband, Eugene Wolf, to reflect her family's passion for issues of social justice. Today it remains the only American book prize focusing on works that address racism and diversity." Accessed 12/28/2010: <http://www.anisfield-wolf.org/Winners/Biography.aspx?id=80>.

<sup>20</sup> Edited by Robert E. Spiller and six other editors and forty-nine contributors, this was one of the first comprehensive studies of American literature. The 1988 Columbia Literary History of the United States tries to correct many of omissions of the 1948 study; Emory Elliot was its General Editor and Associate Editors were Martha Banta, Terrence Martin, David Minter, Marjorie Perloff, Daniel B. Shea.

<sup>21</sup> For more on the emergence of this discipline and how it helped bring attention to western American literature and history and the eventual revisionism undertaken in both disciplines in the 1970s, see Lucy Maddox and Louis Menand's studies.

<sup>22</sup> Three examples that show DeVoto exposing how the mythic West hides the historical realities of the West are from his "Easy Chair" columns for Harpers: "The West: A

Plundered Province” (1934); “Fossil Remnants of the Frontier” (1935); and “The Birth of an Art” (1955). Stegner cites this last one in “History, Myth, and the Western Writer” as an example of how the cowboy myth “condon[es] handmade personal justice [which] is to encourage vigilantism” (196-197).

<sup>23</sup> At Stanford, Stegner and Yvor Winters were the only Americanists in the English department for some time. With both involved in the Stanford Creative Writing Program—Stegner fiction; Winters poetry—they alternated teaching the large contemporary American survey course. Stegner’s courses became *The Rise of Realism in the American Novel* and *The Contemporary Novel* (Fradkin 116).

<sup>24</sup> Some of the anthologies Stegner edited and wrote introductions for are Great American Short Stories (1957), Selected American Prose (1958), and The American Novel from James Fenimore Cooper to William Faulkner (1965).

<sup>25</sup> See Allan G. Bogue’s “The Course of Western History’s First Century” for an insightful overview of the significance of Smith’s argument to western American studies. For more on the prominence of the “idea of the West” in the American cultural imaginary, see John D. Dorst’s examination of Buffalo Bill’s contribution to myth-making in Looking West, Etulain’s Telling Western Stories, and G. Edward White’s The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience: The West of Frederic Remington, Theodore Roosevelt, and Owen Wister. White argues that these three men, especially Roosevelt, used symbols associated with East and West to fashion themselves as a westernized easterner, thus blending the best of both worlds. Roosevelt, in particular, capitalized on the presence of these symbols within American cultural consciousness in

his promotion of his notions of the strenuous life, conservationism, and his political agendas.

<sup>26</sup> See Etulain's "The American Literary West" (153-54). Others who have also discussed this particular representation of America from exploration to conquest are Todorov, Limerick, and especially Richard Slotkin.

<sup>27</sup> See Henry Nash Smith's "Symbol and Idea in The Virgin Land" in which he acknowledges that he failed to fully examine Turner's and his own assumptions. Also see New Western historian Susan Lee Johnson's criticism of Smith for failing to address issues of race, gender, and class and for giving too little attention to female heroines in the dime novels that were emerging in the late nineteenth century. Consequently, she says his study is "mostly concerned with the impact of the West on white men and the consequences of that impact on white male literary and scholarly production" (260). Georgi-Findlay, says Smith acknowledged that he had been influenced by the mythology of the West of his day and had failed to investigate fully the assumptions behind Turner's frontier thesis as well as his own presuppositions (2), and Brian Harding's "The Myth of the Myth of the Garden" discusses how the West as Garden has developed over time and been presented in critical studies.

<sup>28</sup> Some of the more important are Leo Marx's The Machine in the Garden (1964) that furthered Smith's cultural studies approach through discussions of turn-of-the-century technology and its tensions with Jeffersonian agrarianism and the mythic Wild West and the presence of these tensions in American culture, art, and literature; Edwin Fussell's Frontier: American Literature and the American West (1966) that also discussed how the

frontier was represented in American literature; and Leslie Fielder's The Return of the Vanishing American (1968) that focused on the role of the Indian in nature and the frontier mythology of the West from colonial literature to the present, suggesting that contemporary western writers were working with the Indian within the 1960s cultural theme of brotherhood rather than the Indian War conflict evidenced in the colonial writers.

<sup>29</sup> Pomeroy (1915 -2005) was born in Capitola, California. He completed his undergraduate degree at San Jose State College and a PhD at the University of California at Berkeley. During the 1940s Pomeroy taught at the University of Wisconsin (Turner's university), the University of North Carolina, and Ohio State University before coming to the University of Oregon in 1949 and remaining until 1975, when he left for the University of California at San Diego. He retired from UCSD in 1984 and returned to Eugene, Oregon, where he continued his work at the University. In 1993, he became President of the American History Association. Pomeroy is seen as initiating the "new western history" that begins in full force in the 1970s with Patricia Nelson Limerick, Richard White, Clyde A. Milner, David Worster, and others.

<sup>30</sup> Stegner traveled around the globe on a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship to share literary and cultural ideas with many renowned world authors, as well as visiting Denmark, England, Italy, Greece, and Saudi Arabia on other fellowships or by invitation.

<sup>31</sup> The novels were Second Growth (1947), Preacher & Slave / Joe Hill (1950), and Shooting Star (1961). His short story collections were Women on the Wall (1950) and The City of the Living (1956). See the chapter "The Later Years" in Conversations

where Stegner talks extensively about his frustrations with writing, academic politics, and the youth generation during this period.

<sup>32</sup> After his experiences with Remembering Laughter (1937) and Second Growth (1947), Stegner traveled “incognito” as Mr. Page to Eastend, Saskatchewan, for a one-week stay to gather material for his project (Fradkin 35-37). In a letter to his good friends, Phil and Peg Gray who were watching Stegner’s son Page, Stegner states his rationale for not revealing his identity: “Simply I don’t want to be stared at, spared, or even forgiven for my old man’s sake. It is much simpler to be Mr. Page” (Fradkin 35). In Selected Letters and in this letter, Stegner says he is “ashamed” of not revealing his identity but “it’s easier to get what I want as long as nobody here knows who we are” (39).

<sup>33</sup> See Conversations for description of the three stories (73).

<sup>34</sup> For more on this “new western autobiography,” see Kathleen Boardman and Gia Woods’s Introduction to the 2002 special issue of Western American Literature. In the conclusion of this dissertation, this topic will be discussed further.

<sup>35</sup> Then Department Chair Robert Jones helped Stegner secure funding from his brother, Edward H. (Ned) Jones, a physician, Greek Scholar, and Texas oilman, who insisted the fellowships be named after Stegner and not himself.

<sup>36</sup> In addition to those who became writers, several of Stegner’s students became editors, such as Don Moser ( Life, then Smithsonian), William Decker (McGraw-Hill, Dial, and Viking) and Henry Carlisle (Knopf), and some became environmental journalists like Harold Gilliam.



<sup>37</sup> This text originated as responses to questions during a presentation at Dartmouth College regarding the teaching of Creative Writing .

<sup>38</sup> Wendell Berry, Terry Tempest Williams, Gretel Erlich, Larry McMurty, Richard Bass, and even Ken Kesey, along with many others have mentioned some level of indebtedness to Stegner while others such as Thomas McGuane and Kesey have chosen to “revise” or “challenge” Stegner’s views and positions regarding western American Literature. For interviews with McGuane and others, see Gary L. Morris Talking Up a Storm: Voices of the New West, specifically pages 210-11.

<sup>39</sup> The primary scholars were Max Westbrook, Don D. Walker, John R. Milton, and John Folsom.

<sup>40</sup> Comer suggests that this ecological position brought Stegner a wide audience among other western intellectuals whose regional identity and outdoorsy and rural upbringings made a modernist worldview distant (Comer Landscapes 41). See especially the collection of essays in A Tribute to Wallace Stegner: The Geography of Hope, edited by Page Stegner and Mary Stegner and pages 167-199 in Conversations.

<sup>41</sup> Not until the 1970s did he begin to recognize Native American writers, bringing into to his tradition Zikala-Sa, Mourning Dove, Black Elk, D’Arcy McNickle, Josephine Niggli, Edith Eaton (Sui Sin Far), Hisaye Yamamoto, and Carlos Bulosan (Landscapes 43). See also those he lists in “Coming of Age” and mentions to Etulain in Conversations.

<sup>42</sup> This bitterness is registered not only in All the Little Live Things (1967) but also in the Introduction to Twenty Years of Stanford Short Stories (1966), a collection of stories from the students he had taught since 1946.

<sup>43</sup> According to Fradkin, Stegner had been aware of Foote since 1948, when he was doing research for a chapter for The Literary History of the United States (1948), considering her quite good among other local, western colorists he discovered from the same period. He included her often in his courses and in his expanded western literary historiography (230).

<sup>44</sup> For the most detailed discussion of the events and issues surrounding this incident, see the chapter “Angle of Unrest” in Fradkin 225-272; Mary Ellen Williams’ “Angle of Repose and the Writings of Mary Hallock Foote: A Source Study”; Blake Green’s “The Genteel Western Lady Behind This Season’s New Opera”; the chapter titled Angle of Repose in Etulain Conversations; Melody Graulich’s “Book Learning: Angle of Repose as Literary History; Jackson Benson’s “Introduction to Wallace Stegner’s Angle of Repose”; and Linda K. Karell’s Writing Together/Writing Apart: Collaboration in Western American Literature and “The Postmodern Author on Stage: Fair Use and Wallace Stegner.”

<sup>45</sup> According to Stegner, Lyman’s physical characteristics were based on those of his aging Professor, Norman Foerster, whom he discovered lived nearby in Palo Alto with one leg and a frozen spine (Fradkin 229).

<sup>46</sup> See note 134, pg 353 in Fradkin where he cites communication with Jonathan Kirsch, a Los Angeles writer, critic, and literary property lawyer, who states that Stegner did not appropriately acknowledge his use of sources on his copyright page to make a defense of “fair use.” Fradkin’s chapter provides excellent details of the family’s correspondence

with Stegner, Stegner's familiarity with Foote's works, and the opinions of critics on this issue.

<sup>47</sup> Melody Graulich comments that whether one views Stegner as plagiarizing Foote's life or rendering the "woman's point of view" in the West by using her life to tell a "rich, complex, and very new western story" as she does, one must remember that "dozens of feminist scholars" pursued not only Foote but looked to the past as he did to recover many other lost women writers after the incident ("Book Learning" 244, 246-47).

<sup>48</sup> Susan Lee Johnson is particularly critical of Slotkin for trying "to find One Big Myth and to identify its One True Hero" (265) at the neglect of further investigations into emerging dime novel heroines and historical western females (Babe Bean and Calamity Jane for instance), the documents of soldiers' wives and women pioneers, and the period texts of female and minority writers. While praising Slotkin for drawing attention to frontier's role in the myth of progress, Brigitte Georgi-Findlay in The Frontiers of Women's Writing: Women's Narratives and the Rhetoric of Westward Expansion (2) also credits Bruce Greenfield's Narrating Discover: The Romantic Explorer in American Literature, 1790-1855 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) and Michael Rogin's Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian for furthering Slotkin's exploration of the American story of progress and westward expansion and Patricia Nelson Limerick's Legacy of Conquest for discussing the economic motivations behind the myth of progress and the resulting difficulties and consequences in the twentieth century.

<sup>49</sup> Several others who have exposed the economic, ecological, and cultural consequences of America's myth of national progress through westward expansion—include Michael Rogin, Testvan Todrov, and Bruce Greenfield.

<sup>50</sup> For example, the major works coming out in the 1970s and 1980 by John R. Milton (1975), William T. Pilkington (1980), Mark Siegel (1987), and A. Carl Bredahl Jr. (1989) mostly omitted women and minority western writers.

<sup>51</sup> Native Americans Paula Gunn Allen, A. Lavonne Brown Ruoff, and Alan R. Velie did much to open Native American studies in western American literature in the 1970s; W. Sherman Savage's overview of western Black writers was a seminal book for western African American writers, as was the work of Gerald Haslam for Asian Americans. For an excellent overview of minority works and criticism in the 1970s and 1980s, see Western American Literature's A Literary History of the American West and Updating the Literary West.

<sup>52</sup> See also Graulich's "Western Women's History: A Review Essay."

<sup>53</sup> For more on Graulich's view of Stegner and women, see her essays "O Beautiful for Spacious Guys" and "The Guides to Conduct that a Tradition Offers"; Limerick agrees with Graulich in "Precedents."

<sup>54</sup> Comer's study covers Joan Didion, Leslie Marmon Silko, Wanda Coleman, Maxine Hong Kingston, Barbara Kingsolver, Pam Houston, Louise Erdrich, Sandra Cisneros, and Mary Clearman Blew. These women, she says, have been charting new literary territory from many angles since the 1970s.

<sup>55</sup> Herman argues that regionalism tends to hide its conceptual and constructed qualities by presenting itself as “experiential, hence ‘real’” when in fact, he claims, “our everyday, lived experiences are mediated by a wide range of factors” (65) and too often the materiality of these mediating factors are obscured by the notion of regional authenticity. He suggests Comer only “reinscribes the age-old regionalist binary” of northeastern versus western representations (66) in “the expansion of the western regionalist canon” (67). In contrast, in his review for American Literary Scholarship: An Annual 1999, Gary Lee Stonum states that Comer’s Landscapes “offers a much more nuanced reading of the West and its changing significance for the nation in recent decades” (449), arguing “richly and persuasively” to show how the women writers she’s selected are “reimagining Wallace Stegner’s country” through their representation of western landscapes and constitute a “broad cultural phenomenon, not simply a literary group” (450), even though Comer has positioned them as voices for a new western female regionalism.

<sup>56</sup> As Graulich mentions, Austin in 1918 also made an argument for a “legitimate inclination of the sexes” when she stated in The Young Woman Citizen (1918) that “what women have to stand on squarely, is not their ability to see the world in the way men see it, but the importance and validity of their seeing it in some other way” (19).

<sup>57</sup> See also Comer’s “Feminism, Women Writers, and the New Western Regionalism” (20 – 23) for a similar argument for Stegner’s awareness of women’s issues.

<sup>58</sup> The major texts in the field are Patricia Nelson Limerick’s Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West (1987), Michael Malone and Richard Etulain’s The American West (1989), Richard White’s “It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own”: A

New History of the American West (1991), Daniel Worster's Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West (1992), and William Cronon et als, Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past (1992).

<sup>59</sup> See especially Elliot West, Rob Williams and the essays in Curt Meine's Stegner and the Continental Vision for a varied discussion of Stegner's limitations and contributions to environmental, historical, and literary concerns and for focusing on the need to create a "usable past" for the West.

<sup>60</sup> The Regan administration's appointment of Wyoming lawyer, James G Watt as the 43<sup>rd</sup> Secretary of the Interior was particularly frustrating to Stegner given Watt's right-wing stance on individual liberty, property ownership, and use rights. Stegner saw Watt as an example of modern day westerners who clung to the glories and virtues of the mythic West to justify personal greed (Benson WS 161).

## Chapter 2

### Wallace Stegner: Inheritor of America's Myths of the West

*"I'm afraid that the romantic imagination has taken the West,  
And it's probably never going to let it go.  
You're always swimming upstream  
when you try to write something serious about the West."*

-- Wallace Stegner  
Conversations with Wallace Stegner

*"I grew to hate the profane Western culture, the economics and psychology of a rapacious society. I disliked it as reality and distrusted it when it elevated itself into western myths that aggrandized arrogance, machismo, vigilante or sidearm justice, and the oversimplified good-guy / bad-guy moralities invented mainly by East Coast dudes fascinated by the romantic figure of the horseman, and happily appropriated by a lot of horseman and sidearm Galahads as self justification. Those myths have made an impervious shield for all kinds of Westerners, drugstore as well as authentic cowboys, in the dangerous wilderness of moral irresponsibility."*

--Wallace Stegner  
"Walter Clark's Frontier"

*"I am a realist, I guess, and what I'm interested in  
is showing the West as it is and has been,  
not as it might have been and  
not as imagination has re-created it"*

-- Wallace Stegner  
from 1976 interview with David Dillon

In Wolf Willow and the 1960's essays, Stegner explores how individuals (easterners and westerners) and the nation (America) respond to (or think about and act toward) the West as place (its landscape, its nature, its geography—its conditions) and the West as idea (home of the mythic frontiersman, cowboy, pioneer, Indian, and the virginal garden of riches and opportunities). He pursues how this response to the West has been shaped by America's cultural metanarratives of the West: the Frontier, the Cowboy, the Pioneer, and the Garden West myths that provide America's cultural imaginary with a representation of the West's past that is nostalgic, romantic, and heroic. He counters this representation of the West with a recovered "knowledge of place, knowledge of the past" or a non-mythic history of the place of his childhood in order to bridge the discontinuity among the West's historical past, its complex present, and its mythologized past (WW 28). In the 1960's essays, Stegner transfers and theorizes the experience of extracting his personal story from the mythic West undertaken in Wolf Willow to the situation of western regionalist writers whom he saw confronting a mythic western spatiality that threatened to engulf their literary western and deny their western story its relevance to a modern America.

In Stegner's conceptualization of the western spatiality he confronts in Wolf Willow and the 1960's essays, the West is a diverse physical-geographic-present place that contains a non-mythic historical past in competition with a symbolic, imaginative, mythic, and time-bound past of 1860s to 1890s America. The present West, he argues in both Wolf Willow and the 1960's essays, is



defined by America's cultural myths of the West that communicate to the American populace through popular culture and mass media forms a particular world view, values, and beliefs contained in the metanarratives of conquest, settlement, and transformation of the West from wild to civilized and the role of the white westerner in that civilizing and nation-building process. For Stegner, the West's cultural metanarratives of the Frontier, the Pioneer, the Cowboy, and the Garden West promote ideas of possession and transformation of western lands in the name of progress, prosperity, and nation-building and a story of white western settlement that is hierarchical and exclusionary, masculinist and predominantly white, and containing stories of conquest and subjugation (and at times erasure) of the feminine and racial Other.

As a narrative of national identity, America's mythic West presents a story of triumph and the necessary conquest of the savage, the wild, and natural environment to advance America's democratic ideology, to continue its aims of progress and profit, and to enable its (white) citizens to fulfill the American Dream of opportunity and fulfillment promised by the Declaration of Independence in their settlement of the western frontier. Strength, self-reliance, and determination are valued while weakness, collaboration, and compromise are devalued. The overarching conflict is between civilization and wilderness with civilization winning but at the loss of what is wild, innocent, and natural. The locality of this monumental struggle occurs on the American frontier—a western space that is literal and physical as well as imaginative and symbolic and contains America's free, majestic, and expansive lands rich in resources, untouched and virginal, and waiting for the American to transform it into a productive, democratic, and civilized place, a transformation that symbolizes the national and personal "progress" the West's

story tells. Thus, on the western frontier, America's westward expansion and the American's engagement and conquest of the savage and the wild is the geographic and imaginative source of the nation's and the individual's unique exceptionalism that ensures America's greatness and continued progress into the future.

What Stegner confronted in the 1950s and 1960s while writing Wolf Willow and the critical essays was a spatial entity endowed with many complementary and contradictory, cultural and time-bound meanings, or what human geographers identify as a "meaningful location" (Creswell 7).<sup>1</sup> According to Linda McDowell in Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies (1999), the American West has never truly been a geographically defined landscape, a "set of coordinates on a map that fix a defined and bounded piece of territory" (4). Instead, the American West is a geographical "space" constructed by social, cultural, and power relations and some persistent customs and structures that provide it its dominant meanings. As McDowell suggests, geographical "places are contested, fluid and uncertain... [and] made through power relations which construct the rules that define the boundaries. These boundaries are both social and spatial—they define who belongs to a place and who may be excluded, as well as the location or site of the experience" (4).<sup>2</sup> Thus the American West is a "space," according to the Myths,<sup>3</sup> where the uniqueness of the American spirit and American exceptionalism results from the American's and America's engagement with a wild frontier; in this frontier space, the American learned the ways of the wilderness and the savage that he then used

against his internal and external enemies to transform this frontier space into a civilized place.

Stegner similarly sees the West as more than a geographic location (a spot on a map). As he demonstrates in Wolf Willow, the West is a locale people invest with meanings that come from living experientially and emotionally in relation to it so that a history and a memory are created with it. In “At Home in the Fields of the Lord” (1950), Stegner articulates his ideas about the importance of place: “I believe in the influence of places on personalities,” explaining that, for a place to influence an individual, “duration alone does not do it” (166) nor is living in a place during the “‘most impressionable age’ between five and ten” enough (165). Rather what makes a place capable of influencing a person, in Stegner’s view, are the memories and experiences that come from a “*place deeply lived in*”: “where the vitality has been high and emotions freely involved” so that one collects enough “sensory ... images ... for a lifetime of nostalgia” (166), with nostalgia or remembrance the measurement used to determine the depth of one’s experiences with a place, not the degree of regret or sense of loss one attaches to the memory of living in the place. Later in “The Sense of Place” (1986), Stegner explains, “The deep ecologists warn us not to be anthropocentric, but I know no way to look at the world, settled or wild, except through my own human eyes.... So I must believe that, at least to human perception, a place is not a place until people have been born in it, have grown up in it, lived in it, *known it*, died in it—have both experienced it and shaped it” (201, italics mine). Stegner wants westerners and America to come to “a sustainable relationship between people and earth,” a relationship guided not by “the sense of ownership but of belonging” to a place and to the land (206). For westerners and

Americans to achieve this relationship, Stegner believes they need to understand how the West's Myths shape their relationship to the past and present West and thus to western lands, to the Other, and to America. From this understanding, he hopes they can reshape their relationship to the present and future West.

In Wolf Willow and the 1960's essays, Stegner confronts an American West that has been for individuals as well as for American culture and literature a physical, geographic, imaginative, and mythic "place" of various and often passionate meanings.

When he was writing Wolf Willow and the essays in the 1950s and 1960s, defining these meanings were Hollywood films, television shows, and mass-market formulaic western novels. These mass-media forms were in their hey-day and not only depended upon dominant cultural, even national narratives of America's western frontier, but they also did much to continue the dominance of these narratives through film, television, and the formulaic western in the national consciousness of a post-World War II America.<sup>4</sup> Through culturally shaped images, metaphors, and stories, these popular culture forms authorized a narrative of a triumphant and exceptionalist America and American able to conquer national and global frontiers of the past, present, and future. They constructed and disseminated a mythicized western spatiality, in Stegner's view, that was America's as well as his personal and writerly heritage. As a westerner it gave him a past discontinuous with the concerns of his present and untrue to his remembered experiences of being a pioneer's child. As a western writer, it locked him into a romantic, rural, and heroic western narrative that was a cultural cliché

and mostly irrelevant to his living in a modern, urban present. To reclaim and redefine a western story connected to and more accurate in its association with his remembered past and the complexities of his present, Stegner must negotiate this mythic, western spatiality to locate and extract a non-romanticized, historical, experiential, and personal western story that will give new meaning to his “westernness” and ground his creative self in a specific, actual, and historical western place. The approaches he uses in Wolf Willow to complete this task become to a great extent the strategies he uses in the 1960’s essays to redefine a western literary historiography and literary western that can challenge the mythic West’s choke-hold on the relevancy and meaningfulness of the literary western for a modern West and America.

### The Myths and American Culture

In order to analyze Stegner’s interaction with and challenge to the major assumptions of the Myths of the American West in Wolf Willow and the 1960s essays, the term “American cultural imaginary” will be used to refer to an American culture and socio-historical context through which popular culture perceived the American West via film, television, mass-market books, literature, and other cultural artifacts. The notion of an “American cultural imaginary” or public is itself a universalizing identifier as it subsumes the individual American acting independently with some degree of agency into a single identity—Americans. The term refers to what scholars call a “national audience” or “public” that provides a representative identity with the ability to perceive, accept, reject, and modify ideas and positions (Slotkin Fatal Environment 30-32; Geertz 218-

220). As representative of an American populace and that populace's universalized opinion and ideologically shaped position on a topic, the term "American cultural imaginary" will be used to represent this cultural entity or public, acknowledging all the while that it significantly reduces and greatly simplifies what is complex, varied, and specific (Slotkin Gunfighter 10).

In his extensively detailed, three-volume study of the American West's cultural-historical-mythical milieu, cultural historian Richard Slotkin argues for a contextualized view of America's national and cultural myths of the West, stating that they are "shaped by historical contingency" instead of being "archetypes generated either by 'the nature of things' or 'the nature of language'" (Gunfighter 8).<sup>5</sup> To explain how cultural myths obtain a status powerful enough to speak to a society's cultural collective imaginary, Slotkin says,

Myth expresses ideology in a narrative, rather than discursive or argumentative, structure. Its language is metaphorical and suggestive rather than logical and analytical. The movement of a mythic narrative, like that of any story, implies a theory of cause-and-effect and therefore a theory of history (or even of cosmology); but these ideas are offered in a form that disarms critical analysis by its appeal to the structures and traditions of story-telling and the clichés of historical memory. Although myths are the product of human thought and labor, their identification with venerable tradition makes them appear to be products of "nature" rather than history—expressions of a trans-historical consciousness or of some form of "natural law" (Gunfighter 6).<sup>6</sup>

For Slotkin, the American West's settlement narrative is a complex, national myth that draws on what is culturally perceived as a "venerable tradition" in its highly metaphorical rendering through symbols, keywords, icons, and clichés of America's "lessons learned from its frontier past" (Gunfighter 26). However, in their elevation to myth, Slotkin claims, these "lessons" lose their specificity to history, place, and experience. In Wolf Willow, Stegner wants to return the specificity of history, place, and experience to the westerner and to western literature in order to find "new" lessons by which westerners and America can live.

Some myths become elevated to the point where they offer more than "lessons learned"; they are narratives by which a nation defines itself. In Slotkin's estimation, the West's Pioneer, Cowboy, and Garden West Myths comprise America's national story. Although her focus in Anatomy of National Fantasy (1991) is on the nineteenth not the twentieth-century, Lauren Berlant's notion of a National Symbolic is similar to Slotkin's characterization of the status and the role America's narratives of western settlement have had in culture. A National Symbolic, according to Berlant, is "the order of discursive practices whose reign within a national space ... transforms individuals into subjects of a collectively held history. Its traditional icons, metaphors, heroes, rituals, and narratives provide an alphabet for a collective consciousness or national subjectivity; through the National Symbolic, the historical nation aspires to achieve the inevitability of the status of natural law, a birthright" (20). America's "birthright" or National Symbolic is America's story of western settlement that promoted the nation's ideology of Anglo-male dominance; the purpose and necessity of advancing democracy; and the deserved

outcomes of westward movement captured in the Myths' promises of opportunity, prosperity, and freedom.

As national myths, America's myths of western settlement—the Frontier, the Cowboy, the Pioneer, and the West as the “garden of the world”—are what postmodernists call “grand or master narratives,” or totalizing systems of thought that appeal to homogeneous epistemological and moral prescriptions that appear to be inclusive and universal but are in fact exclusive and opposed to heterogeneity, plurality, and constant contestation.<sup>7</sup> They are what Mikael Bakhtin calls in The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays (1981) an “authoritative discourse,” or a discourse that can have great power over Americans. That is, these Myths of America's western settlement represent in their structures of language, metaphor, and symbolism a set of shared assumptions or a world-view perspective that can prescribe actions, a particular point of view, and certain interpretations. Even though America's western Myths can be considered a culturally sanctioned “authoritative discourse,” according to Bakhtin an “authoritative discourse” can be challenged, changed, and dismissed with each of these attempts being reflected in the language of the “authoritative discourse” as it accepts, absorbs, or rejects the challenge. As Slotkin shows, from the seventeenth to twentieth century the West's Myths adjusted in form and emphases in response to America's changing political and cultural needs.

In both Wolf Willow and the 1960's essays, Stegner challenges these cultural Myths of the West through an Other West he constructs from glossed narratives, history, and personal experiences connected to a specific western



locale. He does not present in Wolf Willow an imaginative alternative to the American cultural imaginary's conception of a mythic American past as did William Carlos Williams In the American Grain (1925) or an imaginative rendering of America's past as William Faulkner presented in his Yoknapatawpha stories. Rather Stegner attempts to return to cultural memory what he calls the "unremembered past" (WW 111) of the place that was his frontier childhood home by recovering specific experiences of historical others, his family, and himself in this place, either to contest or to affirm certain values and attitudes the West's Myths have appropriated, universalized, and authorized to define what is western and therefore constitute the parameters that define the "westernness" of his self and his writing. In the 1960's critical essays, Stegner asks his contemporary western writers to challenge the Myths' definition of the West, western writing, and the western experience by discovering what the Myths have obscured in their universalizing of the western experience and America's cultural acceptance of a nostalgic, romanticized, and timeless Wild West era promoted by Hollywood and the formulaic western novel as what is an authentic, historical, and real West.

The story of the American West Stegner confronted during the 1950s and 1960s was a western spatiality quite different from the revisionist West presented today that questions the assumptions of the mythic West and revises the western narrative by inserting new or lost voices into the discourse. Stegner's western spatiality was not informed by films like Blazing Saddles (1974), Dances with Wolves (1990), or The Unforgiven (1992) or a television series such as Deadwood (2004-2006), or the literature of Native Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and Anglo men and women who write against the grain of the mythic West. Instead, the American West spatiality Stegner and his

1950s and 1960s American audience confronted was represented by the tough, virile, stoic western man epitomized by John Wayne, Randolph Scott, Gary Cooper, Alan Ladd, Jimmy Stewart, William Holden, Audie Murphy, Humphrey Bogart, Marlon Brando, Kirk Douglas, and a host of other well-known actors in such movies as Stagecoach (1939), The Outlaw (1948), Fort Apache (1948), Red River (1948), Rio Grande (1950), High Noon (1952), Shane (1953), Hondo (1953), Gunfight at the OK Corral (1957), Rio Bravo (1959), The Magnificent Seven (1960), The Wild Bunch (1960), One-Eyed Jacks (1961), The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962), and Ride the High Country (1962), and through a great many “B” western movies during the 1920s through 1960s.<sup>8</sup> In these films, the actors and the roles they portrayed, the rugged individualistic American hero, celebrate a white, Anglo-male experience and the triumph of American civilization and progress over the Indian, Others, and Nature. Through television, the Wild West entered the homes of mostly white, urban, and middle-class Americans through long-running western series, such as Gunsmoke (1955-75), Cheyenne (1955-63), Wagon Train (1957-65), Rifleman (1958-63), Rawhide (1959-66), The Lone Ranger (1959-67), Have Gun Will Travel (1957-63), Maverick (1957-62), Bonanza (1959-73), and The Virginian (1962-71). These weekly television shows reinforced the West’s metanarratives through a series of short, contained conflicts that in some way captured the essentials of the mythic West: a virile, loner-type, white good guy-hero rescues a woman (or others representing civilization) who is smart and resourceful but also submissive and subordinate to the prowess and intelligence of the hero from outlaws, Indians, and

other minorities who serve as the bad guys and who threaten the woman, the community, and progress and must be defeated (tracked down and typically hung or shot) so the community and nation can continue their growth. The “rescue” is achieved through western justice—an absolutely necessary demonstration of violence—that eradicates the bad, the corrupt, and the savage from the West so that the community, the civilized, and the nation’s progress can continue.

Along with film and television, the dissemination of this metanarrative into American culture also came through literature. In Birthing a Nation: Gender, Creativity, and the West in American Literature (1999), Susan Rosowski claims that the “novel that announced the Western” (158) and did much to popularize it as a genre was Owen Wister’s 1902 bestseller, The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains.<sup>9</sup> Wister’s western helped usher into American popular culture of turn-of-the-century America what has become known as the “classic western story” that the formulaic western novel, film, and television adopted. Wister’s plot demonstrates how a virile, Anglo-Saxon cowboy hero rises from the poverty of his birth in Virginia to enter a new western aristocracy of rancher elites in 1890s Wyoming. In Wister’s view, this new western aristocracy will continue America’s economic and social progress and advance the importance of (western) male virility, dominance, and rationalism as well as the necessity of violence to secure America’s role as a global power in the twentieth century. Furthering the assumptions, images, and values of America’s mythic Wild West and Wister’s story to the American cultural imaginary in the twentieth century was the formulaic western novel. Able to pervade the marketplace because of its lower reading level, its low cost, and its accessibility to readers, as it was sold in paperback or magazine form in grocery

stores and convenience markets rather than as hardbound books in bookstores, these paperback novels promoted a western (national) story to mass culture and readers as well as radio, film, and television. Slotkin suggests in Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America (1992) that these mass produced formula westerns provided readers with a means for understanding the complex realities they faced daily through simplified, clearly defined conflicts, characters, and events set in a western space.<sup>10</sup> In other words, these formula western novels reinforced America's cultural imaginary with metaphoric expressions similar to those being presented in radio and film and eventually television during the first half of the twentieth century that explained the inevitable triumph and conquest of America's western frontier and savage Other so the nation could be settled and prosperous.

As a westerner and an American, Stegner inherits the powerful, culturally-defining, national Myths of America's western settlement. These cultural metanarratives of the West embody a mythic-geographic-historiographic terrain that expresses an American national identity through a single, unified story that issues from America's westward movement and settlement as formulated in America's cultural narratives of the Frontier myth that says the geographic West is home to the opportunity and promise of the Founding Fathers and the notion of the New Republic; the Pioneer and Garden West myths that claim the West is a virgin garden waiting to be transformed by the exceptional American into a new democratic polity and reaped for its bounty; and the Cowboy and Wild West myths of male machismo, white racial-superiority, and conquest of savage others.

Cultural perception in the early decades of the twentieth-century was that a quickly moving western settlement was eliminating the western frontier and replacing its rural based sensibilities with an industrialized urban and business culture. According to J. David Stevens in The Word Rides Again: Rereading the Frontier in American Fiction (2002), between 1890 and 1910, American culture witnessed a “codification of the western myth in the public imagination” because the social climate—due to “radical shifts in American demographics, the political and military landscape, literary and artistic values, and gender and race relations”—was ideal for the rise and acceptance of the western Myths’ story of white triumph over the Other (2). As Americans witnessed a rapid influx of immigrants to their shores pursuing the opportunities the western frontier and American Dream promised, these immigrants destabilized America’s perception of a social, economic, racial, and cultural cohesion with the social and cultural challenges their presence brought to American culture.<sup>11</sup> Thus, argues Slotkin and others, new cultural narratives were needed to replace an outdated perception of America as a rural, Jeffersonian society.

These twentieth-century narratives of the American West are what Stegner inherits as a boy, an adult, and as a western writer. They would be shaped by many public figures and events, but four men in particular were significant to their construction and cultural prominence: Frederick Jackson Turner, Theodore Roosevelt, Owen Wister, and William F. Cody. By taking the ideas from his 1893 speech, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” into the arena of academia and formal education, Turner provided fellow historians and America with a distinctly American story focused on the pioneer’s engagement with a westward moving frontier that explains the resulting

physical, economic, social, and cultural growth and promise of the nation. A more violent, racially divisive western narrative that was different from but not necessarily opposed to Turner's notion of western settlement was brought into the public forum through Roosevelt's role as statesman and Wister's best-selling novel. A great deal of credit, however, for making public and overt the values, the images, and the interpretations of the West's cultural narratives must go to Cody whose "Buffalo Bill's Wild West" became for its audience (whether American or European) a culturally shared, repeatable, iconic, and purportedly authentic representation of the American West of 1870 to 1890.

### The Frontier Myth and Its Hero

Turner, Roosevelt, Wister, and Cody inherited a frontier myth that at its most basic level was constructed on the exploits of a solitary, white-male figure, a trailblazer who clears America's wilderness frontier of its dangerous savages so pioneers may follow and transform this wilderness landscape into a productive and civilized living space. This Frontier Myth, Slotkin argues, is "our oldest and most characteristic myth... this myth-historiography, the conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation or displacement of the Native Americans who originally inhabited it have been the means to our achievement of a national identity, a democratic polity, an ever-expanding economy, and a phenomenally dynamic and 'progressive' civilization" (Gunfighter 10). According to Slotkin, the frontier hero emerged from renditions of Daniel Boone's story in the popular

press and James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking tales that promoted a motif of the hero's regression into savagery and eventual regeneration as a distinctly American trait.<sup>12</sup> Tied to cultural, political, and literary tensions in American culture, Slotkin says the frontier hero was positioned on the social fringe of society as he lived close to the frontier and was typically from the lower classes.<sup>13</sup> Coded as white and male, the frontier hero confronts an uncivilized frontier, and in his engagement with the savage regresses to a state in which he too is savage. His eventual and conceived as necessary violent overthrow of the savage Other pulls the hero out of his savage regression and into a state of regeneration for return to society. Now in possession of characteristics blending the savage and the civilized, the frontier hero employs these traits to assist the forward movement of civilization. However, by assisting civilization with its conquest of the frontier, the frontier hero eventually destroys the very frontier that is the source of his distinctly American traits and the place in which he can live best.

In the early decades of the 1800s, the frontier myth of Boone and Leatherstocking transformed to a military-leader-frontiersman motif that emanated from the iconology surrounding Andrew Jackson and George Armstrong Custer. According to Slotkin, the Jacksonian era elevated the frontier hero to that of military leader who possessed unique skills forged by Indian Wars and survival on the western frontier. This military-Indian fighter hero, argues Slotkin, was still on society's fringes due to his western roots, but the Jacksonian hero was less "wild" than the frontier pathfinder hero because of his military associations, as seen by the very public roles Jackson and Custer played in their eras. Even though the engagement of the white European-American with Native Americans was an essential part of the frontier story from the Puritans to the 1890s Indian Wars,

Slotkin states that, by the late 1800s, the Jacksonian hero was fighting both external (Indians) and internal (immigrants and blacks) obstacles to society's progress.<sup>14</sup> In this new social order, Slotkin observes, the hero is Cooper's Captain Heyworth, a public leader of men and an Indian fighter, rather than the more solitary Hawkeye, the pathfinder, though each combats societal dangers with a skill and deftness that clearly identified them as exceptional and connected to the frontier space. While both heroes were tasked with opening the next wilderness so America could revitalize and expand itself once again, the Jacksonian hero's role also entailed extending and protecting the society's institutions. Limerick observes in Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West (1987) that these two narratives tell a story of hope, conquest, transformation, and domination of western land and peoples, a narrative Roosevelt and Wister emphasize in their versions of white western settlement and one Stegner counters through depictions of historical incidents of compromise and peace in Wolf Willow.

With the twentieth century bringing swift changes in living, culture, and the role of America as a global power, Turner, Roosevelt, Wister, and Cody confronted an American cultural context that was nostalgic for a passing rural way of life as it faced the pressures of an increasingly industrialized and populated urban life. In No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920 (1981), T. J. Jackson Lears argues that the nation's sense of transitioning from a simpler to more complex way of life, from artisan to mass production and from farm production to



industrial manufacturing and global economies, created a cultural anxiety that these men addressed by revisioning the frontier–Indian fighter myths to meet cultural needs. While Turner provides a western narrative to explain the frontier’s importance to the past, present, and future growth of America, Roosevelt and Wister offer a new frontier hero constructed on a past West but positioned for the present and future. In his re-enactments of western settlement and frontier battles, Cody glorifies the violence and white conquest and freezes in cultural memory western scenes, landscapes, and images of bounty, reward, and triumph. In Wolf Willow and the 1960’s essays, Stegner confronts the West these men and a turn-of-the-century American culture fashioned for him. He challenges America’s adoption of these narratives as the story of western settlement as he attempts to redefine for the westerner and for America a new western narrative and western subjectivity for a more modern and future West.

#### Frederick Jackson Turner’s “Significance of the American Frontier”

Of all the cultural narratives within the last century that have most influenced the manner in which America and Americans understand and interpret the role of the American West in the development of the nation and its peoples is that expressed by Frederick Jackson Turner in “The Significance of the American Frontier in American History,” an essay he delivered to the American Historical Society in 1893 at the opening of the World’s Fair in Chicago as Cody’s Wild West extravaganza held daily performances just outside its gates. According to John Mack Faragher in the “Afterword” to Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner (1994), “Turner studied the frontier not merely

because it was his special area of interest, but foremost because he believed its history could illuminate the broader story of America. The power of the frontier thesis derived from his commitment to the study of what it has meant to be American” (241). Turner’s narrative of America’s geographic expansion and economic progress from the nation’s start to the 1890s would become familiar to every schoolboy and schoolgirl for most of the twentieth century. As historian Allan Bogue states in “The Course of Western History’s First Century” (1993), “It was Turner’s genius, or luck, that he was able to meld basic facts of western growth with long-held ideas of western uniqueness and the scientific theories and popular concerns of the day into a rhetorical statement that became one of the most powerful explanations of American development and character” (21). Turner’s statement, says Bogue, “rapidly found its way into textbooks on American History and government” and into graduate programs across the nation’s campuses to become until the 1960s the pervasive historical construct by which American settlement of the West was explained (8). In Wolf Willow Stegner seeks to discredit Turner’s narrative of white conquest of western lands and its story of hope, ease, and inevitability through history, memory, experience, and story, and, in the 1960’s essays, through the “chores” he assigns his contemporary western regionalist writers so they may renarrativize the western story for westerners and America.

As Turner describes it, the American frontier was a series of physical places encountered by waves of pioneers as the nation expanded its boundaries from the Atlantic to the Pacific coastline. He argued that the “colonization of the

Great West” (Significance 31) was accomplished through the conquest of “successive frontiers” (36) by men who occupied and developed the land in preparation for “men of capital and enterprise” (45) who would develop it into “the complexity of city life” (32). Turner’s story begins with the colonial frontiersman venturing forth into the American wilderness to blaze a path for others to follow. As American pioneers proceeded westward, they encountered the frontier, or what Turner calls the “meeting point between savagery and civilization” (32). For Turner, the ensuing struggle with the wilderness and the Indian at the edge of civilization turned European immigrants into Americans and was the source for America’s progress: “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development” (31). Once the wilderness is made safe by the pathfinder, the trailing settler can take possession of the free, virgin, and fertile land and begin to transform it into a civilized place.

So long as the frontier existed, Americans and America could progress because Turner located America’s progress in the exceptionalism of the American character developed from the American’s relationship with the Native American and the presence of accessible and available frontier lands. According to New Western historian Richard White in “Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill” (1994), Turner articulated the widely held cultural view that America’s exceptionalism was derived not from America’s European roots and Old World institutions but from the American’s interaction with a “frontier space” lying beyond the boundaries of a civilized America (12-13). Turner claims that a host of “striking characteristics” and intellectual proclivities were forged on this frontier and were primary contributors to America’s growth of democracy,

independent individualism, and economic and physical mobility that marked America and the American's character. For Turner, these successive waves of advancing pioneers conquering the frontier's wild but bountiful space and transforming it into a more civilized space provided America and the American with continual "hope" for achieving individual and national prosperity and progress. What is demanded of the pioneer and the nation in return, according to Turner, is continual "buoyancy and exuberance" (59); a steadfast commitment to promised outcomes; and acceptance of the idea that one's ruggedness, ingenuity, and determination are what make it possible to collect on the narrative's promises.

In Turner's pioneer story, Indians occupy frontier lands and represent the savage and uncivilized elements distinct to the American frontier with which white settlers engaged. Notably, he does not romanticize them as noble savages. And while he agrees with his contemporary historians, such as Theodore Roosevelt and earlier historians like Francis Parkman, that America was "won by a series of Indian wars" (Significance 36), and he accepts the inevitability of the Indians' passing as a sign of progress, these Indian Wars do not define the frontier's significance for him: "much has been written about the frontier from the point of view of border warfare and the chase but as a field for the *serious study of the economist and the historian it has been neglected*" (32-33 italics mine).<sup>15</sup> In his essay, Turner tried to reorient his contemporaries' view of the frontier from this popular Wild West Indian battle image to the frontier as a place and symbol for America's evolving political, constitutional, and social institutions resulting from the pioneers' possession and transformation of the wilderness into new

American metropolises. For Turner, the pioneers' engagement with and endurance of frontier hardships was to result in new opportunities, prosperity, and social-cultural-political progress for them and for the nation.

Turner's narrative essentially authorized the notions of white ownership and transformation of the land and dominance over others by basing the legitimacy of ownership and possession of a physical West as necessary to the progress and nation building of America. In Brigitte Georgi-Findlay's view in The Frontiers of Women's Writing: Women's Narratives and the Rhetoric of Westward Expansion (1996), Turner's thesis of the "frontier experience and the national expansion westward beyond the Mississippi have long assumed a mythical status as formative events, providing generations of Americans with a collective cultural history and tradition, themes for a national epic, and a space for fantasy" (ix). Indeed, Turner closed the essay by likening the American frontier to "what the Mediterranean Sea was to the Greeks"—a place where America was to find its Athens (Significance 58).

Even though the American frontier experience had been a repeatable process given the succession of frontiers encountered, Turner announces in the essay that the frontier is closed. Intuiting from 1890s census data that suggested the American West was settled, Turner proclaimed, "the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history" (Significance 60).<sup>16</sup> With the physical frontier gone, Turner identifies two distinct threats to a future and present America. First, Turner and America's cultural imaginary visioned the frontier as a space for "second chances" for those who could not achieve America's Dream in the East and as a "safety valve" for those unable to live within the restrictions of civilization. With immigrants wanting to

fulfill the promised dream America symbolized, a closed frontier endangered the democratic ideals inherent in the pioneer's narrative of self-reliance. Second, the loss of the nation's "free lands" or its frontier space—the source of America's exceptionalism—caused many politicians and business leaders, according to Slotkin, to fear America would become a nation less equipped internally to confront growing racial and ethnic tensions and thus unable to retain its increasingly powerful status globally.

The challenge or cultural anxiety America faced at the turn of the century was how to continue developing America's exceptionalism with the loss of its literal and symbolic frontier. Turner notes somewhat presciently that the "energies" Americans have exerted in this frontier space will "continually demand a wider field for its exercise"; thus the new challenge, he claims is for Americans to find elsewhere new frontiers to conquer in order to renew their distinctly American traits shaped by their on-going engagement with a frontier spatiality (Significance 59). Roosevelt subsequently provided America with new frontiers in the Philippines, Panama, and Asia and addressed the loss of the frontier space through preservation of America's lands in national parks.

While Turner's thesis underwent some modification, it became increasingly hegemonic and homogenized through the rigidity with which Turner's contemporaries and students applied his approach to the historical American West and quickness with which the dime novelists, formulaic western, early radio westerns, and Hollywood western films and television series further developed the powerful strain of nostalgia that permeates Turner's view of the

American West. In Wolf Willow, Stegner calls the West a “false-front Athens” that has not realized the promises of Turner’s “cities of complexity” and deflates the notion of the West as a bountiful Garden West. Through the specificity of his childhood home’s historical past, his experiences of being a “pioneer’s child,” and the potential failure of the West to nurture a “purely native art,” Stegner challenges Turner’s pioneer version of westward settlement, especially its promises of hope and opportunity for pioneers like his parents. In the 1960’s essays, he charges his contemporary western writers with rejecting Turner’s nostalgia and finding instead a “usable past” from which westerners can locate “lessons learned” relevant to their living in a present West and America.

### Theodore Roosevelt’s Wild, Violent, Racist, and Rejuvenating

#### Frontier West

In contrast to Turner’s somewhat egalitarian Pioneer West of economic progress and national expansion was Roosevelt’s West, a violent, more class and race specific frontier that posited white conquest of a savage-filled frontier landscape. His proclamation was as inevitable as was Turner’s in the result it defined. Roosevelt’s West greatly informs the “cowboy culture” and the Cowboy Myth Stegner examines in Wolf Willow and the legacy of destructiveness toward the land, Others, and self still present in the modern West. Roosevelt had a particular vision for America and Americans that derived heavily from his own experiences. As a public figure, serving as the country’s twenty-sixth President (1901-1909) and a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, he was in America’s political and social arena nearly all his life with exploits and adventures that

captured the nation's attention. According to Slotkin, Roosevelt used these personal events as example and justification for his interpretations as a statesman and historian for the critical role the frontier and American West served in American history. When he became the nation's President in 1901 at age forty-three, Roosevelt personified many of the characteristics of the new, industrial age Jacksonian frontier-hero: he was a military leader, a commander of men, a youthful man vested with the authority of age, a technocrat, a public persona, and a natural aristocrat by his birth into a wealthy New York family.<sup>17</sup> He was tied to the "metropolis" through his family, his class, and his political ambitions and associated with the "western frontier" in the popular press through his philosophy and practice of a "strenuous life," his struggles against crime early in his political career as New York's Commissioner of Police (1895) and Governor (1898), his experiences in the West in the late 1880s, and his distinctions in the Spanish-American War (1898) as part of the Rough Riders.

Given all that he had achieved before turning thirty, Roosevelt united the binaries of youth and wisdom, energy and maturity, self-restraint and individualism, and East and West.<sup>18</sup> Roosevelt's public rhetoric, particularly his philosophy of a "strenuous life," contained within it an association to America's Frontier Myth and notions of exceptionalism, nationalism, and the doctrines of the Declaration of Independence that entitled the American to the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. According to Slotkin, Roosevelt was "imaginatively engaged by the literary mythology of the Frontier," admiring Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales and historians like Francis Parkman who characterized



history as real-life romances in which the heroes signify national virtues and characteristics that are tested and vindicated in savage Indian wars (Gunfighter 33). Within the historical, ideological, and cultural context of turn-of-the-century America and its unease with the increasing number of immigrants in its cities, the perception that its wealthy sons were unprepared to run their fathers' and grandfathers' enterprises, the ways in which gender roles were changing in an industrialized Victorian society, the influence of Social Darwinism, and a lingering sentimentalism from the Civil War era, Roosevelt offered a vision and history for a progressive America that incorporated the assumptions of the Frontier Myth and his interpretation of this Myth in terms of race, class, and gender.

Only seven years after Custer's defeat at Little Big Horn in 1876, Roosevelt had his first encounter with a semi-frontier West when he traveled to the Plains to shoot buffalo before they became extinct. As his biographer, Edmund Morris and others suggest, Roosevelt was so captivated by the western landscape of the Dakota region and the demanding outdoor life of the Plains that he purchased two ranches in the Dakota Badlands. In 1884 he returned to this ranch in Medora, North Dakota, after the deaths of both his young wife, Alice, a few days after the birth of their daughter, and his mother, Martha, in the same house and day (Valentine's Day) and after the defeat of his reformist faction at the Republican convention. During his two-year recovery (1884-1886) from these personal and public losses, Roosevelt lived on the ranch and learned from his cowhands how to ride and rope and was briefly a deputy sheriff who participated in the retrieval of several outlaws for trial.<sup>19</sup> More importantly, as Slotkin notes, Roosevelt returned to the writing of history.<sup>20</sup>

Focusing his efforts on the American West and its role in the nation's development, Roosevelt produced a significant body of work about the West during this time that infused his western experiences into historical events. Along with a series of articles for Century magazine that became Ranch Life and the Hunting (1885) and Trail and Hunting Trips of a Ranchman: Sketches of Sport on the Northern Cattle Plains (1885) and a biography of Thomas Hart Benton (1886), Roosevelt began his four-volume history of the early frontier, The Winning of the West (1889-1896). In the articles especially, but also in the history, Slotkin claims Roosevelt attributed the West's terrain, nature, and primitive lifestyle as awakening in him the latent qualities of self-reliance, loyalty, determination, courage, and honor that earlier frontier heroes possessed and affirmed the necessity of leading a "strenuous life" that would set him above the selfishness and sloth of the leisured and monied class in the East (Gunfighter 36). Slotkin suggests that, in "The Strenuous Life" speech, the Winning of the West history, and his ranch and hunting books, Roosevelt reified his "lessons learned" from America's frontier past.<sup>21</sup> These "lessons" suggested to Roosevelt that continuation of the American Anglo-Saxon's frontier experiences would lead to and shape a modern, virile and vigorous managerial aristocratic class; that a new class-race relationship among American citizens was necessary for future development; and that private profit should be subordinated to public interests, national aggrandizement, and extension of the American empire abroad (Gunfighter 54). He called upon the men of his class to join him in the "strenuous life" in order to revitalize the exceptionalism his contemporaries had inherited

from their fathers but was now dormant due to their slothful, leisured living in turn-of-the-century America.

Roosevelt interpreted the western frontier as a racial battleground between white and red nations and the space in which the American demonstrated his exceptionalism. Drawing from his western hunting experiences, his interactions with the cowboy, the ranching culture he encountered in the West, and his interpretation of the American frontier, Roosevelt constructed his new hero-type—the rancher-hunter-leader-proprietor. His friend Owen Wister would represent and further shape this hero western-leader and Cowboy Myth in The Virginian (1902). Significantly, Roosevelt completely ignored the racial and ethnic diversity of the cowboys of the 1880s to present them as a group of Anglo-Saxons untainted by the alien blood he saw infusing America’s urban working class.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, he readily acknowledged that these cowboys were hired-hands, “hard-working, faithful fellows” (quoted in Slotkin Gunfighter 39), thus connecting them to the plebian origins and democratic values present in Turner that result in a “composite nationality” (Significance 47).<sup>23</sup> Roosevelt’s rancher-hunter-leader-proprietor hero possesses the skills, character, and virility learned from western experience that he says will be necessary to successfully rule others and model the management skills easterners must employ in their industrialized society. Through physical and intellectual exercise and a commitment to contribute to and be leaders in the new, progressive America, Roosevelt argued that his Anglo-Saxon, leisured class could come to possess the skills needed for a modern frontier if they accepted the responsibilities of leadership, contribution, and action to improve the nation as the managers and proprietors of urban factories and as leaders capable of conquering foreign lands and peoples. To hone these

latent skills, he advocated for an elite hunter-aristocracy and for the preservation of the wilderness or “frontier” space on which the American had developed his exceptional traits.

Though many of his actions helped save America’s lands, forests, wildlife, and scenic wonders for future generations, Roosevelt’s motivations were meant to retain the geographic and imaginary western spatiality and the frontier-like conditions of a space necessary for the sons of his socio-economic class and Anglo-Saxon race so they could engage in activities that would revitalize their inherent but latent frontier skills.<sup>24</sup> From his examination of the nation’s previous history and what America had accomplished already on its western lands with the Indian, Roosevelt provided a replacement frontier in the pursuit of foreign, underdeveloped nations, such as Panama, the Philippines, and Asia from which America could civilize and prosper. Overthrowing these countries and native populations did not violate any of America’s founding principles, according to Roosevelt, because conquering foreign others was analogous to what the early Americans had done to the Native American in America. Even though conquering foreign peoples meant incurring necessary violence and war, it was justified because the purpose was the subjugation or removal of the Other in order to protect one’s race and ensure the nation’s progress through pursuits on a new frontier elsewhere.

Though the above greatly simplifies his view and historical context, it demonstrates how Roosevelt extrapolated from past historical events and the Frontier Myth to construct a process and rationale for why he and his class were

the “new leader-heroes” confronting an evolving urban, industrialized, and global frontier and what had to be done to continue America’s progress. While Turner’s socioeconomic analysis of the frontier eventually eclipsed Roosevelt’s interpretation in America’s political ideology and academic historiography, Slotkin argues that “Roosevelt’s influence is paramount in the cultural realm... the realm of mass-culture. For dime novelists, Wild West show impresarios, the writers of the Western pulp fiction, and the makers of Western movies, Roosevelt’s hero-centered narratives and his affirmative use of the figures and symbols of the traditional literary mythology had far more appeal than the complexities, criticisms, and depersonalized sociology of Turner’s histories” (Gunfighter 61). Roosevelt suggests that his race and class would continue the nation’s forward progress by leading a vigorous life and accepting responsibility as the new aristocrats, by preserving western lands, and by taking swift and decisive action against others when necessary to advance or preserve the nation’s interests. Many of his assumptions and interpretations were racially and class motivated, inherently violent, and in general paternalistic and without heed to the fact that not everyone had the same self-motivation, intellect, hunger, and determination as he.

In his recovery of Cypress Hill’s past in Wolf Willow, Stegner confronted Roosevelt’s violent, action-oriented, and male heroics in the attitudes of his father and his hometown’s acceptance of a prejudicial, hierarchical, and masculinist “cowboy code” that defined one’s position in the town. As a self-described weakling and mama’s boy and admittedly complicit in this code’s actions against ethnic others as a child, Stegner recounts the pervasive destructiveness of this Rooseveltian cowboy code on his personal self, the western self, and western culture while attempting to reclaim certain traits such

as hard work, courage, and responsibility from the exceptionalism of the cowboy and reorient the American cultural imaginary away from the Cowboy Myth's individualism to that of social responsibility to the community. In the 1960's essays, Stegner asks his contemporary western regionalist writers to be especially attentive to this culturally accepted Rooseveltian interpretation of the West's past that emphasizes exceptionalism, hierarchy, and violence in their presentation of the western narrative and its heroes as Roosevelt's vision encourages the destructive attitudes toward others that he wishes to correct.

Owen Wister's The Virginian: The Literary Western's Metanarrative  
and the Cowboy Knight

Along with Roosevelt and Turner, easterner Owen Wister's 1902 bestseller The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains further popularized the western story and its assumptions and values in the American cultural imaginary in the early twentieth century. Seen by historians and literary scholars as the "novel that announced the Western" (Rosowski 158) in its depiction of a cowboy hero and western metanarrative constructed on the ideal of the Roosevelt rancher-leader-proprietor, Wister's novel also captured and promoted a nostalgic regret for a past time specifically situated in a western place and spatiality for the American cultural imaginary: the Wild West of the 1860s to 1890s.<sup>25</sup> Wister solidified through The Virginian and early essays, such as the 1885 "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher," in popular magazines like Harpers and The

Atlantic, the character of the cowboy and the western virtues that Roosevelt was advancing in his political speeches, essays, and histories, and that Cody was re-enacting in “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West.” Like Roosevelt, Wister saw the cowboy hero’s virtues transported into the urban industrial life of the business manager and politician and used to fight internal racial and class strife. Through his characterization of the Virginian as a cut above the ordinary man and thus the epitome of manliness for a culture anxious about its perceived loss of virility, Wister heightened the sense of exceptionalism derived from western experiences that the frontier and Jacksonian heroes already suggested.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Jane Tompkins in West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns (1992) suggests that Wister was responding to the growing popularity of women’s sentimental novels that argued for more humane treatment of the Other. In Wolf Willow, Stegner contests Wister’s version of the cowboy-hero in two short stories by exposing the hierarchical and exclusionary assumptions underlying its construction and by exposing its distance from its historical origin—the western cowhand. And in the 1960’s essays, he charges his contemporary western regionalist writers to examine how their western hero and the values he represents might keep them tied to a romantic and heroic past.

At its most basic level, Wister’s novel supports Roosevelt’s vision of a new aristocracy for the modern world in the story of the lone, talented, virile, eastern-born, white-male who becomes a western hero through the skills he develops and the triumphs he achieves in a western locale. The Virginian’s plot demonstrates how the Anglo-Saxon cowboy hero rises from the ambiguous origins of his birth in Virginia (whether out of poverty or rejection of slothful leisure, he is associated with America’s old aristocracy and founding fathers) to enter Roosevelt’s western aristocracy of rancher-hunter-leader-

proprietor elites. Set in 1890s Wyoming, the novel's taciturn cowboy-hero (the Virginian) is able to move up the social ranks because of his extraordinary skills (physical and intellectual) and demonstration of a superior moral character. Wister uses the hero's qualities to overcome the moral hesitations of the eastern, well-born, white school-marm (Molly) toward the cowboy hero's virility and to justify vigilante tactics to protect property and rights threatened by cattle rustlers (Steve) and individuals (Trampas) who threaten him and the social-economic order he represents.<sup>27</sup> In the end, the cowboy hero defeats the bad guys and demonstrates the restrained but purposeful use of violence to defeat the villains, marries the well-bred school-marm to unite East and West, and becomes part owner of a cattle ranch and deed owner of mines. Accepting his new responsibilities as rancher-hunter-leader-proprietor despite his desire to return to the natural world and a less responsible role, the hero and his new wife will move forward to become the progenitors of a new western aristocracy that will continue America's economic and social progress. To this day, Wister's novel continues to be quite popular and is currently enjoying a renaissance of sorts as western literary scholars examine the novel for the cultural values and tensions it reveals for nineteenth and twentieth-century America.<sup>28</sup>

Within America's western myths, Wister's cowboy hero is no longer the frontier pathfinder or the Jacksonian military-leader Indian fighter; instead he is a path-maker and a leader of men in a western landscape that represents Turner's notion of progress: an emerging civilization carved out of the frontier.<sup>29</sup> In Wister's Virginian, Indians are all but absent, having all ready been removed from



the western landscape that has been settled in Turnerian fashion with towns, businesses, schools, ranches, and railroads. Even though the Virginian is wounded by a renegade Indian's arrow, a scene to remind the reader of the text's western setting, the western locale is no longer wild but owned by absentee landlords and inhabited by cows (property) that are prepared for market by cowhands (laborers). Instead of Indians and a stubborn nature, Wister's cowboy hero confronts villains who exist within civilization, such as cattle rustlers and gunslingers. As Stevens notes in The Word Rides Again (2002), Wister's West is never a literal place but an imaginative space embodying certain guiding principles that he defines as western and that he preserves in the character and actions of its hero-protagonist, the Virginian (16).

These "black-hat" villains that dime novelists and formula westerns will extend to include bank and railroad barons often symbolize to a degree the opposite traits of the "white-hat" cowboy hero to emphasize the self-restraint the hero possesses and the villain lacks. Often directly linked to the hero through their attraction to the same woman, as seen in the Virginian-Molly-Trampus paradigm, these villains create the western Myth's good guy/bad guy dichotomy.<sup>30</sup> The western hero's self-restraint, honor, and sense of justice (even if it is vigilante in nature) save the heroine and society. For Wister, the cowboy-hero does not exist on the fringe of society with questionable class status and ambiguous affinities with the racial other, as did the earlier frontier hero. Rather his cowboy hero comes from civilized society (his roots are in old Virginia) and he rises to the top to be a leader of men (from cowhand to ranch foreman to business partner). In Telling Western Stories: From Buffalo Bill to Larry McMurty (1999), Richard Etulain suggests that , Wister's Virginian is the "nation's nobleman" who stands apart from

others as strong, courageous, and virile: a “superb horseman who understands man and animal” (68) and in true Roosevelt fashion “the best man to win” any confrontation (70).

For Wister, honor, courage, action, and violence define the literary and mythic cowboy. In Westerns: The Making of the Man in Film and Fiction (1998), Lee Clark Mitchell observes that, in the verbal and physical exchanges with Trampas and Steve, the Virginian demonstrates a level of self-control that Trampas and Steve do not, which adds significant weight to his actions when he does finally commit to violent action (98). As many have noted, the use of violence is a primary tension between the Virginian and Molly, with Molly (representative of a cultured Victorian society) arguing against its use in civilized society. In their battle of words, critics claim the Virginian defeats the eastern schoolmarm, Molly, to show that violence falls, according to Stevens, within the realm of men and is a necessity for protecting and defending individual “right” when the Law cannot or will not intercede, as evident in the Virginian’s defense of his honor through the gunfight with Trampas and his participation in the hanging of his friend Steve for cattle rustling (20). Whether or not Wister intended The Virginian to be a literary response to the popularity of the domestic novel in his day as Tompkins argues in West of Everything (1992), Wister’s novel clearly situates women within the domestic realm. Mitchell claims that Molly is a “strong female lead” and can be part of the western story but only within the role of wife (75), as she is clearly a structural element and not an agent (76). Stevens agrees, stating that Molly is limited to acting as counterpoint to others: Molly’s

law and order to Trampas's lawlessness and her insistence on peace to the Virginian's use of violence (20). Without the tension between the Virginian and Molly, these critics claim Wister would not have been able to show how the Virginian embodies the "best" of both worlds—the natural-wild-West and the civil-tame-East. Drawing on the social Darwinism present in the cultural climate of America in his day, Wister makes it clear that the Virginian's marriage or selection of Molly is natural in its uniting of desired characteristics of each and will produce the type of offspring necessary to continue Roosevelt's notion of American greatness.

In the union of the Virginian and Molly and its indication that a family, children, and some level of domesticity will soon enter the Virginian's life, Wister acknowledges that the untamed, Wild West frontier space is gone as Turner proclaimed it was in 1893. According to Stevens, this nostalgia places Wister among other writers of the day, such as Stephen Crane in "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" (1898), Frank Norris in McTeague (1899), Jack London in Martin Eden (1909), and particularly Zane Grey in the 1920s through 1940s, who noted the encroaching complexity of the modern world and the loss of a simpler rural world (101). As scholars have indicated, while Wister clearly laments the passing of the cowboy and western frontier, he shows how the Virginian will carry his western virtues—virility, self-control, courage, ingenuity, and determination—and his western beliefs in righteous violence, manly honor, rugged individualism, and knowledge of man and animal forward into the industrialized, technological urban world that is coming. And, according to Mitchell, this "different world" will continue to be one of male hegemony in Wister's estimation (98), given the revelation of the Virginian's business ventures with the Judge and others at the novel's close. Finally, the Virginian is

Roosevelt's "manager-hero" who will apply western virtues to the urban, industrial world and the "new" frontiers that Roosevelt will seek to conquer as President in the name of Manifest Destiny (Asia, the Philippines, and Panama). Instead of fighting against savage Indians, cattle rustlers, and gunmen, Wister's Virginian will be a manager hero who will combat immigrants, socialist workers, African Americans, and others who make up the urban mob that rebels against low wages and poor working conditions in America's urban centers (Etulain Telling 78; Mitchell Westerns 98; Slotkin Gunfighter 182). In literature and film, as Slotkin and others note, the western locale will be replaced by city streets as the western metamorphoses into American detective fiction, film noir, and the war movies of the 1950s, 60s and 70s.

In Wolf Willow, Stegner explores the culture of the cowboy and the values and actions it promotes, exposing both its cruel, hierarchical, and exclusionary tenets that, he says, have done the modern West more harm than good. While acknowledging the pervasiveness of violence in the West's settlement narrative, Stegner locates other stories of compromise and collaboration in his recovered history of his frontier childhood home and America's West. And, in his two cowboy stories in Wolf Willow, Stegner's rejects Wister's version of the cowboy hero and challenges Wister's presentation of the western woman. In the 1960's essays, Stegner directs western writers to break free of the Myth by questioning its underlying assumptions so they can reclaim certain western values that the Cowboy Myth has perverted in its

appropriation and universalizing of the western white man and woman's role in settlement of the West.

### William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody's Wild West

Along with Turner's emphasis on the western frontier as America's locale for rejuvenation and progress and Roosevelt's and Wister's promotion of an exceptionalist "rancher-hunter-leader-proprietor" hero forged from the western experience, William F. Cody—Indian Scout, stage actor, writer, and entrepreneurial showman better known as Buffalo Bill—helped advanced the notion of the West as critical to America's identity. In his essay, "When Turner and Cody Both Played Chicago in 1893" (1999), Richard White states that it is a mistake to trivialize Cody: "To see Turner as serious and significant and Buffalo Bill as a charlatan and a curiosity, to see Turner as history and Buffalo Bill as entertainment, to see one as concerned with reality and the other with myth, misses their common reliance and promotion of the iconography of their time; it misses their ability to follow separate, but connected, strands of a single mythic cloth" (55). Perhaps as much or more so than the others combined, for its thirty-three year run (1883 – 1916), Cody's "Buffalo Bill's Wild West" promoted the same basic premise Roosevelt and Turner had drawn from America's history: America's development as a nation was due to a progressive series of conquests by Americans over a series of "frontiers" as America marched westward from eastern to western shore. What Cody did better than they did, according to John D. Dorst in his fascinating study of western iconography, Looking West (1999), was to present to hundreds of thousands of American

and Eastern attendees his “slices of the ‘real’ West” (29) that furthered his audiences’ interest in the American West. This Wild West, according to Slotkin, was Cody’s version, as the use of the possessive in the name of the program implies—“Buffalo Bill’s Wild West” (Gunfighter 66). What Cody did successfully was conflate the real (historic) with the fictional (the mythical) to produce a grand narrative of America’s destiny as embodied in its conquest of a western frontier for turn-of-the-century Americans and Europeans that Stegner must negotiate as a westerner, a western writer, and as an American in the twentieth century.

More similar in spirit and tale to Roosevelt’s view of America’s western spatiality than to Turner’s, “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West” confirmed a message about the American’s engagement with the western frontier, wilderness, and savage Others that its audiences already understood—that Americans and America were abused conquerors and justified in their methods of conquest of the frontier. As outlined in the events of his program, Cody depicted a “time” and “place” around different “epochs” in American history that moved America historically across the continent, from the Atlantic’s “primeval forest” through Indian battles on the Great Plains and attacks on settlers’ cabins to the California Pony Express ride (Slotkin Gunfighter 67). As White comments, “Buffalo Bill offered what to a modern historian seems an odd story of conquest, for it is an account of Indian aggression and white defense, of Indian killers and white victims.... The great military icons of American westward expansion are not victories, they are defeats: the Alamo and the Battle of Little Big Horn. We do

not plan our conquests. We just retaliate against massacres” (Played Chicago 53).

Limerick agrees, stating that the American West metanarrative is the story of a series of violent conquests driven by the economic decisions of an American culture that saw itself as innocents but who also had a hard-headed faith in the ability of humans and a people-nation to master nature and the world (Legacy 28-29). These conquests, she argues, were not the romantic adventures and struggles presented in the newspapers and pamphlets of the mid-to-late 1800s, the movies of the early-to-mid 1900s, or American history books from the 1900s to the 1960s. Rather they were at the expense and sacrifice of other cultures, nature and land, and the values of community, compromise, and collaboration that the American West Myths elide (22). This mythology, she claims, has locked the West and America of today into a contentious battle with the realities of its present or the necessary acknowledgment of the devastating consequences of its past because of the themes in and resulting actions from this dominant metanarrative. As Slotkin, White, and Limerick demonstrate, this motif was not new with Cody but had long been a presence in the American cultural imaginary that went back to Puritan captivity narratives and up through the nineteenth century in the portrayal of Indian battles in American popular culture.<sup>31</sup>

What Cody attempted to do in his performances was “instruct” his audiences on the meaning of the American West. According to Slotkin, “Cody himself was primarily responsible for establishing the *Wild West’s* commitment to historical authenticity and to its mission of historical education” as he and his management “declared it improper” to refer to the event as a show (Gunfighter 67).<sup>32</sup> The performance was referred to as either “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West” or after 1899 more formally identified as “Buffalo Bill’s

Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World” (White 47; Slotkin Gunfighter 67).<sup>33</sup> In White’s view, Cody had “educational pretensions” for his program that elevated it above the status of entertainment over other traveling exhibitions, such as P.T. Barnum’s Circus, offered to American and European audiences (Played Chicago 49).<sup>34</sup> He even asked American military figures to provide testimonials to attest to the “accuracy” of his representations of the historical events in which these figures had been participants (Gunfighter 68).<sup>35</sup> In Hunger for the Wild: America’s Obsession with the Untamed West (2007), Michael L. Johnson says Cody gave the audience, often numbering in the thousands, “what it wanted: adventure, battles, heroic bloodshed in the name of progress” while “neglect[ing] mundane facets of Western life” (226). Buffalo Bill’s “historical” West was a series of brief “realistic” vignettes, using living historical figures, authentic props, and animals of the frontier, and effectively blurred, as Johnson states, the distinctions between “authenticity and fakery” (230).

Cody’s depiction of his West as true and accurate problematized what was historical and what was fiction for his audience, especially those unaware of America’s frontier history except through mass-media representations like newspaper accounts, dime novels, paintings and sculpture. It was, in Slotkin’s estimation, an

unparalleled success as a myth-making enterprise. From 1885 to 1905 it was the most important commercial vehicle for the fabrication and transmission of the Myth of the Frontier. It reached large audiences in



every major city and innumerable smaller ones throughout the United States. The period of its European triumph coincided with the period of massive immigration to America. As many immigrants testified, the Wild West was the source of some of their most vivid images and expectations of the new land (Gunfighter 87).

As White states, “Where representation stopped and lived experience began were never very clear in *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West*, and this gave the *Wild West* its power. Buffalo Bill created what now seems a postmodern West, in which performance and history were hopelessly intertwined” (Played Chicago 53).<sup>36</sup> Stegner confronts this blurring of myth and reality, historical fact and fiction in Wolf Willow and in the essays as he confronts the Myths’ replacement of the West’s historical past with a mythic version that has contributed to what Stegner claims in his essays is the West’s lack of a historical continuity between past and present.

As historians and scholars show, Turner, Roosevelt, Wister, and Cody presented the conquest of America’s frontier as a critically determining factor in the nation’s development and achievement of what the Declaration promised: equality, property, happiness, and prosperity. Because they became powerful presences within the cultural realms of politics, academia, and mass culture, they collectively reified through self-promotion, intuitiveness, luck, and even shrewdness existing notions of the American West already present in the American cultural imaginary by working with known images, icons, and messages regarding the American frontier. Their western narratives explained and justified the settlement of the nation and its emergence as a powerful nation-state able (or destined) to further extend its growth because of its exceptional characteristics.

According to historian Martin Ridge, it was “a usable history for a people who were increasingly aware of their emerging role in world leadership and equally self-conscious of the brevity of their national identity” (82). These Myths have been so powerful that Ridge says their “themes regarding American society and character as depicted in fiction, art, drama, and film have so effectively captured the American public’s imagination and are now so deeply woven into the American consciousness that it may still be a part of the American mentality a century from now” (75).<sup>37</sup> Their vision of the West that Cody identified as “the wonderful pioneer and frontier life of the Wild West of America” (quoted in Slotkin Gunfighter 67) is the vision of the West Stegner confronts and wants to correct by renarrativizing it in Wolf Willow and the 1960’s essays with an Other West he constructs through specific historical and personal experiences in a particular western place.

#### The Formulaic Western—The Story of the Big Hat and the Fast Gun

Further popularizing the western story Stegner confronted in the twentieth century was the formulaic western novel. Read by millions of Americans, these inexpensive, low-brow paperbacks pervaded the marketplace in the early 1900s and promoted a western (national) narrative that had mass culture appeal because of the stories’ ties to ideas and values prominent in the political ideology and rhetoric of early twentieth-century America and for their capacity to provide readers a means for understanding the complex realities of modern life through

simplified, clearly defined conflicts, characters, and events. In Jane Tompkins' view in West of Everything (1992), the formulaic western narrative was "secular, materialist, and antifeminist; it focuses on conflict in the public space, is obsessed by death, and worships the phallus.... It is a narrative of male violence" (28). These paperback westerns reinforced America's cultural imaginary with metaphoric expressions of the Western mythology similar to that being presented in the mass media of film and eventually television during the first half of the twentieth century. In the 1960's essays, Stegner admits the popularity of the formulaic western and provides strategies his contemporary western regionalist writers can use to prevent their literary western from aping their mythic West.

The most popular formulaic western writers are Zane Grey (1872 -1939) in the early part of the twentieth-century and Louis L'Amour (1908-1988) in the latter half of the century. Born in Ohio, Grey did not visit the West until his thirties, while L'Amour had first-hand knowledge and experiences with the West, having been born in North Dakota and having traveled much of West as young man.<sup>38</sup> Both writers built upon the western narrative Wister constructed and the formulaic quality of the earlier dime novel Smith discussed in Virgin Land. Having produced fifty-six westerns, Grey is considered by critics like Franz Blaha to be the one who helped to conventionalize the properties of the formulaic western in the early decades of the twentieth century (949). From Wister's Virginian, according to Blaha, Grey created "a highly stylized illustration of the conflict between the values of the fading 'good old days' of the Old West and the ever more intrusive values of urban-industrial civilization" that more mainstream authors such as

Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and others were also portraying in their works in the early decades of the twentieth century (950).

Coming only ten years after Wister's The Virginian (1902), Grey's best known work, Riders of the Purple Sage (1912) provides readers with an escape to a romanticized past of the Old West that furthered Wister's strain of nostalgia. In Telling Stories (1992), Etulain says that Grey converted Wister's plot into a basic structure that became the formula others after him adopted for the western: a powerful, wealthy villain (Mormon Elder Tull) threatens the inheritance or properties of a wealthy, educated white woman (Jane Withersteen); a mysterious, freedom-loving stranger-hero (Lassiter) of ambiguous birth is out for retribution of some kind against the villain and finds that his objective aligns with the woman's needs. In rescuing her from the villain through some form of dramatic violence, the stranger-hero (Lassiter) is morally redeemed and becomes the lover-husband of the woman. Critics tend to agree that Grey's Riders and Wister's The Virginian share several similarities.<sup>39</sup> First, both novels advocate the judicious and necessary use of violence to protect individual and community "rights." Second, both novels illustrate power struggles between the hero and the woman and the hero and the villain(s) and clearly come down on the side of the hero. The cowboy hero's western exceptionalism—the skills, experiences, and understanding of western justice (or "what a man has to do")—enable him to defeat the "villains" in the story while his virility and prowess in language and thinking, despite lacking the formal schooling the woman has had, is shown to be clearer and more precise than hers. Third, both novels clearly consign women to

the subordinate position and as representatives of the values of civilization and the domestic with men as their protectors and guides. As the conclusions of the two novels demonstrate, the man/hero triumphs through his prowess in language, rationality, and virility over the woman and her inner emotions and moral values that include compromise, family, domesticity, and Christian ideals. Fourth, both novels show the hero to be the best man to serve as the guardian of the people and their values and beliefs in relation to other men in the story. Finally, force, violence, and the gun are legitimized and sanctioned in both novels as the ways of the world and necessary for the advancement of society. In both Wolf Willow and the 1960's essays, Stegner challenges the popular western narrative for its promotion of violence and male exceptionalism, as he sees both contributing to America's destructive attitudes toward Others and the land.

Along with these similarities, Wister's The Virginian and Grey's Riders have some noteworthy differences, with the most significant Grey's modification of the hero's origin. In the hero's rise from poor beginnings and the association of his hero through name to the locale of America's Founding Father, Thomas Jefferson, Wister clearly rejects the western "cowhand" as the source for his new American hero (Slotkin Gunfighter 170-171).<sup>40</sup> In contrast to Wister, Slotkin claims Grey's cowboy-heroes tend to be "freedom-loving individualists who defend worthy folk who are oppressed or dispossessed by powerful men and combinations bent on monopoly" (Gunfighter 216), revealing, he says, Grey's attentiveness to the "populistic, liberal, or democratic values in ... mass culture" of his day (217). Grey's Lassiter is a common man who stands out because of the skills and traits he learned from living in the western frontier and who fights against those motivated by greed, power, and dominance over others. Whereas the

Virginian (and Molly) will join the powerful and the monopoly (ranchers), Grey's Lassiter (and Jane) will not, selecting to fade away into Surprise Valley beyond society and history. Additionally, Grey's Riders differs from Wister's Virginian in its Wild West action. According to Rosowski, "action abounds in Riders, where shootings, stampedes, and avalanches blur together in frenzied movement" whereas there is little sustained physical action in Wister's The Virginian (Birthing 165). Action and adventure become the major characteristics of the formulaic westerns and Hollywood films that have been the most successful.<sup>41</sup>

By moving the western story into the mythic, as Cody did, Grey helped to further promote nostalgia for the past West and to subordinate the roles of reality, authenticity, and history in the telling of the western story. According to Slotkin, Grey "translated the West into a purely mythic or fantasy-space" on which later western formula fiction writers and other forms of mass media distribution of the western would capitalize (Gunfighter 216). And, observes Mitchell, along with this nostalgia for the simpler days of the Old West and the cultural apprehension Wister captured, Grey presented the western spatiality—as did Roosevelt, Wister, and Turner—as possessing rejuvenating powers and as a place where eastern characters find health, happiness, and escape from the constraints and limitations of eastern life in the openness of the western landscape in an easy to read, simplified plot, and formulaic pattern he repeated in his other western novels (126). In Wolf Willow, through his personal history, Stegner exposes what the nostalgia glosses—the deprivation, hardships, and failures—and how this

nostalgia separates the modern West from its historical past, a history Stegner recovers in silenced and lost voices of his frontier childhood home's past.

While Grey was the most popular formula western writer in the early twentieth century, rivaling Grey's popularity from the 1950s forward has been Louis L'Amour.<sup>42</sup> His first major achievement came with the short story "Hondo" (1949) that was made into a movie in 1953 starring John Wayne and after which L'Amour's career took off.<sup>43</sup> While Mitchell credits L'Amour with providing the reader with more historical accuracy than Grey in regards to the "cowboy's gear, breed of horses, local biographies, even geographical idiosyncrasies of the Old West" (198-99), Robert Lee Gale in Updating the American Literary West (1992) suggests that scholars need to examine carefully some of the assumptions underlying L'Amour's themes, specifically the "Darwinian, Manifest Destiny rationalization that the land in the West—indeed, every region the world over—belonged and belongs to those with the strength to conquer and hold it" (958).<sup>44</sup> Unlike Grey, L'Amour's heroes, gender distinctions, and plots return to a Wister-Roosevelt paradigm of violence, hierarchy, and conquest. In contrast to Grey whose democratic heroes fight the "black-hat" villains to protect the heroine and the community, the objective of L'Amour's virile, self-reliant (Anglo) men is conquest in the name of national progress. Gale claims L'Amour retells the Frontier Myth as a glorified story of white conquest, a statement Limerick agrees with, stating that L'Amour was "a writer still intoxicated with the independence, nobility, grandeur, and adventure of the frontier. He remains true to the plot formula of tough men in the tough land" (Legacy 32). As Christine Bold notes in Selling the West: Popular Western Fiction, 1860-1960 (1987), the formulaic western story excludes women and minorities from the historical record

and focuses instead on conflict between men and the resolution of that conflict being crystallized into a violent struggle between life and death with no space for compromise. In order to revision the western narrative, Stegner locates spaces in Wolf Willow for compromise in the narratives of western women (his mother and his fictional Molly) as well as in several western men as he recovers the voices of his childhood home's past that the Myths have hidden.

#### Jack Schaefer's Shane: The Idolization of the Gunslinger

If Wister's Virginian was the early twentieth-century's classic western metanarrative, Jack Schaefer's novel Shane (1948), and especially its immensely popular film adaptation, is the latter half of the century's grand western narrative in its nostalgia and loss, emulation of righteous violence, and overall depiction of the West's grandeur. While Stegner was writing Wolf Willow in the 1950s, the film Shane was released in 1953 and starred box-office superstar Alan Ladd. It was the first color western film and became immensely popular almost immediately.<sup>45</sup> As West Coast editor for Houghton-Mifflin, Stegner recommended the publication of Schaefer's novel, describing how one Houghton-Mifflin reader commented that she "couldn't make up her mind whether it was the best western ever written, or a parody of a Western. I couldn't tell either, but I certainly advocated its publication" (HMWW 191). A non-westerner, Schaefer (1907-1991) was born in Cleveland, Ohio, and did not move west until 1955, when he settled in Santa Fe, New Mexico. After graduating from Oberlin College



in 1929 with an English degree and beginning graduate school at Columbia University, Schaefer left college in 1930 without receiving his Masters of Arts to work for United Press as a journalist and eventually to hold major editorial positions for eastern publications.

Schaefer's Shane draws its literary elements from Wister and Grey and its vision of the West from Roosevelt and Turner. In Mitchell's view, Shane "offers a distillation of the Western itself" (193), as Schaefer presents a larger-than life virile cowboy-hero who emerges onto the novel and film's setting with an ambiguous birthright and occupation, though his actions and understanding of western ways suggest he is a gunfighter. In manner, speech, and skills, Shane exhibits an aristocratic nature similar to that of Wister's Virginian and is simply "better" than other men. His enemies are internal; the cattle baron Ryker and his hired gun, Stark Wilson—a Judge Henry and Virginian gone bad—who want to oust a small community of homesteaders from the valley so Ryker can run his cattle. Like Wister, Schaefer's thematic tension is a Turnerian one: with the western space settled (Ryker has already removed the savages and tamed the stubborn wilderness) the conflict concerns the shape of the evolving community, whether it upholds the democratic principles of the pioneer-homesteaders or the autocratic, frontier principles of the cattle baron, Ryker. According to Slotkin, "Ryker's wealth depends upon the 'wasteful' system of open-range grazing, and all the law he has ever needed was made with his guns. The homesteaders represent both economic advancement and political democracy," as their society is based on cooperation, community, and progressive farming techniques (i.e., irrigation) (Gunfighter

396). In terms of Turner's Myth, Shane's defeat of Ryker signals a new, better way of life at the expense of an earlier one—one in which Ryker, Wilson, and Shane belong.

In this somewhat "anti-western" western story that pits the rugged individualism of Ryker/Wilson against the communal and peaceful homesteaders, the woman being threatened is Marian Starrett. Unlike Wister's Molly and Grey's Jane, Marian is already married to Joe Starrett, a strong, somewhat stubborn but unselfish farmer-pioneer and not to the cowboy-hero. Marian—and by extension her husband, Joe, and son Bob (Joey in the film), and the community—symbolizes civilization, progress, family, and democratic ideals. In fact, Marian (like Wister's Molly and Grey's Jane) sees guns and violence as immoral in society and wishes they could be banished from the valley (civilization), as they represent a less civilized period of the West. The loner Shane is the mythic American hero, the white-hat, good-guy, who is closer to Grey's Lassiter than Wister's Virginian in his actions and values. He insinuates himself into the Starrett family and the pioneer community by assisting Joe on the Starrett farm and by attending community meetings. His presence and the skills and knowledge he has acquired from the frontier give the community renewed hope and energy. Young Bob/Joey elevates Shane to a hero, intuitively recognizing his father's deference to and his mother's love for Shane. The adult Bob/Joey says that Shane "was a man like father in whom a boy could believe in the simple knowing that what was beyond comprehension was still clean and solid and right" (Shane Critical 91). As tensions build between Ryker and the

homesteaders because negotiations between the younger Joe Starrett and the older Ryker fail, the plot moves toward the inevitable display of violence between the homesteaders and Ryker, or in this case their representatives, the homesteaders' Shane and Ryker's Wilson. In keeping with the western narrative, Schaefer suggests that only male action and western violence will resolve the existing tension and conflict in the story and the western spatiality.

As the American and western hero, Shane is without a knowable past. He just appears out of the great western landscape and is handsome, independent, self-reliant, competent, taciturn, solitary, socially remote, itinerant, and homeless. In Having It Both Ways: Self-Subversion in Western Popular Classics (1993), Forrest G. Robinson claims that Shane embodies not only the traits of the western hero but also those of the American hero as outlined by R.W.B. Lewis in The American Adam (1955). Like Lewis's American Adam-hero who is outside society, self-reliant, independent, and relatively free to come and go as desired between frontier and society, Shane carries the moral burdens of society in his quest for selfhood. The novel is about Shane, and not Marian, just as Wister's was about the Virginian, and not Molly, and is a story of male identity. Tompkins states that for those men who came of age in the twentieth-century, such as Stegner, the western narrative created a model of behavior and expectations for men that emphasized the importance of manhood as an ideal. It does not matter what role he has—cowboy, sheriff, outlaw, pioneer; what matters is that he be a man (18).<sup>46</sup> From Robinson's perspective, Shane is an older, more experienced, and much wiser (self-educated) Huck Finn; he is a dangerous man, a danger he recognizes and is troubled by (Having 79). That is, unlike Wister's Virginian and Grey's Lassiter, Schaefer's Shane

has an obvious sadness about him that he calls the “dark trail of his past” (Shane Critical 139; Having 83). When Shane’s story is placed within the rejuvenating spatiality of the Roosevelt-Wister West, Shane finds redemption for this violent past by using his exceptionalism and skills in the service of the Starretts and the homesteaders. Instead of fighting with Ryker and Wilson to uphold their frontier autocracy and individualism, Shane fights for Turner’s view of the West as a space for a continually evolving and improving democratic community.

Acknowledging Shane’s importance to the homesteaders and the mythic West, Marian falls more easily in love with the hero than did Molly and Jane. Though every bit as strong as Shane and admired by Shane for his determination, beliefs, and strength, Marian’s husband, Joe Starrett, defers to Shane’s western skills and wisdom, telling Marian that, if something were to happen to him, Shane would take care of her far better than he ever could. However, as the holder of society’s values and virtues, Marian cannot abandon her family and the community. Thus, the two—Marian and Shane—embody a symbolic and chivalric love, not a physical union (Slotkin, Gunfighter 400). Moreover, unlike Wister’s Molly and Grey’s Jane, Marian asks Shane to stay and help them with Ryker, even though this means appealing to the violence she detests to defeat society’s threats. Robinson suggests that Shane agrees to stay knowing full well that the violence will strain his relationship with Marian and Joe and that Marian recognizes his sacrifice is for her and not the community (Having 88). Moreover, Shane (like the Virginian and Lassiter) will finally demonstrate to Marian (as happened with Molly and Jane) in his spectacular gunfight with Wilson and Ryker

that violence and the gun remain necessary to the progression of society. Indeed, Shane essentially tells Bob/Joey this fact: “A gun is a tool. No better or no worse than any other tool, an axe, a shovel or anything. A gun is as good or as bad as the man using it. Remember that” (Shane Critical 139). According to Slotkin, both the movie and novel demonstrate that “A ‘good man with a gun’ is in every sense the best of men—an armed redeemer who is the sole vindicator of the ‘liberties of the people,’ the ‘indispensable man’ in the quest for progress” (Gunfighter 396). Shane’s single-handed dismissal of Ryker, Wilson, and Ryker’s men affirms this western value, as it clears the path for the homesteaders to continue to develop and civilize this western valley in Turnerian fashion and signals Shane’s necessary departure as his use comes to an end.

Schaefer’s novel highlights the role of violence in American progress and importantly the mystique and superiority of the cowboy hero, emphasizing more than either Wister or Grey the hero’s solitariness, independence, and role as a violent redeemer of a democratic and always progressing civilization. In the tradition of Roosevelt and Wister, the valley that Shane saves for the homesteaders is the symbol of a renewed and recovered source of American values. Shane’s departing comment to young Bob/Joey expresses the importance of this western place: “Hold it in your mind like this. It’s a lovely land, Bob. A good place to be a boy and grow straight inside as a man should.... My gaze followed his, and I saw our valley as though for the first time and the emotion in me was more than I could stand” (Shane Critical 250).<sup>47</sup> With his task complete—the villain has been killed and the woman is in the hands of a good (but lesser) man—Shane leaves, but with his violent acts and personal sacrifice redeemed for his part in saving and moving a Turnerian society forward. The novel and film make

obvious a form of reminiscence and longing not unlike that found in Wister and Grey for a past time and place and the values they represent: simpler times, rugged individualism, and promises of American exceptionalism.

The West Stegner and the American cultural imaginary encountered in the first half of the twentieth century was formed by the Cowboy and Pioneer Myths that located American exceptionalism, national progress, and defining cultural ideals in the American's engagement (conquest and transformation) with a western space. This culturally sanctioned mythic West shaped the American cultural imaginary's perception of the West and is the view of the West Stegner wants to correct in Wolf Willow and the 1960's critical essays because this view promotes a particularly destructive attitude toward western lands, claims western violence as a right, warps the modern westerners' sense of self, and separates the modern West and America from their historical past and the complexities of a modern present. With Wolf Willow and the 1960's critical essays, Stegner offers a reassessment of the West's metanarratives well in advance of the revisionist challenges to come in the 1970s and 1980s through the recovery and return of the local history of his childhood home—a western frontier place; the memories of his family's experiences in this frontier place; the two stories he includes about the western man and woman living in a western frontier place; and the “chores” he assigns western regionalist writers to prevent the literature they write about West from becoming like the mythic, formulaic westerns that promote these Myths. While he acknowledges that the westerner's and America's cultural inheritance includes these Myths and their promises of progress, opportunity,

regeneration, and democracy, Stegner argues that they keep the modern West trapped in a destructive fantasy version of its past and present.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Creswell gives an excellent overview of the field of human geography, its definitions, and its assumptions and goals. According to political geographer John Agnew, a “meaningful location” denotes a place that can be “located” by coordinates on a map or the Earth’s surface; has a “locale” or a concrete visual form physically or imaginatively in which lived or imagined lives are conducted; and evokes a “sense of place” that comes from the “subjective and emotional attachment people have to place” (7). In his introduction to Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience (1977), human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan states that “‘space’ is more abstract than ‘place.’ What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (6).

<sup>2</sup> See also Doreen Massey’s Space, Place, and Gender in which she claims that places are defined by local as well as global socio-spatial relations and their intersection that then give a place its distinctive character (4), with the understanding that “customs and institutional structures clearly persist through time and ‘set’ places in time and space” (5).

<sup>3</sup> When I refer to the four main myths of the West—Frontier, Pioneer, Cowboy, and Garden West—I will use “Myths”; when I refer to myth in general, it will be with a lower case “m.”

<sup>4</sup> For this section, I am deeply indebted to the work of Slotkin, John Cawelti, Susan Rosowiski, Jane Tompkins for discussions of these Myths in literature; Lee Clark Mitchell, Rita Parks, Christina Bold, and William Bloodworth for the formulaic westerns;



Michael L. Johnson and John Dorst for studies on the influence of the West Myths in popular culture and the perception of what is western.

<sup>5</sup> Slotkin's three volume study includes Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600 – 1860 (1973); The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800 - 1890 (1985); and Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America (1992).

<sup>6</sup> As he explains in his introduction to Gunfighter Nation, Slotkin draws heavily on scholars of myth and cultural studies for his description of and use of myth. Written in the early 1990s, his work is not as critically informed as some would prefer. For example, see Armitage who accuses Slotkin of being too totalizing in his use of the regeneration myth.

<sup>7</sup> See Best and Kellner, pgs. 1-29 and 163-167, as well as Hutcheon, pgs 3-22.

<sup>8</sup> For more on this topic, see Slotkin's Gunfighter Nation and The BFI Companion to the Western; some consider Peckinpah's The Wild Bunch (1969) an early revisionist film with its focus on violence and an ending in which the "bad" win.

<sup>9</sup> In her study of memoir and literature by nineteenth- and twentieth-century women writers who traveled to or lived in the West, Rosowski argues that, as both a geographical and imaginary place, the American West has reflected the ideas, metaphors, and symbols deeply connected to American national identity, selfhood, and notions of American literature. Rosowski's study dealt with Caroline Kirkland, Margaret Fuller, Willa Cather, and Jean Stafford.

<sup>10</sup> See Gunfighter Nation, 29 – 62, in which Slotkin sets up the context for the mass cultural appeal of the western story and a brief history of how cultural events, people, and historical events contributed to the shaping, promotion, and reception of this western narrative. Cawelti's Six Gun Mystique Sequel, Robinson's Having It Both Ways, Mitchell's Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film, and Jane Tompkins' West of Everything are also very good sources for understanding the evolution of the West's Myths in American culture.

<sup>11</sup> See also Lears' No Place of Grace and Marx's The Machine in the Garden for the challenges early twentieth-century America faced.

<sup>12</sup> For other extremely helpful and informative secondary sources on the Frontier myths in American culture see Richard White and Limerick's The Frontier in American Culture, Roderick Nash's Wilderness and the American Mind, Kerwin Lee Klein's Frontiers of Historical Imagination, and Michael L. Johnson's Hunger for the Wild.

<sup>13</sup> This theme is evident in French-American colonialist writer's John St. John de Crèvecoeur designation of the fringe pathfinder in his Letters from an American Farmer (1782), in Cooper's placement of Hawkeye outside society, and in the colonial narratives that positioned Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, and other frontiersmen on the fringe of the community. As Slotkin and others have shown, Boone was not poor but, as his myth evolved, he lost his class status to fit with the egalitarian needs of the emerging American Republic.

<sup>14</sup> According to Slotkin and others, the notion of the Indian War was being used in the popular press to depict America's conflicts between blacks and immigrants and whites

and between labor and capital in racial and class terms that aligned with the previous savage versus white frontier narratives.

<sup>15</sup> We often overlook amidst his nationalist rhetoric and nostalgia how Turner called for more study on America's religious development, a sociological study of western communities, and development of local economies. Additionally, Etulain shows how 1890s fiction and a lot of historical writing of the day treated readers to incredulous adventure stories far divorced from historical reality of the frontier (Telling 29).

<sup>16</sup> The formal definition of "frontier" was the line beyond which fewer than two people per square mile lived. The 1890 report said a continuous line no longer existed, but pockets of frontier space remained.

<sup>17</sup> See Edmund Morris's Theodore Rex chapters 1 – 4 especially and The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt as well as Slotkin's Gunfighter Nation; Johnson's Hunger for the Wild; and Lear's No Place of Grace for more on Roosevelt's influence on popular culture and the West.

<sup>18</sup> See Susan Lee Johnson on Roosevelt and construction of a masculine west and the crises of manliness that Tompkins discusses in Sentimental Novel; Lears and M. Johnson also discuss Roosevelt's influence as does Slotkin in Gunfighter Nation.

<sup>19</sup> The time he spent in the West would become critical to his self-image and recognition of it would appear in his political speeches and philosophy as well as become the source for many of his views on the role the West had and would have on American political, social, and economic growth. According to Slotkin, Roosevelt's western activities restored his spirit and energy so that he could return to Eastern political life (Gunfighter

36). His ranching and hunting books were an outgrowth of the time he spent at his Dakota Ranch from 1885-1886. He returned East permanently after the 1886-1887 winter that wiped out the cattle on the range, which included his \$60,000 investment, and most of his competitors.

<sup>20</sup> Roosevelt had already published a history of The Naval War of 1812 (1882), which he had begun at Harvard.

<sup>21</sup> On April 10, 1899, at Chicago's Hamilton Club, Roosevelt gave his "The Strenuous Life" speech in which he addresses the "Men who pre-eminently and distinctly embody all that is most American in the American character." He lectures them "not [on] the doctrine of ignoble ease, but the doctrine of the strenuous life, the life of toil and effort, labor and strife; to preach that highest form of success which comes, not to the man who desires mere easy peace, but to the man who does not shrink from danger, from hardship, or from bitter toil, and who out of these wins the splendid ultimate triumph". He urges them to pro-create and for women not to "fear motherhood" but to embrace their role as "the housewife, the helpmate of the homemaker, the wise and the fearless mother of many children," and to follow the precepts of the "strenuous life" so they and their sons may renew their virility and the special frontier characteristics that enable them to run giant corporations now that the frontier is gone. Roosevelt, "The Strenuous Life, Works, XII, pp. 3-6.

<sup>22</sup> See Slotkin's Gunfighter Nation 39; Slotkin suggests that Roosevelt develops a connection first in the hunting and ranching books between the western frontier space and the American's exceptionalism through the presentation of the "cowboy" and his

interactions with them and then through a “myth of origins” that he develops in the multi-volume, The Winning of the West, started in 1885.

<sup>23</sup> In the chapter called “In Cowboy Land” for his 1913 Theodore Roosevelt: An Autobiography, Roosevelt presents his experiences with America’s cowboys of the 1880s as the immersion of a highly civilized man into the life of an earlier historical stage epitomized by the cowboy’s life on the western frontier and the rejuvenation he experienced spiritually and physically.

<sup>24</sup> Lears states that Roosevelt’s actions were in keeping with a paternalistic and managerial philosophy of turn-of-the-century America. Slotkin notes in Gunfighter Nation that they were also necessary within key elements in the Frontier narrative that Roosevelt understood as dictating the necessity of retaining frontier spaces. By the conclusion of his presidency, Roosevelt created sixteen national monuments, fifty-one wildlife refuges, and five new National Parks. Through these acts, the federal government gained control over the nation’s “scenic wonders” and public recognition that these natural wonders were “resources” that required federal management to sustain their use by the West’s growing tourist industry. As Slotkin states, Roosevelt’s writings on the West prompted many well-to-do easterners to go west as tourists and to experience western life in what would become known as “dude ranches.” Much like the frontier hero previously, he says, Roosevelt opened the West through his writings to easterners who would come as tourists rather than as settlers. See also M. Johnson’s treatment of “dude ranches” and Roosevelt’s contribution to them.

<sup>25</sup> Wister says as much in his preface by identifying the Virginian and his virtues with a past world. For more on Wister's use of nostalgia and nostalgia in the formulaic western, see Christine Bold, John Cawelti, Jane Tompkins, Frederick Robinson, and Slotkin's Gunfighter Nation.

<sup>26</sup> For more on Wister, see Richard Etulain's Owen Wister.

<sup>27</sup> See Slotkin's treatment in Gunfighter Nation, 169-183.

<sup>28</sup> See Robinson's Having it Both Ways, Cawelti, Rosowiski, and Tompkins who have recently written about it.

<sup>29</sup> See especially Roosevelt's Winning of the West and critical commentary on it.

<sup>30</sup> See Robinson's Having It Both Ways for an informative discussion of how many westerns, consciously or unconsciously, set up an almost doppelganger effect with the juxtaposition of good and bad cowboys. John Calwelti in Six Gun also examines the tensions between good and bad and the comment they make about values in American culture.

<sup>31</sup> For instance, White states that "Nineteenth-century broadsides such as the 'Massacre of the Baldwin's Family by Savages' and 'Murder of the whole family of Samuel Wells ... by the Indians' kept this theme of white victimization central to American understanding of the Indian wars" (FTJ & BB 53). Furthermore, the role of the Indian in Buffalo Bill's Wild West was to attack, for "many of the great set pieces of the Wild West ... featured Indian attacks" (52-53). See Slotkin's Fatal Environment where he too discusses how dime novelists, popular press, and lectures continued to promote the white victimization theme from earlier captivity narratives throughout the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries. Limerick also discusses this victimology pattern in Legacy of Conquest.

<sup>32</sup> One might argue that today's issue of authenticity in western literature and scholarship has its roots in Cody's desire to be realistic in the presentation of events he (and the others) "lived" as well as a nod to his keen and effective marketing sense in the use of real people, animals, and western accoutrements to promote his program. See Nathaniel Lewis's Unsettling the Literary West: Authenticity and Authorship for more on this issue.

<sup>33</sup> Slotkin says that "Rough Riders" was a popular term at the time used to refer to Cavalry riders so its inclusion in the title is not just a reference to Roosevelt's San Juan Hill event but also an acknowledgement of all American cavalry. Roosevelt's historical presence became an integral part of Buffalo Bill's Wild West performances in 1899 when Cody replaced "Custer's Last Fight" in the program with the "Battle of San Juan Hill" to celebrate the heroism of Roosevelt and his regiment, The Rough Riders (Gunfighter 82).

<sup>34</sup> Cody's program stated the following: "It is the aim of the management of *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* to do more than present an exacting and realistic entertainment for public amusement. Their object is to PICTURE TO THE EYE, by the aid of historical characters and living animals, a series of animated scenes and episodes, which had their existence in fact, of *the wonderful pioneer and frontier life of the Wild West of America*" (quoted in Slotkin Gunfighter, 67 italics mine).

<sup>35</sup> At one time or another, Cody had Sitting Bull, Geronimo, Roosevelt's Rough Riders, U.S. Cavalry units, an assortment of cowboys, cowgirls, sheriffs and outlaws, and of

course Buffalo Bill himself as participants in these representations of past events (Slotkin Gunfighter 74).

<sup>36</sup> Cody problematizes his own social position by indicating in his biographical entry for the *Wild West* program his plebian origins—he says he is a “child of the plains” whose early intimacy with the wilderness frontier provided him with the skills to conquer the savage and move civilization forward—as well as being a trusted and respected equal to leaders when he says he is a “patriarchal figure of fully achieved gentility, a natural aristocrat able and worthy to socialize with royalty” (qtd in Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation 68, 76).

<sup>37</sup> The deeply embedded emotions the American public has for these Myths of the West are evident in the public’s reaction to the 1994 exhibit on the West. See “Introduction” by James R. Grossman in The Frontier in American Culture.

<sup>38</sup> According to Blaha, Grey’s trip west was an “epiphany for Grey, who from that point on dedicated his writing almost exclusively to the American West” (950). In fact, Grey hiked the West’s deserts and mountains (and other areas across the globe) and even started a refuge for buffalo. His personal adventures would later become the inspiration for his western stories. After the success of Heritage of the Desert in 1910, Zane Grey moved his family (a wife and three children) permanently West to a home in Altadena, California, and a hunting lodge on the Mogollon Rim near Payson, Arizona.

<sup>39</sup> Tompkins, Rosowski, Robinson, Slotkin (see pages 175-183) share this view.

<sup>40</sup> See Wister’s essay for Harper Monthly “The Evolution of the Cow-puncher” (1895).



<sup>41</sup> See also Christine Bold's Selling the Wild West: Popular Western Fiction, 1860 -1960 (1987), Forrest Robinson's in Having it Both Ways, and Jane Tompkins' in West of Everything for how much of the "action" in Wister's novel is really sustained verbal exchanges between Molly and the Virginian and the Virginian and others rather than the physical "action" westerns evoke.

<sup>42</sup> L'Amour's has sold more than 200 million copies of his western stories and is extremely popular world-wide. Born in North Dakota, at the age of fifteen he began a series of itinerant jobs that would take him across the Southwest to the Pacific Northwest to the Far East until 1942. At thirty-four, he enlisted to serve in World War II. After the war, he returned to Los Angeles to write.

<sup>43</sup> See Gale, "Louis L'Amour." Updating, 955- 959. These figures exclude the million plus audio tapes and records based on his novels that have been sold (957). For example, he published seventeen western novels in the 1950s; in the 1960s, he published twenty-nine (including the start of the Sackett family volumes) and Flint (1960), which along with Hondo (1953), was later named by the Western Writers of America in 1977 as one of the twenty-five best sellers of all time. In the 1970s, twenty-six more novels arrived that started two new family series: the Chantry and Talon families. And finally, in the 1980s, he produced fourteen more novels, three of which are outside the western story (one set in twelfth-century Europe, another in the thirteenth century, and one in twentieth-century Cold War Siberia).

<sup>44</sup> Gale is quite critical of L'Amour's views, seeing them as politically conservative and backward looking as he claims L'Amour's message came to be "to survive at all as a

nation Americans must be self-reliant and crafty, avoid bureaucracy and socialism, practice pitiless violence and return to primitivism” (Updating 958). See also Robert Lee Gale’s Louis L’Amour.

<sup>45</sup> Western writer A.B. Guthrie Jr. wrote the screenplay for Shane.

<sup>46</sup> Along with Tompkins who argues that the western narrative develops an ideal of manhood and a story that excludes women from the story or relegates them to subordinate and often oppositional roles, see also Nina Baym’s “Melodramas of Beset Manhood.” Baym shows how early literary theorists such as R. W. B. Lewis presented the American Adam motif in American literature based upon Cooper’s Leatherstocking character that created a narrative that excluded female characters and women authors from our national story.

<sup>47</sup> Robinson’s Having It Both Ways argues that in presenting the tale of Shane through the eyes of a child (rather than the adult Bob who is looking back) the readers not only get a nostalgic view of the Shane and the West he represents (94) but see and hear what Bob saw as a child that overlooks the messiness, manipulation, and selfishness in the interaction between Shane-Marian-Joe (106).

# Chapter 3

## Wolf Willow and Questions of Western Identity and History

*“It is equally plain that the religious and political destiny of our nation is to be decided in the West.... Let no man at the East quiet himself and dream of liberty, whatever may become of the West.... Her destiny is our destiny.”*

-- Dr. Lyman Beecher  
“A Plea for the West” (Cincinnati, 1835)

*“Up to our own day 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 the American settlement westward, explain American development.”*

-- Frederick Jackson Turner,  
“The Significance of the Frontier in American History”

*“So many expect a West full of Billy the Kids and romance, adventure, and danger. And that isn't my West.”*

-- Wallace Stegner  
Conversations

Wolf Willow is Wallace Stegner's response to and critique of cultural Myths of America's West and frontier settlement. His literary method for challenging these popular and culturally sanctioned Myths anticipates the approach some western writers beginning in the 1970s will offer readers in their blending of history, memoir, geography, fiction, and social and cultural criticism. Such western literary works as the following could claim Stegner's Wolf Willow as a literary ancestor: N. Scott Momaday's The Way to Rainy Mountain (1969), Ivan Doig's This House of Sky (1978), Juanita Brooks's Quicksand and Cactus: A Memoir of the Southern Mormon Frontier (1982), William Least Heat-Moon's Blue Highways: A Journey into America (1982), Mary Clearman Blew's All But the Waltz (1991), Terry Tempest Williams's Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place (1991), and William Kittredge's Hole in the Sky: A Memoir (1992). These writers combine poetry and/or fiction, family history, and memoir with the history of a western place and cultural-social-environmental criticism to tell narratives of their own or their family's engagement with a specific geographic, time-bound place in the West that disputes the mythic West's singular story of white-male conquest of the frontier.<sup>1</sup> Well before other western writers participated in the literary revisionism of cultural metanarratives that came in the 1970s, Stegner was arguing as early as 1954 when he started working on Wolf Willow that America's national Myths of the Frontier, the Cowboy, the Pioneer, and the Garden West tell an inaccurate and incomplete story of the West's past.<sup>2</sup> Because they frame the West's history of white settlement of the frontier in terms of a romantic, nostalgic, heroic, and singular narrative of an 1890s Wild West

culture that transforms America's frontier into a civilized place, Stegner claims that the West's Myths fail to explain America's pre-European frontier state or address the outcomes of white settlement and conquest of the frontier. More importantly, he claims these Myths, with their association with a brief period in America's history, provide the westerner (and America) with an identity, or cultural story, that is out of keeping with a present, urban, and multi-racial West, precisely the West in which modern westerners live.

Stegner uses Wolf Willow's content, themes, and structure to challenge the hold the mythic West has on westerners and America. Through personal memory (recollections of his childhood past), collective memory (testimony from old timers and newspaper clipping), and a (white) recorded historical memory (found in historical records, journals, maps, and secondary works about the area), Stegner narrates his own western story as a child of pioneers to challenge the dominant mythic West. He argues that the West's Myths are America's culturally dominant discourse for viewing the West's past and present, thus shaping how Americans, westerners, western writers, and literary scholars perceive the geographic region, culture, history, and literature of the West in the mid-twentieth century. According to Stegner, the metanarrative of white conquest and triumph over a wild frontier—as fashioned by James Fenimore Cooper, Frederick Jackson Turner, Theodore Roosevelt, Owen Wister, William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody, and dime novels and newspaper accounts of turn-of-the-century America—omit and deny aspects of the historical West that are important to those living in the present. In Wolf Willow, he seeks to discover and return what has been lost or obscured by the mythic West and to understand how this erasure has influenced the modern westerners'

and his own sense of identity as a westerner. Stegner appraises and challenges this dominant cultural discourse of the West in his search for his own unmythicized western past located in the history and the remembered experiences of growing up as a “pioneer’s child” (15) in Cypress Hills, Saskatchewan, Canada. What his search reveals and means to him as a westerner, an American, and a writer from the West is the focus of Wolf Willow.

This chapter argues that the formal structure of Stegner’s Wolf Willow, his notion of his reader/audience, the narrative strategies his authorial “I” employs, and his emphasis on place and history reveal the ways in which he re-narrativizes western American literary historiography to reclaim the westerners’ narrative for western regionalist writers. In the specific strategies and themes he establishes in Wolf Willow’s “Section I: The Question Mark in the Circle” that is the focus of this chapter, Stegner demonstrates in germinal form the theory he will enact in the 1960’s essays so that contemporary western regionalist writers can reclaim the West’s narrative from the Myths and revision it through “another kind of western story-telling” and thus become a relevant and meaningful narrative to modern westerners and to America (HMWW 187).

Specifically, this chapter describes how Wolf Willow’s five-part structure and blending of genres contests against the singular narrative of white conquest and triumph over western lands and peoples. Additionally, this chapter analyzes how Stegner uses a multiple, yet distinct, authorial “I” to challenge his and the reader/audience’s or American cultural imaginary’s acceptance of the Myth’s romantic, heroic, and nostalgic representation of the West’s past, culture,

literature, and view of the westerner. In his notion of an authorial “I” as an insider or a westerner by lived experience and as an historian and a writer of the West, Stegner challenges America’s cultural Myths of the West’s portrayal of his historical past and writerly and personal selves. He does so by reconnecting his lived experiences, his memories, and the concerns of the present West with an unmythicized historical past, the realism of his lived experiences, and the specificity of his western childhood home on the late frontier. In this way, he can adjudicate the disconnection the Myths have created between his past and present Wests. By creating a space for an unmythicized western past, realism and experience, and the local and specific within the dominant, universalizing, and mythic West’s spatiality, Stegner locates a western self and a home for a new western writing and western writer in the West. Though he situates his reader in an oppositional role (an outsider / easterner to his insider / westerner) and as one who unquestioningly accepts the mythic West’s characterization of all that is western, Stegner also positions the reader as participating with his personal self in learning more about the past West and his childhood self through what his *historian*, *memoirist*, and *writer*’s authorial “I” recover and reveal about his western childhood home.

Stegner’s notion of history in the chapter “History as a Pontoon Bridge” and his methodology for recovering the historical past from the mythic West as presented in the chapter “The Dump Ground” are critical not just to the thematic aims of Wolf Willow but also to the theory of western American literature later presented in the 1960’s essays. In “History as a Pontoon Bridge,” Stegner theorizes history as a palimpsestic layering of interrelated past actions and events evident in a western landscape, sometimes through visible forms and always through the westerner’s physical connection to a specific

western place. This theory allows him to create a continuous flow to bridge the gap between an historical but forgotten or omitted past and the events and concerns of the present West. Stegner's theorizing of history in this way and his focus on the local and specific as described in "The Dump Ground" enable his historian authorial "I" to delve into the past of his childhood home to discover and recover an "unremembered past" or Other West that bridges the discontinuity he and the reader experience between the mythic and actual West. Western myths have locked his personal and writerly selves in a false western spatiality in the present. These structural strategies, his conceptions of the reader, and his methodology of recovering a personal past are necessary forerunners for Stegner's formulation of the "personal, family, and cultural chores" he identifies in the 1960's essays that endorse a realist, historicist, and place-based theory of western American literature, a literature that he believes can move the literary western beyond its marginalized position within the American literary canon and offer hope to western regionalist writers and their literary western.

#### The Formal Structure of Wolf Willow: An Overview

Wolf Willow interweaves multiple genres (history, story, and memory) and several narrative perspectives to present Stegner's major themes: his search to understand his western identity; the influence the prairie landscape has on his personal development and Cypress Hills' historical inhabitants; the discovery of Cypress Hills' "unremembered past" (WW 111); the struggles of the western



artist; and a critique of the Myths of the American West. In its published form, from front to back cover, Wolf Willow contains a Dedication, two maps, a Contents section outlining the four sections of the main text, an Epilogue, and an Acknowledgement. Each formal part contributes in some manner to the meaning of the final text as Wolf Willow becomes for Stegner a unified response to the powerful grasp that monolithic western narratives have on the American cultural imaginary, westerners, and western regionalist writers.

With the Dedication to his mother that follows the bibliographic title page, Stegner announces the role of gender in Wolf Willow. In the essays, he will claim as a dominating theme in both literary and formulaic western literature the tension between the “roving man and civilizing woman” that the Myth promotes, and he suggests that this tension is to a degree due to the “circumstances of western settlement and the legitimate inclinations of the sexes” (HMWW 195). In Wolf Willow, Stegner’s recollections of his mother and his use of the fictional character Molly Henry in Section III: The Whitemud River Range reveal an understanding that men and women act differently toward frontier spatiality, given culturally shaped, gender-oriented “inclinations.” Though limited in their appearance in Wolf Willow, pioneer women like his mother do appear at significant junctures in his presentation of Cypress Hill’s settlement history, and their stories are part of the Other West he discovers and reconstructs for himself and the reader. Thus the Dedication signals the importance attached to women in Wolf Willow.

Stegner’s biographers have noted the very special relationship Stegner had with his mother, Hilda, who died from cancer when he was in his early twenties.<sup>3</sup> At the time he published Wolf Willow, his mother had been dead for thirty years. His dedication

reads, “This is in memory of my mother,” which acknowledges her death while also suggesting that Wolf Willow is a tribute to her. While she was by his admission a protector in his youth against the disgust and anger of his father toward his weak “mama’s boy” self, he became later her nurse, comforter, and the lone observer of her death. In “A Letter, Much Too Late” (1989) Stegner characterizes his mother as someone who “believed in all the beauties and strengths and human associations of place” (33). In Wolf Willow, many of the characteristics he values—strength, hope, compromise, stoicism, a desire for community and stability, and the value of art and education—are evident in his memories of her. These are values he also attributes to many of his protagonists (male and female).<sup>4</sup> Even though no sustained description of Stegner’s mother exists in Wolf Willow, her brief appearances expose the traits and attitudes he values and wants to reclaim from the Myths.<sup>5</sup> In Wolf Willow, as well as in his works as a whole, women are often sites for values Stegner champions and uses to oppose the Myths’ presentation of western men and women. Dedicating Wolf Willow to the memory of his mother is obviously sentimental and personal, but it also reveals Stegner’s acknowledgement of the importance of women in the western narrative, the values and characteristics they represent in the masculinist narratives of the West, and his appropriation of their status as the Other to ground his challenging Other West.

Immediately after the Dedication a spread of two maps comes before the Contents page and the text’s body. These maps highlight Stegner’s historical and cultural focus on the geographic area known as the American West. They identify

what will be the subject of Wolf Willow—a specific western place, his childhood home in Cypress Hills—and, more important, represent the literal place and imaginative territory he explores in the book. Accentuating the geographic materiality of the western space he explores and the methodology he will express in “The Dump Ground” chapter, these maps call attention to the two nations where he lived, Canada and the United States, within the expansive geography of the North American West that the Myths universalize and claim as one place. The two maps therefore point out several juxtapositions that underscore the thematic tensions in Stegner’s text: the local and the general, the human and the natural, the physical and the imaginary, the real and the mythic, East and West, North and South, and the Canadian and American Wests.

As the reader learns in the opening paragraph of Wolf Willow, the maps situate the reader in the specific geographic space of the text that will be Stegner’s concern. The first map covers the top third of the pages and depicts topographically from left to right the West’s lands from the Pacific Ocean east to the western inlands of the Canadian Ontario Province and the northern most part of the state of Minnesota. This top map identifies the national and regional boundaries of Canada and the United States by naming each country’s area and by separating the two countries with a thick, black line that is their shared national border and divides the Great Plains region in which Cypress Hills lies. Inside this top map is a boxed insert depicting an enlarged view of the Cypress Hills area. Underneath this uppermost topographical map is a second, larger map that fills the bottom portion of the remaining two-thirds of the pages. This bottom map shows in more detail the area enclosed by the boxed section on the top map, or Stegner’s Cypress Hills. Naming mountain ranges, rivers, basins, towns, and railroads, this larger,

bottom map highlights the association between the natural (rivers, basins, and mountains) and man-made features (railroads and towns) as well as ownership of the land by overlaying the names of the two nations and their provinces or states.

Stegner opens Wolf Willow by claiming he can locate his childhood home on an “ordinary road map of the United States... that for courtesy’s sake includes the first hundred miles on the Canadian side of the Line” (3), a statement that approximates the geographic coverage of the two maps and significantly reveals his claimed affiliation with the United States (the map’s focus) instead of Canada (the marginalized extra). According to Stegner, his childhood home lies “between the Milk River and the main line of the Canadian Pacific, and between approximately the Saskatchewan-Alberta line and Wood Mountain” (3). With the railroads and rivers identified on the maps, the reader can locate the specific site of Stegner’s childhood home. He proclaims that this “block of country,” or what is displayed in the boxed area of the larger map “is what this book is about” (3). Susan Naramore Maher argues in “Deep Mapping the Great Plains: Surveying the Literary Cartography of Place” (2001) that Stegner’s opening with a literal road map enables him to “create a cartographic text” (10) that brings in realms of geology, cultural history, personal memory, fiction, and myth to present a remembered and “unremembered past” of Cypress Hills.<sup>6</sup> The maps serve to highlight not only the specific geographic region that is the focus of Stegner’s text but also how the geographic place known as Cypress Hills is contained within a larger geographic space, the Great Plains of North America that is part of the United States’ and Canada’s western region and a part of the physical and mythic

spatiality—The West—Stegner is contesting in Wolf Willow and the later essays. Stegner's task in Wolf Willow is to extricate the Other West he constructs from the recovery of Cypress Hills's past through history, memoir, and story and to use it to contest the West's mythic spatiality that is so familiar to the American cultural imaginary and that obscures this personal and historical past.

Stegner demonstrates in Wolf Willow that place and the experiences of the individual in that place shape both the place and the individual. Thus he claims that this spot on the map called Cypress Hills that lies in Canada and borders the United States and his experiences in its western landscape are what make him a westerner and hence define what the critical category of *western* means. In "Stegner, Storytelling, and Western Identity" (1996), Elliot West comments that Stegner's notion of place includes the geographic location of the place, the accumulation of all things done on that spot, the meanings people have taken from a place, and the responses people have to the events occurring in that place (64).<sup>7</sup> The maps and his reference to them in the opening paragraphs of Wolf Willow articulate for Stegner the importance of understanding and acknowledging the influences of place upon the self and the significance he attributes to geographic spatiality, to placed-ness, to the physical, to the actual, and to the concrete world he will describe in Wolf Willow.

Finally, the maps display visually what Stegner will accomplish through narrative in Wolf Willow, which is to have the history of Cypress Hills, a specific western place, serve as challenger to the larger, more universal and national process of settlement the Myths relate. The two maps—the small, specific map of Cypress Hills inside the larger map of the American and Canadian Great Plains—present topographically Stegner's

strategy in Wolf Willow of focusing on the local and the specific to contest the larger, universalizing Myths. According to Patricia Nelson Limerick, Stegner's "place-centered history.... faced up to tragedy and failure, and brutality as well, and connected the whole package of the past up to the environmental and human issues of the present" (Precedents 113). His inclusion of the geographic and natural history of Cypress Hills, along with his focus on a specific place and area, anticipates his argument in the 1960's essays that the American West should be viewed as a geographic and cultural area of multiplicity due to its various terrains and natural regions, so that America's West is not one, but "many Wests" (HMWW 188).<sup>8</sup> In Wolf Willow, Stegner aims to replace the United States' currently accepted view of the West as a timeless, wild, and singular frontier with a concrete, local, specific, historical, and still evolving present West. The presence of the maps visually emphasize the actuality of his place, the varying topographies of the region, and the relationship of humans to the natural that are the subjects pursued in Wolf Willow in its recovery of Stegner's personal western story.

One of the difficulties readers and scholars have with Wolf Willow is how to take it, as it contains three genres—history, story, and memoir—in one seemingly linear and thematically-structured narrative. As a history, Wolf Willow contains personal memories, two stories, and lacks a bibliography and notes to document the sources used to construct Cypress Hills' historical past. As a memoir, Wolf Willow contains more history and fiction than it does recollections about Stegner's life, and the remembrances are subordinated to the

history. And as fiction, two-thirds of Wolf Willow is comprised of non-fiction through the history and memoir Stegner employs to tell Cypress Hills's past. Mainly, however, Stegner contrasts the Myths' singular narrative of the West with the multiple perspectives in Wolf Willow that blends family history and memory with the history of a particular western place and with two stories about that place that derive from the its historical past and his memories of living there.

Stegner shaped his disparate and many chaptered manuscript of original and previously written material, along with and some published sections, into a text that is one and three things at once. In his 1965 essay, "On the Writing of History," Stegner says, "Wolf Willow ought to be called history.... its dominant impulse was historical," even though "it is nearly a third reminiscence and more than a third fiction" (209). In a 1987 letter to his biographer Jackson Benson, Stegner noted, "Wolf Willow ... is frankly autobiographical in many of its chapters" (Selected Letters 85), but as he told Richard Etulain in 1977 for Conversations with Wallace Stegner (1983), Wolf Willow is "to some extent autobiography, but ... autobiography ... used as an adjunct to history ... fiction and autobiography [are] being used for historical purposes. I intended to write a historical work in Wolf Willow, and not a fictional one" (18). The formality of Wolf Willow's Content's page suggests the book is a work of non-fiction. Named and labeled by Roman numeral are the four main sections and the chapters in each section, which are also titled and numbered to show Wolf Willow having a total of twenty chapters in all. The first four sections include the following.

- I. The Question Mark in the Circle
- II. Preparation for a Civilization
- III. The Whitemud River Range

#### IV. Town and Country

As he recovers the history of his childhood home, his memories of his boyhood experiences are the glue that connect the place's past to his present-day, adult-memoirist self, and the concerns of the present: America's use of the West's Myths as its national story and the implications of this story for the environment and society and the situation of the West's literature and western regionalist writer.

The first four sections represent Stegner's path of discovery and recovery of a linear history of Cypress Hills from various narrative points of view that disrupt the Myths' singular story of white western settlement. Section I: The Question Mark in the Circle introduces Stegner's purpose in Wolf Willow, which he says is to find a "knowledge of place, knowledge of the past" (WW 28) that the Myths have erased by declaring his past as a westerner to be a history-less, romanticized Wild West. In Section I, Stegner outlines his search to define his adult "western" self in relation to the experiences of his childhood in a specific western place and that place's geography and history, a history he must discover primarily from newspaper accounts, historical records, secondary sources, interviews, and personal experiences. He says, "the history of the Cypress Hills had ... definite effects on me as did their geography and weather, though I never knew a scrap of that history until a quarter-century after I left the place" (29). In this first section, Stegner introduces the multiple personas he will employ in Wolf Willow—the *historian*, *memoirist*, *writer*, and *critic-theorist-teacher*—and the notion of history and methodology for recovering this forgotten past.

In the second section, Preparation for a Civilization, the dominant narrative persona is the *historian Stegner* who relates the natural and human



histories of Cypress Hills from its known geological formation in the Paleolithic period to 1907 when the Indians have been removed and the land is occupied by ranchers. In presenting this history, Stegner recovers an ethnically diverse set of cultural voices whose historical narratives offer examples of compromise and peace amidst an often violent and destructive process of white settlement that occurred in both nations. He uses the recovered history of Canadian settlement of Cypress Hills to comment on the differences between Canada's and America's settlement of the West, noting particularly the more violent and destructive path of American settlement. The *memoirist Stegner* intervenes sparingly to identify specific implications of Cypress Hills's historical past on the shaping of Stegner's childhood home and to connect the child and adult Stegner with historical others through the place, Cypress Hills, that they share. Instead of their having "no history" (28) as the Myths proclaim, by the end of Section II Stegner has recovered a rich, multi-vocal "unremembered" past in which he locates his writerly self and invites racial others who have a relationship with this place, Cypress Hills, to tell their story as he has told his (111). According to Dick Harrison in "Frontiers and Borders: Wallace Stegner in Canada" (1996), Stegner has been of "great importance" (183) to western Canadian writers, with Wolf Willow "bring[ing] to light and life the history of a neglected area of the prairies" (186) and serving as a "germinal text" (184) for western Canadian regionalists.<sup>9</sup> For western regionalist writers, he recovered a western past and present they could use to prevent their literary westerns from becoming mere copies of the formulaic western.

Following this largely historical section appears the third section, The Whitemud River Range, which contains the only acknowledged fiction in Wolf Willow. Here

Stegner relies on childhood memories and two “cowboy stories” to contest the Cowboy Myth of Roosevelt and Wister. In the novella, “Genesis,” Stegner uncovers the premises of America’s cowboy culture, as he revises and challenges the assumptions of Wister’s The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains (1902) and men and women’s gendered relationship to the frontier. And in the short story, “Carrion Spring,” he explores the western man and woman’s relationship to the western landscape in the aftermath of the 1906-07 winter and the notion of “hope” that Turner’s Pioneer and Garden West Myths attach to the western spatiality.

In the fourth section, Town and Country, Stegner recounts the emergence of the frontier town of Whitemud (Stegner’s pseudonym for his real hometown of Eastend, Saskatchewan) from 1907 to the Stegners’ arrival in 1914 and their departure in 1920. In this section, personal history merges with the historical record of Cypress Hills, as Stegner critiques Turner’s version of western settlement and its corollary, the American Dream, in relation to the actuality of the frontier town’s growth and the homesteading experiences of pioneers such as his parents. He connects the Pioneer and Garden West Myths to America’s national narratives as he tries to understand the “shape and intensity” of the Dream his parents followed (WW 255), and he acknowledges an inherited hopefulness as well as complicity in the destruction of the land as “a pioneer’s child” (15). He juxtaposes the notion of “hope” as promoted by Turner, the Myths, and the American Dream to the narratives of failure, loss, rape of the land, and mistreatment of others that he witnessed, participated in, or located in the history of Cypress Hills.

These four sections of Wolf Willow represent the results of Stegner's search for what has been lost and obscured by the Myths and his restoring the loss to his own and to a collective American and Canadian cultural memory through Wolf Willow. By the end of Section IV, Stegner's western past is not that of the Myths, as it is neither a history-less, empty garden-like frontier nor a Wild West of white conquest over racial Others and the land. Instead, his western past—an Other West—is peopled, ethnically diverse, full of destruction, and with important values currently owned by the Myths that he wants to recover for a present, modern West and a tumultuous 1960's world. He claims this newly found history as his because he is connected to historical others through time and the place, Cypress Hills, and he is able to bridge the historical discontinuity between his past and present that the Myths promote and thereby find a usable past for the present. In Wolf Willow, Stegner suggests that to renarrativize the West's story is to look at the West in new ways. These new ways are embedded in his recovery of the history of specific western places and the human relationships associated with these places that the Myths have glossed in their universalized and singular story of white western settlement. The strategies Stegner uses in Wolf Willow to recover his personal story, to bridge past and present, and to construct an Other challenging West are precursors to the "chores" he will define in the 1960's essays that he will claim as necessary to rescue western American literature and the present West from the powerful grasp of the Myths that engulf the West in a limiting, romantic, heroic, and nostalgic representation.

The concerns Stegner raises in Wolf Willow about the West's historical past and disconnected present do not end with the Section IV. An Epilogue and Acknowledgements follow to complete the text. In the Epilogue, titled "False-Front

Athens,” Stegner revisits the broader implications of the history, themes, and content presented in the previous four sections within the context of the fulfillment of the American Dream and Turner’s essay that the Epilogue’s title ironically alludes to. Although America conquered the frontier, Stegner argues that the cost to people and the environment has been great. In the Epilogue, he uses Whitemud’s 1953 present, as he used its past in the previous sections, to argue against the singular vision of the West that the Myths advocate, demonstrating that Whitemud is no “rural Athens as Turner’s frontier experiment suggested” (288). Thus Stegner initially finds little to recommend the West as a creative home for a western art and artist, inasmuch as many of its small towns, like Whitemud, are dull, dreary, and stifling. Retaining Turner’s paradigm of encounter and engagement with a frontier and western spatiality, Stegner locates a possibility for the future that is guarded and cautious in the citizens’ collective and adaptive responses to the landscape. He suggests that the West’s “native art” (288) will be the western writers’ response to their western places, thus grounding western literature in the writer’s placed-ness and experiences. The Epilogue’s discussion of a western art specifically connects Wolf Willow to the 1960’s essays, in which Stegner articulates a set of “personal, familial, and cultural chores” that continue the approaches employed in Wolf Willow to reclaim western American literature from the Myths (HMWW 201).

Along with expressing the expected “thank yous” to those who assisted him in the preparation of Wolf Willow, Stegner continues the conversation on the role of the artist and the historian and the relationship among history, story, and

memory in the Acknowledgments. In what could be viewed as an “apology” of sorts, Stegner accepts “blame” for those instances in Wolf Willow where he has violated the historian’s credo of factual accuracy by “remember[ing] wrong” or by taking the novelist’s approach of “occasionally warp[ing] fact a little in order to reach for the fictional or poetic truth that [he] would rank a little above history” (307). While the historical accuracy of the history presented in Wolf Willow is beyond the scope of this dissertation (others have already commented on its mostly faithful rendering given the materials he had at his disposal and the approach he took in the text), Stegner does not by today’s standards make the distinction between fact and fiction as clear as he should have in his presentation of Cypress Hills’s history.<sup>10</sup> Instead of history proper, what Stegner does in Wolf Willow, according to Elliot West, is call “attention to the personal, emotional dimension of the regions’ history, the exchanges among individuals and the human and physical worlds from which they grow” (Storytelling 68) in order to define a West less dominated by the Myths. Thus the apologies in the Acknowledgments seem to be for the violations done to the historian’s process, not for his aim of using history to create an Other West.

#### Narrative Voices in Wolf Willow

Compared to other books being published by western regionalist writers in the 1950s and early 1960s, Stegner’s Wolf Willow is fairly unique in its merging of three genres into a more or less coherent statement questioning the Myths and describing his (or the westerners’) connection to western places and western lands. Along with

employing several genres in Wolf Willow to recover a western narrative that opposes the singular story of the mythic West, Stegner uses four narrative perspectives—the *memoirist*, the *historian*, the *writer*, and what I will call the *critic-theorist-teacher*—to reveal and recover his personal and the historical past of Cypress Hills that he will use to critique America’s cultural acceptance of the Myths’ portrayal of the West’s history. The multiplicity of these voices emphasizes the inability of any one narrative, like that of the mythic West, to represent the West’s and the westerners’ story. As Jamie Robertson says in “Henry Adams, Wallace Stegner, and the Search for a Sense of Place in the West” (1977), “What is most interesting about Wolf Willow’s mixture of history, autobiography, and fiction is the philosophical statement it implies about the truth of a people’s connection to a place. Stegner argues implicitly through such a mixture of fact and fiction that a sense of place is a poetic creation, both real and imaginary, that explains our relationship to a place and to its past. It is the task of the artist-historian to convey the memory, to teach the tradition” (94). In the 1960’s essays, Stegner will propose “another kind of western story-telling” to challenge the singular story of conquest and triumph that the mythic western metanarrative tells and to suggest that the West’s past can be approached in different and multiple ways (HMWW 187). This strategy of multiplicity and opposition found in these multiple narrative strains in Wolf Willow prepares him for the “many Wests” (188) he proposes in the 1960’s essays and it offers women and minorities an avenue to challenge the predominantly male, as well as offering

the revisioned literary historiography submitted to his contemporaries in the 1960s.

While there exists an unevenness in presentation and some confusion among these narrative strands and the three genres in Wolf Willow, the multiple strategies help Stegner construct the historical continuity that he claimed westerners, along with himself, lacked because the Myths co-opted the West's cultural and historical past. Although some critics like Forrest G. and Margaret G. Robinson in their early study, Wallace Stegner (1977), found Wolf Willow to be “structurally complicated, somewhat untidy production that almost works” (65), Robert Canzoneri says, “what is memory, what is history, what is fiction, and what is speculation are all clearly delineated” throughout the text with Stegner using each voice to “search into the past in an effort to understand and assimilate it whole” (67).<sup>11</sup> According to Dick Harrison, Stegner's adult consciousness in Wolf Willow, with which he knows and understands the West as a westerner and a writer, is trying to understand how the western landscape and experiences of his childhood influenced his identity as a westerner and a writer (182). This dissertation argues that Stegner's use of multiple genres to examine the West's singular narrative shows him overtly disrupting the Myths' unity, singularity, and cultural dominance.

Of the four narrative voices, three are associated with the genres—memoir, history, and story—that comprise the text and work within the traditional parameters of each discourse employed. While Stegner introduces all four narrative personas in Section I: The Question Mark in the Circle, each voice becomes clearly associated with one of the next three sections: the *historian* in Section II, the writer in Section III, and the *memoirist* in Section IV. The fourth voice, the *critic-theorist-teacher*, like the *memoirist*'s, appears throughout Wolf Willow and is most prominent in the Epilogue and

Section IV. This voice projects an instructive impulse that characterizes the persona of the 1960's essays and defines to a large degree the relationship Stegner establishes with his readers in both Wolf Willow and the essays.

Stegner uses these four personas to construct his notion of "westernness" that influences his estimation of the status of western art in Wolf Willow and the situation of the western regionalist writer in the 1960's essays. In Section I: The Question Mark in the Middle, the *memoirist Stegner* returns to his childhood home to test his memories of his childhood experiences against an unknown history of those who "lived there before" him (27), and the *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner* makes projections about the importance of the place and its history to shaping who he is in the present and how America's and the West's Myths obscure and pervert the West's past and disconnects westerners from their present. In Section II: Preparation for a Civilization, the *historian Stegner* dominates, as Stegner presents the recorded history of Cypress Hills he has discovered in his search to know who and what came before him in Cypress Hills. Section II represents the discovered history of Cypress Hills, a history he locates in the white recorded history he discovers in his research. From this discovered history, Stegner learns that his western past was ethnically diverse, rich, and deep and that, even though previously unknown, informed his childhood and his present in good and bad ways. Once known, he suggests, this past clarifies and counters the values and assumptions underlying the West's Myths and the situation and events of the present. In the next sections, Stegner uses this recovered history to help him and the reader understand the experiences of his



childhood within the contexts of a mythic and unmythicized West. Since Stegner places such importance on the recovery of an unmythologized past, the *historian Stegner* appears to varying degrees in each of the four sections as he tells the linear history of Cypress Hills' settlement.

The third narrative voice Stegner uses is that of the *writer*, a persona found exclusively in Section III: The Whitemud River Range. This voice presents the only two cowboy stories Stegner ever wrote—the novella, “Genesis,” and the short story, “Carrion Spring”—that comprise most of this third section and challenge Wister’s and Roosevelt’s Cowboy Myth and their notions of western heroism. A short chapter precedes the two stories in which the *historian Stegner* describes the “cowboy generation” in Cypress Hills from the 1870s to 1906; and the *memoirist Stegner* recalls childhood events experienced during Cypress Hills’s infatuation with an Americanized “cowboy culture” still present during his time there from 1914 to 1920. Stegner has said about this section that, “when I came to write about the open-range cattle industry, I was irresistibly driven to write it as fiction, as a typical story rather than as an expository summary. I thought *I could get more truth into a slightly fictionalized story* of the winter that killed the cattle industry on the northern plains *than I could into any summary*” (OWH 209-210 italics mine).<sup>12</sup>

While the tensions between fact and fiction, history and story, and myth and truth are the primary tensions explored throughout Wolf Willow, in Section III they become explicit as Stegner revises Wister’s and Roosevelt’s cowboy metanarrative through history, realist-fiction, and personal experience.

The fourth narrative voice in Wolf Willow is an overarching, ever present voice that communicates the perspective of the *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner*. This voice is

didactic, analytic, opinionated, instructive, and knowledgeable about larger western concerns. In the “Introduction” to Wolf Willow, Stegner’s son, Page, characterizes his father’s voice in the book as the “evocative and judgmental mind (and memory) of the region’s most illustrious native son” (xi). This voice pulls the various perspectives of the *memoirist*, the *historian*, the *writer* together to construct the whole of Wolf Willow. Through this voice, Stegner expresses the larger concerns of western American literature, the western environment, western culture, western history, and western subjectivity, and he challenges the culturally powerful Myths of the American West that grip America’s cultural imaginary and influences how westerners and Americans perceive (and have perceived) the American West. This narrative persona, the *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner*, opens with pronouncements about Stegner’s past and the West that the other voices address, complete, and substantiate in Sections II, III, and IV. This voice requires an Epilogue in order to comment specifically on the influence of the Myths on himself, on the past and present West, and on western art, and it carries over to the voice of the 1960’s critical essays.

While the Myths have defined what it has meant to “be western” by controlling how America’s western spatiality is perceived, Stegner attempts in Wolf Willow to reclaim a construction of his western self and his western place by locating it in a western spatiality that is less mythic and more geographically-historically-culturally-experientially shaped. Wolf Willow provides Stegner a textual space to experiment with the blending of the three genres as he locates western subjectivity, not unlike the Myths, in a western place and a frontier

history. However, his frontier place and past is rooted in a specific geographic and not imaginary spatiality of the Myths and is contextualized by place, time, and experience in opposition to the monomythic past.

### Stegner's Reader: The "misdirected" American Cultural Imaginary

Stegner's narrative personas in Wolf Willow present the reader with the local history of Cypress Hills interspersed with personal and family experiences that elucidate the formation of Stegner's western identity. In the opening two paragraphs, Stegner constructs a relationship between narrator and reader so that the reader grants his narrating "I" a certain level of authenticity and credibility for the history and the personal memory he will use to substantiate claims made about the place, Cypress Hills, and its history—claims used to challenge the Myths' ownership of the West's and Stegner's past. In these paragraphs, Stegner also makes pronouncements about his "westernness," his family's role in western frontier settlement, the fate of the Plains frontier and its Native American inhabitants, and the destructive role America's western Myths have had on western settlement that preview the conclusions developed in the main body of Wolf Willow. Unknown to the reader at the start of the book is that the narrating voice of these first two paragraphs is the *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner* who has completed the recovery of Cypress Hills's history and understands his relationship to it and to America's cultural Myths of the West.

In Wolf Willow, Stegner explores the constructedness of his western (and writerly) self in relation to the place and history of Cypress Hills and to the mythic West

and Turnerian process of western settlement that culturally define the story of America, the West, the westerner, and his parents' pioneering experiences. Thus the relationship Stegner creates as author of Wolf Willow between his authorial "I" and the reader is critical to the reader's willingness to accept and consider it legitimate the history he will tell, the significance of the childhood experiences he will recall, and the literary representation of the place and its people—no small ambition since readers will most likely know the West not as Stegner does but as they have learned through the lens of the Frontier, Cowboy, Pioneer, and Garden West Myths. Stegner understood that his audience in the 1950s and early sixties would perceive the West in a way different from his. Having just completed extensive research on the West for the Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West (1954), Stegner had ample evidence in the case of Powell to support his belief that the disconnection between America's perception of the West and its actuality was significant. With Powell, he saw how the cultural power of the Myths bolstered by personal greed were formidable obstructions to Powell's scientific evidence that illustrated how the American West was closer to an arid desert wasteland than to the Myths' garden of bounty.

Stegner argues in Wolf Willow that the erasure of these consequences by America's national and cultural Myths of the West prevents the present West and America from acknowledging its actual past. According to Limerick, the Myths presented—through newspapers and dime novels of the mid-to-late 1800s, the movies of the early-to-mid 1900s, and American history books from the 1900s to

the 1960s—America’s western metanarrative as a series of romantic but violent adventures and struggles driven by the economic decisions of an American culture that saw itself as innocent and possessing a hard-headed faith in the ability of humans and a people-nation to master nature and the world (Legacy 28-29). What the historical record shows, Limerick argues, is that America’s (white) conquest of the West was at the expense and sacrifice of other cultures, nature and land, and the values of community, compromise, and collaboration that the American West mythography elides (22). According to Native American Elizabeth Lynn-Cook, white Americans fail to acknowledge that their “invasion of the New World . . . . was a pseudoreligious and corrupt socioeconomic movement for the possession of resources” (33). In Wolf Willow Stegner attempts to move the reader toward a view of the American West that is different from what the Myths purport and thus challenge deeply embedded cultural narratives of America’s sense of self.

To emphasize the significance of the opening two paragraphs, Stegner separates them by additional white space from the remaining paragraphs of Section I, as his narrating “I” announces the primary themes of the text. The section and chapter, which carry the same name, “The Question Mark in the Circle,” inquire how the narrator, the adult *memoirist-historian-writer* Stegner or the “question mark,” has become the westerner he considers himself to be within a spatiality, a “circle” of known and unknown influences, that has shaped his childhood place and thus him. Stegner’s authorial “I” states that “this book is about” a particular “block of country” on “an ordinary road map” of the western United States that “for courtesy’s sake includes the first hundred miles on the Canadian side of the Line” (WW 3), thus identifying this

“block” as western in its location west of the hundredth meridian, America’s demarcation for designating the West from the East. The “I” describes this area near the Saskatchewan-Alberta line and Wood Mountains as fairly unpopulated and “notable primarily” “for its weather... its emptiness...and its wind,” which is “violent,” “totally frightening” and strong enough to “rattle the eyes in your head” (3). Addressing the reader directly, the “I” characterizes the countryside as “lonely” and the land as “no prize,” since “many parts of it you couldn’t give away” (3). The narrator’s negative image of these western lands rebuffs the view of the West as home to a virginal garden and bountiful resources advertized by the Myths. Furthermore, the narrator says that these western lands are “no safety valve for the population explosion” (3), echoing a long-standing concern of America’s early politicians who worried about the influx of immigrants to its Eastern cities to those in Stegner’s day uneasy about urban and global over-population. For the narrator, this place is “where I spent my childhood” (3) and, in terms of the circle of influences shaping him as a westerner, “it is also the place where the Plains, as an ecology, as a native Indian culture, and as a process of white settlement, came to their climax and end” (4)—a statement that angers Lynn-Cook in its assumption about Native American culture. In this western place, a place having all the elements of the classic western story—Indians, white pioneers, wilderness, and struggle—Stegner locates his personal story.

While the narrating “I” is presented as a westerner, or “insider,” Stegner positions the reader as the American cultural imaginary and as a non-native or outsider who requires a guide to understand the subtleties of the western

landscape, which is much more than it initially seems to be. He says, “Viewed personally and historically, that almost featureless prairie glows with more color than it reveals to the *appalled and misdirected tourist*. As memory, as experience, those Plains are unforgettable; as history, they have the lurid explosiveness of a prairie fire, quickly dangerous, swiftly over” (WW 4, italics mine). For the “misdirected tourist” or outsider who visits but does not live in this western place, the landscape is stark and forbidding (4). From the narrator’s insider perspective, however, this western place is home, has a distinctive history, and “reveals” meaning and significance beyond what the “tourist” perceives: “Color” lies behind the “featureless prairie,” personal experiences are “unforgettable,” and the place’s history is “lurid,” explosive, “dangerous,” and “swiftly over” (3-4). For the reader who has been “misdirected” by the Myths, this “block of country” is the “featureless prairie” (3). For the “insider,” Stegner suggests, the land holds colorful tonalities or the knowledge obscured by the Myths that the authorial “I” can use to change the “misdirected” reader’s perception of the West.

While the narrating “I” claims that this “book is about” (WW 3) the place “of my childhood” (4), many readers of Wolf Willow, particularly those in 1962, might not have equated Stegner-the author with the narrating “I.” Those readers familiar with Stegner’s oeuvre at the time would have expected Wolf Willow to be either a novel or a history, even though he was emerging as an environmentalist both locally and nationally during the late 1950s and 1960s. Best known simply as a writer, he was enjoying significant praise for the 1954 Powell biography and history of the American West; a recent, second collection of short stories, The City of the Living and Other Stories (1956), that focused on living in the urban West; and the release of his seventh novel, A Shooting Star (1961),

to favorable reviews. Unless familiar with his autobiographical and acclaimed first novel, The Big Rock Candy Mountain (1943), few readers would have seen similarities between Wolf Willow's narrating "I" and Stegner the author. In more recent editions of Wolf Willow, Stegner's son, Page, provides an Introduction that informs readers that "Wolf Willow is an intensely personal history, [of] ... the writer's meticulous attempt to realize himself in terms of his own regional sources" (xiv), thus connecting the narrating "I" of Wolf Willow to the person, Wallace Stegner.

In this brief opening, Stegner's authorial "I" sets the stage to explore in Wolf Willow the constructedness of the western self that was shaped by a specific place, its historical past, and the mythic West that veils him and the place. The relationship Stegner creates in these opening two paragraphs between the "I" that is native, insider, westerner, and guide and the reader as non-native, an outsider, a non-westerner (read Easterner), and "misdirected tourist" is critical because the reader must grant a level of authenticity to the memories Stegner submits and the history he presents to counter the universalizing narratives of the mythic West. According to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's Reading Autobiography: a Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives (2001), the authorial "I's" narrative "authority" is granted conditionally by the reader to the life narrator / memoirist. This conditionality, they state, is due to the authorial narrating "I's" representation of the self and the view that the self's experiences do not equate to a personal and unique individual's lived experiences in a totalizing way as previous readings on the stability of the "I" have claimed it to



be. Rather, the authorial-narrating “I” employs “processes of communication” to represent the author-narrator’s self—a self constructed from various historical, cultural, social, and spatial influences that create the self’s lived experiences—and to create what Smith and Watson call “a shared understanding of the meaning of a life” (13). Stegner aims to create this “shared understanding” of his childhood experiences with the reader through his multiple personas and genres, the structure of Wolf Willow, and its content. His purpose is to use this shared understanding to alter the reader’s perception of the West and upset the Myths’ cultural dominance.

Smith and Watson draw from French theorist Philippe Lejeune’s “The Autobiographical Pact” (1982) to explain the roles (narrator and reader) and the relationship of the reader to the *memoirist* and how the two roles navigate the issues of authenticity and truthfulness, the reliability and subjectivity of memory, and the constructedness of lived experiences. According to Lejeune, writers of life narratives, such as autobiography and memoir, construct a contract with the reader that influences the reader’s way of reading a self-referential text (Smith and Watson 140).<sup>13</sup> The narrator, the subject, and the author of a life narrative must share, Lejeune claims, an “*identity of name.*” This shared identity of name is derived from the author and publisher attesting, first, to the truth of the signature and, second, to the fact that the date and place of birth and education of the author are identical to that of the narrator. This one-to-one relationship of author to narrator to protagonist enables the reader to grant a provisional authenticity to the life narrator’s “truth” claims or assertions that are based in the life narrator’s lived experiences and represented in the narrative, even though this “truth” is very subjective and influenced by “cultural myths, dreams, fantasies, and subjective

memories” (9) and thus cannot necessarily be considered factual (140). Lejeune says that even with this provisional authenticity, life narratives are not deemed factual histories by readers, though as memories and testimonials they may be considered part of the historical record of a period.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, neither Lejeune nor other critics today consider the subjectivity and position of either reader or writer/narrator to be stable, unified, or unique, as both positions are provisional and shaped by their historical-geographical-social context and cultural discourses and as such are sites for multiple, situational, and constructed identities.

Stegner leverages his personal memories of pioneer life in a specific and local history of his childhood home and the notion of a stable, unified “I” in order to construct an Other West from history and memory to dispute the Myths’ hold over how the West, a western self, and western literature should be viewed. In the three chapters contained in Section I: The Question Mark in the Circle, Stegner establishes an oppositional yet shared relationship between the authorial “I” and the “misdirected tourist”/ reader by aligning the experiences of the “I” and the reader with the Myths as being similar and by creating a narrating “I” who, as an insider, will guide, instruct, and help the “misdirected” reader navigate the complexities of what is true and false, actual and counterfeit, lived and artificial, and what is history and what is myth in the western spatiality that Wolf Willow explores.

## Section I and Chapter 1: The Question Mark in the Circle

In the first chapter of Section I, “The Question Mark in the Circle,” Stegner introduces the *memoirist Stegner*, states the purpose of the *memoirist*’s return to his western childhood home, establishes the shared situation of the *memoirist* and “misdirected” reader in regard to the Myths having shaped their perception of the West’s past, and connects his present adult-self to his past child-self through the place of his childhood and his sensory connections to that place. The purpose of this opening chapter is for the *memoirist Stegner* to establish the legitimacy of his recollected experiences as a child in a western frontier place so that they can be used to challenge the validity of the Myths’ dominant interpretation of the West’s past and present. In the remaining two chapters of this section, “History is a Pontoon Bridge” and “The Dump Ground,” Stegner describes the approach he will take to reclaim the West’s past; establish the authority of the *historian Stegner* who will tell the history of his childhood home, Cypress Hills, in Sections II, III, and IV; and ground his challenges to the Myths in the local history of a western place and the experiences of those who lived there. The issues Stegner raises about representation and interpretation, the situation of the western artist, the role of history, experience, and memory; and the circumstances of his past in these opening chapters anticipate many of the concerns he will identify in the 1960’s essays for western American literature. The strategies he uses in Wolf Willow to overthrow the Myths’ determination of his personal past are early forms of the “chores” he assigns western regionalist writers in the 1960’s essays, thereby affording them a means to reclaim and renarrativize their literary western narrative. By learning more about the western place of

his childhood, Stegner can reject the monomythical West for an actual, multivalent, and historicized West, which can in turn become an intellectual model of what an active “misdirected” reader and western artist must do to know a non-mythologized present West.

According to the *memoirist Stegner*, American culture has taught him to interpret his childhood through the lens of the Myths. As a westerner, he “has been led by a lifetime of horse opera” (WW 4) to believe that his western past is a “romantic gun-toting past” (5) with “badmen ... gunfights ... saloons” (4). He admits that accepting this romanticized view has its benefits: “a comfortable sense of status” in “more civilized places” (4) that suggests the gullibility of others and the charm the romanticized West projects. But the *memoirist* declares, as “I have learned more I have had to give up the illusion of a romantic gun-toting past” (5 italics mine). Stegner calls upon a specific childhood memory to describe the predicament that the *memoirist* (the westerner / insider) and the “misdirected” reader (the easterner / outsider) confront in their relationship with an American West colored by the cultural dominance of the Myths that teaches them to perceive the West’s past in a predominantly erroneous way.

In relating this memory, the *memoirist Stegner* is not concerned with the accuracy of his recollection but with how the Myths tell him to view the experience. More importantly, he signals the necessity of countering the mythic West with historical and physical evidence, as he highlights how the *memoirist Stegner* and the “misdirected” reader have been duped by the Myths into accepting a romanticized, timeless Wild West as historical reality. The event

Stegner recalls is a stagecoach ride he took at age five in spring 1914 with his mother, brother, and a “cowpuncher” named Buck Murphy sixty miles from Gull Lake, Saskatchewan, to their destination and future home in Cypress Hills, and then the subsequent death of Murphy at the hands of a lawman at the next rail stop. Instead of Murphy’s death mirroring the mythic paradigm of a high noon gunfight, the *memoirist Stegner* says he discovered in old newspaper accounts that Murphy, a “generally harmless Montana cowboy like dozens of others” (5), was shot by a “scared and trigger-happy” Mountie, causing a very “un-Mountie like killing” (4). The *memoirist Stegner* uses this opportunity to announce a tension between Canada’s less violent western past and America’s violent past: “if [Murphy] had to die by violence it was entirely characteristic that he should be shot by a policeman.... In the American West men came before law, but in Saskatchewan the law was there before settlers, before even cattlemen, and not merely law but law enforcement” (5). He will pursue this tension in Section II and use it to comment on the damaging affect the Myths’ glorification of the West’s violent past has had on America and the westerner.

This initial childhood memory is very strategic to Stegner’s aims in Wolf Willow, as it aligns the reader with the *memoirist Stegner* by suggesting that both the “misdirected” reader (outsider) and *memoirist* (insider) have been led by the Myths to perceive the West as one thing when in actuality it is something else—or many things. While binding their two perspectives, Stegner situates his authorial “I” as the more knowledgeable insider / westerner who can instruct the “misdirected tourist” who has yet to “learn more” about the American West (4). In this early recollection, Stegner positions the historical past as the corrector of the West’s mythic past, a method he will use

throughout Wolf Willow and propose to other western regionalist writers in the 1960's essays as a means for disputing the Myths.

He also previews in this recollection his strategy for telling Cypress Hills's history in Wolf Willow, which is to reveal a partial event that he returns to in a later chapter to relate in detail. By previewing the event in one context and detailing it later in another, Stegner connects events in his childhood home with other events across time and space to create for the reader and the *memoirist* a sense of historical continuity. For instance, immediately following this personal memory, he provides a condensed history of Cypress Hills' settlement that unbeknownst to the reader foreshadows what will be detailed in the next three sections of Wolf Willow:

The first settlement in the Cypress Hills country was a village of métis winterers, the second was a short-lived Hudson's Bay Company post on the Chimney Coulee, the third was the Mounted Police headquarters at Fort Walsh, the fourth was a Mountie outpost erected on the site of the burned Hudson's Bay Company buildings to keep an eye on Sitting Bull and other Indians who congregated in that country in alarming numbers after the big troubles of the 1870s. The Mountie post on Chimney Coulee, later moved down onto the river, was the predecessor of the town of Whitemud. (5)

Through this approach Stegner inserts history and context to evoke a sense of connectedness into a western spatiality dominated by the romanticized, non-linear, timeless, and singular context of the Myths. Stegner's contextualized and historical past,

though predominantly but not exclusively masculine and white, offers possibilities in its ethnic diversity, its multiple narratives, and its inclusion of women for enlarging a western story the Myths present as closed.

While history, or the historical record he discovers about his childhood home, is the primary means used to challenge the Myths' control of the West, Stegner also employs personal experiences to counter the Myths' representation of the West and his past as a westerner. Because memory can be less trustworthy than history and tainted by the nostalgia of the Myths, Stegner uses this chapter to establish the validity of his memories and awareness of nostalgia. He states that he has returned to his childhood home as "a middle-aged pilgrim, to the village I last saw in 1920" (WW 5). He is not seeking "a childhood wonderland" (5) but rather "to test memory against adult observation" (6) in order to locate "evidence" that he has "lived what [he] remember[s]" (15). The "evidence" he seeks must overcome the sense he has that "I am remembering not what happened but something I have written" (17), which draws attention to the fiction-making process the Myths and his *writerly self* employ to present their Wests to others. With the Murphy memory, Stegner signals his own dismissal of the Myths' representation of the West, particularly its nostalgia and glorified view of a Wild West past. To be sure, he readily acknowledges the strain of nostalgia inherent in the West's Myths that can render his family's pioneering experiences as "fictive as a dream" (9). Still, working within the paradigm of encounter and response to western lands that characterizes the Myths' representation of the American's engagement with a frontier West, Stegner searches for validation of his memories in some physical sign of his family's existence on the prairie landscape.

To further illustrate the “misdirected” reader’s need for guidance to navigate the mythic and the actual West, Stegner describes how this specific western landscape needs an interpreter, given that the “monotonous surface” the reader-tourist sees is not the landscape Stegner, the westerner, sees: for him the landscape reveals a “prairie wool blue-green, spring wheat bright as new lawn, winter wheat gray-green at rest and slaty when the wind blows it, roadside primroses as shy as prairie flowers are supposed to be, and as gentle to the eye as when in my boyhood we used to call them wild tulips” (WW 6). The country is not “featureless,” but a “landscape of circles, radii, perspective exercises—a country of geometry” (7). The “drama of this landscape,” he states, is not its wind, but “is in the sky.... biggest sky anywhere” (7). Beautiful and tranquil in June, the prairie’s land and skies are to be reckoned with: “Nature abhors an elevation... a hill is no sooner elevated than the forces of erosion begin tearing it down. These prairies are quiescent, close to static; looked at for any length of time, they begin to impose their awful perfection on the observer’s mind” (7). Although “desolate ... forbidding” to the reader-“tourist,” to the *memoirist Stegner*, the landscape and his relation to it defines who he is:

The world is very large, the sky even larger, and you are very small. But also the world is flat, empty, nearly abstract, and in its flatness you are a challenging upright thing, as sudden as an exclamation mark, *as enigmatic as a question mark*.

It is a country to breed mystical people, egocentric people, perhaps poetic people. But not humble ones. At noon the total sun pours on your single



head; at sunrise or sunset you throw a shadow a hundred yards long. It was not prairie dweller who invented the indifferent universe or impotent man. Puny you may feel there, and vulnerable, but not unnoticed. This is a land to mark the sparrow's fall. (8 italics mine)

From this western landscape, he claims certain traits—mystical, poetic, and vulnerable as well as arrogance and egocentricity—that have been derived from the very distance, the sky, and the wind that have shaped him into the person and westerner he is as an adult. Although he echoes the values of the Myths as aspects of his “western” identity in his rejection of “impotent man” for Hemingway’s “stiff upper lip” (8), as he explores the history of his western homes (prairie and town) and his childhood experiences in Sections II, III, and IV, Stegner reveals his desire to reconstruct what is “western” by reclaiming the values that the Myths have appropriated and, by including new ones, the history and experiences of this western place.

To validate the memories or lived experiences that will be crucial to his construction of an Other West in order to contest the Myths’ artificiality, Stegner grounds his memories in the physical and material world. Thus when he confronts a fork in the road when driving toward what he reveals are the two homes of his childhood—the prairie homestead and the frontier town—the division not only announces other tensions Stegner will address in Wolf Willow that affect the shaping of his identity as a westerner—wild and civilized, frontier and town, folk learning and formal schooling, and West and East—but also his decision to base his credibility and his challenge to the Myths on the physical and experiential. He turns away from the prairie’s homestead because he is “afraid” (WW 8) “to go down there *armed only with memory* and find every

trace of our passage wiped away” (9 italics mine) or “vanished without a trace” (9) because the prairie threatens any “upright thing” (8). He suspects his experiences, “used ... for years as if they really happened, have made stories and novels of them,” are thus simply fiction (15). Therefore, he requires more than the “clarity of hallucination” to authenticate his memories of his mother’s “weathered, rueful” face and the “misfortune and failure” (9-10) the family experienced homesteading. He purposely avoids the site of the prairie homestead and elects to go to the town where he believes he can locate physical signs of his family’s presence to validate and authenticate his memories of being a boy growing up in a western, frontier-like place. Although this world may be contextualized and the self constructed by the influences of place, identity is not mediated by but grounded in the experiential.

In the changes to the town over thirty-plus years, Stegner searches for a sensory and experiential connection to locate his childhood past in this western place. Lacking this validation of his memory, the town raises “doubt” (WW 14), as the present town of 1953 is “no longer wild” as his childhood town was (10). Physical landmarks have “grown unfamiliar with time” (14) and “things that look the same, surprisingly the same, and yet obscurely different” (12). He “grope[s] uneasily” (13) and memories seem “imprecise” (6), “fictitious” (14), or “uncorroborated and delusive” (15). While certain places spark recollections of events—a house fire, a “licking” from his father (16), a blizzard—the *memoirist Stegner* considers them only an “academic exercise; I only remember it, I do not *feel*” it (17 italics mine).

Stegner finally establishes the connection of past to present, the child-self to the adult-self through the smell of a “wholly native” bush. The smell is “forgotten”: “an ancient, unbearable recognition, ... pungent and pervasive, is the smell that has always meant my childhood.... an odor that I have not smelled since I was eleven”; but he has “*dreamed*, more than once about it” and it turns out to come from the “gray-leafed bush” called wolf willow (18) that once located “brings [him] home” (20). Bridging “the present and all the years between,” this smell authenticates his lived experiences, as “reality is made exactly equivalent with memory.... The *sensuous little savage* that I once was *is still intact* inside me” (19 italics mine). Aware of the sentimentality and nostalgia that endanger the larger concerns of Wolf Willow, the *memoirist Stegner* rejects the nostalgia for a childhood past: “the queer adult compulsion to return to one’s beginnings is assuaged.... a hunger is satisfied. I can look at the town, whose childhood was exactly contemporary with my own, with *more understanding*” (19 italics mine). Having “learned more” (3), he can refuse the Myths’ “gun-toting past” as his past and suggest that his family’s “misfortune and failure” (10) at the homestead “*was more typical than otherwise* on the frontier.... More than we knew, *we had our place in a human movement*” (20 italics mine). Rejecting the Myths’ nostalgia for the past, a sentimentality that silences the specifics of his remembered experiences—the failure of the homestead—he finds his family story lies outside the culturally inscribed story of America: the Myths’ western narrative of successful conquest of the frontier.

Accordingly, in Wolf Willow, Stegner claims his family’s story as part of America’s story, or a part of that pioneer movement located in the western place of his childhood through the smell of the “wholly native” wolf willow. Arguing that the Myths’

version of the West erases his family's story of "misfortune and failure" (WW 10), Stegner furthers the oppositional relationship he is establishing between his history and the Myths' representation of the American West by claiming that his family's story is as much a part of the western narrative as is the wolf willow bush—they are both "native" to the western place of his childhood. He says, "this is *my* history.... If I am native to anything, I am native to this" place and its past, declaring its history is "the record of my *tribe*" (20). By appropriating the imagery of Native Americans to describe his family's and other white settlers' pioneering experiences, Stegner announces his revisioning of the white westerners' narrative from the position of the insider / westerner and the Other / the silenced. Taking the role of the challenging Other, Stegner informs the reader that the *memoirist's* recollections, though enhanced by the hindsight of adulthood, cannot tell Cypress Hills' past alone. His recollections "cover[s] only a fragment" of the place's history and only a few "men are still live who remember almost the whole of it" (20). To tell his story, a story shaped by the past of his childhood home, memory must be combined with history to challenge the Myths. At the same time, in his suggestion that the "belated concentration of Plains history" that "flowed like a pageant through these Hills" is the West's history, Stegner comes dangerously close to suggesting that Cypress Hills is a microcosm for America's western settlement, making the Other West he wants to construct from memory and history from this place as universalizing as is the Myths' version of the West's past (20). In his rejection of the mythic West's nostalgic narrative of western American history for one informed by personal experiences and a history

ted to a specific western place, Stegner prepares the “misdirected” reader or American cultural imaginary for an enlarged and different view of the history of the American West.

In “Wallace Stegner, Western Humanist,” Etulain states that Stegner caused others to rethink their notions of the West in the approach he took to it. He avoided “the frantic adventure, white- and black-hat stereotypes, and unbelievable fantasy of a six-gun West” and called “for a careful and judicious scrutiny of the human side of the western past” by bringing into the history and story of the past “families, friendships, and cultural landscapes” (53). He builds an Other West from memory, history, and story that contains the narratives glossed or elided by the Myths. In the remaining two chapters of Section I—“History is a Pontoon Bridge” and “The Dump Ground”—Stegner continues to broaden the implications of his return to his childhood home and to refine the manner in which he will construct his Other West for a “misdirected” reader who perceives the West through the lens of the Myths, as Stegner did until once he “learned more.”

#### “History is a Pontoon Bridge”: Already and Always Being Constructed

In the second chapter of Section I, “History Is a Pontoon Bridge,” Stegner weaves the major issues and themes announced in chapter one and clarifies the approach he will use to analyze the interconnectedness of place and individual to argue for the westerner’s identity as shaped by the westerners’ interaction with the conditions of the western landscape and by a western culture the Myths and popular culture have promoted. Stegner suggests that the category of “westernness” is a constructed attribute tied to the

westerners' and the western artist's response to a western place, thus locating the western artist and art he will present in the Epilogue and the literary western he will discuss in the 1960's essays in the experiences of western writers in western places. Stegner ties his notion of "westernness" to his idea of history, or the notion that past events shape future events and the place in which they occur. In explaining his theory of history as a pontoon bridge, Stegner makes explicit the approach he uses throughout Wolf Willow, but especially in Section II where he brings the historical record into the western narrative to historicize his own and his family's frontier experiences to contest the Myths' representation of their western past. This chapter initiates his search into this historical past so he can understand who he is and why he is "western."

Among the several aims in Wolf Willow, Stegner attempts to mend the historical disjuncture he saw in the westerner's life due to the Myths' freezing the West's past into an 1890s Wild West period and mythologizing that period to where it no longer has much semblance to the West's historical past or its modern present. In the 1960's essays, Stegner argues that "millions of westerners, old and new, have no sense ... of any continuity between the real western past which has been mythicized almost out of recognizability and a real western present that seems cut-off and pointless as a ride on a merry-go-round that can't be stopped" (HMWW 199). According to Elliot West, Stegner writes about a "crises of western identity" (Stegner, *Storytelling* 62) in the 1960's essays and the failure of the non-formulaic, literary western to tell "stories that connect westerners both to what they see around them and what they know has come before" (63). To

wrestle his non-mythic past away from the Myths' definition of his western past involves two distinct but connected issues for Stegner, claims West: knowing "what the West is" and "who westerners are" (62). Stegner tries to make westerners feel "situated," in West's view, by illustrating "how the place and its inhabitants have made one another" and how this "mutual shaping ... has unfolded through time" (62).

Stegner claims his western identity is the product of experiences with a western spatiality comprised of the Myths, the West's arid landscape, and a socio-cultural environment shaped by the Myths and the experiences of living in a particular western place. He says, "expose a child to a particular environment at his susceptible time," or "between the ages of five and twelve," which was the age range for his time in Cypress Hills, and the child "will perceive in the shapes of that environment until he dies" (WW 21). Thus he claims that, on the one hand, his childhood experiences came straight out of a Huck Finn or Natty Bumppo scenario and, on the other hand, were tied to the materiality of the place and his experiences there as "a pioneer's child" (15). He admits that, to a degree, his was a "childhood of freedom and the outdoors" (25) that comes from being "reared" on the "frontier" (23), and it taints his childhood experiences with the familiar romanticism and nostalgia of the Myths. His "sensuous little savage" descriptor connects his child-self to this mythic frontier spatiality of both the noble and savage Indian of the West's Myths (25). At the same time, however, the *memoirist Stegner* counters this nostalgia with recollections of "an *insecure childhood where all masculine elements are painful*" (22 italics mine), as he reveals how he was a weakling, a mama's boy, sickly, and berated by a domineering father and thus emasculated in a western world that values the he-man Cowboy mystique. As he constructs his challenging Other West, Stegner's

personal experiences, as well as his family's "misfortune and failure" (10), situate him in the position of the Other in the West's spatiality in which the Myths' metanarratives are the dominant discourse.

Stegner connects his past and present selves through this childhood place. He says, the "prairie and town did the shaping" (WW 24) of his child-self so that, once reconnected through the smell of wolf willow to the place of his child-self, he can again "*feel* how the world *still* reduces me to a point and then measures itself from me" (19 italics mine). He declares, "a good part of my private and social character" was formed by the "little womb-village and the lovely, lonely, exposed prairie of the homestead" (23). Thus the "scenery" he likes, the "people and humor" he "responds to," the "virtues... respect[ed] and the weaknesses... condemn[ed]," the "models and heroes" he emulates, and the "prejudices," "affections," "kind of shame" he exposes, as well as the "code" he lives by and the manner in which he "adjudicate[s] between personal desire and personal responsibility," have all been "scored into [him] by" the western environment of his childhood home (23). By connecting these past and present selves through a sensory association native to a particular western place, any "doubt" he has regarding the authenticity of his recollections of his child-self's experiences and sensations is erased. As he relates the history of Cypress Hills, he recalls the memories of his childhood experiences as "a pioneer's child" (15) and connects his personal and historical past to his adult present. In this historical and personal past, he locates a usable past that challenges the mythic West from which he can redefine the category of "westernness" for other westerners.



In these first two chapters of Section I, Stegner incrementally reveals information about himself and his childhood home to suggest the interrelatedness of his personal history with the history of Cypress Hills and to demonstrate how the western place he and his family encountered from 1914 to 1920 was a “frontier” as defined by the Myths. He conditionally accepts the Myths’ definition of a “frontier” as a history-less, wild, and untamed place inhabited by Indians. In this way, he can position his critique of the Myths from the inside, or from the same context the Myths use: a western spatiality of Indians, cowboys, cattle ranches, horses, homesteads, guns, and his experiences with “a wild freedom, a closeness to the earth and weather” (WW 29). He claims that he was “brought up on a *belated, almost symbolic frontier*” (22 italics mine) that might be foreign or even misunderstood by the modern “misdirected” reader whose world is no longer rural. What was once a “most common American experience” (22)—to be a pioneer’s child—Stegner says is now in the early 1960s an “anachronism in an America that has been industrialized, regimented, bulldozed, and urbanized” (23), a comment that clearly reveals his privileging of the rural over the urban. Even though he reveals some sentiment for this passing rural America in Wolf Willow, in the 1960’s essays, he chastises contemporary western writers for remaining wedded to a rural West of the past in their continued use of that past West as topic and setting for their literature.

Stegner acknowledges his awareness of how the Myths use nostalgia to represent the West and to hide the violence, destruction, and vigilantism in its history under the cloak of a romantic natural world and the exceptional American. By his own admission, his childhood experiences associate his child self with “the physical sweetness of a golden age” (WW 29) that the *memoirist Stegner* says, “to tell the truth” (25), he would

not trade for another. What nostalgia obscures, he notes, is that he also grew up amidst “much ugliness” in a “dung-heeled sagebrush town on the disappearing edge of nowhere” (24) without books, libraries, museums or “monuments, ... historical sites, ... relics of a hundred kinds” (29). In order to avoid what he calls the “psychological narcissism” (22) inherent in self studies, Stegner subordinates his personal story to his search for Cypress Hills’s history and the larger, cultural history of white settlement of the West.

By associating his childhood place with the frontier, or the same imaginative and historical terrain as the Myths, Stegner positions his critique of America’s cultural narratives of the West from within but opposed to this mythic version of the American West. He argues in this chapter, “History is a Pontoon Bridge,” that the Myths’ narratives of white, western settlement of the frontier separate him, the westerner, and America from their historical past because they define the “frontier” as always new and thus without a history. He declares, “Living in the Cypress Hills, I did not even know I lived there, and hadn’t the faintest notion of who had lived there before me” (WW 27), because the “general assumption of all of us, child or adult, was that this was a *new country* and ... a *new country had no history*” (28, italics mine). The Myths limit his understanding of who he is to a spatiality defined by the mythic West: “the world when I began to know it had *neither location nor time, geography nor history*.... I never knew a scrap of that history until a quarter-century after I left the place” (28-29 italics mine). The *memoirist Stegner* returns to locate a context from which he can know who he is, and that context for Stegner is the physical,

geographical, and natural landscape of Cypress Hills and the history of the people who lived there. Western identity for Stegner is grounded in a contextualized western place—the landscape, the history, the experiences of those who live there, and the interaction of all these across time.

What Stegner seeks in order to know who he is as a westerner is a deeper “knowledge of place, knowledge of the past” (WW 28). According to John Daniel in “Wallace Stegner: The Hunger for Wholeness,” Stegner recognizes that “the personal is not sufficient” and “is only one thread” in a “larger weave” (35).<sup>15</sup> The *memoirist Stegner* says that, as a child, “the world I knew was immediate, not comparative; seen flat, without perspective” (28). As Susan Naramore Maher states, “To tell the story of one boy’s family requires connections that run through time, cross borders, determine affiliations, and enter into mysteries of symbol” (10). Informed by his own and his parents’ experiences and by the research for the Powell book, Stegner understood that in the West’s Myths the pioneer is the American Adam, or heroic figure who begins human (American) history all over again each time a new, history-less frontier is conquered. What Stegner reveals through the history in Wolf Willow is what Georgi-Findlay describes as the Myths’ “masking of the economic, ecological, and cultural consequences of westward expansion” (2-3). In Wolf Willow, Stegner constructs an Other West that calls attention to the consequences of white settlement in the present.

Stegner’s view of history as a contextualized process of mutual shaping between people and place forms the theory of history he employs in Wolf Willow. As the *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner* says, “history is a pontoon bridge. Every man walks and works at its building end, and has come as far as he has over the pontoons laid by others he may

never have heard of. Events have a way of making other events inevitable; the actions of men are consecutive and indivisible” (WW 29). Instead of the frontier being history-less as the Myths declare, Stegner shows the West to have a long, deep, and rich historical past. Thus he can say, his childhood home of “Whitemud was not a beginning, not a new thing, but a stage in a long historical process” (29), a process, however, the *memoirist Stegner* and the “misdirected” reader are unaware of at the start of Wolf Willow. As victims of the Myths, the *memoirist Stegner* and the “misdirected reader” are students who need to “learn more” about the cultural-social-historical and geographic past of Cypress Hills that the *historian*, the *writer*, and the *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner* will provide in the forthcoming sections of Wolf Willow so that they too can “give up the illusion of a romantic, gun-toting past” (5) the Myths claim to be the West’s past. In “‘Huts of Time’: Wallace Stegner’s Historical Legacy,” Rob Williams comments that Stegner’s “emphasis on the continuity of historical experience and his continued attempts to rope together the past and the present” are “profoundly conservative” by today’s critical standards (119). However, his integration of personal history with the social-cultural-geographic history of Cypress Hills is an “unorthodox methodology [that] suggests important possibilities” (120). These “possibilities” emerge in his construction of an Other West in Wolf Willow that rebuilds for the *memoirist Stegner* and the “misdirected” reader the historical continuity the Myths have denied them.

Stegner closes this chapter with mention of the western artist and the status of western American literature that foreshadow a lengthier discussion in the

Epilogue and his alignment with a realist literature in the 1960's essays, when he claims that the western regionalist writer is separated from his audiences, both eastern and western, by language and cultural snobbery. Likening his situation as a western writer to American historian, essayist, and writer, Henry Adams, who came to view his education as a youth inadequate for the world he encountered as an adult, Stegner says, "Far more than Henry Adams, I have felt myself entitled to ask whether my needs and my education were not ludicrously out of phase" and "for the wrong place" (WW 24). He declares that neither "the square brick prison of the school" (13) nor the books that were "the survivors of many moves ... had ... the slightest relevance to the geography, history, or life of the place where I lived" (27). Instead, it was the "folk skills" (23), "oral traditions," and "folklore" (26) that "enlarged" him and "released [his] mind for imaginative flights into wonder" (29). He observes that the "language of literature," the "King's English," is the privileged language in school instead of the "native tongue" or "dialect" that originated in the "oral traditions" of the frontier (26). Only by "consciously resisting," as he claims Robert Frost and Mark Twain did, can the western regionalist writer retain an "authentic American tone" and fight against "all the forces of culture and snobbery [that] are against your *writing* by ear and [your] making contact with your own natural audience" (26). If the writer denies his native subject and voice—his "westernness"—Stegner claims the writer's voice is false.

When an author writes about what he knows, Stegner says, the writer expresses an authentic voice. As an example, he uses mid-westerner Willa Cather whom he greatly admires. When she "dealt with what *she knew* from Red Cloud," Stegner states, Cather was "a first-rate novelist" (WW 25 italics mine). However, when she "embraced the

foreign tradition totally” and “recognized Red Cloud as a vulgar little hole,” he claims that Cather became neither an American, nor a European, “nor quite a whole artist” (25). For the writer from the “hinterlands of America”—such as Cather and himself—the ability to “make contact” with the artist’s “natural audience” (26) is “more difficult” (25) than it is for the easterner and the European. Stegner shows in this brief discussion his ties to a realist form of fiction that he never rejected and that informs not only the 1960’s essays but also his notion that for western American literature to combat the Myths and reclaim their western narrative it needed to be a realist literature and register the West’s authentic voice. By associating his memories and experiences with a physical and contextualized western place, Stegner declares his recollected experiences to be western, historicized, and authentic and thus the potential basis of western art and the grounds upon which to contest the mythic West.

In the 1960’s essays, Stegner identifies the central problem faced by western regionalist writers to be the Myths’ version of the West’s past, because it separates the West’s past from its present. He argues in the essays that modern westerners and western regionalist writers live in an “amputated Present” without any historical continuity to explain how the present in which westerners live issue from the West’s past (HMWW 193). One of the “chores” Stegner assigns contemporary western writers is to create an historical continuity for the modern westerner by recovering a history the Myths have “consistently obscured—been used to obscure” (BS 183) so that western regionalist writers can write the “aftermath” (BS 178) of white settlement of the West instead of merely rewriting

its narrative of settlement. In Sections II, III, and IV of Wolf Willow, the *historian Stegner* recovers an “unremembered past” (WW 111) for the *memoirist Stegner* and the “misdirected” reader that will challenge the Myths’ erasure of stories like those of Stegner’s family who fall outside the Myths’ singular story of triumphant white settlement.

In his recovery and the telling of Cypress Hills’s past through history, experience, and story, Stegner contests the narratives of success, violence, and domination the Myths present. In a 1993 essay, “Coming of Age: The End of the Beginning,” Stegner argues that America’s cultural metanarratives of western settlement negated its past by seeing America as the “New World” and a country of second chances and new opportunities.<sup>16</sup> “History,” he says, “was part of the baggage we threw overboard when we launched into the New World” and “plung[ed] into the future through a landscape that had no history” (206). Instead of history, what the West and the westerner has, according to Stegner in conversation with Etulain, is a “frontiersman fantasy” (153) that promotes “physical, masculine competence,” “rugged individualism,” free lands, conquest, extermination, and eternal renewal rather than “communal obligations,” “helpful neighbors,” struggle, failure, and loss that he will show in Wolf Willow to be a part of America’s story of western settlement and nation building (Conversations 150).

#### “The Dump Ground”: An Historical Methodology

In the third and final chapter of Section I: The Question Mark in the Circle, called the “The Dump Ground,” Stegner uses the childhood activity of rummaging

through the town dump as a metaphor for recovering the historical record of Cypress Hills's past that the Myths have hidden in order to ensure that the history the *historian Stegner* will relate in Sections II, III, and IV is western, historicized, and authentic. In this brief chapter, Stegner develops the process behind his search for a "knowledge of the past, knowledge of place" (WW 28) of Cypress Hills's past that he will employ to construct an Other West to contest and correct the culturally dominant discourse of the mythic West that America's cultural narratives and mass-media forms have openly promoted. In this chapter, he prepares the "misdirected" reader and the *memoirist Stegner* for the history and memory to come in Section II: Preparation for a Civilization that not only de-mythologizes his and the West's past so it can be renarrativized but also establishes the interconnectedness of place and people his theory of history as a pontoon bridge suggests. Stegner proposes that to know Cypress Hills's history, he must dig into its "dump ground" to recover "relics" hidden in layers of myth that, once discovered, he can cleanse of the Myths' taint to locate their value to him within the context of his own and his family's pioneer story and their value for the modern westerner and a modern America.

By identifying the town's dump as a source of local history, Stegner situates history in the ordinary and everyday activities of people in a particular place instead of in sweeping events and major cultural trends as the Myths do. According to the *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner*, the place to go to "study in detail the life of any community" is its town dump (WW 36), which was for the child-Stegner the "one aspect of Whitemud's history ... we knew" (31). He claims that,



it held “adventurous possibilities” of things discarded by “passing teamsters, gypsies, sometimes Indians” (31); “the relics of every individual who had ever lived there” (33); and, dishearteningly, “the relics of my own life” (35). For Stegner, the town dump is an “archaeological” site “potent with secrets” (31) providing both the child and adult Stegner “glimpses into our neighbors’ lives and our own” (35). For the *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner*, the dump ground historicizes and explains the town. For instance, he discovers that the dump was “the town’s first institution” stemming from a law passed by the territorial government in 1888 requiring communities to establish sanitation methods (33). The contents of the town’s dump ground also signal the presence of another powerful cultural narrative—the “American Dream”—that he will explore through his family’s homesteading experiences in Section IV as “the dream lay out there with the rest” of the town’s discarded items (34).

In this chapter, Stegner prepares the reader for what is to come, which is his story and the town’s past within the context of Cypress Hills’s, the Plains’, Canada’s and America’s history of white settlement of the West. Analogous to the child Stegner and his playmates rummaging through the dump ground for “treasures,” Stegner suggests he will dig through the historical records, interviews, and old newspaper files he refer to in chapter one and in the Acknowledgements to discover historical “secrets” he will use to return the history of Cypress Hills to cultural memory through Wolf Willow (WW 31). Grounding this history in a specific western place and his connection to that place, the town dump represents creative and historical possibilities for the adult-Stegner. As the *memoirist Stegner* describes it, the dump “was our poetry and our history” (36) and as such contains the history of the town that shaped the child-Stegner and is a possible

imaginative source for the western regionalist writer. For the *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner*, the dump provides social-cultural-historical insights into the past, making history a source of critique for the West's Myths. The dump reveals, he says, "how much is lost, how much thrown aside, how much carelessly or of necessity given up, in the making of a new country" (35), an observation that challenges the glories, adventures, and opportunities the Myths claim the frontier offers. Speaking from the "aesthetic distance" that time, experience, hindsight, and education have given the adult Stegner, the dump's contents offer him the criteria for evaluating the town itself: "a community may be as well judged by what it throws away—what it has to throw away and what it chooses to keep—as by any other evidences" (36). In the next three sections of Wolf Willow, Stegner examines the "relics," the "possibilities," and the "secrets" of Cypress Hills's past through the history he discovers. From this history and his related childhood experiences, Stegner creates his Other West to contest the mythic West's representation of his, the westerners', and America's western past.

According to Limerick, Stegner's "dump ground" methodology anticipates the practices New Western historians used in the 1980s to revision western American history. In "Precedent to Wisdom," she states that Stegner's "place-centered history" (26) shares the assumptions of New Western historians who suggest that when examined thoroughly the local history of a place can lead to an understanding of a larger, regional, and national history (28). From Limerick's perspective, the child Stegner and his pals understood that "It does not make any sense to go to the dump in order to *edit* it, to look only for inspirational relics.

You examine everything, whether it is attractive or not, because you want to understand the *whole* past, not a selected and prettified version of it” (28). With Stegner’s accent on the “harsh realism and ‘negativity’” (28) of the history he is unveiling of the place Cypress Hills and his view that it contained “our poetry and our history” (36), Limerick suggests that Wolf Willow demonstrates “why western creative writers and western historians have found a shared cause in their exploration of the western past, with Wallace Stegner as the guide we have in common” (28). She claims that the history he chooses to tell in the coming sections of Wolf Willow is “place-centered history, beginning with the physical environment, ... telling the full story of the complicated events and maneuverings—of Indians, métis, Hudson’s Bay Company traders, and Mounties—that had preceded the arrival of white American farmers. This was a history that faced up to tragedy and failure, brutality as well, and connected the whole package of the past up to the environmental and human issues of the present” (26). This is the history the *memoirist Stegner* and the “misdirected” reader will learn about Cypress Hills and the West from the *historian Stegner* in the forthcoming sections.

To introduce the main historical section of Wolf Willow, Section II: Preparation for a Civilization, Stegner positions the *memoirist Stegner* and the “misdirected” reader as listeners to the history the *historian Stegner* will relate. Stegner emphasizes in the final sentence of this chapter that neither the reader nor the *memoirist* has the full story of the West because their perception of the West’s past has been colored by the Myths. In this sentence, the *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner* announces that, “If *anyone* had known that past, and told us about it, *he* might have told us something like this” (WW 36 italics mine). As if aware that the reader must negotiate a new “pact” with the narrating “I” that

will become the *historian Stegner* in the next section, Stegner introduces this new voice and the traits associated with this persona to ensure the reader grants the voice the credibility needed to tell the history. First, Stegner further subordinates his personal story that has been integral in Section I to the history that will be the primary focus of Section II. Second, Cypress Hills's history will be "told" by an anonymous "he" to a communal "us" (36). The "he" is the *historian Stegner* who researched Cypress Hills's past to discover in newspaper files, interviews, and secondary historical sources the narratives he now returns to the communal "us." The "us" is, first, the *memoirist Stegner* and the "misdirected" reader who do not know this history and, second, all westerners and Americans who still perceive the West through the lens of America's defining cultural narratives—the Frontier, Pioneer, Cowboy, and Garden West Myths and the presence of the American Dream.

By separating the *memoirist Stegner* from the "he" who tells the history of Cypress Hills, Stegner creates the perception of "aesthetic distance" (WW 35) he believes necessary to characterize this history of Cypress Hills as objective and non-mythicized. While the historian's persona is masculine and therefore speaks from a privileged position within the Myths, Stegner's historian tells the history of Cypress Hills having "learned more" (4) and possessing "more understanding" so that this recovered history can challenge the Myths' and the Dream's metanarratives of the West (19). From Cypress Hills's past, the *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner* will construct an Other West that can be accepted as credible and authentic. The history presented in Section II, and in Sections III and IV,

provides the details needed to accept the *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner's* claims in the opening that Cypress Hills was a "belated" frontier space containing in "condensed" form the history of the white, western settlement of the Canadian and American Wests.

In Section I of Wolf Willow, Stegner identifies the book's major themes that anticipate issues that will be central to his theory of western American literature in the three 1960's essays. Framed by the pronouncements of the *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner* persona about the significance of the western place of his childhood, these three chapters in Section I introduce the tension between history and myth, the discontinuity between the westerner's past and present, the category of "westernness," and the challenges the western artist faces that are central to both Wolf Willow and the 1960's essays. In the remaining sections of Wolf Willow, Stegner recovers his personal story through the history, the memories, and the stories of Cypress Hills and the narratives they hold that the Myths have silenced. The notion of history as a pontoon bridge and the methodology of the dump ground inform his recovery of the place's history and his personal story from erasure by the Myths and foreshadow the "personal, family, and cultural chores" he will describe in the 1960's essays as those his contemporary western regionalist writers must complete so that they may renarrativize the West's narrative as their own. These "chores" will be concerned with the role of myth in the western narrative, the western writers' aversion to the present West, the "westernness" of the western writer, and the irrelevancy of the literary western to modern readers. Stegner's aim in both Wolf Willow and the critical essays is to locate a more accurate narrative of the West's settlement for the westerner and for America.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For more on the “new” western autobiography these writers represent, see Boardman and Woods and Robert Maxwell Brown. Stegner’s literary ancestors could be Maria Sandoz’s Old Jules (1935), Mary Austin’s Land of Little Rain (1902) and Earth Horizon (1932).

<sup>2</sup> The ideas Stegner expresses in Wolf Willow toward the West’s myths are articulated in the Powell book, Beyond the Hundredth Meridian, that he began working on in 1945 and spent nine years conducting primary and secondary research and traveling to the Grand Canyon to traverse some of Powell’s journey. He finishes Beyond just after his trip to Saskatchewan in 1953 and while he was writing some of the early drafts of Wolf Willow. The Powell book informs both Wolf Willow and his novel, Angle of Repose (1971), in which he presents a fictional accounting of the West’s past and its relationship to the future through the story of Susan and Arthur Ward, grandparents to Lyman Ward, the novel’s narrator.

<sup>3</sup> See Benson’s chapter “The Last Homestead Frontier” and Fradkin’s chapter “Unformed Youth” as well as Selected Letters (5 – 8) and Conversations (9-11) for Stegner’s comments on the role his mother had in his life, particularly his youth in which she was his protector against his father’s demands.

<sup>4</sup> The Robinsons argue that many of the traits of Joe Allston and Stegner’s other male protagonists embody the traits he associates with his mother in Big Rock and in Wolf Willow.

<sup>5</sup> His portrayal in Big Rock is more autobiographical according to Stegner in Conversations than what is revealed in Wolf Willow, which does not even provide his mother's name.

<sup>6</sup> Maher likens Stegner's literary cartography to anthropologist, literary naturalist, and essayist Loren Eiseley's mapping of the Nebraska Plains in his collected essays, The Immense Journey (1957). She suggests Stegner was probably aware of Eiseley's book (10).

<sup>7</sup> West's observations derive from his analysis of Stegner's early semi-autobiographical novel, The Big Rock Candy Mountain (1943). I suggest they apply to Wolf Willow as well.

<sup>8</sup> Rob Williams argues that Stegner's thinking was guided by historian Walter Prescott Webb, who argued for "distinctive places and cultures with the larger West" and interest in "describing the relationships between human communities and the physical landscape" (124). Williams also credits DeVoto for shaping Stegner's ideas about the West, its diversity, and its aridity (124).

<sup>9</sup> See also Conversations in which Stegner tells about his experiences at the Banff conference in 1978 where he was recognized for drawing attention to Canadian history and how much can be learned by looking at the difference between Canada and America's western settlement (62).

<sup>10</sup> See Elliot West's "Wallace Stegner's West, Wilderness, and History" and Rob William's "'Hut's of Time'" for more on Stegner as an historian; see also Fradken 179-180 for a discussion of historians' comments on Stegner's Powell biography and history.

Most agree that Stegner captures the large ideas but that his failure to use footnotes, provide a bibliography, and state his criteria in Beyond Hundredth Meridian and in Wolf Willow lessens each as a historical work.

<sup>11</sup> The Robinsons' study was the first full length study on Stegner. They see Stegner's work in terms of what they call the "middle ground" or his attempt to find a space in-between traditional dichotomies of East / West, wild / civilized, and others (45).

<sup>12</sup> Only two of the three stories he wrote for this section made it into Wolf Willow. As he states, "I wrote that section as three connected stories, a sort of broken novel. Later I took out the middle one, a yarn called 'The Wolfer,' for entirely literary reasons: it was told in first person by a Mounted Policeman, and it intruded a disturbingly subjective 'voice' into a book that was already disconnected enough" (OWH 210).

<sup>13</sup> Lejeune identifies a life narrative as a "retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality" (Smith and Watson 140).

<sup>14</sup> For instance, Kolodny and others working with women pioneers' journals treat them as primary historical documents.

<sup>15</sup> See also Jamie Robertson who discusses the larger context into which Stegner placed Wolf Willow (93).

<sup>16</sup> As mentioned previously, Stegner's outlook toward place is not unlike that of human geographers who view place as a "meaningful location" because of the meaning/significance people attach to specific locations.



## Chapter 4

### “The Capital of an Unremembered Past”: Stegner Bridges an “Uncrossable Discontinuity”

*“Up to our own day 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 the American settlement westward, explain American development.”*

-- Frederick Jackson Turner,  
“The Significance of the Frontier in American History”

*“The presence of the Western Frontier was thought to be the most visible symbol of that intangible but very real difference that was early felt to set America off from its European progenitors.”*

-- James K. Folsom  
The Western: A Collection of Critical Essays

*“The very richness of that past as I discover it now  
Makes me irritable to have been cheated of it then.  
I wish I could have known it early”*

-- Wallace Stegner  
Wolf Willow

In Wolf Willow's Section II: Preparation for a Civilization and its nine chapters, Stegner presents the history of Cypress Hills discovered in his digging into available newspaper files, interviews with old timers, and limited secondary sources regarding his childhood home. He uses this history to challenge the West that America's cultural narratives represent and the American cultural imaginary chooses to adopt as its way of knowing the American West. In Wolf Willow and other works of his,<sup>1</sup> Stegner views this mythic depiction of the West as inaccurate and dangerous to modern westerners and to America because it depicts a romantic, heroic, and nostalgic illustration of the West and its past that obscures the violent and destructive ways Americans have acted toward western lands, racial Others, and the self. In Preparation for a Civilization, Stegner uses this discovered historical past to construct an Other West that is both similar to but quite different from the mythic West he contests in Wolf Willow. Comprised of historical narratives about people and events and the geologic history of his childhood home, Stegner's Other West contains white and Indian conflicts, figures representative of historical tensions, a lost culture, and a West that is violent and privileges the masculine and white Euro-American. With Cypress Hills' recorded history as his "dump ground" and using his theory of historical continuity, Stegner sifts through the specific history of his western childhood place to find "treasures" or narratives the Myths have silenced that once recovered enable him to write against the grain of America's culturally accepted romantic, heroic, nostalgic West. The narratives he discovers in the past inform the conclusions he draws in Sections IV and the Epilogue for how childhood home

and those who came before him shaped the place that shaped him, both good and bad, into the westerner and the writer he is in the present. Stegner uses the recovered history in Section II of Wolf Willow to free himself, other westerners, and America from the Myths' culturally trapping definitions of the West. Many of the strategies he uses in this historical section of Wolf Willow to find his personal, historicized, and contextual past and to establish a continuous history between past and present are those he will use in the 1960's essays to renarrativize the literary western as "another kind of western storytelling" and to challenge the dominance of the formulaic western novel and the mythic West to define what is "western" (HMWW 187).

Specifically, the *historian Stegner* relates in somewhat linear fashion in the section's first eight of nine chapters what happened in Cypress Hills before cattlemen arrived in the late 1870s and are the subject of Section III: The Whitemud River Range. The historical narratives Stegner recovers are those of untold or lost racial others; examples of collaboration, compromise, and peace; and Canada's history of western settlement that he contrasts to America's more violent and destructive process of white, western settlement and the Mythic West's empty and history-less frontier white settlers conquered and transformed. As the *historian* tells the recovered, localized history of this specific western place, the *memoirist* interjects recollected experiences in this same place that creates a palimpsest's view of history and continuous flow of events and mirrors Stegner's theory of history as a "pontoon bridge." The *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner* uses the history the *historian Stegner* relates and the memories the *memoirist* recalls to construct an Other West that in its historical continuity and recovered narratives counters and critiques the view of the West the Frontier-Cowboy-Pioneer-Garden West Myths

present and shape his childhood home. The history Stegner recounts in Section II is the “knowledge of place, knowledge of the past” that the *memoirist* and the reader lack (WW 28), or the area’s non-mythologized past “if anyone had known” and “told us” that he seeks for himself and for the West (36). The final chapter of Section II, “Capital of an Unremembered Past,” unites these narrative personas to acknowledge the rich, multi-vocal history Stegner has recovered about his childhood western home through its geography, its history, and its culture as a non-mythologized, historical source to challenge the Myths’ definition of what is western and to identify the consequences of this lost past on his child self and his adult and writer selves.

In his recovery of Cypress Hills’ history and how it molded the place that shaped him as a child, a westerner, and a writer, Stegner evidences in germinal form several of the “chores” he defines in the 1960’s essays. In Section II, he discovers “relics” and “secrets” in this recovered history that anticipates his call in the essays for contemporary western regionalist writers to investigate their history to determine what the Myths have “been used to obscure” (BS 183). In this section, he establishes an “historical continuity” (HMWW 199) between past and present for the modern westerner that bridges the West’s “amputated Present” (193) with its non-mythic past by revealing the West’s continuous history that the Myths deny. By restoring the voices the Myths erase, Stegner presents in this section’s nine chapters an expansive historical basis for his Other West that opposes the mythic West’s narrative of white conquest of a wild 1890s West. Plus he locates for himself and other westerners what he calls in the essays a

“personal and possessed past” (HMWW 199) that demonstrates the importance of knowing the history of one’s place and the story of one’s family so that a “sense of belonging” to a place can support a more sustainable and cooperative relationship with the land and with others (WW 112).

### Stegner as Historian

The dominant persona in Section II of Wolf Willow is the *historian Stegner* who tells the history of Cypress Hills before its settlement by pioneers. This persona returns to cultural memory the history that informs the *memoirist* and the “misdirected” reader about those who lived “in this block of country” before the child-Stegner arrived. In the historical narratives he elects to tell the *memoirist* and “misdirected” reader, Stegner locates his challenges to the mythic West, for the historical narratives he recovers reveal possibilities in the West’s past to contest the mythic West’s representation of his and other westerners’ western heritage. His approach to the past and his use of it informs many of the strategies he advocates in the essays to help western regionalist writers reclaim the West’s narrative from the Myths. His approach is grounded in his notion of the interconnectedness of past and present evident in his notion of history as a pontoon bridge that connects this past to his present. As this section’s final chapter, “Capital of an Unremembered Past,” reveals, Stegner’s methodology offers others whose narratives are defined by the mythic West a means to reclaim through history and place their western narratives from the Myths.

The kind of history the *historian Stegner* tells in Section II evidences the kind of history Stegner personally liked to read and the kind he wrote prior to the 1960's essays. In his 1965 essay "On the Writing of History," Stegner takes issue with characteristics of a newer, theorized historical writing that calls into question the historian's previous use of narrative or story-telling techniques. Reacting to emerging structuralist theories that were examining the constructedness of language and the self and to assumptions embedded in the historian's narrating "I" obscured by the novelistic practices of earlier historians, Stegner notes in the essay that this earlier form of relating history, which he calls "narrative history," is no longer viewed as "valid" among historians of the present: "It is my impression that too many trained professionals consider ... history rendered as story, to be something faintly disreputable.... Pretty obviously they consid[er] the analytical approach the only intellectually respectable one" (202-203). He interprets their strict adherence to the factual as making historical prose "dull" (204), arguing that historians could continue to use "dramatic narrative ... to make a point vividly" (205). He agrees with academic historians that history must be held to "an intellectually rigorous method"; be factually accurate; present information without "bias, bad judgment, misleading implications"; and exhibit "sound research" on the subject (204) because, he says, "history's truth is truth to fact, to what happened" (203). However, Stegner places the burden of discernment between what is factual and what is misleading or false on the individual historian, leaving unquestioned the language and method of presentation historians use to present their histories.

In the essay, Stegner defines history and fiction as “sisters” as they represent, in his view, two branches of literature (OWH 205). He claims they both work with the same elements—“persons, places, and events”—and each reflects “the society that produces it,” except that “history reports the actual, fiction the typical” (205). So long as historians maintain a “truth to plausibility” in their rendering of facts (203), Stegner claims, “the dramatizing of legitimately true events does not necessarily falsify them” (205). “Bias” and “misrepresentation” can be corrected, he argues, through “sound research” (204) and an “impartial” point of view (211). For Stegner, a “*good* book” of history will be a “pastiche” of presented “communiqués, conferences, policies, ultimatums, and abstract forces,” but a “*great* book... is going to be a sort of Iliad, a story that dramatizes” the struggles of people involved in events, and this dramatized history does not mean, in his view, that the history is “intellectually deficient” or false (203). In Wolf Willow Stegner aims for the “great” book idea of history as he presents Cypress Hills’ history through “dramatic narrative” that focuses on interconnected actions by people and related events that shape the Cypress Hills he encounters as a child and that, he claims, shaped him into the westerner he is as an adult.

In his conversations with Etulain, Stegner further associates history to literature when he describes the kind of history he prefers, which is what he calls “history as literary art.” He says, “History as literary art begins with Bancroft, Parkman, Prescott, and Motley in New England. They all had the same romantic notion of history, of taking a great subject, a big tragic subject with a tragic hero like La Salle, and doing it like a great romantic drama coming down to a catastrophe at the end” (Conversations 157). Preferring the history of Parkman, or more recently Samuel Elliot Morison and Bernard

DeVoto, his Harvard colleague and friend, Stegner admits to Etulain that he “would have a hard time getting most historians to grant that the history [these men] write is legitimate” (158) because they “combine the *storytelling* with the romantic choice of a big subject, ... [presented] in terms of personal experience, so that it was constantly evocative in the way that fiction is.... *I like history like that*” (159 italics mine). For Stegner, the historian “tells the stories that history provides, without either missing the drama or leaving out the footnotes” (OWH 222). History, he states, is “not a science but a branch of literature, an artifact made by artificers” (205). While he acknowledges the artifice, or constructedness of the historian’s story of the past, Stegner does not question the assumptions or personal proclivities he brings to his history of Cypress Hills, such as his cultural position as a white male with rural experiences and his dominant position within the Myths’ western spatiality as white and male. At the same time, from this perspective, Stegner constructs a history of Cypress Hills from what he has gleaned from the facts, the people, and the events involved in the past of his childhood home that challenges many of the assumptions in the white-male, rural perspective from which he writes.

Wolf Willow reflects what Stegner molded from historical and secondary sources and personal experiences in the semi-frontier place of his childhood. The book is an acknowledgement of the destructive outcomes of white settlement. He states in “On the Writing of History” (1965) that Wolf Willow “ought to be called history” because its “dominant impulse was historical” even though it contains reminiscences and fiction (209). In both this essay and his conversations



with Etulain, Stegner claimed he wanted to be the “Herodotus of Cypress Hills” in Wolf Willow (209) and like Herodotus to chronicle the traditions, politics, geographies, power, and cultural struggles between various groups living in a place. What Stegner constructs is a history of Cypress Hills told through the people, cultures, geography, and the place’s natural history that he discovers and then assembles into an Other West that challenges the mythic West’s story of a triumphant white conquest and settlement of the West.

Drawing from scant historical records and journals kept by white explorers, traders, Mounties, and settlers, and supplemented by scholarly studies completed on the Great Plains by Joseph Kinsey Howard, Paul Sharp, and others,<sup>2</sup> the *historian Stegner’s* history of Cypress Hills’ past remains primarily male and mostly white. As Stegner told Etulain, “when I began to write Wolf Willow, trying to be the Herodotus of the Cypress Hills, I discovered that ... I had very few sources” (Conversations 61). In “On Writing History,” he says, “I found the documentation thin—a scrap or two in the Jesuit Relations, a bit in Le Métis Canadien, a few Hudson’s Bay records and reminiscences, some newspaper accounts of the Cypress Hills Massacre and its aftermath, something about Sitting Bull, something about the Mounted Police, some recollections of old-timers, one continuous local newspaper file beginning in 1914” (209). Complicating his rendition of Cypress Hills’ past is Stegner’s integration of childhood experiences and those of his family’s—experiences he will explore in detail in Section IV: Town and Country —alongside the history he presents of Cypress Hills. The absence of footnotes, though he references consulted secondary sources in the text, and his use of dramatic narrative blur what is fact and what he extrapolates from the historical sources he

consulted, resulting in a text that operates, like the Myths do, within the realm of artifice and history.

While historians find the thoroughness of Stegner's research for Wolf Willow quite exceptional given the limited resources he had to consult,<sup>3</sup> they mostly praise Wolf Willow for the lessons other historians can learn from it. According to Etulain in "Wallace Stegner, Western Humanist," Stegner provides a "careful and judicious scrutiny of the *human side* of the western past—its families, friendships, and cultural landscapes—and avoid[s] ... white- and black-hat stereotypes... of a six-gun West" (53 italics mine). New Western historian Patricia Nelson Limerick in "Precedents to Wisdom" credits Stegner's Wolf Willow with "connecting the whole package of the past up to the environmental and human issues of the present" (113). Elliot West agrees in "Stegner, Storytelling, and Western Identity," that Stegner teaches us that, "if we want to know what the West is and who westerners are, and also what we should and shouldn't do and be, we need to spend more time trying to reconstruct the western past through the thousands of stories" like that of Stegner's family "to make our history, in the root meaning of the word, familiar" (65). More specifically, Rob Williams in "Huts of Time: Wallace Stegner's Historical Legacy" attributes to Stegner and Wolf Willow a significant historical legacy for writers and historians. Not only did Stegner bridge the gap among regional, national, and international perspectives by connecting regional concerns to larger issues in Wolf Willow, but he also, claims Williams, willingly confronts complex questions and issues, laying a personal and professional foundation for future social, environmental,

and historical others (139). Wolf Willow is not history proper but an historicized personal testimony about Stegner and his family's experiences in a particular western place that Stegner uses to counter what the Myths claim in their universalizing of the West's past. Stegner's approach is not unlike that used by early feminists, civil rights activists, and postmodernists in the 1960s and 1970s to deconstruct cultural metanarratives through examination of the specific, the experiential, and the local.

Even though he applauds Stegner for his willingness to scrutinize details and make thoughtful judgments about events and people in order to create a readable, complex history of a place (140), Williams also describes Stegner's methodology of blending fiction, memory, and history as problematic in its didacticism, conservative in its humanist outlook, and primarily masculine and white in its perspective (141), even though Stegner gives some consideration to how cultural perceptions construct the self and the cultural dilemmas mixed-race people face (132). As Williams notes, what might be Stegner's historical "truth" and personal story can easily be another's "illusion" (133), which is how Lynn-Cook views Stegner's Wolf Willow. Though she grants that Stegner's view of Native Americans in the West "is of course not his own invention" but "as his culture gave them to him," she is "hostile to [his] idea that history stopped in 1890" (30) for Native American Plains Indians as Stegner's proclaims when he says, "the Plains, as an ecology, *as a native Indian culture*, and as a process of white settlement, *came to their climax and their end*" in Cypress Hills (WW 4 italics mine). In Lynn-Cook's view as a Dakotah Indian, Stegner's presentation of Native American history in Wolf Willow highlights how his history is not his own but entangled with the stories and histories of others involved in the West's past and the difficult terrain both he and the

reader must negotiate. Williams argues that Stegner's integration of memory and experience with the social-cultural-geographic history of Cypress Hills "suggests important possibilities" that can be used to reclaim a historical West from the mythic West (120). While Elliot West also acknowledges that Stegner's history is not up to today's theoretical standards in its examination of the assumptions guiding his authorial "I," he credits Stegner with being concerned about the "many aspects of western life" and "call[ing] for more attention to the personal, emotional dimensions of the region's history" (Storytelling 68) through the "telling of better stories" (70) that bring "autobiography, familial chronicle, geography, fiction, and history" together as he does in Wolf Willow (68).<sup>4</sup>

Along with recovering Cypress Hills' geologic history, Wolf Willow's Section II primarily details America and Canada's relationship to their Native American populations. In this ironically titled section, Preparation for a Civilization, Stegner writes against the grain of the mythic West and Roosevelt's narrative of white supremacy in the West's settlement. Whereas the mythic West categorizes and defines the Native American as the Other, as they are part of the "wild" frontier that must be overcome or transformed in America's settlement narrative, Stegner draws attention to white culpability in this violent history of the West and criticizes America's acceptance of the Myths' glorification of violence, a theme he traces throughout Wolf Willow and connects in Section IV to America's destruction of western lands. From chapter one to chapter nine in Section II, Stegner humanizes Native Americans by referring to them by tribal affiliation with distinct cultures and customs instead of objectifying them as one

racial group. He localizes their history to challenge the Myths' singular representation of them and juxtaposes Canadian and American treatment of the Indian to reveal alternative narratives that the monomythic West obscures. In his aim to construct for the *memoirist Stegner* and "misdirected" reader an Other West to counter the mythic West, Stegner's treatment of the Native American and racial others in Cypress Hills' past provides him with narratives of possibility he uses to re-narrativize the western story for himself and for others.

However, as Lynn-Cook and Williams point out, Stegner's perspective of the Indian history he presents is distinctly white, male, and from the position of the dominant culture and discourse he is challenging in Wolf Willow. As he examines the Native American role in white settlement of the West, Stegner argues for history's correction of the mythic West's depiction of the land's natives by claiming white responsibility for shaping the interaction between white and red cultures and by locating alternative narratives for that relationship in Cypress Hills' past. While Stegner lapses into stereotypical presentations of the Indian at times that reveal his own inherited prejudices and cultural perceptions, which hinders his potential to renarrativize the western story, he clearly recognizes the injustices done to them and calls for their descendents to tell their story "properly" (WW 112). He acknowledges that, to tell an inclusive narrative of the West, he must include their stories as well as his own. In the 1960's essays, Stegner criticizes contemporary western writers for failing to confront the West's historical realities and too quickly adopting as their own the mythic West's story of America's western past.

Setting the Context: Cypress Hills' Geology, Geography, and Inhabitants  
in "First Look," "The Divide," and "Horse and Gun"

In Section II of Wolf Willow, Preparation for a Civilization, the *historian Stegner* presents a contextualized historical narrative of Cypress Hills' past that is focused on less-than heroic figures, rebellious leaders of a half-forgotten culture, unacknowledged peace makers, and conquered but dignified Native Americans. In the opening pages of *Section I*, the *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner* presented a condensed history of Cypress Hills for the *memoirist* and "misdirected" reader—

The first settlement in the Cypress Hills country was a village of *métis* winterers, the second was a short-lived Hudson's Bay Company post on Chimney Coulee, the third was the Mounted Police headquarters at Fort Walsh, the fourth was a Mountie outpost erected on the site of the burned Hudson's Bay Company buildings to keep an eye on Sitting Bull and other Indians who congregated in that country in alarming numbers after the big troubles of the 1870's. The Mountie post on Chimney Coulee, later moved down onto the river, was the predecessor of the town of Whitemud. The overgrown foundation stones of its cabins remind a historian why there were no Boot Hills along the Frenchman. The place was too well policed. (5)

—to which the *historian Stegner* now adds the details in Section II. Additionally, the *memoirist Stegner* connects the history of his childhood home to his child-self's

experiences to create the historical continuity he claims the Myths deny him and the westerner. In Section II, Stegner employs history, memory, and realism to correct the *memoirist* and “misdirected” reader’s acceptance of America’s Myths of the West by locating in his recovered history, memory, and experience the realities of white settlement of the West. In the first three chapters of Section II, Stegner defines the western spatiality of his Other West. In keeping with his position as an “insider / westerner,” Stegner’s Other West is a frontier space with savage Indians and trespassing whites, plentiful buffalo and wild animals, and a Plains landscape both harsh and beautiful. From within this western spatiality shared with the mythic West, Stegner builds an Other West that opposes the monomythic West’s values of exceptionalism, conquest, ownership, and continuous renewal by telling a “discover[ed]” past of Cypress Hills that juxtaposes America’s violent western settlement with a less-violent settlement of the Canadian West (112).

Stegner opens Section II: Preparation for a Civilization with a lengthy excerpt from Captain William Francis Butler’s 1872 The Great Lone Land: A Narrative of Travel and Adventure in the North-West of America that counters the “oppressive” description the *historian Stegner* says earlier explorers applied to the landscape of the Great Plains (WW 38).<sup>5</sup> Like the *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner* in the opening paragraphs of Wolf Willow, Butler’s descriptions and experiences correct the perception others have about the West and specifically Cypress Hills. According to Butler, Cypress Hills has a “prairie-ocean” beauty that has been mistakenly represented as a “vast inland sea” on early maps of the continent by explorers searching for the “much-coveted passage” to Cathay to validate Prince Rupert’s (the first Governor of the Hudson’s Bay

Company in 1670) claims of ownership for the whole of the Hudson Bay watershed area (37). Not only does Butler's journal entry remind the reader of Stegner's assertion at the start of Wolf Willow that the Plains' expansive, often forbidding landscape holds much "color" (4), but it also highlights a structural device Stegner employs throughout Wolf Willow, which is to mention briefly an historical person or event whose role or importance in Cypress Hills' past will be revealed later in the text. Butler's appearance here links Cypress Hills' beauty in 1870 to Stegner's similar estimation of it in 1953, thus connecting the past and Butler to the present and Stegner through the place Cypress Hills. While Butler's role in Cypress Hills' past comes in chapter eight, "Law in a Red Coat," when Stegner chronicles the history of the Mounted Police, Butler's amendment of what others know about Cypress Hills foreshadows Stegner's correction of Cypress Hills' past through the history he tells in this section.

In Section II especially and Wolf Willow as a whole, Stegner weaves people, places, and events throughout, showing how each is influenced by and influences others, a process that aligns with his theory in Section I that "history is a pontoon bridge" in which those "work[ing] at its building end" have traversed "the pontoons laid by others" (29). By constructing a structural and narrative sense of connectedness between past and present through the stories of people, places, and events, the *historian Stegner* constructs a palimpsestic sense of the history of Cypress Hills.<sup>6</sup> According to James D. Houston, this sense of connectedness evidences Stegner's view of history as being "like strata seen in a canyon wall" (Tribute 30) or like a series of pontoons strung together. Thus, the



*historian Stegner* traces Cypress Hills' history from its formation by glacial warming in the Eocene period to its early exploration in the 1670s and territorial control by the Hudson's Bay Company until the Company relinquished ownership in 1869 to the Canadian government who created the Mounted Police to subdue white, Métis, and Indian conflicts in the early 1870s so pioneers could establish a township in 1879 that would become Stegner's childhood home from 1914 to 1920. From his telling of Cypress Hills' local and specific history, the "misdirected" reader and *memoirist Stegner* learn that they are inheritors of a long, peopled past and not a new, empty, pristine place without a history as the Myths define a frontier.

Stegner uses Cypress Hills' geologic and pre-white settlement history to explode the Myths' definition of the West's past, a definition constrained to its white settlement, to a Wild West period of the late 1800s, and to the idea that a frontier is a place without a history. According to the *historian Stegner*, not only is Cypress Hills a watershed for the Mississippi River, but "Geologically [the Hills] are an anomaly" on the Great Plains (WW 45): "Everything about them is special, and everything special about them is explained by the *accident of elevation*" (44 italics mine). The Hills' elevation, a result of glacial formations during the Eocene period, created a special climate for fauna and a sheltered haven for animal life, a "neutral ground between many warring tribes," and a physical dividing line between white and red men (48). In the chapter, "First Look," the *historian Stegner* states that, "because the Hills are a thousand feet higher than the rest of Saskatchewan" (45), the place remained part of an "unmapped West" (43) and "carried 19<sup>th</sup>-century culture well into the 20<sup>th</sup>" (45). Missed by white explorers in the 1690s, again in the 1730s, and in 1805 by Lewis and Clark, the *historian Stegner* says that not

until 1859 when Captain John Palliser, who is mentioned in Butler's book, "puts [the Hills] by name in approximately their correct place" on a map do they come "into the knowledge of English topographers" of the Royal Geographical Society (47). With their placement on a map, Cypress Hills becomes a physical as well as conceptual area possessed by white culture to begin its historical "mapping."

As he describes the Hills' physical distinctiveness and echoes the Myths' claim about the physical and imaginative uniqueness of the West, the history the *historian Stegner* presents to the *memoirist* and the "misdirected" reader is a historicized, demythologized West that rejects white culture's historical mapping of Cypress Hills' past. However, when he states that Cypress Hills was a "Wild West longer than anywhere else" (45), Stegner aligns Cypress Hills with the mythic West. But his definition of the Wild West is not that of the Myths. Instead, for Stegner the Wild West is the "*last home* of the buffalo and grizzlies, *last sanctuary* for the Plains hostiles, *last survival* of the open-range cattle industry, *booby prize* in a belated homestead rush" (45 italics mine). Instead of the Myths' glorified narrative of transforming a wild garden land into a prosperous civilization, Stegner exposes the realities of western conquest: extermination of animals and Native Americans, an end to the open-range, and the unworkable lands of the desert and plains. Even though he places Cypress Hills geographically as a part of the Great Plains and America's western region and a part of the mythic West's spatiality, Stegner denies the Myths' imaginative hold on his childhood home by demythologizing its past. According to Williams, Stegner's approach to Cypress Hills' history is indicative of Stegner's

understanding of historian Walter Prescott Webb's approach to the history of the Southwest. A contemporary of Stegner's, Webb proposed that the Southwest was a piece of the larger geographic region of the American West as well as a region of distinctive topographies and cultures (124). In the 1960's essays, Stegner uses this argument of geographic diversity of the West to suggest that western American literature can contain both the formulaic and literary western.

Stegner uses the history of the Native American in Cypress Hills to acknowledge his own complicity in their mistreatment and to introduce a strain of violence that permeates both the mythic and historical West that he traces throughout Wolf Willow. He contests the Myths by describing Cypress Hills before Europeans arrived. In the chapters, "The Divide" and "Horse and Gun," the *historian Stegner* acknowledges the Indian's presence in Cypress Hills to establish a motif of ethnic and racial diversity in his Other West. Even though Native Americans enter his Other West through the lens of white culture, their presence challenges the mythic West's exclusion and representation of them. In fact, he presents Indians as victims of an invading white culture well before the revisionist history of the New Western historians in the late 1970s. In his Other West, Native Americans are historical figures representing many tribal nations with unique cultures that will become later part of his analysis of the violence that permeates the historical and imaginative American West.

In Stegner's Other West, Native Americans are neither Noble Savages, marauding savages, nor a single racial group as the Myths suggest. In the chapter, "The Divide," Native Americans come into Stegner's narrative through journals kept by Sir Isaac Cowie, "the first Hudson's Bay trader to come into [Cypress Hills]" in the 1870s

(WW 48). Stating that Cowie's own "story belongs in a later chapter" (48), the *historian Stegner* uses Cowie to restore the rich, multi-vocal history Cypress Hills' past contains. In Cowie's journals of 1871, Stegner not only discovers lists of animals Cowie and Bay Company men capture by trap or by trade with local Indians, but he also recovers Cowie's descriptions of tribal affiliations, folklore, practices, and language. For example, Cowie writes, "As far back as the memory and traditions of the Crees then living extended, these Cypress Hills –'me-nach-tah-kak' in Cree—had been neutral ground between warring tribes.... No Indians for hunting purposes ever set foot on those hills.... Only watchful war parties of any tribe ever visited the hills, and so dangerous was it to camp in them that it was customary for such parties to put up barricades about the spots on which they stayed overnight" (48). As a surrogate voice for Native Americans whose oral tradition is voiceless in the white written record, Stegner through Cowie identifies the diversity of tribes in the area by naming them (Cree, Assiniboine, Peigan, Gros Ventre, Blackfeet, Sioux, etc.) and by distinguishing the variety of customs and behaviors they live by, which gives Cypress Hills' Native Americans in his *Other West* more than the status of subordinate, universalized Other that the *Myths* assign them.

In the process of recovering Native American presence in Cypress Hills' past, Stegner's chapter, "Horse and Gun," exposes the separation between the historical Indian and the Indian of myth and literature that results, he says, in an "uncrossable discontinuity" between the two representations and the role white culture has had in creating both views (WW 53). This "discontinuity" is caused,

he argues, by the lack of any historical context regarding the Native Americans' role in the West's history. Stegner uses his childhood experiences with Native Americans and the *memoirist's* perspective to show how the Myth's rob the Native American of their historical context. According to the *memoirist Stegner*, neither he, his parents, nor the other settlers knew they "lived in the very middle of what had been for generations a bloody Indian battleground" of Indian versus Indian and Indian versus white (53) because their cultural narratives told them they lived on a frontier and a frontier is a place that "had no history" (28). Nor did they know their western home was where white and red cultures achieved a temporary peace. The *memoirist* recalls how "real Indians" hardly existed for them (49); the "Indians" they knew were those from inherited prejudices and books: "real Indians we saw perhaps once a year" (49) and they were probably "from some reservation, though it never occurred to us to inquire where it was" (50). In chapter eight of Section II, "Law in a Red Coat," Stegner indicates why the local Indian tribes were removed from the area.

More important in this early part of Cypress Hills' history is Stegner's recognition of his own unquestioned, culturally shaped biases toward Native Americans and what he considers now to be the shameful way in which he and his playmates treated the "real Indians": "Our inherited, irrelevant, ineradicable Indian lore was not modified in the slightest, any more than our humanity was aroused, by these contacts with the real demoralized Cree" (WW 50). He admits that they viewed the Indian either from "fully developed prejudices ... we inherited without question or thought" from other Canadian and American immigrants who came from areas "where Indians were part of a lurid past" (50) or from "our literary and sentimental attitudes" promulgated through representations

of the Indian in the works of James Fenimore Cooper, Zane Grey, and The American Boy series the settlers passed amongst themselves (49).

Through recollections, the *memoirist Stegner* reveals the distance between the “real Indians” (WW 49) he encountered as a child and the Indians of “boyhood fantasy” (51). The “real Indians” existed only on the fringe of his boyhood world, as the child-Stegner knew nothing of the connection between them and the Assiniboine, Blackfeet, Sioux, Crow, Gros Ventre, and Nez Percé who lived in Cypress Hills long before the arrival of Europeans. He recalls how he and his playmates taunted a family of Cree when they camped near the river, and how the family ignored their jeering, believing then that the Cree were “helpless” but recognizing now as an adult how they were as “dignified” (50) as were their “grandfathers” (51) “Big Bear, Wandering Spirit, Poundmaker, and Piapot who hunted” in Cypress Hills as did the child-Stegner (53). Nor did he realize at the time that the quiet “half-breed children” (12) he played with were descendants of the enslaved Métis, a half-breed culture resulting from the intersection of local Indians and early Hudson Bay Company employees and to whom Stegner devotes a chapter later.

While more details on the significance of the 1870s and the Indian tribes in Cypress Hills comes in chapters six, seven, and eight of Section II, the *memoirist Stegner* acknowledges that he and the other settlers were not “totally ignorant” of the “historical Indians of our own region” (51) given The American Boy series that included James Willard Schulz’s stories about his life amongst the Blackfeet in the 1870s. But they “had no comprehension that this Indian lore was

*local to us*” (51 italics mine) and therefore they did not incorporate local Indian events into their play as these “real Indians” did not stir “in the least our imaginations” (53). Instead their understanding of Indians “came mainly out of novels written eighty years before and two-thousand miles away” (49) that they used to guide their play and attitudes toward the “real Indians” around them.

In this discussion of how these prejudices evolved, Stegner suggests that literature can be a vessel for cultural narratives. As the *memoirist Stegner* explains, his notion of Indians came “from books” (49) he read that “reinforced our prefabricated notions” (51). As children, he and his playmates imitated Cooper’s Noble Savage to become “masters of the lore of the broken twig” (49) or the marauding raiders of Zane Grey’s The Spirit of the Border, “with its skulking and bloody war in the hardwood forests of Pennsylvania and Ohio” (51). Even though Grey’s stories of the southwest Indians were significantly different from Cooper’s northeastern Indians, this disparity did not, argues Stegner, “correct ... amplify or bring distinctions into our view of Indian life” (51). Unfamiliar with Twain, Stegner says they had no ironic perspective to “destroy our faith in Cooper’s delicate arts of the forest” (49). More important, lacking any local history to challenge what they read or what others said, Stegner says that he and his playmates adopted as their own what their culture, as conveyed through the literature they read, gave them: Indians either as Noble or skulking savages. In Stegner’s view, these images of the Native American are the product of easterners, popular generalizations, and unquestioned past encounters that the Myths assign the Native American. The child-Stegner’s view of what an Indian is, as the adult Stegner shows, has been shaped not by a-historical Myths.

Stegner uses Cypress Hills' local history to correct this misrepresentation of the Native American and to expose the role that white European culture had in creating the situation of the "real Indians" the child-Stegner taunted. In juxtaposition to the created savages of Cooper and Grey, Stegner acknowledges the Plains' Native Americans and their encounter with an invading white culture. The *historian Stegner* delineates the impact of this encounter by describing how the Spaniards, starting from the south in the 1600s, brought the horse and in the 1700s introduced the gun and how these two events changed the way in which Indians interacted with each other and eventually the way in which Indians confronted whites. In the kind of sweeping generalization Lynn-Cook and others object to, Stegner says, "The white man literally created the culture of the Plains Indians by bringing them the horse and the gun; and just as surely, by conquest, disease, trade rum, and the destruction of the buffalo, he doomed what he created" (53). What is important is Stegner's assertion that the mythic West denies this responsibility.

In Wolf Willow, and later in the 1960's essays, Stegner challenges what these cultural narratives say about the West. Instead of images of the Sioux or Nez Percé escaping the American cavalry, Stegner claims American cultural narratives present a "lurid past" (WW 50) with defenseless pioneers circling the wagons to defend themselves against armed and mounted "Plains hostiles" (53). In The Legacy of Conquest (1987), Limerick links the image Stegner presents of "defenseless pioneers" to America's cultural "idea of innocence" that persisted during the pioneers' settlement of the West. She says, "the dominant motive for



moving West was improvement and opportunity, not injury to others. Few white Americans went West intending to ruin the natives and despoil the continent.... The ends abundantly justified the means; personal interest in the acquisition of property coincided with national interest in the acquisition of territory, and those interests overlapped in turn with the mission to extend the domain of Christian civilization. Innocence of intention placed the course of events in a bright and positive light; only over time would the shadows compete for our attention” ( 36). In 1962, Stegner attempted to correct this view by invoking the local, the historical, and the personal to expose the “shadows” that underlie the Myths.

In these first three chapters and his challenge to the Myths’ presentation of the Indian, Stegner anticipates the “chores” he assigns his contemporary western regionalist writers in the 1960’s essays. In the essays, Stegner attempts to reclaim the western story from the mythic West by showing how those who defined it—Cooper, Wister, Roosevelt, Turner, and the formulaic western—too often located their stories in an American West defined by easterners. He strongly urges these writers to “take a hard look at [the West] and acknowledge some things the myths have consistently obscured—been used to obscure” (BS 183). Stegner uses the remaining chapters of Section II to dig deeper into the specific and local history of Cypress Hills to discover what has been “glossed” and to construct an Other West to challenge the mythic West’s control of the western narrative.

## A Germ of Possibilities: “Half-World Metis”

Along with Native Americans who had their culture significantly altered by a white culture that negated its responsibility, Stegner recovers another culture—the mixed race Métis—that embodies a missed potential for the West. In “Half World: the Métis,” Stegner positions the Métis, like the Plains Indians previously, as more victim than victimizer in white settlement of the West. His placement of this chapter on the mixed race Métis immediately after the previous “Horse and Gun” chapter furthers the theme of white culpability in western settlement and introduces another concern he explores throughout Wolf Willow and especially in Section IV: Town and Country, which is the relationship between people and the land on which they live. The history of Cypress Hills that the *historian Stegner* recovers for the “misdirected” reader and the *memoirist Stegner* suggests that this “preparation for a [white] civilization” is built on white arrogance and domination over other cultures and the land. Even though he lapses at times into stereotypical presentations of minorities, makes broad generalizations about Native Americans and frontiers men, and writes a dramatized rather than objective history of Cypress Hills’ past, the Other West Stegner constructs in Wolf Willow is very different from the Myths’ narrative of triumph, exceptionalism, and nationalism found in the Turner and Roosevelt stories. For the 1960s, this revisionist narrative is quite bold.

Scholars have generally praised Stegner’s efforts regarding the return of the Métis history to Canadian cultural memory. According to Williams in “Huts of Time,” Stegner’s Wolf Willow helped to lay the “interpretative groundwork for

many social historians, exploring the cultural dilemmas that accompanied the creation of a mixed race of people in his chapter titled, ‘Half World: The Métis’” (132). Harrison states in “Frontiers and Borders: Wallace Stegner in Canada” that “for Canadian historians, and not only literary historians, Stegner’s work has been valuable”: “When Wolf Willow was published, . . . Canadian history was not much taught in schools. Most western Canadians were as surprised as Stegner himself to discover the history that had lain unnoticed at their feet” (186). Indeed, Canadian historian John Foster claims that Stegner’s contributions as “folk historian in the most positive sense” have been important to others who have come after him (as qtd in Harrison, “Frontiers” 186). In this chapter, the *historian Stegner* engages in the methodology of the “dump ground” to uncover from Cypress Hills’ past the story of the Métis. For Stegner, the Métis narrative offers possibility, compromise, and cooperation in the blending of two cultures, that of the intruding European whites and the native Indians of Canada. By including them in his history, he contrasts the racial diversity of his Other West with the racial singularity of the mythic West and the Myths’ paradigm of Us (whites) versus Them (Others) for ownership of the West. Their inclusion further enables him to establish an historical continuity between past and present, as he connects his experiences with the Métis of his childhood with their presence in the past.

In the history of the Métis, Stegner finds much to value, such as their approach to the land and their potential as a “buffer race” between two cultures, and much to be ashamed of, like their enslavement, the dispossession of their land, and the near elimination of their culture by whites (WW 61). The *memoirist Stegner* opens this fourth chapter by drawing on memories that show the “misdirected” reader that he has no

historical context for the Métis. While he recalls that some of his town playmates were of Métis families, he did not understand that they “had gone white” by foregoing their heritage as seasonal wanderers to settle in towns (57). His formal “education” (or lack thereof) failed to provide the “proper... distance and understanding” of their lives when he and his family encountered these Métis families. They had no historical foundation to know that “as a race, a tribe, a possibility...[they had] ceased to exist” (57). Thus the objective of this chapter is for the *historian Stegner* to “tell us about the *métis*” (57) and how they were twice denied their “independence” and “identity” because of white arrogance (58).

The history Stegner tells about the Métis is the kind of “history” Stegner claims he likes. He takes a “big subject” (the possibilities the Métis culture had to offer) and its “tragedy” (their demise by white culture) and uses the struggles between historical figures (Louis Reil, Gabriel DuMont, William MacDougall) to make a point about their role in white settlement. The Métis were, according to Stegner, “*the germ of a culture* that could have come to something in its own special terms if history had been kind” (WW 65 italics mine). What Stegner relates is how the arrogance of white culture, or more specifically the early Canadian government, ended the possibilities the Métis offered for better treatment of western lands and for a smoother integration of early white and red cultures. The Métis represent for Stegner, as do the “horse and gun culture” of the Plains Indians another example of white abdication of their responsibility for their interaction with other cultures (61). According to the *historian Stegner*, the Métis appeared as early as 1654 and were the product of fur traders—the Quebec

Frenchmen—and Huron or Algonquin women.<sup>7</sup> He says that their children were “literally born into the company, and bound to it as no European would ever be” (61). By 1763, they were thirty thousand strong west of the Great Lakes in Canada and America: “Like the Plains Indian culture, the *métis* were a white creation; ethnically and culturally they were the product of white and Indian.... And like the Plains culture, they were obliterated eventually by what had made them” (58). Within his paradigm of “history as a pontoon bridge,” he states that actions have consequences that ripple across time, so the introduction of the horse and gun or the enslavement of the Métis and later their removal from their land are actions for which white culture must accept responsibility.

Stegner uses his discovery of the Métis to show that other possibilities existed for settlement of the West. As a mixed race, the Métis could have been an “indispensable buffer race” between whites and Indians, as they were “multilingual and bi-cultural” and skilled hunters, traders, and “middlemen, sometimes ... peacemakers” (WW 61). Their invention of the Red River Cart that blended the Indian travois and the Quebec cart, in the view of the *historian Stegner*, “did for the Plains what the York boats and canoes did for the river routes of the fur trade” (63), a significance he discusses in the next chapter, “Company of Adventurers.” More important, according to Williams, is Stegner’s historicizing the relationship various communities and cultures had with the land through his recovery of how the Métis, the Plains Indians, and white settlers interacted with the land (“Huts” 124-125). According to the *historian Stegner*, the Métis used a method of “land division ... appropriate to their life” that “far better *adapted* to the arid and semi-arid Plains than the rectangular surveys were, but nobody in Canada or the United States understood that” and would not, he says, “until deep in the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (59 italics mine).

As Stegner learned from his research for the 1954 Powell book, European division of western lands was grounded in farming techniques suited to European landscapes or devised for land speculators, railroads, and banks and not for the pioneer farmer who tilled the arid western lands. Knowing about the Métis, Stegner suggests, is to understand that a different kind of western settlement could have occurred that might have helped settlers, like Stegner's parents, be successful homesteaders and less destructive to the Plains landscape.

By historicizing the relationship of different cultures to the land, Stegner not only builds a continuous and relational history of people to place but also continues to locate narratives in the past that the Myths have glossed. Stegner contrasts Métis adaptation to white arrogance that led to the demise of the Métis culture. The *historian Stegner* tells this narrative in Parkmanesque fashion by focusing on the struggles between two men: Canadian Minister of Public Works, William MacDougall who represents the invading white culture and Gabriel DuMont, the Métis rebel who fights in 1870 and again in 1885 for cultural independence and against a European survey system that disregarded the land rights of the Métis. For Stegner, these two men represent larger cultural issues. Stegner characterizes MacDougall as an “arrogant and politically obtuse” (WW 59) man whose intent was to privilege the Protestant and Anglo-Saxon Ontario settlers over the Métis whom his government labeled as “blacks” rather than Indians in order to disenfranchise them as descendants of the early French fur traders who “encouraged” racial mixing and whom Métis farmers were “allied to ... by faith and language” (58).

While MacDougall is Stegner's "bad guy," the "good guy" is the Métis rebel, DuMont, of whom Stegner says "the world has never heard enough" (WW 62). For the *historian Stegner*, DuMont is a "skilled, strong, brave, gentle to weakness, durable as rawhide, inflexibly faithful to his people .... Their most capable leader and their most redoubtable champion" (62). In this narrative, DuMont and the Métis are undone in their struggle for independence and land ownership because of the "overwhelming firepower" of the Mounted Police, aided by Americans, and because their leader, Louis Riel, whom DuMont admired and traveled 700 miles to see, surrenders. DuMont escapes and makes his way to the United States where, Stegner claims, he ends up "riding broncs in the show ring of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show" until he can return years later under amnesty to his native land (62). According to the *historian Stegner*, with their claims for independence denied, the Métis culture dissipates with many following the buffalo into the sanctuary of Cypress Hills to become *hivernants*, or winterers (64), and others becoming the families who "had gone white" that he encountered as a child (57).

As much victim of excessive "firepower" as they were of cultural prejudice that saw them as "black," Stegner uses the Métis to expose white greed for land ownership that by consequence also denied homesteaders like his parents farming methods suited for the arid lands of the Plains and Cypress Hills. Like the history of the Plains Indians in the earlier three chapters, Stegner's Métis narrative calls attention to the need to re-examine how the Myths classify victors and victims, good and bad, and the just and unjust. Not only does he reverse the dynamics of the western story in this narrative by having DuMont, the Other, play the good guy while the white MacDougall is the bad guy, but Stegner also shifts the focus from the heroic actions and exceptionalism of

DuMont to what he calls DuMont's "faithful[ness] to his people" (62), or the notion of social responsibility that becomes a defining feature of Stegner's Other West.

A Violent Past: Three Massacres in "Company of Adventurers"  
and "The Last Exterminators"

As he continues his linear history of Cypress Hills' past, which becomes deeper and richer with each chapter and counters the Myths' representation of the frontier as an empty, garden-like place without a history, Stegner builds an Other West for the "misdirected" reader and the *memoirist Stegner* that is racially diverse, contains silenced voices, and exposes white culpability for creating a destructive, violent tension between white and red cultures. In the next two chapters, "Company of Adventurers" and "Last of the Exterminators," Stegner explores the western violence he believes the mythic West promotes. Issuing from this focus on the mythic West's privileging of violence, Stegner begins to reclaim the western story from the Myths through the Other West he is constructing with its alternative narratives, like that of the Métis, that bring the assumptions of the mythic West under scrutiny. In the previous chapter, the *historian Stegner* recovered a history of the Métis that was mostly unknown to him and to most Canadians. In this section he enters the more familiar historical territory of the frontier and the Hudson Bay Company, one of the oldest commercial corporations in the world still prominent today. He connects the



historical topic he is presenting—western violence—to the experiences of the child-Stegner in order to historicize it and to make continuous this history of place to his child and adult selves.

In the chapter, “Company of Adventurers,” the *historian Stegner* offers a narrative that challenges the Myths glorification of violence in the settlement of the western frontier. The chapter opens with the *memoirist Stegner* reiterating his limited knowledge of his local past, specifically in regard to the famous Hudson’s Bay Company that made the blankets under which he slept as a child. This reference to such an ordinary thing as a blanket and its having historical-cultural-social significance calls attention to Stegner’s emphasis on how the local and specific are tied to larger issues. In the previous chapter, Stegner revealed a darker side to the Hudson Bay Company’s legacy—its enslavement of an entire culture, the Métis. In this chapter he exposes the Company’s orderly and systematic exploration and ravaging of the land’s resources that enabled them to produce their hats, coats, and blankets. While the chapter’s title is part of the company’s original name<sup>8</sup> and is highly suggestive of a romanticized, mythic tale of frontier heroics of the early fur traders, Stegner undercuts these expectations with his focus on a specific chapter from “a book called Company of Adventurers, by a man named Isaac Cowie” (WW 67). Through Cowie’s documentary-style observations of the natural landscape and its wildlife, the customs of the Native Indians, and the entrance of whites into Cypress Hills, Stegner locates characteristics and values in Cowie similar to those he admired in the Métis Gabriel DuMont.

In Stegner’s history, Cowie could easily become the emblematic frontiersman of the Myths, a Hawkeye or Daniel Boone pathfinder. Instead, Stegner presents Cowie as

an empathetic reporter of events and a man he calls “intelligent, resolute, made of rock or iron” (WW 68).<sup>9</sup> According to Cowie’s testimony, he was an Orkney Englishman instead of the typical Scotsmen who comprised the Company’s leadership. He joined the Company only a few years prior to the Company’s surrendering its deed to the Canadian land it had held since 1670 to the new Dominion of Canada in November 1869. In Stegner’s recovery of the history of Cypress Hills, Cowie’s book marks “nearly the beginning of *recorded knowledge* with respect to the Cypress Hills” (68 italics mine), starting with Cowie’s task in fall 1871 to establish a trading fort in Cypress Hills for the Company.

Stegner presents Cowie as an alternative to MacDougall in the previous chapter and the “wolfers” to come in the next chapter. The traits Stegner values in Cowie are his responsibility to the community, his integrity, and his sense of obligation as demonstrated in the rules he establishes to prevent hostilities among Company men, the traders, and Indians and how he stopped a smallpox epidemic from decimating the local tribes by making a vaccine from a vaccinated Métis. Like the Métis DuMont and the ranch foreman, Ray Henry, to come in Section III, Cowie evidences traits of the Stegnerian hero. According to Comer, Stegner’s heroes are honorable; take care of obligations to family, children, and community; hold themselves “and others responsible for their actions”; respect women; and uphold Victorian male virtues (Landscapes 47).<sup>10</sup> In Cowie’s actions toward the Hills’ Native Americans, Stegner locates the value of social responsibility he found in DuMont earlier that he argues runs counter to the values of the mythic

western hero whose exceptionalism rather than a sense of community fulfills the hero's role as a protector of society.

In Cowie's "The Company of Adventurers," Stegner found descriptions of three massacres that happened in the Hills that he uses to investigate western violence and its associations with the western hero. These three massacres, each spurred by different motivations and evidencing increasing degrees of violence, differentiate the settlement of the Canadian West from the American West. Stegner calls on these three violent incidents that occurred in what is called Chimney Coulee, or the same area in which the child Stegner played and where Cowie established the Hills' first trading post, to emphasize the placedness of history. The first and second massacres, which are between Indians (Blackfoot and Cree, Blackfoot and Assiniboine), further reveal the influence of the "horse and gun" on Plains Indian culture.

To report the first massacre that happened in October 1871, the *historian Stegner* draws on Cowie's journals and what "ex-whiskey trader" James Willard Shulz reports about living "with the Blackfoot" in The American Boy series Stegner read as a boy (WW 51). The first massacre involves a band of sixty un-mounted Cree entering the Hills in search of spring spruce gum. Stegner speculates from Shulz's tale that they possibly hoped to encounter a similar un-mounted Blackfoot war party ravaged by smallpox and thus easy for the Cree to defeat. Unfortunately, Stegner says the Cree met a mounted Blackfoot war party who "scalped and mutilated" the larger band of exposed horse-less and gun-less Cree (69). According to Cowie, this was no senseless massacre between tribes, but rather one motivated by the Cree's desire for "vengeance against the Blackfoot" and the British whose "insatiable" appetites had forced the Cree to hunt

buffalo in the territory of their enemies (69). To provide a sense of this British “appetite,” Stegner provides a list from Cowie’s journal of the animals killed in a few months: “750 grizzly bear skins and 1500 elk hides, plus hundreds of smaller and more valuable furs” with Cowie’s comment that the “independent” fur traders “got as many more” (70). This list recalls Stegner’s point at the start of Section II that a “frontier” is the “*last home of the buffalo and grizzlies, last sanctuary for the Plains hostiles*” and not the bountiful garden the Myths present (45 italics mine).

The second massacre furthers Stegner’s point about white culpability in the hardship Native Americans faced on the frontier. The second massacre occurs in the spring of 1872 when Cowie and his men are departing their post in Cypress Hills. As they leave the area, Cowie says the Blackfeet descended on a small band of Assiniboine “prowling the abandoned buildings” for stray bullets, causing Stegner to comment that their “going, like its coming...[was] with mass murder” (71). In his description of the two Indian massacres, Stegner suggests that they are the result of very defined territorial and cultural tensions between tribes and the consequences of the invading whites. The *historian Stegner* concludes this chapter with this 1872 event, indicating that Cowie’s journals provide a “prophecy of the extinction” (71) for the animals and Indians who occupy Cypress Hills. Stegner’s reference to “extinction” that concludes the chapter further emphasizes his view of white responsibility for what he calls in the 1960s essays the westerners’ “crimes against the land” (BS 179).

The third massacre Stegner describes comes in the next chapter, “Last of the Exterminators,” and carries Stegner’s strongest invectives against America’s policies of Indian extermination and the greed that motivated the killings to near extinction of the Indian, the buffalo, and other Plains animals. The third massacre, known as the Cypress Hills Massacre, between Indians and whites one year later and at the very same place as the earlier two, illustrates the degree of violence associated with America’s West. Stegner makes it quite clear that, when examined in a larger historical context, the actions and events of the American West are fairly reprehensible: “no one who has studied western history can cling to the belief that the *Nazis invented genocide. Extermination was a doctrine accepted widely, both unofficially and officially, in the western United States after the Civil War*” (WW 73-74 italics mine).<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the violent, exterminatist approach of the Americans, Stegner offers the Canadian course of cooperation and laws, which he examines more closely in the next two chapters, “The Medicine Line” and “Law in a Red Coat.” These alternatives help position Stegner’s Other West as a viable, usable, historical past for the West that exists alongside the mythic West and by its very existence challenges the mythic West’s dominance as purveyor of the western narrative.

While he oversimplifies the historical complexities and cultural differences among the Native Americans, Canadians, and Americans involved in the third massacre through the story-telling or “dramatic narrative” he uses to present the incident, Stegner demonstrates how attitudes have been culturally shaped and how interpretations of the event are culture and time bound.<sup>12</sup> This third massacre of Indians by whites results from some Canadian Indians stealing the horses of some American “wolfers” or frontiersmen

camped near Fort Benton. According to various reports and eye-witness accounts that the *historian Stegner* consults, shots were fired when the thieves—some Assiniboine (but not the suspected Blackfoot)—were confronted by the Americans and their vigilante posse of local Canadian traders and a few Métis. Whether it was 200 as some reported or the 80 Assiniboine Cowie reports that were killed by the small band of whites who suffered only one death, the *historian Stegner* states that they “inflicted a terrible defeat upon the Assiniboine” by using their new repeating rifles (79).<sup>13</sup> Stegner likens this “massacre” to the extermination practices of Americans in the West, practices that began with early “raids against natural resources” that essentially removed any “function that the Indians might have retained” against their white intruders (74), thus making the Indians unessential and an irritant to be removed in America’s nation-building progress.

The Cypress Hills Massacre of 1873 illustrates Stegner’s idea of unnecessary American violence that has its roots in a culturally shaped white arrogance that fails to understand the Other. Before going into much detail about the incident, Stegner primes the reader and *memoirist* to look below the surface of the event to understand what he calls the “American attitude” toward violence (WW 73). According to his research, Stegner states that, to the Indian, horse theft was “one of the most honorable of Indian activities” because in “one stroke the theft of a horse weakened and humiliated the enemy, strengthened the thief’s tribe, and glorified the thief” and could be a bloodless exchange of honors as the thievery goes back and forth (73).<sup>14</sup> From the American perspective, Stegner says

horse theft is theft of one's property, carrying no honor or glory for the thief or the thief's associates. While the motivations for thievery are many, he notes that the way in which theft of one's stock is treated in the West has been defined by Wister's classic western, The Virginian: "The semi-mythical cowboy West—which after all both reflected and helped to form the values of the real West—established firmly the convention that the proper response to a horse theft was a hanging" (73). Mentioning Wister in this context relates this event to his earlier discussion regarding the distance between the mythic / literary Indian to the "real Indian" and his view that literature and myth can influence events and individual actions. In the 1960s essays, Stegner notes how Bernard DeVoto's essay on The Virginian suggests that the economic tensions behind the Johnson County War that Wister's novel in part represents and Wister's alignment of his hero with the Eastern ranch owners may not be as innocent or black and white as Wister represented it to be.<sup>15</sup> Thus he asks his contemporaries to question the assumptions that underlie the mythic West and the values, like western justice, that it advocates.

Stegner's presentation of this incident, however, lapses into overly generalized judgments about Americans, Canadians, and Native Americans that devalues the point he attempts to make about America's ravaging of its natural resources, its treatment of Native Americans, and its cultural privileging of violence. In her critique of Stegner, Lynn-Cook dismisses Stegner's account of Indian attitudes toward horse theft as "fictional illusion" that reduces survival tactics of Indians to mere "cliché" (34). His failure to fully question his own attitudes and the assumptions of his sources (histories of the area written by white men in the 1940s and 1950s) as he builds his challenging Other West is troubling since his point in this chapter is how easily attitudes can be shaped by

culture. In his depiction of the Cypress Hills Massacre and the culturally shaped motivations of its participants, Stegner contends that America's western settlement was different from Canada's because America's perceptions of the West were shaped by early European and colonial narratives that portrayed America's western frontier as a "garden" to be plundered without restraint. Thus America valued property and the rights of the individual over those of the community and the Other.

Stegner's characterization of the "ferocious"-ness of American violence in his portrayal of the American wolfer's traits dramatize for him the influence of America's cultural narratives and the significant difference between American and Canadian settlement of the West. Overlooking his earlier comment on the "insatiable appetite" (WW 69) of the British as a motivating factor for the second massacre, Stegner says that the "near-monopolistic control" the Hudson's Bay Company exerted from 1821 to 1869 in Canada created a place different from America where "circumstances of the American West gave freer play to the instincts of self-reliant and often criminal men" (73) who were "more easily aroused, and bloodier... more impatient and more violent than the Canadian" (75). He makes the American "wolfers," who possess "ferocious virtues... necessary for survival on the American frontier," the representatives of America's western and violent proclivities: "they were men who lived freely, wastefully, independently, and they lived by killing—animals as a rule, men if necessary. If any of them were thoughtful men, which is not likely, they may have conceived of themselves as the advancing fringe of civilization, an indispensable broom



sweeping clean the Plains for white occupation” (75). Because he cannot find the values he seeks in America’s West, Stegner looks to events in Canada’s settlement of its western region to construct his Other West.

One aim of Stegner’s in the 1960s essays is to reclaim and renarrativize western American literature so that the literary western that he and his contemporaries write can be seen as a credible western narrative—“another kind of western storytelling” (HMWW 187)—within the western American literary spatiality that has been dominated by the formulaic western and the Myths’ singular narrative of white conquest. In order to be seen as “another kind” of western narrative, Stegner differentiates the literary western from the formulaic through the writer’s approach to the subject of the West, to the emphasis given to particular themes, and to the “westernness” of the writer. In this discussion on western violence, Stegner attempts a similar differentiation between the settlement paths of America and Canada through an examination of the third massacre and what it says about America’s use of violence in western settlement.

The Canadian Way—Law and Order on the Wild West: “The Medicine Line”  
and “Law in a Red Coat”

The *historian Stegner*’s discovery and recovery of Cypress Hills’ past presents a dramatized history to the “misdirected” reader and the *memoirist Stegner* of an outside (European) culture’s intrusion on a native (Indian) culture and the effects of that engagement on the land’s natural ecology, the Indian’s way of life, and the methods of the invaders as Cypress Hills’ frontier space transforms to a civilized place the child-

Stegner will encounter in 1914. Unlike the Myths' triumphant conquest of wild lands and savage natives that glosses the violence of this process to support cultural narratives of national progress, Stegner's history of the West's transformation involves white culpability in the enslavement of the Métis, the near extermination of Native Americans and wildlife, and the discovery of various racial and ethnic voices suggestive of courage, reason, compassion, compromise, principle, and loyalty. With each chapter in Section II, Stegner increasingly situates his emerging local history of Cypress Hills, or the "past as it might have been told to us" (WW 36), within a larger historical context of western settlement of the Canadian and American Wests. Within this broader context, he positions Cypress Hills as a microcosm for the larger West he wants to reclaim from the narratives of the Myths.

In the next two chapters, "The Medicine Line" and "Law in a Red Coat," Stegner continues to locate alternative narratives in the local history of Cypress Hills to challenge the more violent narratives associated with the American West. He draws on the recollections of the *memoirist Stegner* to connect these alternative historical narratives to the place that shapes his child-self's present and to his adult self as he constructs a usable past for the present. In the culminating chapter of this section, "Capital of an Unremembered Past," Stegner locates in this historical past—now that he knows it—his "westernness" and his imaginative source. He argues for a constructed self, a self shaped and influenced by his western place and his experiences in that place. Thus far, Stegner's childhood memories have served to connect the *memoirist's* childhood to the past the

*historian* discloses. What grounds both the history and the memories for Stegner is place. Together, history and memory provide the “knowledge of place, knowledge of the past” (28) that should lead to self-understanding.

In the two chapters, “The Medicine Line” and “Law in a Red Coat,” Stegner counters the violence, particularly the delineation of an American violence embodied in the “wolfers” and the Cypress Hills Massacre, with two narratives of cooperation, compromise, and peace that undercut the Myths’ promotion of “western” violence and the idea of western exceptionalism. In “The Medicine Line,” the *historian Stegner* documents the cooperation between Canadian and American surveying teams who surveyed the two nations’ shared border line along the 49<sup>th</sup> Parallel in 1873 and 1874 and why both countries’ Native Americans saw it as a “Medicine Line.” In the next chapter, “Law in a Red Coat,” the *historian Stegner* historicizes the meaning of the Medicine Line within the context of the formation of Canada’s North-West Mounted Police (NWMP) in 1870, which returns Butler, Cowie, and DuMont to his narrative, and ensuing Native American and white tensions and the “firm peace” the Canadians have with the Indian Nations gathered in Cypress Hills from the mid to late 1870s (WW 110). For Stegner, the Mounties are a transformative agent that moves the Canadian frontier toward a more civilized spatiality through the law and order they bring to the frontier. In the Mounties, he locates the ideals of social responsibility that he introduced with Cowie and DuMont earlier and an aversion to the violence the “wolfers” and the American West embody for him.

In “The Medicine Line,” Stegner uses the surveyors to challenge the Myths’ notions of western exceptionalism. Positioned in Stegner’s narrative after the violence of

the Cypress Hills Massacre, the mutual cooperation of these surveyors represent frontier “possibilities” in contrast to the previously depicted violence. While he could have likened the surveyors to the mythic pathfinder, especially America’s iconic surveyors George Washington and Daniel Boone, the *historian Stegner* emphasizes instead their ordinariness, the mundane tasks they do, and their cooperation as they overcome the hardships of the landscape to agree upon a national border. Of the surveyors, he says, they “are not heroic figures” and “conquer nothing but ignorance” (WW 86); the “*mythic light* ... does not shine on the surveyor as it shines on the trapper, trader, scout, cowboy, or Indian fighter. Surveyors do not even acquire the more pedestrian glamour of the farming pioneer, *though they make him possible*” (87 italics mine). These surveyors completed work, he says, undertaken by the two nations that was “international, cooperative, mutual” (87)<sup>16</sup> and by unknown men, except for Major Reno of the 7<sup>th</sup> Calvary who would become known for his actions at Little Big Horn. According to Stegner, their task took two years to complete and was “so well-planned, so successful, and so utilitarian” that it has no “heroes”; nonetheless, he says, “they need credit and remembrance for a job finished swiftly and efficiently” (87) because he “discovered that practically nobody else knew how it had come” about (84-85). Thus the chapter relates in significant detail the step by step progress of the American and British surveyors, who “working alternate stations, each commission divided into several parties,” laid out “chain by chain, stake by stake, mound by mound, ... their true-west line, each party surveying as it went a belt five miles wide on its own side” (85). Forty years later, he says, his

father hunted for these survey stakes to mark a portion of their homestead. Along with the “mutual cooperation” their work evidences that the mythic West glosses, Stegner’s narrative of the surveyors suggests that in these obscured narratives lie important knowledge and possibility.

Stegner uses the story of the national border along the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel to highlight the two nations’ attitudes toward Native Americans and as a personal reminder of his dual cultural residency. Anticipating the revisionist histories to come in the 1970s, Stegner’s narrative of the border’s creation contrasts an American ideology of conquest and extermination against Canada’s peaceful but short-lived attempt at social responsibility toward its Native Americans. Once established, this boundary between nations quickly became, according to Stegner, a line dividing cultures, allegiances, and laws. For the *historian* Stegner, this “line of iron posts” (WW 85) or mounds of rock every three miles represented “an *agreement, a rule, a limitation, ...* acknowledged by both sides”; “the beginning of civilization in what had been a lawless wilderness” through its marking of ownership of the land (85 italics mine). It had, Stegner claims, the most visible effect on the area’s Indians who immediately recognized the border as “the Medicine Line” (98), a boundary “which *should* not be crossed by raiding Indians literally *could* not be crossed by uniformed pursuers” (97). Before discussing the significance of the border in terms of white and red cultures, which is his focus in the next chapter, Stegner first highlights how the border affected him as a child, emphasizing its felt as well as actual presence on his child-self.

While the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel served as a legal dividing line for the two countries and a “medicine line” for Indians in the nineteenth century, in the twentieth century it separates

the two cultures in which Stegner lived as a youth. The *memoirist Stegner* explains that it “exerted uncomprehended pressures” by reminding him of the “subtle choices” they made in their daily living (WW 84). During the summer when they homesteaded along the Montana border, he says that he and his family were Americans, enjoying American magazines and catalogs (Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward), holidays (Fourth of July and Labor Day), news (newspapers and mail from Great Falls), and sports (baseball). In the winter, they lived in town and had Canadian catalogs (T.Eaton), heard news and entertainment about the Mounties, celebrated Canadian holidays (Victoria Day, Dominion Day), had a Canadian education (school books published in Toronto), and participated in Canadian sports (ice hockey). Despite this division, he proclaims, “we never thought of ourselves as anything but American” (84). In “Frontiers and Borders: Wallace Stegner in Canada,” Dick Harrison states that, “even during the winters in town, Stegner experienced Canada from within an American family and in one of the most American corners of the Canadian West” (195). Even though he says he knew nothing of the border’s history as a child, the *memoirist Stegner* felt the impact of its cultural division in the language, loyalties, customs, and costumes of his seasonal residences. These subtle, daily, and local differences serve to highlight the larger, cultural differences Stegner is suggesting existed between America and Canada in their approach to the Indian, to violence, and to law on the frontier, and these differences are what Stegner captures in order to formulate his Other West as he uses Canada’s western past as counterpoint to America’s western past.

In the story of the surveyors and the *memoirist Stegner's* recollections of living in two cultures, Stegner locates possible narratives of cooperation and co-existence. In the history of the North-West Mounted Police (NMWP), which is the focus of “Law and the Red Coat” that follows “The Medicine Line,” Stegner continues his theme of law and order begun with the appearance of the border. For Stegner, the “law and order” the Mounted Police bring is “what made the Canadian West a different West from the American” (WW 100). Because of treaties and agreements established by the Mounties with whites and Indians in the 1870s, railroads could be built, cattle ranches could operate, and towns could be started. Instead of a Wild West of cowboys versus Indians and outlaws versus lawmen from America’s mythic West, the narrative of the Canadian West’s, as presented by the *historian Stegner*, is markedly more peaceful and therefore an alternative discourse he can use to critique America’s mythic West.

Stegner opens the chapter, “Law in a Red Coat,” with two childhood memories that emphasize the significance he attributes to the Mounted Police and their importance in settling the Canadian West. Both memories romanticize the Mounties with a reverence that reveals both the importance he attributes to the role of the Mounted Police in Canadian western settlement as well as his unquestioned acceptance of his interpretation of that role. Stegner is interested in the Mounties’ ability to establish law and order on the frontier whereas the Americans could not. He uses these childhood memories to introduce a brief history of the North-West Mounted Police and their presence in Cypress Hills as an example of what he considers law effectively applied. Stegner locates in the Mounted Police values—such as order, self-discipline, social responsibility, and compromise—that the mythic American West perverts in its glorification of violence and

sponsorship of western justice. These core values of law, order, communal responsibility, and fairness—are values that speak to his Victorian sensibilities and to the reasoned activism and political leanings he evidenced in his personal life. These are values he pursues in Section III’s revision of the cowboy story and in the 1960s essays in his criticism of his contemporary regionalist writers for unquestioningly accepting the Myths’ glorification of western violence.

In these two memories, Stegner contrasts his vision of the Canadian West with the American mythic West. As Lynn-Cook points out, Stegner is “romanticizing the Canadian Mountie” (36) as much as the Myths romanticize the cowboy. The *memoirist Stegner* claims these memories have remained “unaltered and undimmed after nearly half a century, static, austere, symbolic” (WW 100). The first recollection involves Stegner at age five traveling with his mother and older brother to meet his father in Cypress Hills after a six-month separation. He is in the “waiting room of the customhouse in Weyburn, Saskatchewan.... hushed as if in a *church*” looking at the “framed portraits of men in red coats” who with “resolute, disciplined faces” stare out across the room, leaving him in “*awe*” (100 italics mine). This “awe” is enhanced by a second memory associated with their arrival at the Cypress Hills train station: the child-Stegner’s eyes fix on “another man in a red coat,” who “wore not only the scarlet tunic of the men in the portraits, but yellow-striped blue breeches, glistening boots, and a wide campaign hat. Holstered ... [was] a revolver with a white lanyard, and he was altogether so gorgeous” (101). These memories of the Mounties contrast sharply with his memory of the slovenly, drunken American cowboy, Buck Murphy, whom he



used in the opening of Wolf Willow and the “wolfers” who are “self-reliant and often criminal men” (73). Stegner clearly prefers the Mounties and what they represent over the American cowboys and frontiersmen whom America’s mythic West glorifies.

A major determiner of the difference between Canadian and American Wests for Stegner is how each country approached the problem of the Indian. In “Law in a Red Coat,” the *historian Stegner* indicates his awareness that “Canada had its own difficulties with the tribes when the buffalo disappeared” and in 1885 “hunted down its hostiles just as the blue-coated Long Knives” had done (WW 102).<sup>17</sup> He acknowledges that the social-cultural context in which Canada settled its West was quite different from that of America’s, stating, “if Canada had been settled first, and the American West had remained empty, the situation might well have been the reverse” (102): Canadian Indians might have fled south to America to escape encroaching whites, instead of American Indians fleeing north.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, he claims that Canada’s mistreatment of its Native Americans was neither as numerous nor as violent as those of America. The Mounties, he argues, “relinquish” to the child-Stegner a “tame” West (101) through their extraction of a bloodless, “firm peace” (110) with the Indians, instead of using tactics of extermination or shootouts with the “toughest white border men” (103) that he says America used.

As he did with the Métis, Stegner dramatizes the history of the Mounted Police in a way that oversimplifies the complexities of the events while enabling him to call out his point, which is the peace established in Cypress Hills in the early 1870s between white and red cultures. His “big tragic subject” is white culture’s taming of the West and the consequences to the land and to the people involved, both Indians and whites. To

emphasize his notion of history as interconnected relationships and actions that flow across time through a specific place, Stegner returns to the narrative previous historical figures (such as Butler, Cowie, and DuMont) and events (the Medicine Line, the Cypress Hills Massacre, Shulz's life among the Blackfeet, the ravaging of the Hills' ecological sanctuary) and introduces new figures (Macleod, Walsh, Sitting Bull) to tell this story.

In this chapter, "Law in a Red Coat," Stegner focuses on two men: William F. Butler and NWMP Assistant Commissioner John Macleod, their connection to the North-West Mounted Police, and the values they represent for his Other West. According to the *historian Stegner*, the Mounted Police were formed in response to the Hudson's Bay Company's departure from and control of much of the land in central Canada and the land being deeded to the Canadian government. Stegner's history of the Mounted Police in this chapter includes Butler's role in shaping the unit's purpose and Macleod's fulfillment of that purpose. Stegner reveals that Butler was on a "secret mission" in 1870 for the new Canadian government when he wrote The Great Lone Land in 1873 that Stegner used to open Section II and that references the first accurate inland map, John Palliser's 1859 map, of the Cypress Hills area. His mission was to enter the Hills to "look into the state of the Indian tribes and the condition of law and order in the West" (WW 102), a journey that took him from Ottawa to British Columbia and back before Cowie arrived in Cypress Hills.<sup>19</sup> Butler proposed in March 1871 that to "replace the now officially abdicated power of the Hudson's Bay Company" with "civil law" a unit of 100 to 150 men called the North-West

Mounted Police be formed to oversee 300,000 square miles, containing what Stegner calls 30,000 “of the most warlike Indians... and some of the toughest white border men” (103). Even though this description makes the Canadian West seem very similar to America’s wild West, Stegner shows that the methods of the Mounties were very different from those of the American cavalry who had a similar task.

In an attempt to de-mythologize the Mounted Police, Stegner approaches their history as he did the un-heroic surveyors by chronicling the daily toll the landscape exacts from the 287 Mounties who set out from Fort Dufferin, Manitoba, on July 8, 1874, using the Métis’ Red River Carts to carry supplies. Drawing on primary and secondary sources he names in the text, Stegner describes how the founders believed the Indians’ perception of the Mounted Police was critical, which acknowledges again how cultural narratives shape perception. Thus, he reports, the Mounties’ advisors, of which Butler was one, insisted that “their coats be scarlet” because the Indians suggested that the “friendly ones wore red” (104).<sup>20</sup> Stegner’s emphasis on the daily tasks and the detailed descriptions of the men’s challenges with the landscape foreshadows his approach to the mythic cowboy in Section III, where he focuses on the daily realities and economics associated with being a cowhand, the historical source of the mythic cowboy, to undercut the Cowboy’s mystique.

Stegner closes this chapter, “Law in the Red Coat,” with an example of the kind of law the Mounted Police were able to enforce that the Americans could not—a “firm peace” (WW 101) among white and red cultures. Stegner divides this narrative of law, order, and peace across the two remaining chapters in Section II to link one historical event with another to provide the historical continuity for the *memoirist Stegner* and the

“misdirected” reader that challenges the mythic West’s view of the past as frozen in a late 1800s American West. This first part involves the actions of NWMP Assistant Commissioner John Macleod at Fort Whoop-Up to control Indian and white hostilities. According to the *historian Stegner*, Macleod’s initial task was to contain a white, “semi-outlaw element” given the uncontrolled whiskey trade from 1868-1874 and “thousands of demoralized and suspicious Indians” (109) who had fled north in search of safety and food. The *historian Stegner* invests Macleod, as he did DuMont and Cowie, with the traits he values: because he is “characteristically prompt and decisive,” within a month Macleod has ended the whiskey traffic, jailed the traders, and “held a conference with the Blackfoot” that “resulted in a lasting pact of *friendship* with Crowfoot, greatest of the Blackfoot chiefs” (109 italics mine). For Stegner, Macleod’s actions are a “remarkable demonstration that law, *when strictly and equitably enforced*” can bring about peace (110 italics mine). More important, MacLeod’s actions are in direct contrast to the vigilantism, violence, and broken treaties found in America’s engagement with its Native Americans. In America’s settlement of the West, racial tensions, as Slotkin and Limerick note, precluded equitable treatment and enforcement of laws between whites and racial others. As Stegner argues in Section IV, America’s cultural narratives promote an ideology of self over the community that the western Myths have captured through their emphasis on America’s exceptionalism, need for conquest to expand its democratic ideals, and the necessity of ownership of the land to expand its power, progress, and opportunities.

In Macleod's actions toward the Indians, Stegner locates an alternative response for his Other West to challenge the frontier violence the mythic West glorifies in its story of white conquest over the savage Indian in the quest to transform the Wild West into a tamed place for an encroaching civilization. Instead of the chase, battle, and conquest (or extermination) of the Indian by Americans or endless gunfights, hangings, and shoot-outs, the Canadian NWMP, as represented by MacLeod, champion peace and law over violence and represent for Stegner a humane and reasonable approach to a problem. In the 1960s essays, Stegner suggests that some western literatures, literary or formulaic, promote this nineteenth-century, Wild West personal justice that he rejects in Wolf Willow for an alternative equitable justice that the Mounted Police represent. On this note of hopefulness for a frontier history other than the violent one America's history provides, Stegner concludes "Law in a Red Coat," having located in the actions of the Mounted Police an alternative western story to the bloodier and more violent one America's Myths tell.

None of it was known to me: "Capital of an Unremembered Past"

In "Capital of an Unremembered Past," the culminating chapter in Wolf Willow's Section II: Preparation for a Civilization, Stegner discusses what it means to the adult *memoirist Stegner* to now possess the "knowledge of place, knowledge of the past" (WW 28) that he claims to have been denied by early twentieth-century cultural narratives of the mythic West. Foreshadowing many of the issues he discusses in the 1960s essays in this chapter, Stegner develops the multiple meanings—historical, literary, cultural, and

personal—behind the word “capital” in the chapter’s title through the multiple personas he has been employing throughout the book. In the process of telling the “past” as it “might have [been] told to us” in this section’s eight previous chapters (36), the *historian Stegner* has provided the “misdirected” reader and the *memoirist Stegner* with racially and ethnically diverse voices who provide the historicized alternative narratives for his Other West. These recovered alternative stories tell the white destruction of Indian cultures, the ravaging of Cypress Hills’ land, the dissolution of a “germ of a culture” in the Métis, as well as the British and American surveyors’ cooperation to complete the national border and the Mounties obtaining a “firm peace” between whites and Indians in Cypress Hills(110). In response to this now known history, the *memoirist Stegner* exclaims repeatedly in this chapter, “I wish I had known some of this” (121). As the *historian Stegner* brings to a “close” the first phase of Stegner’s “telling” of Cypress Hills’ past—the frontier phase—the *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner* comments on the importance of this recovered history to his personal and writerly western selves.

In his recovery of Cypress Hills’ past, the *historian Stegner* provides the *memoirist Stegner* with what Stegner calls in the 1960s essays the westerners’ “personal and possessed past” that represents for Stegner a “real western past” (HMWW 199) in contrast to the Myth’s romanticized and heroic past that glosses and obscures, in its exclusionary, monomythic story of western settlement, narratives such as those he has recovered in Section II and those to come in Section III and Section IV. The *historian Stegner*’s recovery of this white,

recorded history of Cypress Hills that the child and *memoirist Stegner* did not know anticipates his call in the 1960s essays for the western writer to restore to public and cultural memory voices and stories silenced by the Myths. Once restored, this past becomes usable to those in the present and to the building end of the pontoon of history. The history Stegner has been recovering is personal in its relationship to his experiences in his childhood; local in its illumination of specific events that happened in the place of his childhood home, Cypress Hills; geographical in its portrayal of the land, climate, and topography; historical in its reliance on actual events and the details surrounding them; and western in its location on a map. The Other West he has been constructing from this inquiry into the past of his childhood home rejects the Myths' privileging of the nostalgic; counters the romantic through the history he provides; and undermines the heroic by emphasizing the ordinary, factual, and experiential. By locating his history in the place of his childhood, he grounds, as he confesses in this chapter, his imaginative self in the history and memory of this western place and finds a past in which he can be "tribally and emotionally committed" (WW 111). By situating his writing in what is historical, geographic, experiential, personal, local, and western, Stegner suggests a realist, place-based literature that constructs a usable past and provides the knowledge to defeat the Myths' power to define his "westernness" and the kind of literature he writes.

In "closing" the frontier phase of Cypress Hills in the chapter, "Capital of an Unremembered Past," Stegner accomplishes three goals. First, the *historian Stegner* completes the history of the frontier Cypress Hills in what was in the 1950s and 1960s considered traditional terms: the hostile Indians are removed, the wild men civilized, and a once untamed western place is made ready for settlement. By today's critical standards,

the conditions Stegner uses to close his frontier history are understood to be far more complex and the segmenting of history into phases is viewed as an arbitrary designation. More significantly, Stegner illustrates in his recovered history that there are political, cultural, geographic, and human costs in western settlement, as revisionist historians will do later. Second, the *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner* uses the second narrative of the Mounted Police's "firm peace" with Cypress Hills' Indians to draw attention to core values he will develop further when he confronts the Cowboy Myth in Section III and the Pioneer and Garden West Myths in Section IV (WW 110), which are order, respect, fairness, and community responsibility. Third, the *memoirist Stegner* claims this "very rich" history as the creative source for his writerly self, a missed opportunity for his child-self, and a rich legacy for the future children of Cypress Hills and for future western writers (112). In his recognition that his story alone cannot convey the "richness" of this place's "unremembered past," Stegner calls for others, like the Métis and the Native American, to tell "properly" their "epics" that his recovery of Cypress Hills' history has revealed, thus announcing in germinal form the multiplicity Stegner suggests in the 1960s essays for western American literature (112).

The *historian Stegner* chooses to frame his "end" of the frontier with the narratives of two historical figures who symbolize the tensions between the mythic, frontier West and the Other West Stegner's history has been conveying. These two figures include Superintendent J.M. Walsh, a NWMP who in 1875 built Fort Walsh only two miles from "the spot where [the Cypress Hills



Massacre] had occurred” (WW 110) and the American Indian and Sioux Chief, Sitting Bull, who retreated to Cypress Hills immediately after his victory over Custer at Little Big Horn seeking food and sanctuary and joining an already large Confederation of Canadian Indian Nations camped there. Earlier in Section II the *historian Stegner* noted that his childhood home was “in the very middle of what had been for generations a bloody Indian battleground, and what in the late ‘70’s and ‘80’s became the refuge of the last Plains hostiles” (53). This violent history, now known, converges with the *memoirist’s* recognition “that *their boots and moccasins printed the gray silt of those bottoms where my bare feet would kick up dust years later*” (118 italics mine). In claiming this history as his—“all of it was legitimately mine” even though “none of it [had been] known to me” (112)—Stegner connects history and memory, past and present, the Other and the self, and the child to the adult through the place and the land of his childhood home (112). The land becomes the conduit for the recovered past, or his “personal and possessed past” (HMWW 199), and a usable past because it connects him to Walsh and Sitting Bull whose narratives contain values and thus hope for challenging the mythic West’s dominance.

In Walsh, Stegner locates another historical figure who espouses the traits he values. Like Macleod before him, Walsh was tasked, according to the *historian Stegner*, with quieting frontier hostilities that had been erupting between whites and Indians after the departure of the Hudson’s Bay Company, which left the border unmonitored for the developing whiskey and gun trade. Stegner positions these two men, Walsh and Sitting Bull, within the traditional and mythical narrative of white and Indian engagement, but uses their co-existence in Cypress Hills without incident from 1876 until 1881, despite

several opportunities for hostilities to erupt, to illustrate missed opportunities on the American frontier for white and Indian relationships. Stegner presents, first, the story of the “tough Irishman Walsh” (WW 115) who with “a little over a hundred red-coated men” (112) stood against thousands of contentious American and Canadian Indians who had congregated in Cypress Hills only a few years after Cowie’s initial entry in 1871 and a much smaller number of white whiskey and gun traders, wolfers, and fur traders. Intertwined with Walsh’s narrative is Sitting Bull’s story, in which the American Indian Chief, “the great man of the Sioux nation” as Stegner refers to him, agrees to Walsh’s proposed peace only to have it eventually rescinded because of events beyond the control of both men (117).

Like Cowie, DuMont, MacLeod, Butler, and the earlier surveyors, “Irishman Walsh” possesses personal characteristics Stegner admires. He characterizes Walsh as determined, resolute, “tough, friendly to Indians but a realist, a good policeman and absolutely without nerves” (WW 115) who ensures that the Canadian Law he represents is “applied to everybody” equitably (117). According to the *historian Stegner*, Walsh’s fairness ensures the peace between white and red cultures. From the historical records Stegner consults, Walsh is known as the “White Forehead Chief [who] was a man of his word” (115) because, Stegner states, Walsh would incarcerate whiskey traders and Indians alike in the Fort Walsh jailhouse and “seiz[e] the great man of the Sioux nation... and pitch him out the door” if need be (117). Walsh’s principled, equitable actions enable the Mounted Police to accomplish what, Stegner says, was never

achieved on the American frontier West—a relatively bloodless peace with the Indians and wild, white, frontier men. In Stegner’s view, America did not have a Macleod, Walsh, or the Mounted Police; instead, America had a Custer, the wolfers, and the American blue coat cavalry.

Stegner presents Walsh in the manner of the Great Man biography, an approach he was criticized for using with Powell in Beyond Hundredth Meridian because it led to his minimizing Powell’s faults in order to highlight Powell’s understanding of the arid West and the consequences he predicted if current homestead regulations were maintained.<sup>21</sup> Stegner similarly elevates Irishman Walsh to the heroic in his descriptions of how Walsh obtains this “firm peace” with the Indian Confederation (WW 110). The *historian Stegner* describes how, “outnumbered thirty or forty to one, [with] no chance of help nearer than several hundred miles,” on three separate occasions Walsh entered the Indians’ encampments to tell “them the rules”—the Canadian Treaty Law by which they must live—and how “they said they would obey” because “they were tired of war and wanted peace” (115). According to the *historian Stegner*, Walsh delivered his first “lecture” in 1877 to the Indian Chiefs and to Sitting Bull (116). Because of Walsh’s equitable deployment of the Law, a level of trust was earned between the two cultures that not only resulted in the “firm peace” but also allowed Walsh to do the unthinkable—allow the Sioux while quartered in Cypress Hills to purchase ammunition for hunting. This bloodless, “firm peace” lasted for five years, a feat, argues Stegner, never achieved on the American West, nor conceivable in America given the Myths’ narratives of Us/Whites versus Them/Reds and white conquest of the land and savage necessary to move the nation and democracy forward.

While he attributes historical agency to Walsh in his “great man” treatment, Stegner does not do the same for Sitting Bull whom he objectifies and thus reveals his own inherited prejudices and cultural perceptions of the Native American, which lessens the potential this narrative holds for his Other West. While Walsh can “lecture on Canadian law,” be “kept busy applying it” (WW 117), and “smother the hornet’s nest” (123), Sitting Bull and the Indians are “objects” acted upon. According to the *historian Stegner*, the Sioux are “told ... the rules” for “how they would behave” (115), are pitched out the door, spend “months in a Mounted Police jail,” and are “reminded” when they wish to avenge the treatment by American soldiers of the decimated Nez Percé who arrive in Cypress Hills August 1877, “that if they went they would not be back” and “would find the red coats hunting them as the blue coats hunted them now” (117). What Stegner reveals in his characterization of Sitting Bull’s role in this narrative is that he cannot escape viewing the Native American as the Other, even though he clearly recognizes the injustices done to them.

In connection to this period of “firm peace,” Stegner discusses the state of Cypress Hills’ natural environment to show its destruction, consciously and unconsciously, by the presence of both red and white cultures. This narrative lessens the exceptionalism of Walsh and the Mounties, as all is not perfect in their western garden. Also, this destruction of the land eventually leads to Walsh’s inability to keep his promise to the American Indians for fair treatment despite their honoring the Canadian rules. Contrary to the Myths’ presentation of western lands as a garden, the *historian Stegner* details how the “sanctuary” and “haven”

Cypress Hills once was is made unhealthy by its human inhabitants. He says, Fort Walsh was “never ... a healthful site” with “unexplained fevers” and water “polluted by buffalo and horse carcasses [that] ... brought typhoid” (WW 120). Although whites and reds co-existed peacefully from 1876 to 1881, their presence devastated the Hills’ environment. According to the *historian Stegner*, “Little more than a decade after Cowie moved cautiously into them,” the Hills had been “cleared of their grizzlies and elk, ... swept clean of buffalo” until Cypress Hills’ ecology could no longer sustain them all (121), leading to “starvation” for “all the Indians” (119) despite the Canadian government’s introduction of Texas Longhorns and cowboys to help with the problem.

Stegner suggests that, like DuMont, Walsh is undone by outside forces—the issue of starvation and the refusal of the Canadian government to feed the American Indians. Nevertheless, Stegner retains Walsh and the Mounties as exemplars of law, order, and the “firm peace” they achieved against tremendous odds (110). The *historian Stegner* claims that this change in situation meant Walsh had to tell the American Indians they “were not, whatever their desire, Canadian Indians” and “entitled to payments under any of the seven treaties which Canada had made with the tribes” (119). Because they refused to leave, Stegner says, Walsh employed “persistent tactics ... undercutting [Sitting Bull’s] power as head chief” to persuade more than twelve hundred of the Chief’s followers to return to the States in order to avert an outbreak of hostilities among the Canadian and American Indian nations (119). Finally, on July 11, 1881, Sitting Bull is taken to Fort Buford, Montana, to become a reservation Indian and to participate briefly, like the exiled Métis DuMont, in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West. Employing the language and imagery of the Myths, the *historian Stegner* “closes” his discussion of the frontier of Cypress Hills by

expressing the predominant cultural understanding since the mid-nineteenth century of white and Indian tensions marking a western place as a frontier. Once the Indians are removed physically, the frontier is closed. The *historian Stegner* declares that by 1885 the rebellious Métis leader, Gabriel DuMont, of whom he says “the world has never heard enough” (62), and Sitting Bull, “the great man of the Sioux nation” (117), are both members of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West re-enacting western scenes they once determined.

Rather than celebrating white triumph in the frontier’s end, however, Stegner notes what has been lost. While nostalgia seeps into his lament that “a way of life extremely rich in human satisfactions both physical and spiritual came to an end here” (WW 112), the “unremembered past” that the *historian Stegner* has returned to cultural memory has mostly depicted Cypress Hills, Native Americans, and the Métis as victims to a rapacious, violent, mostly unforgiving, and unacknowledged attack by white European culture. Even as the Mounted Police depart, leaving “the Hills pacified and safe” (123), this phase of Canadian history contained racial violence and ecological destruction similar to what America’s West underwent, as the buffalo are gone and the land is spoiled; Fort Walsh is “dismantled” (120) and the Canadian Indians are moved north beyond temptation of the American Indians who are pushed south. Within less than a decade, *the historian Stegner* claims, the frontier of Cypress Hills “had gone out like a blown match” (121). Marking the start of Cypress Hills’ next phase—white settlement—is the coming of the cross-continental Canadian Pacific Railroad

(CPR) and the Mounted Police's new charge of "protecting civilized men in places rapidly becoming tame" (121).<sup>22</sup>

Even though he concludes his discussion of the western frontier with traditional motifs and cultural symbols, Stegner's *Other West* has recovered stories that offer a western narrative different from what the Myths promote. Instead of a virginal garden West, the fragile ecosystem of Cypress Hills is destroyed by animal and human presence. Instead of white and red hostilities, the Mounted Police establish a "firm peace" from 1874 to 1881 through equitable application of the law. Instead of exhibiting savageness, the Sioux demonstrate dignity and compromise. Instead of exceptional heroes, Stegner focuses on the un-heroic Canadian and American surveyors whose cooperation led to complete the "Medicine Line." Instead of heralding white triumph over the Métis, Stegner uncovers their gross mistreatment by the Hudson's Bay Company and early Canadian government and claims they represent the "germ of a culture" that had "possibility." And, instead of a violent, vigilante Wild West, Stegner's *Other West* boasts the Mounted Police and the civil law to produce a far less violent and bloody West for Canadians in contrast to what occurred for the Americans whose law came much later in the process of white settlement. These recovered historical narratives are the "capital" of the "unremembered past" that the *historian Stegner* returns to cultural memory and claims as "legitimately" his (112). They represent for Stegner a usable past from which he can understand the present and build a better future.

The "unremembered past" Stegner recovers elicits anger and loss as well as unbounded potential for the *memoirist Stegner*. What the *memoirist Stegner* regrets is the missed opportunity of having a broader cultural and historical context for self-definition

and a creative source for his imagination. With neither home, nor school, nor literature connecting him to this rich past, he believed he was the heir to “an unpeopled and unhistoried wilderness” (WW 122). As the *memoirist Stegner* “discover[s] it now,” the “very richness of that past ... makes [him] *irritable* to have been *cheated* of it” (112 italics mine). He blames those cultural institutions who are typically purveyors of history and culture for this lack of knowledge: “I wish our homes or schools had given us stereopticon slides of Fort Walsh” (112); “I wish I had seen the Union Jack obeying the prairie wind” (113) “I wish we had heard of the coming of the Sioux” (114); “I wish somebody had told us how the tough Irishman Walsh ... rode in[to] ... Wood Mountain” to meet the Indians (115). If he had known he had a past, a history, he would have had a culture to draw from for his present. He would have known that the Mounted Police “brought the first graces of imported civilization,” such as “amateur theatricals, pets, music, sports” (113) and engaged in cultural blending by drawing the Indians and Métis into their horse races, cricket, tennis, and rugby. He would have known how “the games, like the parades, often had the ceremonial full-dress quality” as did the Indian “sun dances” (113). He would have known about the village outside the Fort that “boasted a hotel, a restaurant, a log pool hall, a barber shop, and even a photographer’s shop”; how “the first recorded inhabitants” of his “home town dates from 1879, when Sitting Bull and his Teton Sioux made their winter camp on its site” (114); and that the line of stone chimney remnants were not “Indian signaling chimneys,” as his father claimed (28), but rather “chimneys of the police cabins,.... relics not of savagery but of law” (114). This lack of



“knowledge of place, knowledge of the past” (28) has, in the *memoirist Stegner’s* view, prevented him from having a “sense of belonging” and connectedness to those who lived before him and to a larger, present world (112).

As he confronts his newly found history, the *memoirist Stegner* locates his creative and imaginative identity in the rich, historical past of Cypress Hills. If he had known this past, the *memoirist Stegner* says that as a child, “I might have peopled my imagination” with “the company of Sitting Bull, Long Dog, Spotted Eagle, Walsh, Macleod, and Lèveillé”<sup>23</sup> and “felt as companionship and reassurance the presence of the traders, métis, Indians, and Mounties” (WW 121). Because he has “walked that earth” (112) and “know[s] how that October river bottom would have looked, ... the secret smell of wolf willow,” he receives “actual pleasure to think,” as an adult, “of them camping there, great men of their time and kind” (118). He regrets that this “rich” history now comes to him with “the smell of books” instead of “the smell of life” and “wishes” its “very richness” (112) had fed his childhood “imagination” (123) and thus shaped his writerly self as the physical-geographic-folk environment of his youth shaped the “sensuous little savage” in him. As a child who “wandered through the coulees with a .22 and found nothing more dangerous than cottontails and anemones, and a lynx that might have been a product of a yearning imagination” (123), he would have had instead his imagination “peopled” by those who lived there before and would not have felt alone, isolated, or disconnected from “human tradition” (122) but a part of it.

Through the *historian Stegner’s* recovery of his past, the *memoirist Stegner* finds for the *writer Stegner* and for others connected with this place a very rich and deep imaginative source. The *writer Stegner* claims more than once that the “very richness of

this past” is the “stuff of an epic” and “any child who grows up in the Cypress Hills *now* can have—Fort Walsh, and all that story of buffalo hunter, Indian and halfbreed, Mounted Policeman and wolfer” (WW 112 italics mine). These “epics” wait to be written, he says, by “anyone *who knows it right*” (112 italics mine), a statement that if read generously opens the western American literary tradition to include the voice of the racial Other. He suggests no singular story, as the Myth claims, can be THE story of the West. While his history has included the narratives of racial Others—the Plains Indians and the Métis—neither he nor others have told these stories “properly” (112). They have “often ... been summarized,” as he has done in Wolf Willow, but “no one has *properly told the story* of the defeat of the Plains people, a people of many tribes” or the story of the Métis, which “could be another epic” (112). He calls for “some métis or Cree, a descendant of Gabriel DuMont or Big Bear or Wandering Spirit, *who can see the last years of the Plains frontier with the distance of history and with the passion of personal loss and defeat*” to tell these other “epics” because his story is incomplete as a history of Cypress Hills (112 italics mine); there are more stories to be discovered from the West’s past by anyone who wishes to learn “who came before” them as he did (27). But Stegner also suggests that their stories must be authentic: they must be connected through the “distance of history”; they must be “a descendant”; and they must have a connection to the place—to have “walked that earth” (112). From his discovery of his past, Stegner encourages others to recover theirs. And, in this sense, he extends the parameters of western American literature to include the stories of Others as he has done in Wolf Willow.<sup>24</sup>

Stegner further enhances the importance of place as the conduit to the layered history it holds for the writer in the incident he chooses to close this chapter and Section II. The incident involves a young Mountie named Marmaduke Graburn and his Indian attacker, Star Child, who have “printed” the same coulee dust as Cowie, DuMont, Walsh, Sitting Bull, and the child Stegner. Stegner uses this incident to highlight how he has been disconnected from history and the larger world because of the mythic West’s constraining his past to a single epoch in history and a culturally and imaginatively defined place. According to the *historian Stegner*, Graburn is a nineteen year old “rookie sub-constable” who in 1879 was killed by “Star Child, a Blood Indian with a grudge,” “alone and uselessly” under the “same sky, with the same big light and the same quiet over it” Stegner knew as a child from 1914 to 1920 (WW 122). Graburn’s solitary and violent death signifies for Stegner, first, the “quality” of the Law he has been admiring in the Mounties, for Graburn “was the first” and only Mountie “to die by violence” in the five years the Mounties were in Cypress Hills. They had “neither killed nor been killed” during their time there (123), which echoes his statement in Section I that Buck Murphy’s death by a young Mountie was unusual because Canada had no “Boot Hills” as America did (5).

Second, and more important, in the solitariness of his death, Graburn represents the “uncrossable discontinuity” (WW 53) the pioneer child-Stegner felt roaming the coulees in a country that had “no history” (20). Having grounded his “knowledge of place, knowledge of the past” (28) in the place, history, and memory of Cypress Hills, the *memoirist Stegner* no longer feels isolated, as did the child-Stegner who sat alone in the coulee. By locating his “imaginative yearning” (123) and “imaginative flights” (29) in

the western spatiality of Cypress Hills and its socio-cultural-historical-geo-physical contextualized past, the *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner* suggests that the subject material to which he and other western regionalist writers can be committed to and claim as their own is located in their western places, their experiences with these places, and their knowledge of the past of these places. This western spatiality provides for the western regionalist writer, as it does for the *memoirist* and *writer Stegner*, the sustenance for their imaginations in the potential “epics” it holds that they can use to connect modern westerners to a usable, historical, non-mythic past.

These “epics” free the literary western from the dominance of the Myths as they are the “another kind of western story-telling which is not mythic” he argues for in the 1960s essays (HMWW 187). The “chores” he defines for his contemporary western regionalist writers are designed to help them approach their western past as he has done his. He has written mostly against the grain of the American cultural imaginary’s acceptance of the mythic West in Section II, creating for the “misdirected” reader and *memoirist Stegner* a more comprehensive picture of the early West by arguing for the culpability of European culture in the demise of the Indian, the Métis, and the land; by praising and criticizing the Canadian Treaty Law that sends the cooperative American Indians who had adhered to the “rules” back across the Medicine Line; by recovering the voice of the Métis, a “germ of a culture” that arose from indentured servitude to the Hudson’s Bay Company only to be silenced by the new Canadian government; by including the stories of MacDonald and the

wolfers along with those of MacLeod, Walsh, DuMont, and Sitting Bull; and by claiming representatives from all three ethnicities—Métis, Indian, European-Canadian—to be the “great men” who “walked the earth” of Cypress Hills (118). Stegner’s *Other West* exposes the costs of white conquest and contains the possibilities for the present and future West and is a peopled and historied past he can claim as an imaginative source from which to fashion his stories.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Stegner's novels The Big Rock Candy Mountain (1943) and Angle of Repose (1970) and the 1954 Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West as other examples of texts in which he directly challenges America's cultural narratives of the West.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Kinsey Howard published in 1952 Strange Empire: A Narrative of the Northwest. The book was a history of the exploration of the American and Canadian Great Plains. Howard covers the same geographic area Stegner focuses on and discusses at length the role of the Métis, particularly Louis Riel, and the Canadian-American-Indian troubles of the mid to late 1870s, especially the Whoop Up Indian wars. Stegner's friend Benard DeVoto wrote the introduction for Howard's book. Another text Stegner excerpts from is Paul F. Sharp's Whoop-Up Country: The Canadian-American West, 1865-1885 (1955).

<sup>3</sup> See Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer for the following essays: Richard Etulain's "Wallace Stegner, Western Humanist" (49-60); Elliot West's "Stegner, Storytelling, and Western Identity" (61-72); and Rob Williams' "'Huts of Time': Wallace Stegner's Historical Legacy" (119-144). They comment on the thoroughness of Stegner's research and all that he discovered regarding Cypress Hills and Canadian history, some of which had not been collected and documented previously.

<sup>4</sup> West describes how Stegner's encouragement for other westerners to claim their "possessed past" as he did has elicited a host of works blending various genres by authors like Doig, Kittredge, Blew, and Williams. He also suggests that Stegner's attempt to

understand how the West was “involved in [his] making’ . . . resonates” with “‘new’ Indian writers” seeking to tell their story (Storytelling 68).

<sup>5</sup> For more information on Butler’s importance to Canadian history and Cypress Hills in particular see <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/15401>; the Heritage Community Foundation’s Alberta Online Encyclopedia’s entry:

[http://www.abheritage.ca/pasttopresent/settlement/butler\\_excerpt.html](http://www.abheritage.ca/pasttopresent/settlement/butler_excerpt.html); and a website built by Bruce Haig, Teacher Alberta Schools and Canadian students and supported by the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation to preserve and document this heritage: <http://www.ourheritage.net/index.html> (last updates March 16, 2008) and specifically <http://www.ourheritage.net/Who/butlerwho.html> . All accessed on February 4, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> As his son, Page Stegner, commented, his father was very much aware of how interwoven the geographic, anthropologic, cultural, and historical records of these various western places were:

“My father . . . could never just *look* at scenery. If we happened to be driving across the Colorado Plateau through southern Utah, say from Cisco to Price along the Book Cliffs, he’d offer up an anecdote about Powell being rescued by Bradley in Desolation Canyon, and then explain to his slightly annoyed eight-year-old boy (me), who was trying to concentrate on his Batman comic, who Powell was and why he was important. Then he’d point out the La Sals and Abajos to the south and tell that boy something about laccolithic domes, betting him he couldn’t spell laccolithic. He’d comment on the immensity of geological time and the number of Permian seas responsible for the deposition of the Moenkopi, Chinle, Wingate,

and Kayenta formations (he could identify them all) on our left and the Dakota sandstone and Mancos shale on our right. He'd observe the Fish Lake Plateau far to the west and remember something of his boyhood summers at the lake, though he was never particularly loquacious about his own childhood except in his writing. Crossing the Wasatch Plateau and heading south through the Spanish Fork Canyon would remind him of specific dates of the Escalante/Dominguez expedition through the region (September 23, 1776), and that it was exactly fifty years before Jedediah Smith came through following essentially the same route. He had a kind of holistic relationship with the land, and he couldn't look at it without remembering its geological history, its exploration, its social development, its contemporary problems, and its prognosis for the future."

(Father 105-106)

<sup>7</sup> For his history of the Métis, Stegner draws heavily on and references many excerpts regarding the Métis from Joseph Kinsey Howard's book Strange Empire: A Narrative of the Northwest (1952).

<sup>8</sup> When the company was incorporated by British Royal charter in 1670, it was called The Governor and Company of Adventurers of England.

<sup>9</sup> Stegner says this of Cowie: "*Capable of facing down* a bunch of drunk and murderous Indians, and of controlling the independent métis traders who undercut the Company's no-liquor policy, and *of keeping the loyalty of an isolated and polyglot band of Company servants*. During the smallpox epidemic which began in 1869, Cowie took lymph from the arm of a recently vaccinated daughter of Pascal Breland, one of the métis leaders, and



from it made vaccine that stopped the disease in its tracks around Swan River, though elsewhere on the Plains, that year and the next, it so decimated and demoralized the tribes, especially the Blackfoot, that they never fully regained their power to make war. Trader, doctor, soldier, judge, explorer, he fulfilled his function as a Company agent, and was one of those who steered the Saskatchewan country through the transition years from wild to half tamed.... *Cowie's information about the Hills was the first. In many ways it was not encouraging*" (WW 68 italics mine).

<sup>10</sup> Others note the importance social responsibility and community obligation are to Stegner's world view. See especially Limerick's "Precedents," Williams' "Huts of Time," and his two biographers.

<sup>11</sup> See Limerick's Legacy for an excellent discussion of America's Indian policies that did call for extermination of the Indian.

<sup>12</sup> See Slotkin's three volumes for more on this issue. He too argues that America's narratives of the frontier and West have supported violence as a justifiable means of resolution.

<sup>13</sup> Stegner explains that this event brought out anti-American sentiments in the Canadian papers that had been simmering because of annexationist talk and "sympathy in American quarters for Louis Riel and his 'rebellious' métis" (WW 79) as well as anti-Canadian and Hudson's Bay sentiments from the American side who felt the "wolfers... were being victimized by Hudson's Bay Company pressure" ( 80). Stegner concludes by saying, "It seems safe to believe that the traders and wolfers, though violent and bloody

enough, true offspring of the violent frontier that had bred them, were less ruffianly than some of the testimony and most Canadian opinion suggested” (80).

<sup>14</sup> Stegner says he draws heavily on these sources mentioned in the text: he extrapolates events from Cowie’s reports, historian Paul Sharp’s 1952 The Whoop-Up Country, and various American and Canadian newspaper accounts of the 1873 Massacre.

<sup>15</sup> See DeVoto’s “The Birth of an Art.”

<sup>16</sup> For example, Stegner describes how a “discrepancy of thirty-two feet” between the two surveying parties was discovered and how the “Joint Commission set a precedent in international relations by amicably halving it” (WW 88).

<sup>17</sup> Another Canadian atrocity occurred during 1880 -1885 when then Lt. Governor Edgar Dewdney cut rations to the Indian nations in contradiction to the earlier treaties in which they had negotiated for a guarantee of food and help to begin farming. With the disappearance of the bison as a food supply (the last Canadian hunt is recorded as 1879), Dewdney cut food supplies and approximately 3,000 Plains Indians starved to death in the Northwest Territories of Canada. Though some Cree chiefs resisted these treaties, and in 1884 2,000 Cree lead by Wandering Spirit attacked Frog Lake, eventually assimilation efforts in 1905 and 1911 by the Canadian government brought most under control of Indian Agents. As with American Indians, the Canadian Indians or First Nations peoples (aboriginals) continued to struggle against inadequate funding for food and education well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

<sup>18</sup> In recounting the creation of the Mounted Police, Stegner does identify several key advantages the Canadians had over the Americans in settlement of the West. The first

event was the official annexation of Rupert's Land in July 1870, a land under control and supervision of the Hudson's Bay Company that incorporated the Indian into its process and prompted the surveyors to define cooperatively the American-Canadian border. The second event was British Columbia's entrance into the Canadian federation in May 1871 that increased the call for a transcontinental railroad to bridge the two shores and the need for protection for the men building it. And the third was the violent Cypress Hills Massacre on June 1, 1873, an event highlighting the need for some form of law to prepare the area for settlement in the absence of the Hudson's Bay Company.

<sup>19</sup> Along with Butler's book, which Stegner says is "one of the best" (102), he also references Canadian John Peter Turner who was historian for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (a change in name occurring in 1920) and documented the meeting of Sitting Bull and Major John Walsh just after Custer's defeat in Volume 1 of The North-West Mounted Police 1873-1893 (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1950) 2 vols.

<sup>20</sup> Slotkin describes in volume 1 of his study how colonial day engagements with the Indians and the major ideological differences in settlement between Canada and America, seen in (Canadian) Jesuit versus (American) Puritan influence pushed Indian allegiance toward the British more than the American side. Stegner notes in Wolf Willow that the "red coat" since the eighteenth century had "meant, to the Indian minds, a force that was non- and sometimes anti-American" (101).

<sup>21</sup> See Williams's "Huts of Time" for more on this issue.

<sup>22</sup> For more on the impact and symbolism of the railroad in the frontier and turn-of-the-century literature see Leo Marx especially and Slotkin's volume 2.

<sup>23</sup> Jean Louis Léveillé is the Wood Mountain trader to whom Walsh grants the right to sell ammunition to the Sioux in 1876 (WW 116). Five years later he escorted Sitting Bull to Fort Buford in Montana and handed him over to Captain Clifford (120).

<sup>24</sup> The explosion in Native American stories did not begin until the 1970s. In 1969, Momaday publishes The Way to Rainy Mountain and wins a Pulitzer. See also Saskatchewan Canadians like Guy Vanderhaeghe whose The Last Crossing (New York: Grove Press, 2002) is set in nineteenth century Cypress Hills, which Stegner depicts in the second section of Wolf Willow.

## Chapter 5

### Cowboys and Cowhands / School Marms and Ranchers’ Wives: Stegner Revisions the Mythic West’s Classic Narrative

*“Custer, Wild Bill, Billy the Kid, the James Brothers, and Teddy Roosevelt were confused.... It’s hard to differentiate heroes and villains immortalized by Hollywood and because so we ignore the assiduous slaughter of the Indians and the Buffalo... the sleazy and murderous scum that accompanied God-fearing pioneers and the violence around us today.”*

-- Jean Stafford

“Heroes and Villains: Who Was Famous and Why”

*The western past, in a lot of people’s minds,  
is the mythic past of the horse opera,  
which is no past at all. It is an illusion.*

-- Wallace Stegner

A Tribute to Wallace Stegner: The Geography of Hope

*The romance of the West is so powerful, you can’t really swim against the current. Whatever truth about the West is printed, the legend is always more potent.*

-- Larry McMurtry

New York Review of Books

In Wolf Willow's Section III: The Whitemud River Range, Stegner critiques Cypress Hills' "one cowboy generation" (WW 121) and its destructive influence on the western identity of both men and women through their gendered relationship to the western landscape and to America's cultural narrative of the Cowboy. In the three chapters comprising Section III, Stegner addresses the experiential and cultural constructedness of his "western" self and how America's culturally and literarily inscribed cultural icon of the West—the Cowboy—and the "Cowboy Code" the Cypress Hills settlers embraced shaped his identity. Using memories of childhood encounters with the mythic, cultural, and literary Cowboy icon, Stegner illustrates how this Cowboy Myth shaped the western place of his childhood and made him the westerner he claimed to be in Section I.<sup>1</sup> He tries to reclaim certain traits and values he deems western—such as courage, self-reliance, endurance, honor, and strength—that the Cowboy aura has appropriated. Because these values and traits have become almost indistinguishable from the mythic Cowboy, any use of them within a western context, as seen in his application of them to describe Dumont, Cowie, MacLeod, and Walsh, only aligns his heroes with the mythic Cowboy rather than with his Other West.

Instead of relying on history and memory alone to reclaim Cypress Hills' history, as he does in Section II and again in Section IV, in Section III Stegner includes story as a means for telling the history of his childhood place and for challenging one of the West's most powerful cultural narratives, the Cowboy hero. By working within the same genre and narrative mode that Wister, dime novelists, formulaic writers, and Schafer used to create their Cowboy figures,

Stegner confronts what Etulain calls “the nation’s nobleman” from within the same field of representation as the Myths (Telling 68). However, unlike those who fashioned the mythic Cowboy that he inherits, Stegner’s experiences are tied to the West whereas they were easterners with little or no experience living on western lands. From this position of westerner and insider, Stegner attempts to unseat the mythic Cowboy and its cultural power to define the western man by locating narratives in the West’s history and his experiences. In the 1960’s essays, Stegner similarly rewrites the West’s literary tradition by reclaiming western authors that Eastern constructed literary tradition glossed.

In Section III, Stegner tells the history of Cypress Hills’ “one cowboy generation” in three chapters (WW 121). In the first chapter called “Specifications for a Hero,” Stegner analyzes the notion of western heroism drawn from the Cowboy Code that the settlers adopted from the American cowboy culture that came to Cypress Hills with the cattlemen who brought the Texas Longhorns to feed the Mounties and Indians in the early 1880s. He links the documented history of Cypress Hills’ cowboy period that the *historian Stegner* discovered in newspaper clippings, books, and interviews with the *memoirist Stegner*’s recollections of growing up as a young boy within the American Cowboy Code’s ethos of heroic individualism. What Stegner argues is that the values of the mythic Cowboy are grounded in notions of superiority, persecution, and domination that issue from the early twentieth-century influences of Theodore Roosevelt’s “strenuous life,” Buffalo Bill’s glorification of the Cowboy in his Wild West performances, and Owen Wister’s association of personal exceptionalism and justifiable violence with his hero. As the content of “Specifications” indicates, the Cowboy narrative is Stegner’s personal “epic” to tell “properly” (112).

Following “Specifications” are the only two “cowboy” stories in Stegner’s canon: “Genesis” and “Carrion Spring.”<sup>2</sup> In these two stories, Stegner employs literary realism, personal experience, and history to expose the distance between the Cowboy of Myth and his source, the working cowhand, and to recover the voice of the western woman in a frontier, western spatiality that is dominated and defined by men. In the first story, “Genesis,” Stegner confronts, as its title suggests, the origins of the literary western, or more specifically, Wister’s classic, The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains (1902). Through the perspective of a naïve narrator who desires to be an “authentic cowboy” on the Cypress Hills range, the *writer Stegner* calls attention to the economic and practical realities of the working cowhand that the Cowboy Myth obscures (WW 140). Stegner revises the western narrative of the white-male, solitary, exceptional, and heroic western horseman by focusing on the differences between his narrator’s desire to be a “cowboy” and the actuality of his being a “cowhand.”

In the much shorter, second story, “Carrion Spring,” the *writer Stegner* further engages Wister’s cowboy story by exploring the gender relationships Wister presented in his foreman, the Virginian, and his bride, Molly, through Stegner’s own characters, the foreman Ray Henry and his new wife, Molly. In his presentation of the turmoil Ray and Molly encounter as they try to decide whether or not to settle and work a ranch in Cypress Hills, Stegner brings into his Other West the role of the frontier woman and the issues of feminine identity in a space the Myths define as male and masculine. By portraying the gendered differences between Ray’s and Molly’s attitudes toward the frontier landscape in which they



live, Stegner initiates his critique of Turner's narrative of western settlement. He positions Molly's struggle with the western landscape to be the voice of "doubt" against the Pioneer Myth's promises of "hope" and "opportunity" in order to expose the failure of pioneers, like his parents, that America's narratives of progress and Manifest Destiny deny.

In Section III, Stegner attempts to reclaim and re-narrativize the western story by continuing to dig into the history of his childhood home and his lived experiences there as if they were his personal dump ground. His excavation of this history and his linkages of it to his personal past reveal his efforts to demonstrate his idea that "history is like a pontoon bridge." His exploration of the gendered differences between western men and western women and their relationship with the western landscape also foreshadow his discussion in the 1960's essays of what he calls the "legitimate inclinations of the sexes" due to "the circumstances of western settlement" that explain, for him, the roles of western men and women in the non-mythic West (HMWW 195). More important, in Wolf Willow's two stories, Stegner practices the very place-based, historically informed realism he advocates as the method by which western American literature can defeat the Myths' hold on the West's narrative. By depicting the realities of the cowhand's everyday life, Stegner calls attention to the hidden assumptions of the Cowboy Myth, particularly its exclusionary, hierarchical, and exceptionalist foundations. And, in rewriting Wister's story from the perspective of a westerner, Stegner reclaims this western story for westerners so it can be revisioned to address the concerns of modern westerners and a modern America. The strategies Stegner uses in Section III to reclaim and renarrativize his personal western story become the very "chores" he asks his

contemporary western regionalist writers to complete in the 1960's critical essays so that their "another western story" challenges the monomythic West, rather than becoming absorbed by it.

### Western Heroism: "The Specifications for a Hero"

In the opening chapter of *The Whitemud River Range*, "Specifications for a Hero," Stegner contests the masculine credo and "western" values the mythic Cowboy signifies through the history and the memory he grounds in the place of his childhood home. In this challenge to the Cowboy Code through personal experience and events in a specific place, Stegner prepares the *memoirist* and "misdirected" reader for the context, themes, and concerns the two stories that follow will address. Specifically, Stegner disrupts the mystique of the Cowboy through analysis of the *memoirist Stegner's* childhood engagement with Cypress Hills' cowboy culture, or what Stegner calls an "inhumane and limited code" (WW 133). Because this Cowboy Code dictates that one must earn the right to be "immune" (129), the chapter's title, "Specifications for a Hero" instead of "Specifications of a Hero," emphasizes the exclusivity of a cowboy culture that advances an Anglo, masculine, hierarchical superiority of the Roosevelt-Wister kind. For the *memoirist Stegner*, this chapter reveals painful, intimate details of his childhood from ages six to twelve. He describes his child self as a "cry-baby," sickly, accident prone, a coward, and "squeamish about human pain" in a "semi-barbarous world" that defined what "a man should be" (130). In a culture that

privileged the image of a “masculine life full of activity and adventure” (135), Stegner admits he wanted to be “made of whang leather” but was not (132). According to Neil Campbell in The Cultures of the American New West (2000), “the mythic space of the West, for so long summed up by the Turner thesis, John Wayne films, the Marlboro Man, and Ansel Adams’ pristine wilderness, [is] being revised by those concerned to represent a fuller, more complex portrait of the region” (9). The practice of revision, especially from the position of the Other, is an “interrogation of myth” that opens myth to “multiplicitous discourses” and is a “political act concerned with survival, especially for those omitted or silenced in the old histories” (9). The *memoirist* speaks from the position of the Other in this chapter and opens the mythic West to revision, as he critiques the shaping influence of America’s Cowboy Myth on his western subjectivity, the American cultural imaginary’s perceptions of the geographic-historical-cultural American West, and the role the Cowboy Myth has as a defining story for America and Americans.

Stegner uses the recovered history of Cypress Hills to historicize and contextualize the Cowboy culture that came to Cypress Hills as early as 1879 and remained until 1907. He makes a point to show its distinctly American origin in order to keep the “misdirected” reader and his *memoirist* self focused on his critique of America’s unquestioning adoption of this Cowboy narrative. The *historian Stegner* claims that, when cowhands from America’s southern States, especially Arkansas and Texas, drove their cattle into Saskatchewan to feed the Indian Nations, white traders, and Mounties in Cypress Hills, they brought with them a “ready-made” (WW 135) culture of outfit, costume, practices, and slang that the Canadians adopted so that the Canadian cowboy-

rancher was “indistinguishable” from his American counterpart (134). In keeping with his argument that events in Cypress Hills were “belated” (44), the *historian Stegner* observes that the Canadian range was still open and mostly without the settlers and shepherders who had broken up and closed the ranges of Montana by the time this Americanized cowboy culture arrived in the Hills. Saskatchewan’s ranches and open-range ranching, however, were not to survive the winter of “blue snow” that hit the Plains in 1906-1907 (137), an event the *memoirist Stegner* specifically noted in *Section I* as having “affected my life” even though “I never heard of the terrible winter of 1906 until many years later” (28). In *Section III*, Stegner reveals the historical and personal significance of this winter: it “changed the way of life of the region” by opening the prairie to homesteading, or “another sort of frontier ... of which [his] family was a part” (137). This next, “new frontier” is the subject of *Section IV* in which Stegner confronts the Pioneer-Garden West Myths (137).

In “Specifications,” Stegner describes how the Cowboy he encountered as a child was constructed from both the actual and the imaginary, and in *Section III*’s two stories he contests this mythic image by blending the personal and the imaginary in his realist, historicist, and place-based fiction. The *memoirist Stegner* states that what he desired as a boy was the image the cowboy figure projected: “it was the cowboy tradition, *the horseback culture*, that impressed itself as *image*, as romance, and as *ethical system* upon boys like me” (WW 134 italics mine). To be a cowboy meant that one possessed special skills that were not “too civilized” and that made one the “best” among other men (129).

Drawing as much from his encounters with the real cowhands of Cypress Hills' Lazy-S ranch as from the fictional cowboys of the "Bar-Twenty novels of B. M. Bower" he read as a boy (27), Stegner declares that this image of the Cowboy "got in [his] eyes like *stardust*" (135 italics mine).<sup>3</sup> These Lazy-S cowhands were, he claims, his "heroes" (128) and "a model for [his] life" (135). In particular, he admired the short and skinny Slivers, a competent cowhand and saddle bronc champion. Not only did he want to look like Slivers—"bowlegged and taciturn, with deep creases in my cheeks and a hide like stained saddle leather" (135)—but, more important, he desired the behaviors the literature they read gave the Cowboy: "I would be the quietest and most dangerous man around, best rider, best shot, the one who couldn't be buffaloed. Men twice my size ... would catch my cold eye and begin to wilt, and when I stared them into impotence I would turn my back contemptuous" (135-36). This image is probably familiar to Wolf Willow's post-1950s readers as it captures the 1950s Hollywood cowboy represented by the young John Wayne in Red River, Stagecoach, and The Searchers and by Alan Ladd in Shane more than the cowboys who populated B. M. Bower's formulaic westerns or Wister's The Virginian.

Stegner's point in this first chapter is that the ethical system the Cowboy Code advocates is anathema to the values associated with Dumont, Cowie, and MacLeod in Section II. Stegner strips his reminiscences of their nostalgia to show the "misdirected" reader how the Cowboy Code is socially destructive to the society that emulates it and to the western self. From hindsight, he feels "ashamed" to have been associated with it (WW 128): "many things that those cowboys represented I would have done well to get over quickly, or never catch: the prejudice, the callousness, the destructive practical

joking, the tendency to judge everyone by the same raw standard” (136). Because this Cowboy culture advocates a social hierarchy in which “the strong bullied the weak, and the weak did their best to persuade their persecutors, by feats of courage or endurance or by picking on someone still weaker, that they were tough and strong” (129), the child-Stegner engaged in bragging and bravado that in one incident left him alone, scared, and humiliated atop the high dive over the town’s swimming hole until alone with no one in sight he completes a near disastrous dive.

In his remembered experiences of being both the persecuted and the persecutor because of this cultural code, Stegner argues that America’s unquestioning acceptance of this Cowboy culture has led to western values being used in modern America in ways that remove or make hollow their value to the present-day westerner and to America. Such traits as “courage, competence, self-reliance” that, he says, may have been necessary for “making a go of it” in a challenging and unforgiving geographic-historical-cultural spatiality of a frontier West are in the present’s non-frontier, civilized West unnecessary (WW 136). He claims that America’s Cowboy culture was based in a “value system of a life more limited and cruder than in fact ours was.... inherit[ed] from the harsher frontiers that had preceded ours” (133). Instead of promoting the values of democracy and community that the Myths proclaim the Cowboy hero protects and secures, Stegner exposes how the Cowboy culture runs counter to America’s cultural narrative of inclusiveness, community, and democracy in the prejudices, intolerance for the Other, and exclusivity upon which it operates.

To illustrate how the Cowboy ethos has become destructive to society and the self, Stegner contrasts how his parents applied the Cowboy code to others. Even though both parents because of their pioneer heritage were part of the “immune” (129), as was his elder brother, Cecil, for his athleticism, the child-Stegner was excluded because of his physical deficiencies and temperament. According to the *memoirist Stegner*, his father indiscriminately applied the code’s “stiff upper lip” to himself, to the child Stegner, and to others (130). Try as he might, Stegner recalls how he could never earn praise from his father for his athletic ability and masculinity. Emasculated in a masculine world, he says, he “grew up hating [his] weakness and despising [his] cowardice” (131), “sick for the hero [he] was not,” and full of “self-contempt” and “black envy” (130) for those who met the “specifications for a hero.” According to Lee Clark Mitchell in Westerns: Making of the Man in Fiction and Film (1996), the western myth is about how the biological male becomes a man, a process that “requires the display of a male body and a constructivism that grants manhood to men not by virtue of their bodies but of their behavior” (155). Because the “town went by the code” (132), the child Stegner participated in the “teasing, baiting, and candy-stealing that made [Mah Li’s] life miserable,” even though the former Lazy-S cook “was a friend” of his in order to be included (128). What the *memoirist* understands now is how his participation in activities that the Cowboy Code and his father required of him to be a “man” led to childhood self-loathing and recognition as an adult that he is “as impatient with the weakness of others as [his] father ever was” (133) and that pity “embarrasses” him, “incompetence exasperates” him, overt displays of pain or grief make him “uneasy,” and “affectations” bring laughter he is now too mannered to

show (133).<sup>4</sup> Through other recollections in this chapter, Stegner describes how the Cowboy Code left him with traits he now rejects.

In his mother, who was also one of the “immune,” Stegner locates the values of courage, self-reliance, competence, intellect, and compassion. He explains that his mother earned her right to be one of the “immune” because of her pioneer heritage, her red hair and “sassy temper,” and her remounting their mare Daisy after being thrown in front of a bunch of men without their assistance (WW 132). While his father applied the Cowboy’s “stiff upper lip” code to everyone without discrimination, his mother held herself to the code but exhibited compassion toward those weaker than she. In this compassion for another, a trait he admits he has difficulty practicing at times, Stegner locates an alternative narrative to include in his *Other West*. As he claims in the 1960’s critical essays, the mythic West’s notions of rugged individualism, a “stiff upper lip,” bravery, vigilante justice, and honor hide a West that is “politically reactionary and exploitative”; “rootless, culturally half-baked”; and far from the “last brave home of American freedom” it claims to be (BS 183). When the Myths universalized the cowhand’s traits and behaviors, they de-historicized their meaning, and, when these Cowboy behaviors are enacted upon a present as if they are still necessary, Stegner says these behaviors are destructive to the self (as he claims they have been to him) as well as to the society that practices them. His aim in this section is to enlighten the “misdirected” reader and the modern westerner of the need to judiciously question the values and behaviors of an older, historical West that the



Myths have appropriated, universalized, and kept available to the present through its representation of the Cowboy figure.

Working at the level of the local (the history of Cypress Hills) and specific (personal memory), the *historian* and *memoirist Stegner* use this history and lived experiences to recover narratives to counter the culturally-powerful, generalized metanarrative of the Cowboy that shapes how the present and past American West are to be interpreted by the “misdirected” reader and how the *historian* and *memoirist Stegner* should perceive the very local, historical, and personal West they are relating. While childhood memories have exposed the ugly underside of America’s beloved Cowboy culture, the *historian Stegner* demonstrates how Cypress Hills’ historical record reveals further distancing between the cowhand and the mythic cowboy. From the record books and “reminiscences of men ... where historians customarily dig” (WW 138), the *historian Stegner* describes how contrary to the Myth’s image of the Cowboy as a virile, Anglo white-male of exceptional talents and skills earned on the range the “cowboys” of Cypress Hills are, like their American brethren, “made up of many kinds: drifters from the American Plains all the way from Texas to Montana, Irish immigrant boys, venturesome English youths with too little self-control or too many elder brothers, made-over Mounties, French aristocrats, *métis* squatters, reformed whiskey traders” (121). Along with ethnic diversity, Stegner claims that the historical record shows how these cowhands lived a “life of hardship” that “blunt[ed] their sensibilities to their own experiences,” as they do not “adorn” or “tell their stories in Technicolor” (138). Instead of the embellishment surrounding the mythic Cowboy, the historical cowhand, according to Stegner, “record[s]” his exploit as “*an ordeal by weather*. The manner of recording

is laconic, deceptively matter of fact. *It does not give much idea of how it feels to ride sixty miles on a freezing and exhausted pony, or how cold thirty below is when a fifty-mile wind is driving it into your face, or how demoralizing it is to be lost in a freezing fog where north, south, east, west, even up and down, swim and shift before the slitted and frost-struck eyes*” (138 italics mine). In this space between myth and history and myth and experience, the *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner* proposes to deconstruct the mythic Cowboy figure and Cowboy Code by differentiating the mythic and universal from the actual, the historic, and the experiential. In the two stories in *Section III*, Stegner attempts to de-mythologize the Cowboy by stripping him of his exceptionalism, superiority, and individual heroics in order to rescue from the Myths the values of the cowhand—such as courage, self-reliance, and competence—that he wants to retain for the modern westerner.

In the distance between the myth and the reality of the cowboy, Stegner locates the constructedness of the Cowboy culture that shapes the American cultural imaginary’s view of the American West. In the two stories that follow “Specifications for a Hero,” the *writer Stegner* unravels the reality of the cowhand discovered in his historical research from the *myth* of the Cowboy that permeates American culture not through history but through “invention” or story (WW 138). Through story he can use realistic description, narrative, and character to show the *memoirist* and “misdirected” reader “what it was like” to be a cowhand in Cypress Hills and how unlike the Cowboy icon this is (138). Through a place-based, literary realism or what he calls in the 1960’s essays “another kind of western

story,” Stegner de-mythologizes the heroic, nostalgic, and romanticized Cowboy hero of the mythic West.

To make this shift in genres, from memoir and history to story, Stegner employs a strategy similar to what he did at the end of Wolf Willow’s Section 1 when he transitioned from memoir to history: he positioned the *memoirist* and the “misdirected” reader as “listeners” to the *historian Stegner* telling the history of Cypress Hills as it “might have told” (WW 36). Now, the *historian Stegner* encourages the “misdirected” reader and *memoirist* to listen to the story the *writer Stegner* will tell. He says, “if we want to know... how it feels” to be a Cypress Hills cowhand “we had better see it” through the perspective of an outsider, a naïve youth filled with romantic visions of being a cowboy (138 italics mine). By invoking the communal “we,” Stegner creates a complicit relationship between the listeners (reader, *memoirist*, and *historian*) and the *writer Stegner* regarding the narrative stance of the stories to come, asking them to share the desire to know “what it was like” (138) in Cypress Hills to be a cowhand in the winter of the “blue snow” in 1906 (137). In the specificity of the sensory and the experiential, Stegner challenges the universal, the romantic, and the nostalgic aspects of the Myths and the mythic Cowboy hero.

Just as he validated his memories in the fragrance of the “native” wolf willow bush found in his childhood home, so Stegner attempts to authenticate his version of the cowhand in his experiences in a western place and the historical record of others who lived in this place. Thus the *writer Stegner* informs the *memoirist* and “misdirected” reader that his characters are drawn from Corky Jones, one of the town’s first inhabitants and noted in the Acknowledgements; from a cowhand the child-Stegner listened to at the

Lazy-S bunkhouse; and from “something of” (WW 138) that child Stegner who felt “black envy” (130) toward those who exhibited the “specifications for a hero.” By suggesting that his fiction is located in the experiential, the place, the actual, and the history of Cypress Hills, he advocates a realist, place-based western writing drawn from the kinship he has with the place of his childhood and those associated with it—Corky, the cowhand, the child-Stegner, the historical others—that enable him to “know it right” and to tell “properly” his story (112).

### The Cowboy Story: Revealing the substance of its truth

Stegner opens Section III of Wolf Willow with a passage from Joseph Conrad’s “Preface to The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’” that aligns Stegner’s objectives in this section with Conrad’s for capturing what Conrad calls the truth of a subject. According to Conrad, an author can take an intangible subject in the social world (“a moment of courage” for instance) that through the author’s description of it can suggest “a passing phase of life” and “reveal the substance of its truth” and thus successfully connect the reader to a larger humanity in the “visible” or tangible everyday world of the present (WW 125). In Section III, Stegner turns to literature and the literary realism he advocates in the 1960’s essays as the western regionalist writer’s approach to reclaim and revision the westerner’s story. In the two stories, “Genesis” and “Carrion Spring,” he uses the realities of the ordinary cowhand in order to “reveal” what he might call the mythic Cowboy’s “substance of its truth,” a “truth” the Myths have warped or

taken as their own. Just as the *memoirist Stegner* uncovered through memory a destructive and prejudicial Cowboy culture in “Specifications for a Hero,” so the *writer Stegner* locates in the historical roots of the mythic Cowboy “*what it was like* on the Whitemud River range to be a cowhand (138 italics mine). In his recovery of the working cowhand that is the mythic Cowboy’s origin, Stegner tries to adjust or correct the Myth’s Cowboy narrative for modern readers, westerners, and the American cultural imaginary so that his cowboy narrative can function as a “usable past” for the *memoirist Stegner*, the “misdirected” reader, and America.

While he seeks to render what he considers the “truth” of this historical period through the two stories in this chapter, Stegner’s source for this imaginative representation remains the history of the place and the memories he has recovered in his personal past and Cypress Hills’ historical past. Selecting story as the discourse from which to contest the culturally dominant narrative of the mythic Cowboy situates Stegner’s Other West within the discourse of the Myths. From the position of insider, westerner, and western writer, Stegner claims his narrative authority over the “misdirected” reader. In his 1965 essay, “On the Writing of History,” Stegner describes his reasons for relating this piece of Cypress Hills’ history through story: “When I came to write about the open-range cattle industry, I was irresistibly driven to write it as fiction, as a typical story rather than as an expository summary. *I thought I could get more truth into a slightly fictionalized story* of the winter that killed the cattle industry on the northern plains than I could into any summary” (209-210, emphasis mine). By aligning his intent to “get more truth” regarding the Cowboy story with the Conrad excerpt, Stegner suggests, as does Conrad, that literature can convey “truths” about life

that other modes cannot. The literary realism he uses in the stories grounds his fiction in the local, experiential, specific, and historical that the nostalgia, heroics, and romanticism of the Myths' singular story elide.

In the two stories in Section III, Stegner contrasts what he calls a “real” West of cowhands, cattle, and every day responsibilities against a “mythic” West of gunfighters and Indian fighters, high noon shoot outs, rescues of women and children, and the lone horseman heading off into the mountain sunset after fulfilling his obligation to protect the civilization from which he rides away. According to Slotkin and others, this cultural image of the mythic Cowboy emerged from Wister’s The Virginian: Horseman of the Plains, dime novelists, western formula fiction writers, Hollywood western films and television series, and other forms of mass culture, such as the Marlboro Man of cigarette advertising fame that began in 1954.<sup>5</sup> Mitchell claims that the Cowboy hero emerged at the end of the nineteenth century and represented on the one hand an escape from middle-class obligations in the Victorian era as well as the medium through which the era practiced the “construction of masculinity and the making of men” against a disappearing frontier landscape and against its notions of womanhood (Westerns 27). Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence in Rodeo: An Anthropologist Looks at the Wild and the Tame (1982) says that, “over time, the figure of the cowboy seems to have traversed a path further and further from cattle, even to the point of becoming an ‘urban cowboy’ today” (267). However, Americans and others, she argues, continue to see the cowboy as representing his

original form despite the fact that very little of his original reality remains in today's modern world.

In "Genesis" and "Carrion Spring," Stegner engages with and contests the cultural-literary-historical-geographical meaning of the mythic Cowboy narrative. He re-visions the behaviors of the western man by having his cowboys engage with the western landscape differently from the mythic Cowboy hero. In his conversations with Etulain, Stegner explains why he thought the figure of the cowboy so enamored Americans: "He's everybody's fantasy for one thing" and comes with a "whole set of trappings, dress, mannerisms" (Conversations 153). He embodies, says Stegner, "the myth of rugged individualism, freedom, adventure, ... of being out alone with nature in wild colorful places" that America cherishes, and even more so as its wild lands disappear. The mythic Cowboy, in his view, represents for Americans "a continuing legacy of spaciousness and an illusion of independence and rugged individualism" that are tied to America's national sense of self (163). "I'm afraid," he says, "that the romantic imagination has taken the West, and it's probably never going to give it back" (152). He attributes much of the western myth in literature to Wister's Red Men and White: Salvation and Other Western Classics (1895) and The Virginian (1902).<sup>6</sup> Stegner states that "out of the imagination" of Wister, as fed by his adulation for the cowboys he experienced on his trips to Wyoming and discussions with his friends, Roosevelt and Frederic Remington, Wister created a "knight errant" or "chivalric kind of figure" that writers since have inherited and confront when they write about the West (Conversations 153). Wister's narrative created a significant distance between the actual working-cowhand and the mythic cowboy-knight and locked the western story, western characters

(male and female), western themes, and the western landscape into a frozen Wild West past spatiality.<sup>7</sup> Constructed from observation and interaction with working cowhands during Wister's time as manager of a Wyoming ranch for absentee eastern landlords and his periodic visits to the West, Wister's cowboy figure represents cultural values and situations Wister believed had been lost to the white-male, Anglo-American living in an industrialized, urban America at the turn of the nineteenth century, particularly the frontier space upon which the American exists as conqueror and thus serves as representative of America's exceptionalism.

The gravity of this lost wild, rugged western world for Wister is similar to the loss Turner associates with the passing of the frontier. For Wister, as he told his readers in The Virginian's preamble, his horseman was the "last romantic figure upon our soil" (12) who "rides in historic yesterday" (11). By aligning his cowboy hero with "Columbus" (12), the early frontier "pioneers of the land" (13), and the colonial state of Virginia and Thomas Jefferson, Etulain claims that Wister re-positions America's pastoral vision and frontier exceptionalism from an earlier, agrarian America to the western spatiality of the Wild West and open-range western lands of the late 1800s (Telling 68). In Mitchell's view, Wister defines his hero through the landscape he inhabits. He is a part of the landscape, yet rises above it, and, in his mastery of the natural landscape, he exhibits the necessary self-restraint, independence, strength, and skills that Wister and Roosevelt saw endangered by Victorian society yet necessary to conquer the challenges that industrialization, immigration, and urbanization posed (173).



Wister enhanced for his audience the nostalgia for the past and romanticized what was lost by claiming for his novel the status of “historical novel” because it “pictures an era and personifies a type” (12) in the same way, he argues, that Silas W. Mitchell’s Hugh Wynne, Free Quaker: Sometime Brevet Lieutenant-Colonel on the Staff of his Excellency General Washington (1896), William Dean Howells’ The Rise of Silas Lapham (1885), Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter (1850), and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly (1852) capture through “imaginary figures . . . faithfully a day and a generation” (12). He coupled his nostalgia and historicized setting with a disgust for the present, modern world, themes Stegner claims in the 1960’s essays remain prevalent in the westerns of his contemporaries.<sup>8</sup> In both stories, but especially “Genesis,” Stegner rejects Wister’s romanticized, nostalgic, and mythic view of the Cowboy by emphasizing the everyday realities of the working cowhand who was also Wister’s historical and experiential source and by disallowing his cowhands any mastery over the landscape they inhabit while retaining values of courage, endurance, and self-reliance.

#### “Genesis”: The Making of an “Authentic Cowboy”

While connections between Stegner’s “Genesis” and Wister’s The Virginian do not seem necessarily apparent, the two stories share several significant similarities and divergences. In 1902, Wister “created” for his readers an image and ideology of the Cowboy drawn from first-hand observations of Wyoming’s cowhands, the cultural ideology of his friends Roosevelt and Remington, and his response to what he saw as the

issues of his present. Some fifty years later, Stegner “deconstructs” this cultural icon embedded in America’s cultural memory by returning to its roots, the working cowhand and the economic realities of the cowhand’s life. Both Wister and Stegner define America’s values and characteristics through the relationship their cowboy protagonists have to other men, to the land, to the wild, and to animals. In his preamble to The Virginian, Wister argues for the story’s place in American fiction as an historical novel and claims to have constructed his western characters from first-hand observations and interaction with real working cowhands in the West. Similarly, Stegner claims in Wolf Willow’s “Specifications for a Hero,” the 1964 essay “On the Writing of History,” and Conversations that his characters are composites of actual people from historical records, interviews with old-timers, and personal experiences in a western landscape. Both Wister’s The Virginian and Stegner’s “Genesis” concern people and events at a large ranch with an absent owner who entrusts the operations or money-making of the ranch to its foreman. Stegner’s foreman, Ray Henry, is a Virginian-like figure in position, leadership, and the respect he garners from the men, and he is a newlywed with a young bride named Molly. However, as Stegner’s two stories make clear, his Ray and Molly have a very different future from that of Wister’s Virginian and Molly, which is one of the points Stegner is making in his revised western narrative.

Another critical difference between the two authors lies in how each views the western spatiality. For Wister, the American West is the setting in which other (non-western) ideas work out their tensions; thus at The Virginian’s

conclusion, the place (the West) is only a back drop to the exceptionalism and superiority earned there, to the fulfillment of the Virginian's responsibilities, and to the challenges he will face elsewhere as proprietor of a mine and in partnership with the Judge. For Stegner, the West is more than setting or scenery; it is a specific geographic place, a character, and something with which to contend. Additionally, the literal difference between Wister's American West and Stegner's Canadian West allows Stegner to use the Canadian West as counterpoint to the violence and destructiveness he sees in America's western past and to demonstrate how the American West has shaped his and others' western identity. Therefore, the western landscape has a role and a presence in his stories that Wister does not assign to his western setting.

While Wister presented his themes—the exceptionalism of the cowboy hero, the necessary use of violence, and the necessity of a hierarchical and aristocratic social order—through the Virginian's interactions with Molly, Steve, Trampas, and the innocent eastern narrator, Stegner addresses similar themes in "Genesis" through his young narrator, Lionel "Rusty" Cullen, a naïve, English immigrant to Cypress Hills. Through Rusty's relationships with the foreman Ray; the ethnically diverse, but more experienced cowhands; the foreman's wife, Molly; the elder "wolfer" and his son; and, most important, with the western landscape, Stegner elucidates his story's themes. Moreover, the very absence in "Genesis" of the gunfight between hero and villain, cattle rustling, and a hanging found in Wister's story de-mythologizes the world of the cowboy as the *writer Stegner* makes explicit in his story what Wister chose to withhold in his novel: the workday responsibilities of the men, the role of the cattle drive, and the role of the cowboy in the West's economy. For example, The Virginian omits the events of the

cattle drive from Medicine Bow, Montana, to Chicago, Illinois. Wister acknowledges this event only as back-drop for the Virginian's telling his frog-legs tall-tale during a train stop as the men return to Montana, a tale that emphasizes the Virginian's superiority over the other men. In Wister's world, the Virginian's superiority over others can occur in any context.

Stegner, on the other hand, re-writes the narrative of the Cowboy by undercutting the expectations of the "misdirected" reader and the American cultural imaginary's acceptance of the popular Cowboy hero of formulaic westerns and films that portray the grandeur, heroism, and individualism of the Cowboy in the Myths' representation of the West. He puts the business of ranching and the everyday work-world of the cowhand in the forefront of his story by describing the cowhand's routines, tasks, skills, equipment, and needs to suggest the cowboy's placidness, or the contextualized nature of his behaviors. According to Mitchell, the historical cowboy was a laborer or a hired hand who was often underfed and undereducated (25); however, the image of his assumed freedom from family ties, work, and social obligations acted as a cultural escape from the pressures of urban industrialization and production line labor in turn-of-the-century America as well as today (26). In "Genesis," Stegner replaces the romanticized ideal of the Cowboy with the everyday, contextualized reality of being a cowhand in 1906-1907 Saskatchewan. He uses the genre of the "coming of age" story, or Rusty's initiation into the world of the working cowhand, to detail the changes in Rusty's awareness of his wrong-headed perceptions of what it means to be a cowboy. By recovering the monotonous routine of the cowhand,

his role as laborer, and in the economy of the West his lesser position relation to the cow, the ranch-owner's property, Stegner recovers for his Other West what has been silenced by the Myths' romanticization of the Cowboy figure: the values of community, social responsibility, hard work, and camaraderie that can be a usable past for the modern westerner and America.

In contrast to Wister's voyeur, the eastern tenderfoot narrator, Stegner thrusts his naïve, youthful narrator, Rusty, into the action of the story to provide the reader with first-hand experiences and interpretations (though wrong-headed initially) of those experiences. The change in Rusty's and the reader's understanding of what it means to be an "authentic cowboy" is Stegner's aim in this story (WW 140). Like the *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner's* "misdirected," non-western reader, Rusty arrives in the West smitten by the "wonder" that colors the American cultural imaginary's infatuation with the iconic Cowboy; therefore, his head is "full of vague heroisms" (178) and he has "ambitions beyond any of them" (164). He has come to Cypress Hills to "enter manhood—or cowboyhood, manhood in Saskatchewan terms" (141). Even though he knows "practically nothing" (143) about being a cowhand, he characterizes himself as a "strong, bold, high-spirited, and ready for anything" youth (141) "on probation, under scrutiny" until he passes what he believes is "a test of some sort" that will give him the "self-assurance that he respected and envied" in the other cowhands and certify him a "cowboy" (143). Over a two week period in which Rusty and the experienced cowhands gather the ranch's herd before the winter of 1906 hits Cypress Hills, Rusty undergoes his "test"—an "ordeal by weather" (138)—that reveals to him, the *memoirist*, and the "misdirected" reader what it means to be an "authentic cowboy" (140). Through Rusty's

experiences, the *memoirist* and misdirected” reader have the “wonder rubbed off” (138) as each learns more about the difference between a mythic Cowboy and an “authentic cowboy” (140).

In “Genesis,” Stegner not only deflates the notion of a mythic “cowboyhood,” but he replaces it with values of social responsibility, community, and hard work that come from Rusty and the other cowhands’ engagement with each other and the western landscape. Stegner demythologizes the Cowboy’s universalized characteristics by grounding them in the behaviors that emanate from the experiences of the cowhands in a specific, historicized place. As Stegner illustrates, Rusty’s notions of “cowboyhood” have been shaped by the Myths. He highlights this tension between myth and reality by depicting Rusty as a writer who, like the formulaic western story, furthers the expectations of his eastern and European audience. In a journal “begun ... on the train coming west” (WW 143) and in letters home, Rusty writes what he believes he is expected to say: “to fill pages with cowboys and Indians and wild game and the adventures and observations of a well-educated young gentleman in the North American wilderness” (170) even though he encounters no cowboys, no Indians, nor any wild game. He believes he is “liv[ing] a dream in which everything went right,” for within “twelve [hours off the train], he was sleeping in the T-Down bunkhouse, an *authentic cowboy*,” or ready to learn how to be one (140 italics mine). In Rusty’s view, the fall cattle round-up is an “apprenticeship in the skills of survival” (161) that he has yet to achieve as the “greenhorn, the outcast tenderfoot,” for he has not yet “*personally* turned a stampeding herd, or rode

seventy-five miles and back in twenty-four hours to bring a doctor,.... Or plucked somebody from under the horns of a crazy longhorn steer” (162). Not only must Rusty attain certain cowboy skills to achieve manhood, but the Myths claim he must do it alone.

He must

challenge the country *alone*—some journey, some feat, some action that would demand of him every ounce of what he knew.... There would be a real testing, and a real proof, and the certainty ever afterward of what one was.... he thought of it in the same way he might have thought of sailing a small boat *singlehanded* across the Atlantic, or making a *one-man* expedition to climb Everest. It would be something big and it would crack every muscle and nerve and he would have to stand up to it *alone*. (161 italics mine)

To be admitted to this exclusionary and hierarchal club that identifies one as the “best” of all men, Rusty believes he must demonstrate some “special excellence” (219). Stegner provides Rusty his “test hoped-for, met, and passed” (165) that will signal his entrance into “cowboyhood” (143) in the fall round-up of the 1906-1907 winter of “blue snow” in a way other than what Rusty and the “mis-directed” ready might expect (137).

In keeping with the parameters of the mythic West, Stegner separates the realms of men and women in the western spatiality from the very start of the story. As the men depart for the round-up, Rusty contrasts the situation of Molly Henry, the foremen’s new wife whose only appearance in “Genesis” is at its opening, with that of the men. Using traditional dichotomies, the men are associated with the outdoors, the wild, and freedom and Molly is tied to the domestic, home, and civilization. Stegner’s inclusion of Molly,

the western woman, signals his further revisioning of the monomythic Cowboy narrative.<sup>9</sup> As the men depart the ranch house, Rusty declares that it was a “lonesome piece of luck for a girl married only three weeks to be left now, with no help except a crippled handy man and no company except the Mountie on his weekly patrol from Eastend, and no woman nearer than twenty-five miles” (141). Molly’s life is not the domestic home-making bliss the Myths portray but is instead, as the writer Stegner portrays, a lonely and hard life. In “Carrion Spring,” the short story to follow, Stegner uses Molly’s story to challenge further the role of the western woman in the West’s monomythic narrative.

In contrast to Molly’s confinement to the ranch, Stegner positions, as do the Myths, the wide-open, wild space Rusty has described in his journal and letters as the spatiality of men. However, as Rusty gets initiated into the world of the working cowhand, Stegner disassembles the mythic West to reveal a more realistic and historicized West. For Rusty, the men’s departure is “like a print of *Life on the Western Plains*” that he coats in romantic and pastoral grandeur: the sun’s rays in the early morning make the horizon “dazzle,” leave the willows “gilded,” and the ranch house “glazed” in sun (WW 139). In Rusty’s view, he and the other cowhands are likened to a “medieval procession . . . bound for adventure,” though they “carried no lances or pennons” (140), which reiterates the Myths’ representation of the cowboy as an Anglo-Saxon male astride a horse in a pristine wild, open, and natural western space. Stegner disrupts this view of the Cowboy by describing the motley, ethnically diverse cowhands of his story: Jesse, the elder and cook; Rusty, the young English immigrant; Slippers, Little



Horn, Buck, and Ed Spurlock as his itinerant cowhands; the Indian cowhand, Panguingue<sup>10</sup>; and the wolfer Schultz, a Mountain Man and “exterminator” of the kind Stegner discussed in Section II; and Schultz’s unintelligible and semi-wild son who will figure prominently in “Carrion Spring.”

In “Genesis,” the *writer Stegner* exposes the realities of the cowhand’s life that Wister’s story and the Myths obscure by focusing on the tasks, work, expectations, and dangers of the cowhand’s life. It is neither glamorous nor heroic as Rusty soon finds out: “what had been an adventure *revealed itself as a job*” (WW 149 italics mine). The reader comes to understand through Rusty that a cowboy is a working cowhand who is “expected” to “climb in the saddle, on a new pony ... and ride, and ride, and ride” (149). Within the economics of the ranch, cowhands are, as the foreman Ray says, “in this business to raise calves.” They are not “more valuable than a calf” and their job is not to “lose any, if work’ll save ’em” (168). Thus the days become for Rusty a “procession of trials: icy nights, days when a bitter wind lashed and stung the face ..., mornings when ... they rode with eyes closed to slits.... tears leaking through swollen and smarting lids.... Their skin and lips cracked as crisp as the skin of a fried fish .... All the boys had spills, chasing longhorns through rough country and across the icy flats; and they wore the horses, already weak and thin, to the bone” (152). As Richard C. Poulsen and others have shown,<sup>11</sup> the life of the cowhand is “stark and bland compared with the popular image decorated by the media” (qtd in Johnson’s Hunger 154). Indeed, as Michael Johnson explains, the cowhand “was a member of a team dedicated to the herd—not a carefree wanderer. His world was one of dull utility centered” around a castrated animal—the steer—and “directed by a commercial trail” that took the product to market

(Hunger 154). Typically he was “modestly educated, not just a non-Indian child of nature. His mobility and solitude (and bachelorhood) were facts of his existence—though seldom glamorous ones. He tended to be young ... with a solid measure of self-discipline” (Hunger 153). Stegner’s “Genesis” provides the reader through Rusty’s fictional experiences on the cattle drive a realistic portrayal of “how it feels” to be a cowhand (138).

To emphasize the significant gap between the historical cowhand and the mythic Cowboy, Stegner’s itinerant but seasoned cowhand, Little Horn, delivers a rather long, playful, and ironic speech on the opportunities afforded by “cow country and the cattle business” (WW 171). This speech occurs while the men are trapped inside a tent during the winter’s storm, which illustrates the men’s inability to master their western landscape as the Cowboy Myth suggests they can. According to Little Horn, “She’s a real good business.... There was millions in it. All you do, you just get some cows and a few bulls, and you turn’em out on the range” (171). Stegner embeds in Little Horn’s irony the significant challenges and dangers to the cowhand that the Myths gloss, such as the work necessary to care for the cattle, the physical dangers to the men that must tend them, and the natural dangers of weather and wolves that can decimate the herd, which is the rancher’s investment and property.

Further emphasizing the cowhands’ predicament, Stegner reveals the historical reality of many early western ranches—they were operated by absentee owners. While Wister aligned his foreman with the interests of the owners, Stegner aligns his foreman, Ray, is closer to that of the cowhands, who are mere

laborers and of lesser value than the property they tend. Stegner's emphasis on the cowhands' role calls attention to Wister's Virginian and how Wister hid the economic situation of the cowboy by having the notions of property, ownership, and western justice outweigh the Virginian's personal friendship with Steve whom he hangs for cattle rustling. Stegner's friend Bernard DeVoto exposed the economic tensions behind the Johnson County War that Wister used as a source for his 1955 Harper's article, "The Birth of Art," that Stegner references in the 1960's essays. What Rusty and the "misdirected" reader come to learn is that most "owners [were] off in Aberdeen or Toronto or Calgary or Butte ... [and] would never come out themselves and risk what they demanded of any cowboy for twenty dollars a month" (193). With each passing day of the storm, Stegner shows Rusty's energy, enthusiasm, and "vague notions of heroism" being whittled away by the struggles he and the other men have in performing their job for their absent owner (178).

Stegner illustrates through Rusty's persistent belief in the notions of "cowboyhood" how difficult it is to defeat the Cowboy Myth in the American cultural imaginary. Despite his acknowledgement that the "adventure" is in actuality a demanding "job," Rusty continues to believe that emulating the Myths' idea of rugged individualism will earn him "cowboyhood." As Rusty tries to define himself against the western landscape using the values of the Cowboy Code as his standard, the *writer Stegner* corrects Rusty's belief in the Myth by juxtaposing the Myth's ideal of rugged individualism against Rusty's growing awareness of his dependency on his fellow "company" of cowhands for survival during the winter storm. Not only does Stegner's plot highlight the men's failure to conquer the western landscape, which according to

Mitchell is used in Wister and the formulaic western to “define the essential attributes of manhood” (175), but he uses this tension to emphasize their role as laborers. The cowhands’ failure to gather the fall calves for the winter feeding means they cannot be fattened for market, the absent ranch owner cannot earn a profit, and the cowhands will not receive their salary. In the business of ranching, as Little Horn’s comments make clear, the survival of the herd is paramount to the success of the ranch.

Stegner’s focus on the realities of the working cowhand demythologizes the wide-open space of the range, or the cowboy’s working environment, and in the process the western landscape becomes more than setting. In Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture (1977), John Cawelti notes that “the symbolic landscape of the western formula is a field of action that centers upon the point of encounter between civilization and wilderness, East and West, settled society and lawless openness” (193). Stegner’s setting exposes these tensions and associates the cowhands in “Genesis” with the wild, but as victims of an indifferent universe rather than tamers of it as the Myths propose. As Johnson observed thirty years after Cawelti in Hunger for the Wild, “most, maybe all, images of the cowboy characterize him somehow in conjunction with wildness” (151). What Wister and others did with their observations of the cowboy in fiction, sculpture, and painting, according to Johnson, was to make them “wilder than they were” and suggestive of “a range of qualities—recklessness, perseverance, what have you” (153).<sup>12</sup> Thus the mythic Cowboy figure, states Johnson, is a man “perfectly suited in temper and

appearance to the natural milieu” and capable of dominating not only the environment but also wild animals (152). In “Genesis,” Stegner subverts this mythic notion with the inability of Rusty and the men to keep the herd together (there are always strays) during the storm.

Furthermore, Stegner debunks the romanticized lure of the wild through Rusty’s changing view of the wolfers, Schulz and his son, who are linked to an historicized frontier in their behaviors and occupation and to the Myths’ notions of exceptionalism and individualism within the frontier (wild) landscape. In Section II, the *historian Stegner* described the wolfers’ participation in the Cypress Hills Massacre and their service to the cattle industry and (absentee) ranch owner. Their function, he said, was to eradicate the wolf (what is wild) as a predator of range cattle (what is tame) by leaving poisoned traps that too often killed more than the wolves. In the wolfer, the *historian Stegner* locates the genesis of the mythic values of rugged individualism, self-reliance, and stoicism. They are, he states, the “offspring of the violent frontier” (WW 80), possessing “ferocious virtues” meant for an earlier time (75). Underneath their rugged individualism lies a dangerous, violent, and extreme individualism that Stegner suggests threatens what is civil, democratic, and natural, as seen in their poisoning the environment and their participation in the violent Cypress Hills Massacre. In American literature, Stegner claims they are similar to Crevecoeur’s semi-wild pioneer family in his essay “The American Farmer,” Cooper’s Bush family, and A.B. Guthrie’s Boone Caudill in The Big Sky. The danger they represent to society resides, in Stegner’s view, to their privileging the self in a context beyond its historical time or western frontier when they needed to put the self foremost to survive.

In “Genesis,” Rusty’s perceptions of the Schulzes illustrate the romantic lure of western individualism and exceptionalism that are a concern of Stegner’s in the 1960’s essays in regard to the representation of these values in both the literary and formulaic westerns. Initially, Rusty admires the wolfer Schulz and his nameless fifteen-year-old son, viewing Schulz as the “survivor of an earlier stage of Plains life” and “env[ying] Schulz’s boy brought up in lonely cabins, skimpy cowchip campfires on the prairies, familiarity with wild animals, the knack and habit of casual killing” (WW 144). While Rusty “*admired the wildness and the obvious competence of the wolfer*” (147 italics mine), the other cowhands are much less enamored by Schulz, who chooses to sleep with the animals instead of the men, a practice Rusty believes demonstrates that Schulz “didn’t run with the pack, he was of an older and tougher breed” (162). To de-mythologize Rusty’s misplaced notions of wildness and competence, Stegner has Jesse, the cook and elder cowhand whom Rusty also associates with this “earlier stage of Plains life” (144), tell a tall-tale that suggests that the wolfers are capable of cannibalism (148), leading Rusty to acknowledge he is not “sorry to see them go” when they break camp the next morning (149).

Although the wolfers cause Rusty (and the *memoirist* and “misdirected” reader) to acknowledge a dangerous, darker side to the Myths’ privileging of individual freedoms and exceptionalism, Stegner uses Rusty’s lingering belief that he must demonstrate to the others how he can be a lone, self-reliant, rugged and undefeatable Cowboy “hero” to show how deeply embedded in the American cultural imaginary these notions of the self are that the Cowboy Myth advocates.

The more Rusty embraces the view that heroic action is what is necessary to make him an “authentic cowboy” (WW 140), the more he perceives each new setback as his “punishment” for “his so-far failure to perform heroically” (162). Despite his realization that each day brings “only more cold hard work” (150) in a landscape that “obliterate[s] their little human noises” (151), the more Rusty considers these “discomforts ... privately an outrage” (165) because “he knew the answer” to being a cowboy was that he had “to be invincibly strong, indefinitely enduring, uncompromisingly self-reliant, to depend on no one, to contain within himself every strength and every skill” (164). Stegner’s story suggests that as long as Rusty accepts the Cowboy narrative’s notions of individual exceptionalism and rejects the values of communal cooperation and responsibility to the community—values Stegner espoused in *Cowie*, *Dumont*, *Macleod*, *Walsh*, and *Sitting Bull*—neither Rusty nor the cowhands will survive the storm. What “Genesis” expresses is Stegner’s rather bleak estimation of the ability of humans to see their way beyond the needs of the individual and the violence and destruction to the self and the Other that the Cowboy Myth endorses. Rusty’s unrelenting determination to hold on to his notions of “cowboyhood” at the expense of his and the others’ survival reveals the extent to which Stegner views the cultural dominance of the Cowboy Myth in America’s national ideology. In Section IV, Stegner will attribute the roots of the West’s myths to America’s cultural rhetoric of national and personal progress and demonstrate how the traits of America’s Cowboy culture was furthered by America’s literature, its cultural Myths, and the American cultural imaginary’s unquestioned acceptance of them.

In the context of the earlier sections of Wolf Willow, “Genesis” also offers a counter-narrative, a correction, or alternative to the Myths. In previous chapters, Stegner

situated his challenge to the Myths in historical events and figures who illustrated compromise, collaboration, possibility, and compassion, or what the western Myths silence. In “Genesis,” he locates an alternative narrative in the actions of the cynical cowhand, Ed Spurlock, and the foreman, Ray Henry, and what each “teaches” Rusty about social responsibility, cooperation, and compassion—the core values his Other West privileges. Beginning with the procession from the ranch, the *writer Stegner* paired Rusty with Spurlock, the only other cowhand, except the foreman Ray and the old timer Jesse, who is always referred to by his formal name instead of a nickname. Spurlock represents the cowhand laborer; he is here to earn his money for completing a job. From Spurlock’s perspective, Rusty is one of many “little English punks... coming out *pretending* to be cowhands” (WW 175 italics mine), and he accuses Rusty of being physically delicate, a “fawncy” dude or “remittance man” (174).<sup>13</sup> When Rusty takes a spill trying to catch a stray calf, Spurlock accuses Rusty of an incompetence that makes his job harder: “You sure chose a hell of a time to get piled, I’ll say that. You fall off and we lose the whole God damn herd” (155). Since Rusty considers himself “a man with the right stuff in him” (155) who needs only the opportunity to demonstrate he has “every strength and every skill” (164) to be a Cowboy, Spurlock’s aspersions cut to the heart of Rusty’s and the “misdirected” readers’ notions of the Cowboy’s exceptionalism, or the “specifications” Rusty must exhibit to be an “authentic cowboy.”

Stegner reveals Rusty’s and by extension the “misdirected” readers’ continued misunderstanding of what a non-mythic cowboy is through Rusty’s



rejection of Ray's assistance and Rusty's view of Spurlock as a western "villain," Stegner shows Rusty's initial "rage" at the perceived "callousness" of his companions when "no one came around with help or sympathy" and feelings of self-pity are misplaced as Ray's offer to take his night ride so Rusty can recuperate indicates (152). And even though Rusty labels Spurlock a "literary badman ... wearing black gloves and black guns like a villain in The Virginian" (175) and believes Spurlock "could not teach him something" (164), the *writer Stegner* shows that Spurlock instructs Rusty in several key ways: it is Spurlock who questions how civilized Schulz's boy is since he never talks, who tells Ray that the storm is not cow-herding weather, who foreshadows the story's conclusion when he says, "I bet we end up by leaving the whole herd to scatter" (168), and who becomes the catalyst for Rusty's eventual rejection of the Cowboy Myth's exceptionalism for the sake of the community's need for social responsibility.

The predicament Stegner faces as a "western" writer is how to rescue from the Myths certain values and traits—such as a "stiff upper lip" code, courage, competency, and self-reliance—he considers important and to a degree necessary to his Other West without merely aping the heroic and exceptional connotations that these words convey. He attempts this rescue in the story's resolution, though not as successfully as might be desired given when he declares that Rusty's actions are viewed as only "chores" in the western spatiality instead of the "heroics" they would be elsewhere (WW 219), a comparison that continues to privilege the actions and behaviors in the western spatiality just as the Myths do. Within the "ordeal by weather" (138) he has used as the story's historicized and realistic context, the *writer Stegner* has been illustrating that the foreman Ray and the cowhands have been doing their job, which within the ranching business is to

raise and fatten for market the absentee owner's cattle and to understand that, as employees, they are not "more valuable than a calf" (168). However, after a blizzard shreds their tent, leaving the men exposed to cold and death as Spurlock had projected, Ray tells the men to "turn'em loose" to prevent having "a corral full of dead ones," a decision Rusty views as "wrong against every principle and every expectation" of cowboyhood (189-190). The *writer Stegner* interjects in the narrative to indicate "it has been *human foolishness* that has brought the cattle" to their ghost-like condition: "Driven all day by cowboys, and every other night by blizzards, they have eaten hardly anything for days. Left alone, ... they could at least have gnawed willows" (193 italics mine). Within the economy of ranching and the paradigm of the Cowboy narrative, Rusty's interpretation is correct, as the men are not acting like Cowboys if they turn the cows loose. But as Stegner's comment reveals, Ray's decision is the correct one: men are more valuable than animals, both man and animal deserve a chance to survive, and they are not "giving up" as Rusty believes, as it is only "human foolishness" or the Myths that lead one to think otherwise.

To counteract the Myths' individualism and notions of exceptionalism, Stegner symbolically and literally binds the weakened men together in a social order that addresses the values he articulates in this section and the next in Wolf Willow and in the 1960's essays. With the nearly dead cattle released to survive on the open range, the men's survival becomes the story's focus. Even though the men are half-dead and battling "the blind force of nature" (WW 190), Rusty refuses to accept his own "frailty and impermanence" (161). To save the men,

Ray connects them with a lariat that becomes their literal lifeline during the storm, as they become the “herd” for which Ray as foreman is now responsible. Symbolically, the lariat rejects the exceptionalism of the lone, solitary cowboy figure inherent in the Myth of the West and institutes instead a relational dependency of one to the many in their struggle for survival. The lariat is Stegner’s symbol of communal responsibility in his *Other West* that challenges the exceptionalism the Cowboy Myth encourages. As an emblem of communal support and responsibility, Stegner will refer to it again in Section IV when the *memoirist Stegner* describes how his father and other men of the pioneer town string ropes from their homes to form a rescue line to the school house to retrieve the children trapped inside by a blinding blizzard. More importantly, Stegner refers to this same image in the 1960’s essays when he suggests that the “personal, family, and cultural chores” needing to be done by his contemporary western writers to “enlarge” western American literature beyond that of the mythic West and formulaic fiction are like the lariat in their being chores necessary to the survival of this community of writers and the “another kind of western story” they write (HMWW 201).

In “Genesis,” Stegner suggests that a commitment by Rusty and the men to the community is also needed. Stegner depicts this commitment by the cowhands as less than democratic. In *The Virginian*, Wister situates his foreman as a leader of men and the “best” of them all due to the special skills earned in the spatiality of the West. Stegner invests his foreman Ray with a special station that comes from the “burden of responsibility for both the men and the cattle” he accepts in his role as foreman and the wisdom gained from his experiences in this western spatiality that enable him to guide the cowhands to safety (WW 176). Instead of superiority over the others, Stegner’s Ray

demonstrates a kind of stewardship, even paternalism, that Comer associates with the characteristics of the Stegnerian hero. However, the *writer Stegner* shows Ray's superiority to be quite different from the kind Wister assigns the Virginian, who gains his through violence over others (Steve and Trampas) or attitudes of superiority (the frog tall-tale). In contrast, Stegner's Ray earns his "responsibility" through experience, the "respect," and desire of the men "to do well for him" (176), and the "inescapable example" he provides for how to act that are similar to how Stegner described his mother's actions as one of the "immune" in "Specifications" (184). Ray demonstrates, as does Stegner's mother, the application of a "stiff upper-lip" code that is tempered with compassion toward others.

In "Genesis," Stegner repudiates the individualistic heroism and exceptionalism of the Cowboy Myth, supplanting it with a Hemingway-esque world of hard work, male camaraderie, collective commitment, and compassion. It is a world that strips away Rusty's romanticized notions of "cowboyhood" and replaces them with the experiences and realities of being a cowhand. Stegner uses Rusty's attitude toward Spurlock and Ray's leadership to bring about Rusty's rejection of the Myths for a new understanding of self and his role toward others that he did "not to want to distinguish himself by heroic deeds" or "ever want to do anything alone again" (WW 219). When the men are joined by the lariat, Rusty is "furious" that Ray puts him beside Spurlock and commands him "to help him up" after a scuffle (198). Several days of brutal cold that threatens the men's survival causes Rusty to doubt Ray's leadership and become sullen, so that, when

Spurlock falls again, Rusty turns his back, thinking “what a beautiful and righteous and just thing it was that the one who did crack should be Spurlock” (207). However, Ray’s explanation that Spurlock is not weak or incompetent but smothering underneath a frozen muffler jolts Rusty into recognition that “this was how a man died” (208). Directed by Ray to “help” Spurlock to a nearby cabin while the others help with the wagon, Rusty comes to see Spurlock as an individual in his calling him by his first name when he pleads—“Please, Ed! Please, come on!” (212). The *writer Stegner* further rejects the Cowboy Myth’s idea of heroism by denying Rusty the opportunity to save Spurlock by himself. Only with the assistance of the Indian cowhand, Panguingue, can Rusty help Spurlock to safety.

Even though “Genesis” rejects the idea of Cowboy exceptionalism for the values of compassion and socially responsible camaraderie, Stegner retains for his cowhands other traits that tie his story to the mythic West. By the conclusion of “Genesis,” Rusty (and by implication the *memoirist* and the “misdirected” reader) has had the “wonder rubbed off” (WW 138) and no longer equates being an “authentic cowboy” with the iconic Cowboy figure (140). According to the Cowboy Myth, the cowhands have failed at their role, because, even though they are alive, they have lost the herd and the absentee owner’s profits. Suffering from hypothermia, severe frost-bite, and gangrene, Little Horn once again reminds Rusty, the reader, and the *memoirist* of the incongruities between the Cowboy and cowhand when he states, “there’s no business like the cow business to make a man healthy and active” (217). As the men recover from the storm, Rusty notes the “mystic smells of brotherhood” in the cabin (219). According to Comer and others, this scene evidences “a longing for love and camaraderie between men, a love not defined (or

less defined)” that is similar to what she claims Wister displays in The Virginian as he “lingeringly preserves the bonds between the Virginian and Steve and, more deep and formative still, between the Virginian and the ‘tenderfoot’ narrator” (Landscapes 161).<sup>14</sup> Even as this scene of male-bonding joins Rusty to the Cowboy Myth, the *writer Stegner* indicates that Rusty’s illusions of western heroism have been rejected as has no more desires to do “anything alone again” and has taken “a step in the *making of a cowhand*” (219 italics mine). Stegner completes Rusty’s rejection of the Cowboy’s exceptionalism by replacing it with an alternative narrative of compassion and social responsibility.

In the final scene of “Genesis,” Stegner still claims uniqueness for the western spatiality and the westerner that binds instead of frees his narrative from the western Myths. Although Rusty’s rescuing of Spurlock is characterized by the *writer Stegner* as something to be expected in this western locale—Rusty’s “sticking with Spurlock” was not “an act of special excellence,” however “tempting” it might be to consider it as such, “because it was what any of them would have done. To have done less would have been cowardice and disgrace”—the *writer Stegner* also claims that Rusty’s actions are an example of “*what would pass for heroics in a softer world was only chores around here*” (WW 219 italics mine). Even in his rejection of the Cowboy hero’s rugged individualism, exceptionalism, special knowledge, and superiority over others that the Cowboy Myth promotes for a “stiff upper lip” endurance tempered by a collective camaraderie (the lariat symbol) that advocates acting responsibly toward others (his mother’s code), Stegner maintains that the western space is not the “softer

world” of (eastern) others but a “western” place requiring different actions (“chores) from people (219). In this claim of difference, Stegner mirrors the Myths designation of the West as a “special place.” At the same time, the story “Genesis” as a whole critiques the exceptionalism and individualism the Cowboy Myth advances by historicizing the Cowboy’s origins and by exposing what the Cowboy Myth hides, which is human frailty. “Genesis” reiterates the values Stegner recovered in the stories of Cowie, DuMont, MacLeod, Walsh, and Sitting Bull—respect for the Other, community, compassion, and compromise—that he wants to reclaim as part of the western spatiality for his Other West.

#### “Carrion Spring”: The Wild, The Land, and The Woman

With the notion of the West as home to Virginian and Shane-like Cowboys who can mold the western environment to their will replaced by a more socially aware and collectively responsible figure at the conclusion of “Genesis,” Stegner turns his attention in the short story “Carrion Spring” to the Turnerian myth of western settlement he encountered as a “pioneer’s child” when his family homesteaded in Cypress Hills from 1914 through 1920 to focus on the gendered responses of men and women to the western spatiality (WW 15). In 1893, only twenty-one years before Stegner’s family arrived in Cypress Hills and only nine years before Wister published The Virginian, Turner presented his essay, “The Significance of the American Frontier,” to a group of historians meeting at the Chicago World’s Fair. In his essay, Turner re-contextualized a long-standing view of America and the western frontier as the “new city on the hill,” the new

Jerusalem, or the virginal garden waiting to be tilled through the lens of the cultural anxiety that Wister, Roosevelt, and others of the period felt toward an approaching turn-of-the-century American culture in transition from a land-based, agrarian economy to a laissez-faire, industrialized global power.<sup>15</sup> As scholars have shown, Turner's narrative has its roots in the Puritan jeremiad; Jeffersonian agrarianism and the promises of the Declaration; Franklin's practicality and ingenuity; and the Founding Fathers' vision of an ever-evolving democratic polity from the nation's engagement with a frontier spatiality. In his narrative, Turner invests the West with special significance related to America's emerging power, the uniqueness of the American character, and a nostalgia for a passing agrarian and yeoman farmer of Jeffersonian idealism. Turner's western frontier is a garden-like West that affords success and profit to the hard-working, replaces the wild frontier with a democratic civilization that advances the nation, and promises continual progress, bountiful resources, and improvements for the pioneer and an America engaged in the land's transformation from what is wild to the civilized.

Turner's narrative is closely aligned with America's cultural narrative of the American Dream that was particularly prominent in America's post-Civil War decades to early 1900s America. Its cultural power was evidenced in the influx of immigrants to America's shores and the number of existing citizens seeking to escape America's urban centers by going West to realize the promises of the Dream. In his parents, Stegner finds both the American's (his father, George) and the immigrant's (his mother, Hilda) stories and the hopes for achieving the promised opportunities and rewards their hard-work on the frontier will provide.



In the story of Ray and Molly Henry's future—the foreman and his new wife from “Genesis”—Stegner not only continues constructing the historical continuity the West's Myths deny but also critiques the settlement narrative that become his main focus in Section IV when he returns to history and memory to challenge Turner's narrative. While exceptionalism and conquest over the Other characterizes the Cowboy narrative, Stegner argues that ownership and transformation of the land, material success, and personal freedom are the promised outcomes of Turner's narrative, and these mythicized ideals have been as destructive to the westerner, the Other, and America as have the ideals and values of the Cowboy narrative.

In “Specifications” and “Genesis,” Stegner demonstrates through history, memory, and story how the Cowboy Myth hides issues of race, class, and gender in its promotion of white-male exceptionalism, individuation, and dominance over the western spatiality. In “Carrion Spring,” Stegner continues this critique through story rooted in history and memory to show how the Pioneer-Garden West Myths gloss the failure, hardship, and economic realities behind the opportunities, hope, and regeneration these Myths promise. Stegner tries to correct Turner's Pioneer-Garden West narrative, as he did Wister's Cowboy narrative in “Genesis,” by making obvious in his story “Carrion Spring” the economic, historical, and physical realities of settlement that pioneer men and women faced on the frontier West. According to cultural historian David Hamilton Murdoch in The American West: The Invention of a Myth (2001), “nowhere was the image so far from an often brutal reality than in the farmers' West. The great march of sturdy pioneers certainly took place, but not with the results that the received wisdom accorded it.... By the last decade of the century success already belonged to agri-

business; like mining and ranching, the future lay, not with the hardy individual, but with large-scale, industrialised enterprise” (6-7). From his earlier research for the Powell and Mormon books, Stegner was well aware of this historical disjunction between the Myths’ claims and the pioneers’ reality in the cultural narrative of western settlement.

With “Carrion Spring,” Stegner announces Wolf Willow’s thematic shift from Cypress Hills’ historical “one cowboy generation” and the Wisterian Cowboy narrative of Section III: The Whitemud River Range to white settlement of the West that is the focus of Section IV: Town and Country. He analyzes the Pioneer-Garden West Myths along seemingly traditional avenues in his presentation of Ray and Molly’s consideration of whether they will settle in Cypress Hills after the devastating 1906-1907 winter of “blue snow” depicted in “Genesis.” In their indecision on whether to become “stickers” (WW 280)—a word in Stegner’s lexicon carrying positive connotations, such as commitment, home, a respect toward the land and community, and a compassionated “stiff upper lip” philosophy—Stegner introduces a gendered West by bringing the western woman, Molly, into the traditionally male and masculine western spatiality and narrative. Opposed to Stegner’s “stickers” are the “wanderers” (241), or those who are selfish aggressors, destructive toward the land, and continuously seeking the fortune or the “big rock candy mountain” the mythic West promises.<sup>16</sup>

In “Carrion Spring,” Stegner specifically challenges the “future” West that Wister posited at the conclusion of The Virginian through the options Ray and Molly have before them to define their future on the frontier. Stegner unmasks

and makes explicit in Ray's attitudes toward the land the economic motivations concealed in the Virginian's conflicted response to the western landscape after his marriage that Stegner associates with America's destructive attitudes toward western lands.<sup>17</sup> And, in Molly's story, Stegner draws out for the *memoirist* and "misdirected" reader how Wister's story of the western man and eastern woman obscures the struggles pioneer women faced on the frontier, struggles he draws from his mother's experiences. At the conclusion of The Virginian, Wister's Molly and the Virginian have before them a future of prosperity and security. Wister suggests that, as a result of the Virginian's hard work, judicious investments, superior skills, and leadership of men, the Virginian has purchased oil fields and is elevated from foreman to partner in ownership of the ranch with Judge Henry that acknowledges the Virginian's abilities. As Forrest G. Robinson notes in Having It Both Ways: Self Subversion in Popular Western Classics (1993), these opportunities have remained behind the scenes in Wister's narrative and are exposed only at the end to reveal the Virginian as a western "captain of industry" or Wister's model for the new, industrial-society manager of the early 1900s because of the exceptional skills the Virginian has learned living on the western frontier, his intellectual and moral superiority over others, and his virility that negates the objections of the feminine to his western (and violent) ways. The cost of the Virginian's social and class advancement that his marriage signifies—the necessity now to be "responsible"—is the subordination of his desire to "mix with" the nature or the western spatiality that shaped him (Virginian 343).<sup>18</sup>

In "Carrion Spring," Stegner presents a different future for Ray and Molly by making apparent the economic challenges and personal sacrifices each will need to make

to settle on the frontier, thus exposing the costs behind the responsibility, superiority, and hard work that Wister's narrative masks. According to the *writer Stegner* in the opening of "Carrion Spring," Ray and Molly have embraced the promises of the "Myth of the Garden West" and want to become "stickers." On their "buckboard honeymoon" in the fall of 1906 as they come from Molly's home in Malta, Montana, to their new home in Cypress Hills, Saskatchewan, where Ray is foreman of the T-Down ranch, the couple "talked about ... the *future settlement* of that country and the *opportunities open to the young and industrious*" (WW 222 italics mine). As Stegner presents them, they believe that through hard work and persistence they will achieve prosperity and success on the western landscape. However, after the brutal storm of "Genesis," Molly's perspective has changed and she and Ray are at odds over whether to settle or return to Malta.

While Wister's and Turner's narratives situate the western spatiality as the locale for opportunity and promise upon which men can successfully construct their future, the opening few paragraphs of "Carrion Spring" told by an omniscient narrator remind the "misdirected" reader and *memoirist Stegner* that these opportunities are not so easily achieved in wild western lands. As the title suggests, "Carrion Spring" is a story of contrasts. On its surface, the story depicts the difference between the death and destruction of the winter and the regeneration and new life of spring. Stegner reflects this tension between death and new life, devastation and regeneration in the strain between Ray and Molly produced by their differing responses to the western landscape and the role these

gendered responses have in their final decision to settle. For Ray, the emerging spring provides “another chance” to “make this God darned country holler uncle” and associates him with Turner’s optimism and Wister’s exceptionalism regarding the American’s engagement with the frontier (WW 237). Molly, on the other hand, views the land as “a *hopeless* country a hundred miles from anywhere” (227 italics mine). Molly’s estimation of the West’s value offer Stegner the opportunity to analyze the role “hope,” or the cultural narrative of the American Dream, plays within the western settlement narrative.

Stegner uses Ray and Molly to investigate what he calls in the 1960’s essays traditional dichotomies in the western spatiality between male / masculine / dominant and female / feminine / subordinate that have been, he claims, central to the mythic western story. In the 1960’s essays, Stegner defines this tension as that of “male freedom and aspiration versus female domesticity, wilderness versus civilization, violence and danger versus the safe and tamed” (HMWW 195). He references as example his earlier, semi-autobiographical novel The Big Rock Candy Mountain (1943) to explain what he means. In the characters of Bo and Elsa Mason, who are modeled after his parents George and Hilda Stegner,<sup>19</sup> Stegner represents these tensions through Bo’s connection to freedom, the wild, the outdoors, the opportunity, and the violent western mythography and Elsa’s linkage to the domestic, to civilization, to the indoors, and to the compassionate. In “Carrion Spring,” Stegner will illustrate that Ray is no Bo Mason or Virginian and Molly is significantly different from Wister’s Molly and more directly expressive of Elsa’s situation as a pioneer woman.

In contrast to Wister’s and Turner’s narratives that present the opportunity and promise to be obtained on the western frontier, Stegner reminds the “misdirected” reader

and *memoirist Stegner* that the West is an indifferent and uncontrollable presence and not the malleable space the Myths represent. Stegner suggests in “Carrion Spring,” as he did in “Genesis,” that the natural environment cannot be controlled. In “Carrion Spring,” however, he also suggests that the western landscape can be destroyed unless precautions are taken to protect it, a position he will advocate in his life through his environmental activism and essays. In Lay of the Land (1975), feminist scholar Annette Kolodny investigates the assumptions behind the frontier mythology that coded the land feminine. She demonstrates how European and American writers identified the land as metaphorically feminine in the popular press, promotional tracts, and travel narratives.<sup>20</sup> According to Kolodny the assumptions behind the land as female metaphor—both the land-as-mother to later nineteenth century land-as-virgin imagery—corresponds to white-male desire for conquest of the frontier space that she argues was evident in early American narratives of exploration and the pioneer narratives of settlement and transformation of the land. She insists that these evolving narratives and their production through mass culture mediums have contributed to conflicting desires that have shaped the American’s relationship to the land in frontier and western mythologies in much of America’s literature.<sup>21</sup>

In discussing how pioneer white-women engaged with the cultural narratives of the West, Kolodny both confirms their difference from white men’s engagement with the land and their complicity in the economic motives of westward expansion by illustrating how women responded to the frontier through the role given to them—that of domesticator, nurturer, and the vessel of

civilization<sup>22</sup>—in the culturally sanctioned, masculine tradition of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries. Like the male hero who goes off to the wilderness to be revitalized, Kolodny shows how some pioneer women were also renewed and reborn through their engagement with frontier landscapes. Unfortunately, according to Kolodny, this feminine version never achieved the status of a cultural myth except within the limitations of the male myth that identified women as symbols of civilization.<sup>23</sup> Finally, as in the male frontier narrative in general, Kolodny indicates that pioneer women's narratives did not account for Native Americans, often relegating them to savage Others to be overcome in the narrative of national progress and expansion.

While Stegner attempts in both stories through his descriptions of the West's lands to present a gender neutral landscape, he does explore the responses of Ray and Molly to the western landscape and in their responses aligns them with the traditional mythic and cultural associations both he and Kolodny mention in regard to how America's cultural narratives presented the frontier spatiality. Stegner's Ray views the landscape as a means for achieving individuation and freedom, or the Myths' association of the West to notions of "second chances," while Stegner aligns Molly with the domestic realm confronting a western landscape coded masculine and thus a danger to feminine identity. Additionally, within the context of the couple's economic realities as disclosed in "Carrion Spring," Stegner conveys how male aggression, an aggression juxtaposed to Molly as the land's protector, can destroy and rob the land of its resources. Finally, by showing how both Ray and Molly are seduced by the land's regenerative presence reflected in its spring-like beauty that wipes away the devastation of the winter, Stegner exposes how easily the Myths silence the realities of frontier life. The Myths, like the

land, blind pioneers like Ray and Molly just as they did Eva Rizzi's father and Stegner's parents to the actuality of western settlement.

In "Carrion Spring," Stegner presents over the course of a single day, dawn to dusk, the attitudes Ray and Molly illustrate toward the western landscape and each other. In the tension that resides between them regarding their differing view of the landscape and why it means what it does to each, Stegner reveals the subject of his story: what drew men and women to the frontier and caused them to accept without question the promises of the "Garden West" narrative? Drawing from the recovered history of Cypress Hills', the *writer Stegner* uses an omniscient narration to historicize Ray and Molly's dawn to dusk buckboard ride discussion. Like most ranches after the storm, the T-Down is bankrupt, its absentee owner is looking to sell, and Ray and the cowhands are soon to be unemployed. For Ray, Molly, and the cowhands, the winter was "nothing but unrelieved hardship, failure, death, gloom" (WW 221) that the spring thaw reflects in a landscape that looks like a "bad and disgusting wound, infected ... with the bandage off"; the area around the ranch house is "matted, filthy, lifeless, littered" (223); the "carrion smell" (222) of "two acres of carcasses [is] ... rich and rotten" (225); "willows were bare,... the floodplain hill was brown" and "the sky roiled with gray clouds" (223). To emphasize the impact of the land's physical devastation on people, the *writer Stegner* calls out two examples of individuals "defeated by the wild" western environment that undercut the assumptions regarding the wild and the relationship of people to it (222).



The two examples involve the wolfer Schulz and Molly from “Genesis.” Schulz signals the end of the frontier as a wild place both in his violent destruction of it and its destruction of him, while Molly represents the taming influence of an encroaching civilization on the wild and the tension in this engagement between the wild and the civilized. According to Johnson, the western Myths “function to conceal, with an affirmative imagery of Western wildness, precisely what imperils that wildness.” It hides, he says, the “taming process” inherent in a set of binaries Johnson defines as “desire and domination, of colonialist nostalgia and Manifest Destiny” (*Hunger* 158-159). In “Carrion Spring,” Stegner attempts to make this “taming process” overt. In the example of Schulz, the skilled frontiersman, Stegner reveals Schulz’s participation in the demise of the very environment that sustains him through the economic role he has in the ranching business, which further illustrates Stegner’s view of white culpability in the destruction of the western environment. The *writer Stegner* says that because the wolves were “so well fed and so smart they never went near the traps” in the winter, causing Schulz to resort to poisoning cattle carcasses in order to kill the wolves that the ranchers pay him to destroy (WW 221). Schulz’s pet staghound, Puma, accidentally eats a poisoned carcass, leading Schulz to kill the dog when it turns on him. Rumored to have drowned in the river’s spring thaw, the *writer Stegner* claims Schulz is “a wild man defeated by the wild” (222), emphasizing again the frailty and inability of the westerner to control the western landscape.

In contrast to the violent and “wild” Schulz, Stegner positions the civilized Molly, the rancher’s wife, as the second “casualty” of the winter. While Ray and the cowhands display the physical signs of the winter’s experience on their bodies, having “puckered

sunken scars on their cheekbones” and skin “weathered and cracked as old lumber left out for years,” Molly reveals the psychic scars from the winter shut-in. Instead of viewing the West as a place of “opportunities” as she did initially, the *writer Stegner* claims that the “hope” Molly had as a newlywed “festered in her” (222) until she wants “to be gone” (223) from this “*hopeless country*” (222) and return to the slightly more civilized western town of Malta, Montana. Although it appears as if he is dividing his story along the traditional masculine / wild versus feminine / civilized, the *writer Stegner* suggests that neither can control the western environment as the Myths suggest. More important, Stegner appropriates Molly’s perspective to tell this western story, thereby interjecting the role of the western woman into the traditionally defined male and masculine western spatiality and making her voice part of his Other West.

The other “character” in this story about western settlement is the frontier landscape. Once again, Stegner situates the land as more than setting in his story. As in “Genesis,” the western landscape (its land and weather) is gender neutral, both brutal (the winter storms) and seductive (the glistening morning of the cowhands’ departure), and indifferent to the responses of the men and women who encounter it: the wolfer Schulz gets drowned by it, the civilized Molly says it is a “hopeless country” (WW 222), and Ray believes he can “make [it] holler uncle” (237). In the omniscient opening, the *writer Stegner* plays with the contrast between carrion (decay, rot) and spring (rebirth, new) suggested by the story’s title. There are “sounds of hope” (WW 220) in the early, spring-like Chinook winds that the *writer Stegner* says causes men to believe “something can

be saved” (221) from the “harsh Saskatchewan winter” (220) along with the smell of death and the look of ruin and waste the landscape evokes.

Stegner aligns Ray with this “hope” through Ray’s view that the winter has given them—the “young and industrious”—an “opportunity” to capitalize on the owner’s need to sell the T-Down after the winter’s devastating losses (222). Molly, however, sees only futility, hardship, and hopelessness in the western landscape. Her wish to go home to Malta is a decision that angers Ray and one that both acknowledge endangers their marriage. The *writer Stegner* suggests that this tension is not to be resolved easily, despite the ease at which the mythic West defines their positions as “he to this wild range, she back to town and friends and family” (236), because their differences are more complicated than the simple divisions the dichotomies represent. In the 1960’s essays, Stegner criticizes his contemporary western regionalist writers for too easily accepting the Myths’ interpretation of the West and what is western.

After the initial and brief omniscient perspective used to open the story, the *writer Stegner* shifts the point of view to Molly to highlight the physical and emotional struggle, the economic hardship, and the potential for failure the Pioneer Myth obscures. Through Molly’s outlook, the *writer Stegner* provides a glimpse of the situation and role of the “western” woman in the settlement of the frontier West. Until “Carrion Spring,” women appear infrequently in Wolf Willow and then only on the peripheral of Cypress Hills’ history. The *memoirist Stegner* mentions women only in general terms, as the town’s women, the mothers of childhood playmates, or in reference to his mother. All have been white and unnamed, even his mother.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, the *historian Stegner* has named several male fictional and historical figures of diverse ethnicity. However, in

appropriating Molly's outlook to challenge the settlement narrative, Stegner risks supporting the predominantly white-male, western story even as he contests it.

In the classic western metanarrative, The Virginian, Wister's Molly is aligned with the domestic and cultural spheres, or the traditional association of the female and feminine in the mythic western paradigm. Unlike Wister's cultured, eastern schoolmarm who lives close to town, shares the company of her sister and other women, and needs the Virginian to explain to her the ways of the West, Stegner's Molly understands the demands of her role as a rancher's wife in what the *writer Stegner* describes as a "nearly womanless culture" (WW 135). When Stegner first introduces Molly in "Genesis" it is through the greenhorn Rusty who is looking back from the open range to see her "hugging her elbows by the ranch-house door," leading him to comment that it was a "lonesome piece of luck" to be a recent bride and left alone for several weeks with only "a crippled handy man" and a passing Mountie on weekly patrol to bring her news of the world beyond the ranch (WW 141). In Rusty's comment are signs of Molly's western frontier situation: she is an isolated, lone woman in a male world. In "Carrion Spring," the *writer Stegner* says Molly adheres to the western code of the "stiff upper lip"—she is "tough and competent," "believed in hard work," and is a "good wife to a cattleman" (222) because she tends to the needs of the "boys" or the cowhands: "she had looked after them, fed them, patched their clothes, unraveled old socks to knit new ones, cut their hair, lanced their boils, tended their wounds" (223-224). In fact, she considers the cowhands "family" (223) and likens her leaving the ranch to "the gathered-in family parting at the graveside" (224).

Because Molly is no naïve, wonder-filled young woman blinded by the Myths, as was the young Rusty, Molly's two weeks of "worry" during the storm about Ray's safety and her reaction to the "six months" of being "shut in" with only "desperate work and hardship and shortages and unmitigated failure" and "neither fun nor the company of another woman" are presented by the *writer Stegner* as justifiable concerns and not feminine weaknesses (222). Nor is her view that this place is a "hopeless country" (233) to be interpreted as her "giving up" (228), even though she feels Ray "blames her" (228), and thinks she "is running out on" him (232). The *writer Stegner* presents Molly as justifiably angry at what she takes to be Ray's failure to understand her reasons for wanting to return to Malta given that she knows what it means to become a "sticker."

*Stegner* suggests that Molly's desire to leave is motivated by a gendered response to a western landscape designated by America's cultural narratives code as distinctly male. For Molly, the western frontier is not simply a "hopeless country" (WW 227) but a land that strips her of her feminine identity. As the *writer Stegner* makes clear in his characterization of her, Molly is a tough, competent western woman fully aware of what it means to be a rancher's wife. What Molly lacks is what the men already have on the frontier—a sustaining community of others of their sex. In contrast to the men, Molly has no sisterhood to their brotherhood. What Kolodny, Georgi-Findlay, Limerick, and other literary scholars and historians illustrate as an historical reality in their post-1970s works is what *Stegner* depicts in his 1950s story: the frontier does not provide the pioneer woman with a community of women and this difference motivates Molly's departure. To remain, in her view, means she must lose her female identity in the isolation, deprivation, and hardship the frontier spatiality offers pioneer women.

What the *writer Stegner* reveals through Molly's experiences is the pioneer woman's isolation and lack of a sustaining community on the western frontier. Even though she considers the cowhands "family" (WW 223) and can "giggle" (227) at recent memories from the winter's shut-in with the cowhands, the cowhands cannot provide Molly with the kinship she desires: she has "no woman nearer than twenty-five miles" (141) and for "six months," excepting the "Christmas blowout[,] she had enjoyed neither fun nor the company of another woman" (222). In fact, Molly saw "exactly one woman, for one day and a night" during the winter (233). While Ray and the cowhands were able to survive the winter's storm because they were a "group of men" (186) who can pass the "ceremonial" (185) whiskey bottle in desperation or celebration and form a "mystic brotherhood" (219), Stegner shows that Molly lacks even the "company of another woman" with whom she can bond, share experiences, and find support for her encounter with the western frontier spatiality (222). In Molly's story, Stegner calls attention to an historical situation the "Garden West" Myth, Turner, and Wister obscure or deny in the image of pioneers and cowboys conquering the western landscape. As Stegner noted in "Specifications," the traditional western story is male-centric—a "nearly womanless culture" of male individualism, camaraderie, and conquest of the western landscape and the savage (WW 135). Molly desires to return to Malta because it can provide "lilac bushes by the front porch ... people passing by, women in dresses... everything they had done without for six weeks (227).

In this masculine West, if women appear, as Molly did in “Genesis,” they are fringe figures associated with the domestic sphere, the dangerous, or the erotic. In Henry Nash Smith’s Virgin Land (1950) and R. W. B Lewis’s The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century (1955), and D.H. Lawrence’s counter study Studies in Classic American Literature (1923), each defines the primary narrative of American literature to be the story of the young man seeking selfhood in the narratives of Cooper, Franklin, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, and Faulkner. As Baym argues in “Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors” (1981), these works by Smith, Lewis, Lawrence, and others explicated and essentially canonized a male story of selfhood that became the dominant narrative by which authors and narratives in American literature were judged and, in doing so, stories and authors that did not fit the male pattern of individuation were deemed lesser and omitted. This story of leaving-regression-renewal-conquest-transformation-return is particularly prohibiting to female authors and narratives, as evident in the lives of Willa Cather’s Antonia and Jean Stafford’s own Molly. In “Carrion Spring,” the *writer Stegner* recovers the western pioneer woman’s voice through Molly’s experiences and her desire for female selfhood and a sustaining community of others of her sex.

Stegner illustrates how Molly responds to the western landscape not only as the cultural narratives of the Myths represent it but also as her experiences define it. She is unwilling to relinquish her gendered identity to the masculine-defined frontier space, a space where the solitary, exceptional Cowboy hero rides—a space Stegner has rejected already in “Genesis.” From Molly’s view, for her to find a “community” on the frontier she would need to become “one of the boys” and “come along with a whole bunch of

men on ... roundup, spend six or eight weeks in pants out among the carcasses” (WW 228). In her decision not to become “one of the boys,” the *writer Stegner* suggests that Molly acknowledges and denies the temptation to become masculinized by the frontier spatiality. She also refuses the isolation and entrapment her domestic role on the frontier presents to her if she becomes a “sticker.” These options and their consequences are what she believes Ray does not understand and interprets as her “giving up.” Through Molly’s struggles with the frontier landscape, the *writer Stegner* not only recovers the pioneer woman’s story that the Myths eclipse in promises of success but also contests the Myths’ sponsorship of the West as home to “hope” and “opportunities,” or the perspective Ray represents in “Carrion Spring.”

In contrast to Molly’s view of the western spatiality, *Stegner* positions Ray as understanding the West to be the home of opportunity, hope, and self-definition. Even though Molly perceives Ray as leaning to the “wild range” (WW 236) in his desire to purchase the T-Down, the *writer Stegner* indicates that Ray is not a Bo Mason seeking the “big rock candy mountain” at the expense of family and community. Instead, he portrays Ray as “responsible” and somewhat empathetic to Molly’s situation by recognizing that her reaction to the winter shut-in was similar to his and the cowhands—“You was just fed up. We all was” (227)—and acknowledging “how she had felt” (233) and how it was “hard on you” (228). In fact, Ray’s desire to stay is motivated as much by “opportunity” as it is by the future settlement that will bring Molly the community she seeks.



In presenting Ray's rationale for becoming a "sticker," Stegner undermines the future Wister provides his protagonist by revealing the economic costs of Ray and Molly's settling. For Ray, the spring thaw presents "opportunities" to take advantage of, and he is angry at Molly for failing to see the "second chance" the winter has given them: "We're never goin' to have *another chance* like this as long as we live. *This country's goin' to change*. There'll be homesteaders in here soon as the railroad comes. Towns, stores, *what you've been missin'. Women folks*" (WW 237 italics mine). The writer Stegner makes Ray's hopeful vision of their future suspect, however, in its echoing Little Horn's earlier ironic diatribe on the benefits of ranching to the greenhorn Rusty in "Genesis":

When else could we pick up cattle for twenty dollars a head with sucking calves thrown in? When else could we get a whole ranch layout for a few hundred bucks? That Goodnight herd we were running was the best herd in Canada, maybe anywhere. This spring roundup we could take our pick of what's left, including bulls, and put our brand on 'em and turn 'em into summer range and drive everything else to Malta. We wouldn't want more than three-four hundred head. We can swing that much, and we can cut enough hay to bring that many through a winter like this last one.

(236-237)

Additionally, Ray's future is founded on the promised "railroad survey" that will "open up this whole country" (235), bring "a town .... with a store" (236), and "homesteaders.... Women folks" (237). In his certainty of this future, Ray twits Molly for not having the "*ambition to be the first white woman in five hundred miles*" (238

italics mine), highlighting further Molly's current isolation and separation from a community of women. Like the Myths, Ray denies the economic and personal hardships his dream "to buy the T-Down" (236) entails for him and for Molly by echoing the Myths' promises of independence, freedom, and self-reliance for the hard-working.

Stegner reveals these economic realities and hardships through both Molly's and Ray's explanation of the rationale for their positions. From Molly's perspective, Ray's dream is "crazy" (WW 236) because this future holds "unremitting slavery and imprisonment" to an indifferent nature and a "burden of debt heavy enough to pin them down for life" (238): Molly asks, "where'd we get the money?" (236), underscoring a fiscal reality that Ray's dream rebuffs in the assumption that hard-work and persistence will be enough to "make this God darned country holler uncle" (237). Further accentuating the difference between his western couple and Wister's, Stegner provides the motivation behind Ray's desire: it is not to remain in the "wild" but to exchange his current role as wage earning cowhand with that of being his own boss. Ray tells Molly, "maybe you have to go back home," but he will not as it means he remains a laborer: "you don't have to make me go back to ridin' for some outfit for twenty a month" (232). Stegner's Ray is not Wister's Virginian who has oil fields and a ranch partnership in his present. Even to purchase the T-Down means Ray and Molly must take a loan from Molly's parents and incur a bank mortgage that will saddle them with a "lifetime of heavy debt" (238). As in "Genesis," Stegner unmasks the brutal realities that Turner's Pioneer and "Garden West" Myths and Wister evade—the burden of debt; the physical and emotional toll of the environment on

each of them; women's isolation and lack of community; and the potential for failure no matter how hopeful, determined, or hard-working they are. Against the "hope" of the Myths, Stegner positions the realities of failure and loss.

While Ray's and Molly's responses to the western spatiality underline their gendered situations in the western space—Ray's belief in promises of economic success and male individuation and to Molly's fear of isolation and her feminine identity being subsumed by a world of male camaraderie—Stegner closes "Carrion Spring" by returning to the dichotomy of wild and civilized that opened the story. In the story's beginning, Stegner indicates that the death of the wolfer Schulz signals the end of a wild, savage West, while Molly's shift in opinion from the West as a place of "hopefulness" to a place of "futile hope" makes known the struggle pioneers had in gender specific and culturally determined ways that the Myths conceal in cultural narratives of opportunity and reward (WW 235). Representing the "wild" now is the wolfer Schulz's son from "Genesis," a boy of fifteen referred to simply as Young Schulz. In "Carrion Spring," Young Schulz represents a darker side of the frontier Myth—a human savagery far more destructive to the land and others than nature's indifferent brutality. This darker side, according to the Myths and to themes in American literature, will be forced to move on to another "frontier" by civilizing forces; be reclaimed and tamed by these same civilizing forces; or remain within civilization, an internal threat waiting to erupt. As part of the West's fringe, Stegner makes use of Young Schulz to expose the raw violence of men toward the western landscape and the economic motivations behind this destruction.

Instead of a gunfight between hero and villain as in The Virginian, which enabled the Virginian to control his West but also upset Wister's Molly until the Virginian tells

her it was a necessary violence to protect more civilized others like herself, Stegner's Ray must defeat the urge to merge with a violent male aggression toward the land that Young Schulz represents. Young Schulz appears initially to Molly from afar as a frontiersman with a rifle, in accordance with the mythic image from which he descends. However, what appeared to be a rifle is a shovel that Young Schulz is using to dig out a coyote den for the money the scalps will bring him. To Molly, he is like "a wild man, worse than an Indian" (WW 228) who in his appearance, vulgar language, violent actions, and strictly economic intent mirrors the physical ugliness of the landscape Molly has seen around her all morning. To Ray, he is an orphaned boy raised in the wild who "don't know much about living with people" (233). Ray's sympathetic view aligns him with Young Schulz who represents the destructiveness of men toward the environment.

Stegner shows in this episode that Ray's and Young Schulz's violence sustains the Myths' ideals of freedom, independence, and self-reliance only within an economic sphere. Against Molly's protests, Ray joins the younger Schulz in the coyote dig in order to have some "fun" (WW 229). She notes how Ray's digging releases his pent-up energy: "the *violent work* seemed to have *made him more cheerful*" (230 italics mine). This episode reveals how less-wild the frontier has become as coyotes, not wolves are the targeted prey of this second generation of exterminators and how male aggression manifests itself in the new, more civilized West—as fun, which is evident in the violent video and virtual reality games today. Ray's anger dissipates as he turns his frustration at Molly toward

the land and to assisting Young Schulz in “violent work” that results in “a little dog brutally murdered” (231) for “three dollar[s]” in scalp money for Schulz and one fewer predator for the rancher (232). To the shock and disgust of both men and danger to herself, Molly rescues the next pup when it escapes the men in order to give it “a little bit of life” and “to *tame* him” (232 italics mine), an action that situates Molly as protector of what the men want to destroy—the wild and the land. Young Schulz demands payment for the pup Molly keeps, and even though Ray says the wild pup will not survive in the civilized world [“he’ll be a chicken thief and then somebody’ll shoot him” (232)], Ray’s inclinations are not with the wild Young Schulz symbolizes but with Molly and settlement. With Young Schulz’s departure, Molly finds that the antagonism between Ray and her lessens and the wild pup grows “quieter” under her skirts (235). While her gesture is perhaps foolish as Ray suggests, Molly’s action is what stops the men’s aggression toward the land.

In this role of guardian and defender of the western environment, Molly becomes victim to the seductiveness of the Myths in the sense that her resolve to “be gone” diminishes. The *writer Stegner* reflects Molly’s change in attitude through her observations about the weather. At the day’s break, when Ray and Molly depart from the ranch for the train to Malta and both are angry at the other, Molly is overwhelmed by the stench, death, and ugliness of the passing winter and anxious to escape what she sees as a “hopeless country” (WW 233). When they come upon Young Schulz at mid-afternoon, she feels a “soft wind” blowing that opens the clouds to patches of blue, causing her to feel as if the “taint of carrion [had been] only ... imaginary” (229). As she watches Ray and Young Schulz dig and as Ray’s anger dissolves in the energy he directs toward the

land, Molly notes how the sun is full and warm. After Young Schulz's departure, she declares the day a "real spring day" (229), and soon she and Ray are having a picnic and "laugh[ing]" as they did in October when they arrived at the ranch full of optimism for their future (233). Ray tells Molly how, "soon as the sun comes out, *she don't look like the same country,*" a comment that feminizes the landscape and awakens in Molly her earlier wariness of giving into Ray and "some renewed and futile hope" for a future in a masculinized country (235 italics mine).

The story suggests that Molly's shift from a sense of "hopeless futility" to the cautious "hopefulness" she will express at the conclusion is due to the seductive power of an emerging spring landscape. Molly feels her resolve "soften" (WW 236) as she listens nervously to Ray's plans for buying the T-Down. When she spots a crocus on the brown hillside, she thinks the flower's smell may be "enough to cover the scent of the carrion" (237). When she sees the "faintest green" in the brown hillside, a western landscape that was "hopeless" (233), "futile" (235), "lifeless" (223), and suggestive of "unrelieved hardship, failure, death, gloom" (221) now becomes a landscape Molly now calls "tender and unbelievable," smells of "mild freshness," and is "good land" (237). On this "beautiful day" (234) Molly tells Ray she will stay, "if that is what *you want,*" even though she feels "sick and scared" (238), knowing she is entering a lifetime of debt, hardship, and lack of community that may consume her identity. While Wister fully supported the Virginian's thematic position and dominance,

Stegner's position is ambivalent as he ends the story with Molly's question left unanswered by Ray.

In "Carrion Spring," Stegner proposes that the Myths deny the failure and physical and emotional hardships of settlement with promises of hope, opportunity, and second chances. By exploring Molly's motivations for not wanting to become a "sticker" and Ray's desire to be one, Stegner uncovers aspects of western life that, as he states in the 1960's essays, the Myths have "consistently obscured" (BS 183), such as the economic realities of western settlement and the situation of the western woman. In Conversations, Stegner notes that Americans have gotten "used to the image of the pioneer woman in the poke bonnet, but a lot of people who came west in poke bonnets were not just housewives with a third grade education.... a lot of ... women [who] ... came west [were] gifted and intelligent women" (91). According to Comer in Landscapes of the New West, Stegner recognized that "the frontier often meant different things to women versus men," as he "imagined men as desirous of both western adventure and also domestic fulfillment" (46). In Molly's acceptance of Ray's desire to settle, Stegner shows that the West was not settled by men alone but rather by men and women who sacrificed significantly to achieve the Myths' promises.

"Carrion Spring" not only denies the exceptionalism of the Cowboy Myth but, more important, inserts the western woman's narrative into the predominantly male narrative of conquest of the West. Stegner opens a space in the western story for the "western" woman to construct her story by acknowledging women's concerns, such as the importance of a sustaining community of women and feminine identity in a western spatiality that is defined as male and masculine. Stegner's appropriation of a female

perspective for his western story in the 1950s when he was writing Wolf Willow and at its publication in 1962 stands out as quite bold. Neither Wister's Molly nor women characters in Twain, Harte, or Cather through Stegner's own 1943 The Big Rock Candy Mountain and the fictions of his contemporaries—A.B. Guthrie, Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Vardis Fisher, Wright Morris, and others—tell the western story from a female character's point of view. In her 1947 The Mountain Lion, in which another "Molly" appears, Jean Stafford uses a contemporary setting and third person point of view to show how the masculine West silences women and the wild. Excepting perhaps Mary Austin's early California fictions and the work of other women who wrote and lived in the West, such as Helen Hunt Jackson, Mary Hallock Foote, Maria Sandoz, and others, the female perspective of the pioneer West was grossly missing from the western narrative. With "Carrion Spring," Stegner anticipates the revision of the western narrative to come in the 1970s by men and women western writers of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.<sup>25</sup>

With "Carrion Spring," Stegner concludes Wolf Willow's Section III having demythologized the Cowboy narrative and embarked on an examination of the settlement narrative in Turner's Pioneer and Garden West Myths, which is the focus of Section IV. He has debunked the notion of "free" western lands and a controllable destiny by exposing the rancher-settler's economic dependencies on absentee owners, bank mortgages, and an unpredictable and powerful nature. Through a place-based, realist, and historicized narrative, Stegner returns to cultural memory the profit motive behind white male aggression toward western



lands and the necessity for others to defend the land against this male onslaught. Plus, he revises a masculine and male western narrative by showing the potential loss of identity and lack of community the western woman confronts on the western frontier. In Wolf Willow's next section, Section IV: Town and Country, Stegner pursues further the idea that America's Garden West Myth, which denies the possibility of failure in its promises of hope and opportunity, drew pioneers, like the fictional Ray and Molly and his parents, to settle in Cypress Hills' western frontier (WW 281).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, I will use the capital Cowboy to refer to the mythic cowboy of Wister, Schaefer and others and the lowercase cowboy to be interchangeable with cowhand for the non-mythic version of this figure.

<sup>2</sup> Though Angle of Repose is mostly set in the western region and has Oliver Ward who is described as western, Ward is not a cowboy and it is not a cowboy story.

<sup>3</sup> B.M. Bower is the pseudonym used by Bertha Muzzy Sinclair or Sinclair-Cowan, who was an American author writing western novels and short stories about the American Old West. Born Bertha Muzzy in Minnesota in 1871, at age 17 she moved with her family to Montana. She taught school in the Great Falls area. At the age of 19, she married Clayton J. Bower. Around 1900, she began writing short stories, but not until her novel Chip of the Flying U was published in 1906 did she become successful. She later moved to Los Angeles and wrote for Hollywood. Between 1906 and 1940, Bertha M. (B.M.) Bower wrote sixty-eight novels set in the American West. She wrote and published regularly until her death in 1940. See Victoria Lamont's "B.M. Bower" for more information.

<sup>4</sup> Stegner claims the powerful cultural hold this mystique had on him carried into his teens as he desired to be "hard" like others (WW 136). He recalls as a sixteen year old freshman at the University of Utah how he took long workouts at the gym and track to improve his physique.

<sup>5</sup> Slotkin's volumes II and III have quite a bit of information on the cowboy figure, as does Michael Johnson's Hunger for the Wild. The Marlboro Man figure has an interesting history. According to Brandt, the Marlboro Man was a tobacco advertising

campaign for Marlboro cigarettes conceived by Leo Burnett in 1954 and used until 1999. Intended to popularize filtered cigarettes, which were in the 1950s considered a feminine product, Burnett's campaign involved a rugged cowboy or cowboys depicted in a western setting with only a cigarette. Brandt suggests that this campaign quickly moved into a masculine arena in a matter of months. Although there were many Marlboro Men, the cowboy proved to be the most popular and led to other "Marlboro Country" campaigns.

<sup>6</sup> In Conversations, Stegner mentions that he read Wister's collection of short stories Red Men and White: Salvation Gap and Other Western Classics (1885) as a child in Cypress Hills (21).

<sup>7</sup> See Etulain's Telling Stories and Owen Wister, Mitchell's Westerns, and Richard White's "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own" for more on Wister and his friendships with Remington and Roosevelt. According to Etulain, Wister's magazine essays on western cowboys, in particular his Harper's article, his use of a naïve Eastern narrator in The Virginian, and his "To the Reader" preamble in The Virginian form the "genesis" for the mythic cowboy figure as "nature's nobleman" (Telling 68).

<sup>8</sup> See Forrest G. Robinson's Having it Both Ways, Jane Tompkins West of Everything, and Lee Clark Mitchell's Westerns for excellent treatments of Wister's novel in relation to his cultural context.

<sup>9</sup> For the remainder of "Genesis," Molly appears only through the men's recollections of her pies and her cooking, which ties her to the realm of domesticity and as an object not a subject in this western story.

<sup>10</sup> Panguingue's name is the name of a gambling Rummy game commonly known as Pan with its own unique lingo that was a staple of the gambling halls during the California gold rush in the mid-1800's and popular in the southwest. The name is pronounced as "pan-ginn'-gay" or [pahng-geeng-ge]. (<http://www.rummy-games.com/rules/panguingue.html> Accessed February 12, 2011.)

<sup>11</sup> For more on the historical cowboy, see Blake Allmendinger's excellent historical study The Cowboy and Andy Adams' The Log of a Cowboy for first-hand journal reporting of cowboy life in turn of the century America. See also Michael L. Johnson's Hunger for the Wild and David Hamilton Murdoch's The American West: The Invention of a Myth for discussions on the working cowhand as a western laborer, particularly their involvement in the Wobbly movement in the early nineteen hundreds.

<sup>12</sup> Johnson is referring specifically to the paintings and sculptures of Frederic Remington and Charles Russell as well as to Wister and Roosevelt's essays.

<sup>13</sup> Spurlock calls Rusty an "excelsior" which means fine wood shavings used to pack fragile items (WW 156).

<sup>14</sup> See also Tompkins's West of Everything and Robinson's Having It Both Ways for similar interpretations of Wister's male-camaraderie in The Virginian.

<sup>15</sup> For more on Turner's cultural impact and the cultural climate he, Roosevelt, Wister responded to, see Allen Bogue, T. J. Jackson Lears, and John Mack Faragher's Introduction to Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner as well as Slotkin's volumes II and III.

<sup>16</sup> In “History, Myth, and the Western Writer,” Stegner links this notion to the “roving man” (195) that he associates with his portrayal of Bo Mason in his semi-autobiographical first novel, The Big Rock Candy Mountain (1943). In Conversations, he says Bo is based on his father, George Stegner.

<sup>17</sup> See Curt Meine’s Continental Vision and John L. Thomas’ A Country in the Mind for more on Stegner’s environmental attitudes.

<sup>18</sup> See Tompkins and Mitchell who also discuss this tension within the Virginian and Zeese Papanikolas’s Trickster in the Land of Dreams, which discusses how readers compromise the views of him: one as the cowboy hero and the other as the story’s racist, social Darwinist, and capitalist (73).

<sup>19</sup> Bo Mason believes in the West’s promises of second chances. With each failure, he foregoes his responsibilities to family to pursue the next new venture, dragging his wife, Elsa, and his children across the West in search of the “big rock candy mountain.”

<sup>20</sup> Limerick and others have since delineated this feminization of land and nature and connected it to American destructiveness toward land/nature. In The Frontiers of Women’s Writing, Georgi-Findlay says of the role of the frontier hero: “womenkind is all he fears and desires and in either manifestation, women cannot win” (7).

<sup>21</sup> Todorov in The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other (1999) and Slotkin in his three volumes discuss European and American cultural configurations of the New World and America. See Susan Lee Johnson’s “‘A Memory Sweet to Soldiers’: The Significance of Gender” and Susan Rhodes Neel’s “A Place of Extremes: Nature,

History, and the American West” in A New Significance (pg. 105-125) for more discussion of the land’s feminization and configuration by frontier mythology.

<sup>22</sup> These issues continue to be themes explored by contemporary western women writers, such as Joan Didion, Barbara Kingsolver, Maxine Hong Kingston, Leslie Silko, Louise Erdrich, Sandra Cisneros, Terry Tempest Williams, Amy Tan, Pam Houston, Harriet Doerr, Molly Gloss, and Annie Proulx to name a few as well as Judy Blunt, a contemporary western women writing memoir.

<sup>23</sup> Kolodny, Tompkins, and Graulich in “O Spacious Guys” have argued that the popularity of Owen Wister’s The Virginian (1902) and popular westerns helped to obscure this female tradition.

<sup>24</sup> From my reading, I detect that his playmates were all boys; he does not suggest that any girls were ever with them playing in the coulees, scavenging the dump, or otherwise. At the same time, when he says “children,” he suggests that boys and girls were participating in events, as in their times at the town swimming hole or in school.

<sup>25</sup> See these various works in which Stegner either has an “introduction” to the tradition of western literature and western writers or specific essays and commentary on western women writers: The Writer in America (1952); The Great American Short Story (1957, editor); Selected American Prose (1958, editor); The American Novel from James Fenimore Cooper to William Faulkner (1965, editor); Twenty Years of Stanford Short Stories (1966, co-editor); The Sound of Mountain Water (1969); One Way to Spell Man: Selected Essays (1982); Stegner: Conversations on History and Literature (1983, 1990 rev ed) The American West as Living Space (1987); and Where the Bluebird Sings to the

Lemonade Springs (1992). Early treatments of the western literary tradition that began to be published in the 1960s through 1980s, are mostly dedicated to a male literary tradition and literature written by men, with the occasional references to Willa Cather and Mary Austin. See for example Robert Edson Lee's From West to East: Studies in the Literature of the American West (1966); Leslie Fiedler's Return of the Vanishing West (1969); James K. Folsom's The Western: A Collection of Critical Essays (1979); William T. Pilkington's Critical Essays on the Western American Novel (1980); John R. Milton's Novel of the American West (1980); David Wyatt's Fall into Eden: Landscape and Imagination in California (1986); and A. Carl Bredahl's New Ground: Western American Narrative and the Literary Canon (1989). Even Barbara Howard Meldrum's edited collection Under the Sun: Myth and Realism in Western American Literature (1985) gives cursory treatment to women with essays touching upon Willa Cather, Mary Hallock Foote's western illustrations, pioneer women's journals. Not until the 1990s do feminist and ethnic studies open the academy to a broader western literary tradition, though Stegner had been presenting a broader range since the 1960s.

## Chapter 6

### The Pioneer Story: “Understanding the shape and intensity of the dream that peopled the continent”

*In the popular imagination, the reality of conquest dissolved into stereotypes of noble savages and noble pioneers struggling quaintly in the wilderness. These adventures seemed to have no bearing on the complex realities of twentieth-century America. In western paintings, novels, movies, and television shows, those stereotypes were valued precisely because they offered an escape from modern troubles.*

-- Patricia Nelson Limerick

The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West

*“You remember what you once said about the graveyard, and the old story writing itself over? Only it is we who write it, with the best we have.... The land belongs to the future.... We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it –for a little while.”*

-- Willa Cather

O’ Pioneers

*“If one is inclined to wonder at first how so many dwellers came to be in the loneliest land That ever came out of God’s hands, what they do there and why stay, One does not wonder so much after having lived there.”*

-- Mary Austin

Land of Little Rain



With the conclusion of “Carrion Spring” and Section III’s focus on the Wister-Cowboy Myth, Stegner continues his linear history of Cypress Hills with an analysis of pioneer period in Section IV: Town and Country. Because his family did not arrive in the Hills until 1914 when Stegner was six years old, the *historian Stegner* relies on information recovered from historical records, newspapers, and the testimony of “old timers” (those he thanks in the Acknowledgements section) to inform his account of the early settlement of his hometown. As history and memory merge with the Stegner family’s arrival, the persona of the *memoirist* overtakes that of the *historian* as Stegner focuses increasingly on his family’s experiences in Cypress Hills. In this chapter, the *memoirist* and *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner* emerge as dominant voices with the *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner* becoming the primary persona in the Epilogue as Stegner attempts to understand “the shape and intensity of the dream” that drew people like his parents West and his family’s settlement experiences in relation to that dream (WW 281). While Wister’s Cowboy Myth and the earlier Frontier-Pathfinder Myths produce a triumphant exceptional (white male) American who conquers the land and the Savage Other to create a path for the settlers who follow, Stegner shows in this section that the stories of the successful farmer, the merchant, and the town father that Turner’s Pioneer-Garden West Myths generate are as remote from the realities of settlement as was the Cowboy from the cowhand.<sup>1</sup>

To critique Turner’s Pioneer-Garden West Myths, Stegner uses his personal story as a “pioneer’s child” (WW 15) and the recovered history of Cypress Hills’s pioneer settlement to reveal an unchecked “hopefulness” and “cult of progress” that obscures the “failures” of pioneer settlement depicted in his family’s and the Cypress Hills pioneers’

stories. Because his family's experiences were split between winters in the Canadian town of Whitemud and summers at the American prairie homestead, he draws from these experiences to recover alternative narratives for his Other West and to critique the Pioneer-Garden West Myths. In the first and second chapters of Section IV, the *historian Stegner* approaches his hometown's history as he did the Cowboy Code in Section II's "Specifications for a Hero," using history and memory to expose the racist, hierarchical, and masculinist assumptions of the code and to connect the shaping influence of this code on the child-Stegner. In chapter one, "The Town Builders," Stegner juxtaposes the narrative of one of the town's founders, Pop Martin, with the *memoirist Stegner's* childhood recollections of Martin and the new town's optimism for its future to reveal the greed, arrogance, and profit motive obscured by the settlement Myths. As he did in Section I, Stegner calls specific attention to and rejects the nostalgia for a glorious western past that colors the memories of his childhood past. In the second chapter, "Whitemud, Saskatchewan," the *historian Stegner* chronicles the town's growth through its adoption of a tax structure, construction of public institutions, and demand for public amenities within the context of the *memoirist Stegner's* participation in the frontier town's activities and the Myths' promises of opportunity and prosperity for the determined pioneer. In "The Garden of the World," the third chapter, Stegner contrasts Turner's Pioneer-Garden West narrative of "hope" and prosperity to the "failure" and disillusionment the town's citizens encountered and the Stegner family experienced homesteading in this frontier place. And in the fourth and final chapter of Section IV, "The Making of

Paths,” a very self-reflective chapter similar to “The Capital of an Unremembered Past” in Section II and “Specifications for a Hero” in Section III, Stegner focuses solely on his own and his family’s experiences at the homestead to critique “the shape and intensity of the dream that peopled” the West and the false “hope” the Myths promote that contributed to their failure and then erased their experiences from the West’s pioneer narrative (281). With Section IV, Stegner completes his recovery of the history of Cypress Hills that the *memoirist Stegner* did not know as a child or as an adult until he returned in 1953 and thereafter began to research.

Stegner frames Section IV with a brief excerpt from Josiah Royce, American philosopher, historian and novelist of the American West and his posthumously published The Hope of the Great Community (1916), written in the last year of his life about global politics, World War I, and the notion that knowledge is a process of interpretation. More important to Stegner’s Wolf Willow and his notion of social responsibility is Royce’s theory of Community that rejects heroic individualism for membership (or “loyalty” in Royce’s terminology) to a community. While he recognizes that Communities can become degenerate in their destruction of the values of others, Royce’s Community defines collectively the causes and social roles each member will embrace. Additionally, each member accepts both a past that is the community’s past and an expected future that each member is committed to, which constitutes their loyalty to the community. Finally, individualism or personal identity is maintained but as “a kind of second-order life that extends beyond any of their individual lives.”<sup>2</sup> In the excerpt Stegner selected, Royce describes how, as a child of five or six years—or approximately Stegner’s age when he arrived in Whitemud—and no older in years than the Sierra-Nevada mining town in

which he lived, he always “wonder[ed]” what his “elders meant when they said that this was a new community” when in fact all around he saw “vestiges” of miners’ graves, old mines, and rotten trees that showed that people had “lived and died thereabouts” (WW 239). While the “logs and graves looked old,” he remarks how the sunsets were “beautiful,” how the Sacramento Valley vista was “impressive,” and how the miners and pioneers “love[d]” this “new” country. What perplexed the child-Royce—this incongruity between new and old, crude and civilized that those who lived there attributed to his childhood home—was to become the elder Royce’s “life’s business”: “to find out what all this wonder meant” (239).

In Section IV of Wolf Willow, Stegner wants to answer the same questions about his western home in Cypress Hills that Royce asks about his Sierra-Nevada mining town, particularly what the “wonder” is that drove and sustained the pioneer to settle the West. Royce’s “wonder” is the “dream” that Stegner investigates in Section IV and that he claims is embedded in the promises of Turner’s Pioneer-Garden West Myths. In his recovery of his personal pioneer past, Stegner discovers what he calls “the folklore of hope” (281), or an ideology of unquestioned “hopefulness” that, he argues, underwrites Turner’s Pioneer-Garden West Myths in their promises of opportunity and reward for those pioneers who settle the West through struggle and transformation of the land from its wild to tamed state. First introduced in “Carrion Spring” in the tension between Ray’s “hope” and Molly’s “hopelessness,” Stegner claims “hope” as a critical marker in the pioneer movement that the Myths use to hide the realities of

frontier settlement and America's destructiveness toward the Other and toward western lands. As "a pioneer's child" (15), he claims that this idea of "hope" or a "faith in the future" (281) is his inheritance and infects him still as a "middle-aged" adult (5).

In Wolf Willow, Stegner is critical of and guarded about this ideology of "hope," given its role in the Pioneer-Garden West's Myths and these Myths' influence on settlers like his parents. In the Epilogue that concludes Wolf Willow, he retains this cautiousness about "hope," even as he uses it to suggest that there is some "hope" for the West to produce, nurture, and sustain a "native art" (WW 288).<sup>3</sup> In the 1960's essays that appeared only a few years after Wolf Willow, this inheritance of "hope" underwrites the conditional optimism that he and his contemporaries can alter the marginal status of their literary western through the completion of "chores" that stand in opposition to the tumultuous 1960's America which sanctions the western Myths. In the essays, Stegner makes "hope" a characteristic of the western writer and uses it to support and sustain his claim that western American literature can and should be "enlarged" beyond the status of a minor or local color genre in the larger canon of American literature (HMWW 201).

In the Epilogue that follows Section IV and completes Wolf Willow, Stegner brings the history of Cypress Hills to his authorial "I's" present of 1953, or the time-bound perspective which opens Wolf Willow when he returns after an absence of twenty-three years in search of the "knowledge of place, knowledge of the past" (WW 28). The Epilogue completes the linear history and historical continuity between the past of Cypress Hills and the 1953 present that he has been constructing throughout Wolf Willow. Informed by the history, memory, and story that Sections II, III, and IV provide, Stegner claims to possess a deeper understanding of his own complex connection to his

western place, as demonstrated in the interconnectedness he illustrates between the actions of historical others, the influence of these actions on the place Cypress Hills, and the shaping influence the place had on the child-Stegner who is now the adult *memoirist, historian, writer, critic-teacher-theorist* who constructs Wolf Willow. Because of what he has learned about the place and people who lived before him in Cypress Hills, he possesses a knowledge of self and place that enables him to confront and reject the mythic West's ownership of his past. As insider and westerner, he situates himself as both the West's defender and the West's harshest critic in order to present to westerners and non-westerners, to western regionalist writers, and to America a usable western past for "building" a sustainable and socially responsible present and future.

In the remaining two sections of Wolf Willow—Section IV and the Epilogue—Stegner uses his personal past and Cypress Hills's historical past to locate narratives for his challenging Other Pioneer West that he can use to critique pioneer settlement as represented by Turner's Pioneer-Garden West Myths and to relate this mythic and non-mythic past to his own and to Cypress Hills's present. Framed by the issues he raised in "Carrion Spring" and the tensions and inquiry introduced in the Royce excerpt, Stegner uses these final two sections of Wolf Willow to provide the details in the history of his town and the experiences of his family to clarify two claims he made in Section I: first, that his "disjunct, uprooted, cellular family was more typical than otherwise on the frontier" (WW 20), and, second, that as a "pioneer's child" he is a "product of the American earth" because his western character was "scored into [him] by" his experiences

from “that little womb-village and the lovely, lonely exposed prairie of the homestead” (23). For the first claim, Stegner uses the history of his home town’s emergence to recover the economic realities of pioneer settlement, the pioneers’ aggression toward the land, and their “failures” that the Myths conceal in narratives of “hope,” opportunity, and second chances. In this way, Stegner can demonstrate that his family’s homesteading experiences are part the West’s settlement past. And, for the second claim, his recovery of narratives of cooperation and community in the town’s history and his child-self’s desire to “bond” with the prairie land, confirm his view that his identity as a westerner and a writer was shaped by his engagement with this western place. From his estimation of the usable past he has found, the current state of his western childhood home, and his experiences as a writer from the West, Stegner locates in the response westerners have to their western places the source for a “native art” (288) grounded in the present-day Cypress Hills farmers’ adaptation to the land and community responsibility to others rather than to the aggressive and transformative engagement with the land that the Myths advocate.

#### Turner’s Pioneer and Garden Myths

While Roosevelt, Buffalo Bill, and Wister are the cultural meta-fathers of the Cowboy-Wild West Myths, Turner is the central shaper of the Pioneer-Garden West Myths. In Section IV, the assumptions underlying Turner’s narrative are the primary focus as Stegner relates the history of Cypress Hills’ settlement past. As scholars have shown, from the early explorers on, America was depicted and perceived as an “empty”

continent of “free lands,” a perception that negated the presence and the rights of its native inhabitants and contributed to the invading outsiders seeing them as savages and/or children who could be displaced. It is a foregone conclusion in Turner’s essay and in Section IV of Stegner’s Wolf Willow that the pioneer possess the frontier lands to transform them as they wish. In Section II, Stegner describes how the Canadian government and Mounted Police removed both the Métis and Canadian Native Americans to make way for the ranchers and settlers he traces in Section III and Section IV. In Section IV, Stegner’s concern is with how pioneers attempt to mold these “free,” frontier lands to their desires, whether to fulfill the dream of the metropolis for Pop Martin or the wheat farm for his father.

When the land is feminized and presented as virginal, bountiful, and resourceful, as it often was in promotional tracts, literature, and folklore, the invader’s relationship to the feminized land could range from that of husband and caretaker to conqueror and possessor to master and assaulter. While he does not overtly use this language of violence and possession, Turner presents frontier land as malleable, plentiful, and a space of struggle, transformation, and rebirth for Americans as they strive for individual and national prosperity and progress. What is demanded of the pioneer and the nation in return, according to Turner, is continual “buoyancy and exuberance”; a steadfast commitment to the Myths’ promised outcomes; and acceptance of the idea that ruggedness, ingenuity, and the determination of the pioneer are what make it possible to collect on the promises (Rereading 59). And, because Turner believed this frontier space was



disappearing—“never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves” to America and the American (59)—a nostalgia for this pioneer past not unlike Wister’s for the cowboy, pervades Turner’s Myths of pioneer settlement. At the same time, Turner’s vision of white western settlement suggests that progress, democracy, freedom, and inclusiveness await pioneers as reward for the hardships and dangers they encounter and overcome. Within the paradigm of Turner’s Myths, the settlement history of Cypress Hills should be one of success, fulfillment, and prosperity. Instead, Stegner discovers in the recovery of his childhood home’s historical past, his family’s homesteading story, and his boyhood experiences on the prairie that “failure” was “woven into the very web” of pioneer settlement, a “failure” masked by Turner’s promises of prosperity for the hardworking, faithful, and hopeful pioneer (WW 255).

In Section IV, Stegner reckons with his own role in history-making as he confronts his family’s involvement in the settlement of Cypress Hills from the perspectives of participant and distanced observer—the latter in the stance of the *memoirist*. His strategy of exploring the “dump ground” underlies his pursuit of the settlement history of Cypress Hills, and he grounds his critique of the Myths in the specific and local. Since history and past childhood experiences cover mostly the same period of Cypress Hills’s past in this section, Stegner’s approach encounters some narrative dangers in his attempt to rebut Turner’s Pioneer-Garden West Myth, as when nostalgia occasionally creeps into his reminiscences and when he situates his (white) family’s experiences as a representative example of the pioneer experience. Often Stegner recognizes the nostalgia, acknowledging as he has done before that he is not searching for a “childhood wonderland” and that other narratives outside his own exist to

tell the settlement history of the West (WW 5). However, he seems to fall victim to the universalizing of the Myths in his use of his boy-child and family stories that complicate and undercut his contesting the Myths.

In Section IV, Stegner changes the relationship he has created between history and personal memory, as the historical past and the lived past of Stegner's childhood converge in the telling of Cypress Hills' settlement period. In Wolf Willow's previous sections, Stegner uses Cypress Hills' history or the "knowledge of place, knowledge of the past" that he did not possess as child or adult as the primary source of his challenge to the mythic West (WW 28). He connects this recovered historical past to his child-self's experiences that shaped his "middle-aged" *memoirist* self to create an historical continuity for his and the West's past that challenge the Frontier-Cowboy-Pioneer Myths' freezing of the West's historical past into the mythic time-frame and values of the late 1890s western frontier. In Section IV, Stegner relies less on history and more on memory as the primary source of his challenge to Turner's Pioneer-Garden West Myths.

As he elevates his story as a "pioneer's child" to representative story, Stegner seems very aware of the constructedness of his western identity. He explores how his "westernness" is grounded in his experiences with the West's lands and how this place was shaped by those who came before him. He calls attention to the influences of this place on his identity, reiterating the likes, dislikes, traits, and values his present "middle-aged" self (5) as shown in the depictions of his experiences as a "pioneer's child" in the town and on the prairie

homestead (15). In the essay, “Experience,” Joan Scott argues that, while individuals view lived experiences as shaping them (as does Stegner), “it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience,” experiences that are culturally, socially, economically, materially, and psychically defined and then expressed through language or narrative that is constituted similarly (27). In Section IV, Stegner uses his subject identity as “a pioneer’s child” constructed from lived experiences in the place Cypress Hills and the factors that shaped Cypress Hills to challenge the values of Turner’s Pioneer-Garden West Myths.

However, as he focuses more on his personal pioneer narrative in its localized environment, he acknowledges less overtly the historical-social-cultural context that shaped his experiences, and thus his narrative becomes potentially less effective in its opposition to Turner’s and America’s Pioneer and Garden West Myths. Lynn-Cook’s argument that Stegner’s West remains a predominantly white-male, Anglo story of the West is especially pertinent in this context, as Section IV does not acknowledge the narratives of the Cypress Hills’ Indians, Mounties, Métis, and Hudson’s Bay Company—or all the rich historical-cultural context elucidated in the previous sections. Nevertheless, their absence, an absence of which his child-self was not cognizant, enables the *memoirist Stegner* to make evident the hardships, the failure, the aggression toward the land, and the “profit-motive” through the isolation and behaviors of the child-Stegner that the Myths hide (WW 245). For the “misdirected” reader and *memoirist Stegner*, Stegner’s personal and family pioneer narrative lies within the context of Cypress Hills’ historical past that he has been recovering and America’s cultural context of the mythic West that he has been critiquing throughout the previous sections of Wolf Willow. Thus

Stegner's personal story as a "pioneer's child"—a story constructed on the specific, local, and personal that his methodology of the "dump ground" provides—becomes a part of his Other West as a powerful rejection and challenge to the assumptions in Turner's mythic pioneer story.

### The Profit Motive and the Garden of the World

In the first three chapters of Section IV: Town and Country, Stegner uses the founding of his childhood town, Whitemud, to question Turner's narrative of the pioneer who encounters free, bountiful, and malleable lands and gains prosperity by transforming the land from wild to tame. In "The Town Builders," "Whitemud, Saskatchewan," and "The Garden of the World," he recovers narratives of white arrogance, greed, and failure in the town's historical past along with memories of cooperation, diversity, and community in his personal past to challenge Turner's story of the mythic pioneer. In this section, he contrasts the optimism witnessed in the fictional ranch foreman, Ray Henry—now loosely associated with the town's settlers and ambitions of town-father Pop Martin—with the "hopelessness" of Molly that is evident in the settlers' economic realities and hardships. To relate this part of Cypress Hills' past, the *historian Stegner* draws from primary sources, such as old files from the town's newspaper, The Leader, and interviews conducted in 1953 with early inhabitants, such as Corky Jones, to complete the past unavailable in his memories of living in the town from 1914 to 1920.

According to Turner's Pioneer-Garden West Myths, the hard-working pioneer successfully tames the land so that the entrepreneurial merchant can develop it into Turner's "city of complexity"; together, pioneer and merchant advance the nation's progress, prosperity, and ideals of democracy. But Stegner undercuts the Myths' promised outcomes with the narrative of Pop Martin, Cypress Hill's town builder who had "a manorial imagination" (WW 241). In Martin's narrative, Stegner situates the "profit-motive" (245), and what he calls the "cult of progress" (255) that he encountered in his earlier research for the Powell book in the actions of land developers, politicians, banks, and railroads. This profit and progress narrative, he argues, is suppressed by the Pioneer Myths beneath the image of the prosperous, hard-working pioneer. In telling Martin's story, Stegner employs "dramatic narrative," as he has done previously with historical figures, blurring what is fact, conjecture, and dramatization. While Martin's rise and fall as town-father is documented in the recorded history of his childhood town of Whitemud, Stegner states that Pop Martin is a composite figure of history, memory, folklore, and literature. Illustrative of the point Stegner wants to make, Martin's story exposes the greed, failure, and moral bankruptcy omitted by the Pioneer-Garden West Myths, the very traits and that contributed to the failure of his parents and other homesteaders in the settlement of the West.

Stegner situates the story of Whitemud and western pioneer settlement in the narrative of Martin's rise and fall. And, as he has done in previous sections, he connects his child self to Martin's story and Whitemud's beginning in order to show how the actions of those who come before him shaped the place that shaped him. With the town's "first act," which was to create a town dump from "land donated by Pop Martin," the

very dump the child-Stegner and his pals later rummage through for “treasures,” Stegner ties his child and adult selves to the place Cypress Hills (WW 246). From the *historian Stegner*, the “misdirected” reader and *memoirist* learn how Whitemud demonstrated at its start the optimism of the Myths as illustrated in Turner’s promises that “every *possibility* is open, every *opportunity* still untested.... everybody, is there for the *new start*” (WW 251 italics mine). Incorporated on March 30, 1914, only a few months before the Stegners arrived, as a town site with a population of 117, Stegner describes Whitemud’s citizenry as racially and ethnically diverse, thus contrary to the West of Roosevelt, Wister, and the Myths: they are “farmers, shopmen, sharpies, métis squatters, Texas cowboys, Syrian and Jewish peddlers, and Cockneys straight out of London’s East End” (248). And while Pop Martin’s narrative suggests the achievement of what Turner promises—prosperity, success, transformation of the land, and civic progress—history and memory reveal a parallel narrative.

In contrast to historical figures on which he has focused before, such as Cowie, Dumont, and Walsh, Stegner’s Martin shows no signs of community or social responsibility, even though the folklore surrounding him suggests otherwise. By donating land for the town’s dump and later for its sports ground and its cemetery, Martin “shaped ... the structure of the town” (WW 242). He became its booster, real estate agent, loan agent, and even something of a Canadian Populist hero in his two victorious battles with the Canadian Pacific Railroad (CPR). He was not as a mere “homesteader” who believed in the “Myth of the Garden bad” but rather a man who wished to be “the father of our town ...

its founder, creator, landlord, and patron” (241). For Stegner, Pop Martin is emblematic of the Pioneer-Garden West Myths’ ideal of progress and success, representing Turner’s industrious settler who can “dream [a] flea-bitten, false-fronted burg into another Chicago” (250). Stegner aligns Martin with the enterprising American figure constructed from a composite of historical and literary figures in America: “a common figure in our novels” that he likens to Cooper’s Judge Temple, who also aspired to establish a fiefdom on the frontier, and Cather’s Captain Forrester in A Lost Lady, who wants to be a literal gardener of the West. From Stegner’s perspective, Martin, Temple, and Forrester all reflect the folly of those whose “manorial imaginations,” like Turner’s, give rise to the notion that the West and western lands can be transformed into something they are not (241). As Stegner represents it, the folklore surrounding Pop Martin is not unlike the cultural narratives surrounding George Washington, Daniel Boone, Benjamin Franklin, Andrew Jackson, and Theodore Roosevelt that writers as diverse as Jack London, Horatio Alger, Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, Frank Norris, and others emulated or satirized during turn-of-the-century America—not to mention western boosters, such as politician William Gilpin and Nevada Senator Big Bill Heyward against whom Stegner railed for their unrealistic, damaging, and profit-driven promotion of the West in the Powell book, which he was completing as he started Wolf Willow in 1953.<sup>4</sup>

Stegner uses what he discovers in Martin’s history to undermine the Pioneer Myths, by demonstrating how Martin’s success does not result from hard work on “free” land but from the profit-motives that guided him. Martin’s relationship with Cypress Hills began in 1902 when he and his partner, Fisher, lease nearly 70,000 acres and forty-eight miles of fence from money earned from their “business in Butte” to hold their

white-face Herefords and thoroughbred horses (WW 241). Instead, having “free” land as the Myths proclaim, they purchased it and, as Stegner surmises, took “advantage of the territorial law which permitted acquisition at low cost of lands brought under irrigation” because of the dam, or “really a weir,” they built on it (243). Thus they had thousands of acres of “good bottom hay land” that kept them from being “seriously hurt by the winter of 1906-07” (244). Additionally, Stegner suspects that Martin and Fisher “count[ed] on the railroad” that they “had probably helped promote” to procure not only a town site but a division point for the coming CPR to ensure the town’s economic stability. A division point, Stegner says ironically, would have guaranteed Whitemud “floods of settlers, thousands of cattle and horses, millions of bushels of wheat” (250).<sup>5</sup> With money in hand and still more to be earned and Martin’s own “compulsion to dream big” (242), the pair converted “their bottomland into lots and formed the Whitemud Townsite Company” (244-45). While it appeared as if he was divesting himself of land, Martin reinvested money from these town lots into farm mortgages so that he was “spreading like an ink-blot over the whole eastern end of the Hills” until he “owned a good many people because when homesteaders desperate for house-money or machinery-money came around, he would issue them loans, with their land as security” (251). In recovering Martin’s “profit motive” (245), Stegner exposes the exploitation of the pioneer that parallels that of the absentee ranch owners with regard to their cowhands’ labor completely ignored by the Cowboy Myth.



As the *historian Stegner* locates in historical fact what town folklore obscures, the *memoirist Stegner* observes that Martin “commanded respect because of his money and power,” not because of his generosity (WW 251). His reputation as a Populist hero because of two battles with the CPR reflect, Stegner asserts, a “belligerence” that eventually lost Whitemud its position as division point and, therefore, the much-needed continual influx of people and resources to help it subsist on the arid plains (252). Stegner states that Martin is eventually “whittled away” when drought and storm caused farmers and merchants to give up (267), leaving Martin empty-handed as the farmers had not “proved up on their land” and had no title he could put a lien on and the merchants had no equity (251). When the Stegners left Cypress Hills in 1920, Pop Martin was bankrupt and divorced, and the town was “a dust bowl” (267). For all the “frontier frenzy of practical optimism,” ideals of progress, town building efforts, and western exceptionalism, Stegner shows through the town’s documented history how the Pioneer-Garden West Myths conceal—through promises of free land, second chances, and opportunities—the greed, vanity, arrogance, and failure that Martin represents (247).

Even though Stegner’s recollections of the town are laced with the nostalgia of the “good ol’ days” of childhood freedoms and adventures, he marks his awareness of nostalgia’s trap by punctuating these childhood memories with an exclamatory “Eheu” (WW 242). For example, he describes the moonlit, belly-flopping, ankle-grabbing sled rides he and other kids enjoyed when the Martins’ ranch-hand drove a bobsled through the town in winter; his “love” for the dam and swimming hole created by the weir that Martin built across the Whitemud river (243); the boyhood freedoms his brother, other playmates, and he enjoyed in the town; and the immense pleasure his mother and he

received watching “two or three hundred horses as wild as antelope ... pour across that apparently limitless pasture [owned by Martin] under that big sky” (244). And, while he confesses that his “remembering senses [are] imprisoned there ... by my own account, I would not have missed—*could not have missed it and be who I am*, for better or worse” (281 italics mine), Stegner emphatically states, “I would not for a thousand dollars an hour return to live” there (277). Accordingly, he rejects the nostalgia to expose instead the greed, failure, and false hope the Myths’ elide.

Stegner locates this failure from researching the town’s newspaper and historical records, making history and fact the correctors of the Myths. He observes that his home town was presented as a place where Turner’s promises “might still be realized” in “the new start” it represented as a frontier town (WW 251). For instance, he finds notice of how Martin and Fisher survived the terrible winter of 1906 because of their good bottom hay land; how in 1915 a bumper wheat crop above sixty bushels an acre was produced; and how those ranches on the high benches “every spring ... [sent] long trains of cattle cars down the river” (250). However, amid Whitemud’s bursts of success, Stegner recovers another story—that of failure, hardship, and loss. “Failure,” states Stegner, was the “inevitable warp, as hope was the woof” (255). Even though Whitemud continued to build on a “future that no one yet had given up on” (261), Whitemud became weaker, “lessened ... economically and psychologically,” its hope “diluted” (262) by “hard times and isolation and wartime shortages” (261). Against images of the town’s civic progress—its street lamps, sidewalks,

cemetery, town dump, and tax laws—Stegner finds mention of the scarcity of necessities as well as the persecution suffered by those who were different (the Martin's Chinese cook Mah Jim, the lanky Hugh McGuire, and the Jewish store merchant). He uses statistics from the town's newspaper to show the significant number of families who left during his six years there. And he recalls instances of how the frontier was "hard on women" (256), not because they were the weaker sex but because frontier life was crude, meager, and raw. For example, he recalls the shabbiness of his mother's high-laced shoes, how Martin's wife became dependent upon drugs, how the Martin's English maid could "find contentment easily" (242), and how the gambler's wife committed suicide with gopher poison after the gambler's death in the 1918 flu epidemic. Through Whitemud's history, Pop Martin's story, and Stegner's memories of the men and women of Whitemud, Stegner demonstrates how Turner's Pioneer Myths deny these failures in stories of triumph, prosperity, and hopefulness.

Alongside the failures, Stegner locates narratives of community obligation—a trait that he previously located in historical figures such as Dumont, Cowie, and Walsh and that he gave to the fictional cowhands in "Genesis"—in the pioneer community and the image of the lariat. In contrast to the heroic individualism of the Myths, Stegner associates social responsibility as it was expressed in "Genesis" and Rusty's acknowledgement that his individual efforts needed to be combined with and directed toward the health of the community so that he and the cowhands could survive the brutal storm with the settlers collective response to the 1918 flu epidemic and a winter blizzard. Stegner recalls the flu epidemic and how his parents along with others assisted in the care of others even though his father nearly died helping. Stegner also describes how the 1916

winter blizzard “marooned teachers and children in the schoolhouse for a day and a night and part of the next day” until his father and others strung together “a long string of lariats” from home to school that became their “lifeline” and made the town “a community” (262). In these acts of care and compassion for others and for the welfare of the community, Stegner locates the kind of courage, bravery, and action the Myths have appropriated for narratives of individual exceptionalism and conquest of the Other that he wants to reclaim for his Other West.

#### Victimized by the Folklore of Hope

By reconstructing Cypress Hills’s town-building past through documented events and memories of Pop Martin and the town, Stegner uncovers what he calls the “folklore of hope” that Turner’s Pioneer-Garden West Myths promote and was accepted without question by pioneers like his parents (WW 281). This “folklore of hope” is grounded, according to Stegner, in America’s Declaration of Independence and the vision of the Founding Fathers for the on-going progress of the nation and its people as they fulfill America’s democratic aims. In Section IV, he argues that this “folklore of hope,” of the kind Molly is suspicious in “Carrion Spring,” failed pioneers and led to destructive practices against the western lands on which they depended for survival. This “hope,” Stegner argues, is what drives the “shape and intensity of the dream” of western settlement that Turner’s pioneer story symbolizes and is Stegner’s inheritance as a “pioneer’s child.” In this fourth

section of Wolf Willow, Stegner rejects outright the Pioneer-Garden West Myths' claim that western frontier lands are a garden, an Eden, and a home to plentiful resources. He argues that pioneer settlement of the West was destructive to the land and that pioneers, like his family, participated in this destruction due to inappropriate farming techniques, wrong-headed land laws, and the "folklore of hope" promoted by the Myths. He looks to the past to locate alternative ways to treat the land in the present and future.

Stegner informs the "misdirected" reader and *memoirist Stegner* that America's pioneer story tells pioneers that they are going to "the Garden of the World" (WW 254). This narrative led pioneers to expect western lands to produce. When the lands did not, pioneers associated the problem not with the "garden" (the land) or the Myths but with "luck." What Stegner illustrates is that this "luck" had more to do with the pioneers' situation than arbitrary good fortune or hard work. He says, "the dream that circulated vaguely in the heads of people like my parents had something to do with corncribs and pigpens of Illinois and Iowa, but little to do with the arid Plains" they encountered (255). Therefore, his father "did not grow discouraged" when crops failed in spite of his efforts. Instead he "grew furious" (277), refusing to be beaten by a land that the Myths said was to be productive and bountiful. When personal efforts failed, his father, like other pioneers believing in Turner's "perennial rebirth" and second chances, moved on to the "next opportunity" (277), attributing failure to "bad luck" rather than fallacies in the Myths' assumptions. Stegner indicts America (and Canada) for failure to adapt land laws suitable to the West's aridity—such as those methods he located in the Métis and in the recommendations of John Wesley Powell in his research for Beyond the Hundredth Meridian—as well as the greed of western boosters, eastern bankers, and railroad

magnates who capitalized on the pioneers' failures and the arrogance embedded in America's cultural myths of frontier conquest.

To demonstrate his point, Stegner contrasts his parents' approach to homesteading with neighboring homesteaders, Pete and Emil. While his father built a shack on their summer homestead in order to "prove up" and thus secure their "free" land, immigrant neighbors Pete and Emil built a shack "that was never meant to be lived in, but only to satisfy the law's requirement" (WW 274). While Pete and Emil left the land alone in their "simple minded effort to cheat the government out of title to 320 acres," Stegner's father "used the methods and machinery that were said to be right" and sowed their government loan Red Fife wheat on their 320 acres. Pete and Emil, states Stegner, were the better farmers, for they "plowed no prairie, imported no weeds, started no dust bowl" while his father's pursuit of the Myths' promises led him to accept the practices of his ancestors, who had farmed far less arid lands in eastern and southern states and in Europe, and "rumor or the Better Farming Train." Like other industrious pioneers, he ruined the prairie lands by raising top soil and introducing non-native thistle, flax, and bluebells that contributed to the prairie's later dust bowls (274).

His father's and other pioneers' failure, Stegner argues, was a failure to adapt, a problem exacerbated by the Myths' notion of second chances, the historical state of the pioneers' constant state of migration, and the pioneers' unquestioning belief in the Myths. Knowing nothing about "minimal annual rainfall, distribution of precipitation, isohyetal lines"—and nothing about the Métis "winterers," whom he described as having adapted to the land—Stegner

says pioneers held to their Anglo-European-American beliefs and were “summerers,” as their ancestors had been, and thus they committed more sins against the land and gained a lot less from it than did the wandering Métis or the crooks (281). Contributing further to this failure to learn and adapt, argues Stegner, was the condition of constant migration that pioneers experienced because of their “bad luck” and America’s cultural narratives of Manifest Destiny. The *historian Stegner* claims that Whitemud’s records reveal that most of the town’s initial settlement had moved farther West within a few years, seeking “some new opportunity” on the next frontier (277). Only a few pioneers were able to stay long enough on the prairie to complete ownership of their land and apply the lessons they and others learned. Stegner proposes that western settlement was “discontinuous”; therefore the lessons to be learned from Kansas pioneers’ uses of dry-land farming in the 1860s were not realized until “sixty or seventy years” later (254).

More important, Stegner claims that, because the Pioneer-Garden West Myths represent the “frontier” as an ideological as well as a physical place where free land, plentiful resources, new starts, opportunity, and hope reside, pioneers repeated what they “could not learn, short of living it out” (WW 254) on each “new frontier” (255). For instance, it “would have never occurred to [his parents and other pioneers] to think that [their] family and thousands of others had been betrayed by homestead laws totally inapplicable on the arid plains” (281). Instead, understanding only that they were “licked” (281), they attributed the cause of their failure to a personified nature that sent “blistering hot winds” and rains that were interpreted as “bad luck” (277). Since they did not understand that the laws and the methods used for wetland farming would not apply to arid, dry land farming, their failure was inherent from the start. By recovering this

narrative of “failure” silenced by the Pioneer-Garden West Myths, Stegner adds another challenge to his Other West alongside his narratives of white culpability in the injustices to Native Americans, the acceptance in “Specifications” of a prejudicial and dangerous Cowboy code of individual heroics, and the western woman’s story in “Carrion Spring” to further unhinge the mythic West’s representation of his and America’s western past. The germ of Stegner’s theory of western literary tradition and environmental stewardship is inherent in this section’s analysis of the pioneer and the pioneer’s engagement with western lands. In the 1960’s essays, Stegner returns to these ideas of the westerners’ “constant migration” and “discontinuity” to argue for the literary western to represent multiple, regional traditions and be “another kind of western story-telling” that contrasts with the monomythic male Myths.

Having “learned more” about the pioneers’ historical-cultural-geographic context in which his family’s homesteading experiences reside, Stegner maintains that his family and many other pioneer families were part of a great number who were derailed in their pursuit of the dream and foiled by the profit-motive and inappropriate land laws and farming methods. He acknowledges that America’s cultural stories of exceptionalism, progress, and prosperity furthered America’s cultural narratives of western settlement whereas narratives of “failure” would not have. The lesson that the pioneer “would have found most useful—the marginal nature of agriculture on the arid Plains—was precisely the one that as a pioneer he found unacceptable, *because it denied his hope*” (255 italics mine), a “hope” inherent in the Pioneer-Garden West Myths and promises of the American Dream



embedded in America's sense of identity. Although the Pioneer-Garden West story is the kind of narrative Lauren Berlant says creates a "national symbolic" because it contains stories and values of a nation's citizens that form "a common national 'character'" (Anatomy 20-21),<sup>6</sup> Stegner declares, as he did earlier in Section I, that his parents' failure was not the aberration as the Pioneer-Garden West Myths would suggest but instead historically "more typical than otherwise on the frontier," which gives them and other unsuccessful pioneers a "place in a human movement" that is the settlement of the West (WW 20). As Stegner argues in the Epilogue, these cultural narratives are what America gave the pioneer, narratives consisting of nationalistic and expansionist rhetoric constructed primarily from an ideology derived from America's Founding Fathers and created by Easterners who knew the actual West very little, and what they did know they knew primarily through paintings, travelogues, western and eastern boosters, military reports, and newspaper and dime novel accounts. This narrative of "hope" and historical reality of "failure" are a part of a usable past that Stegner is attempting to recover for the present westerner and America, one that he views as necessary for the present to create its future.<sup>7</sup>

In Section IV, Stegner argues for inclusion of the narrative of "failure" in the story of western settlement, acknowledging that this change requires a fundamental and overarching modification of America's self-identity. America's frontier settlement, he notes, has followed what he describes ironically as an "American faith":

That a new society striking boldly off from the old would first give up everything but the axe and gun and then, as the pioneering hardships were survived, would begin to shape itself in new forms. Prosperity would

follow in due course. A native character would begin to emerge, a character more reliant and more naturally noble than any that could be formed in tired and corrupt Europe, and new institutions would spring from the new social compact among free and classless men. (WW 288)

To change this narrative will mean writing a new narrative of western settlement, which is what Stegner is attempting to do in Wolf Willow by locating a space in the West's past for his family's failed homesteading experiences and by constructing an Other West from Cypress Hills' "unremembered past" that can challenge the ideology, exclusivity, and singularity of America's Myths of the West. As Stegner describes it, the pioneers' "hope" is rooted in America's sense of cultural identity: "Franklin and Jefferson had formulated it, politicians and speculators and railroads had promoted it, the *ignorant faith of hundreds of thousands of home-seekers had kept it alive* and well into the industrial age and out into the dry country where it had little chance of coming true" (255 italics mine). To rewrite the narrative implies that America will need to admit that the vast area of the West is not a garden after all but potentially a wasteland of unarable land. And America would have to accept that even if western lands were a garden or a desert, the western environment is not malleable and cannot be bent to anybody's will, which cuts to the core of America's notions of exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny that were still present, according to Slotkin, in the 1950s and 1960s when Stegner was writing Wolf Willow and the 1960's critical essays.

In his understanding of the role "hope" has in the Pioneer Garden West Myths, Stegner locates what he considers an explanation for the "intensity" and "shape" of the Dream to which his parents and other pioneers subscribed.

Because neither the pioneer nor America could accept these lessons without sacrificing the “hope” that the Pioneer-Garden West Myths promote pioneers like his parents were trapped by cultural narratives that said they could transform and control the land, and deemed failure merely a product of “bad luck” or lack of hard work. The Myths’ “hope” sustained and encouraged people like his parents through the failures and hardships they confronted on the frontier West by offering second chances and new opportunities farther west: “apparently no matter how hard a time *hope* may have had in earlier settlements, *the opening of any new frontier, even a marginal one, revives it intact and undiminished*” (WW 255 italics mine). Significantly, Stegner finds that this “hope” still resides in him because “the pioneers unquestioningly passed on to their children, *including me, some of their faith in the future. At least until the memory of free land fades, hope, it turns out, is heritable*” (255 italics mine). In Wolf Willow, Stegner’s pioneers confront what he claimed Powell met head on and failed to defeat, which was America’s vision of itself as a New World full of opportunities and possibilities, or a garden to be sown and harvested by its industrious and determined citizens.

America’s desire to transform any land or place it defines as a “frontier” to fulfill its notions of selfhood is what concerns Stegner in Wolf Willow because of the destructive tendencies the Myths endorse about the frontier—whatever it is and wherever it resides. Indeed, Turner had already projected in 1893 that “the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise” (Rereading 59). In the 1950s, many westerners like Stegner were only two or three generations removed from the experiences of the pioneer’s life, and America’s West still had vast expanses of undeveloped space. Moreover, as Stegner argues, the cultural “memory of free lands” and notions of

prosperity, opportunities, and second chances were still very much a part of the West's present. By grounding the pioneers' "hope" and "faith in the future" in the American's experience with western lands and claiming both as his inheritance, Stegner makes them "western" traits that contribute to his own shaping "for better or worse" as a westerner (WW 255). Although his parents and other pioneers accepted this Pioneer Garden West Myths' "hope" out of "ignorant faith" (255) because of their cultural-historical-geographic context, Stegner argues that this "hope" must be questioned, as the fictional Molly does and as these recovered narratives of "failure" in the town's history and his parents' homesteading experiences indicate. In the 1960's essays, Stegner suggests that only if his contemporary western regionalist writers question these cultural Myths and expose what they have hidden can the western story be reclaimed and revisioned.

The Making of Paths: "Altering to his own purposes the virgin earth"

In the final chapter of Section IV, Stegner focuses specifically on the relationship his child-self creates with the land at his family's prairie-frontier homestead. Through his experiences as a "pioneer's child" living on a belated frontier, Stegner connects the actions of his child-self to Turner's Pioneer-Garden West Myths, admitting his own complicity in the destruction of the land he identifies as American. In his descriptions of the family's homesteading experiences, Stegner uses his father's desire for conquest, his child-self's attempt

to define his presence, and his mother's knowledge that they had failed to offer his own interpretation of the "shape and intensity of the dream" that led pioneers like his parents to settle the frontier West. Even as he acknowledges that America's western Myths positioned western lands as an Other against which American and *western* identities were constructed—an identity embodying male aggression, domination, and exceptionalism developed from the Myths' paradigm of struggle, conquest, possession, and transformation of the land—Stegner attempts to counter that mythic paradigm of the American's engagement with the land with one of belonging, care, and compassion derived from the child-Stegner's desire to "bond with the earth" (272).<sup>8</sup> By focusing exclusively on his child-self's experiences on the homestead, Stegner fails to connect his personal story to the larger historical-cultural context he has been establishing in the form of an Other West, but he does succeed in emphasizing the cultural constructedness of the American's attitudes toward western lands through the innocence of the child Stegner.

In "The Making of Paths," Stegner returns to what he evaded at the beginning of Wolf Willow: his pioneer story of "failure" that exists only in his memory because the land has literally erased his family's presence and the Pioneer-Garden West Myths have silenced their story. In Section I, Stegner deliberately avoided the prairie homestead upon his return to his childhood home, because he was "afraid" (WW 8) no "trace" of his family's "hard years of effort," no "mark" of their existence, "no shack or wind-leaned chicken coop, wagon ruts or abandoned harrow ... to reassure [him] that people once lived there" remained on the prairie landscape after his thirty year absence (9). Lacking a visible mark of their presence on the land to authenticate his recollections of their homestead life as real instead of "fictive" or a sign of "solipsism" (9), he goes to the town

of his childhood to locate some material sign that his memories of being a “pioneer’s child” are not the product of his fiction-making. After connecting his present adult-self to his past child-self through the smell of the “wholly *native* bush wolf willow”—which restores, he says, his “perspective to what it used to be,” makes his present “reality . . . exactly equivalent with memory,” and awakens what he calls his “sensuous little savage” child-self (19 italics mine)—he claims a position of narrative authority as westerner and insider with the “misdirected” reader, anticipating the “wholly native” western history, memory, and story to come in the next sections of Wolf Willow. Now, after the story of “those who lived there before” has been recovered (27), Stegner must confront his personal narrative, a western story negated by Turner’s Pioneer-Garden West Myths because of his family’s failure to succeed.

To tell his and his family’s pioneer story, Stegner elevates his childhood memories to historical “testimony” in “The Making of Paths” that thus becomes a part of the recovered history of Cypress Hills and a part of the “knowledge of place, knowledge of the past” that Turner’s Pioneer-Garden West Myths have silenced (WW 28). He leverages the relationship established in *Section I* between himself as *memoirist*-author-I and the “misdirected” reader who accepts (to a degree) the memories and experiences as based in truth and in the real world, because of the “I’s” association with the person and author, Wallace Stegner, who grew up in rural Saskatchewan from 1914 to 1920. As history and memory converge in this chapter, Stegner uses memory instead of history to critique the notions of “hope” and “a new start” embedded in the Pioneer-Garden West Myths

that were a part of the child-Stegner's cultural-historical-geographic context and encouraged a destructive relationship to the land that the innocent child-Stegner reflects in his "making of paths" on the homestead.

Stegner views nostalgia as a powerful tool that the Myths employ to represent the West's past as a timeless Wild West with heroes and outlaws and cowboys and Indians—stories that fit neatly into the singular story of the solitary, white-male hero triumphing over a wild nature, its beasts, and the savage Other. For Stegner, this nostalgia codifies the West's past as an easier, less complicated period in American life: when right and wrong, good and evil were easily distinguished and Americans had "heroes" defending them, their principles, and the nation from the "bad." Therefore, the self-imposed moniker of a "sensuous little savage" (WW 19) he applies to his child-self to explore the ramifications of his encounter with the frontier could potentially carry a nostalgia that includes white culture's objectification of the Indian. Stegner, however, avoids nostalgic associations with Cooper's pathfinder, Noble Savage, or marauding savage in his use of this appellation. Rather, he calls out the various meanings that this adult-applied description suggests and links them to "heritable" traits from his white cultural past.

In his attempt to understand not only the "shaping" (WW 24) of his western identity by Turner's Pioneer-Garden West Myths but also how these experiences explain the "shape and intensity of the dream that peopled the nation," Stegner locates in his child self's experiences values and relationships to the land that he attributes to pioneers and makes "heritable" so he can re-narrativize the relationship of modern westerners to their land. On one level, this chapter presents the "middle-aged" *memoirist Stegner's* depiction of the child-Stegner's desire to establish a presence and an identity within and

opposed to the wild, natural landscape of the prairie that erases each winter the presence that the child-Stegner creates every summer through the “paths” he makes. On another level, Stegner encounters problems that potentially undermine his critique of nostalgia, because his focus on his child-self and his family’s homesteading experiences omits the experiences of Others, just as his story has been excluded from the historical movement of white western settlement.

Stegner both enables this exclusivity and denies it by adopting the point of view of his child-self to relate his activities at the homestead. The perspective of the innocent child becomes rhetorically significant to his critique of Turner’s Pioneer-Garden West Myths in its indication that pioneers, as he argued earlier, are partly unaware of the destructive ramifications of their actions and “victimized by a folklore of hope” (WW 281). In her ground-breaking study of western history, The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West (1987), New Western historian Patricia Nelson Limerick comments that, among the most “persistent values” of the Pioneer Myth,

few have more power than the *idea of innocence*. The dominant motive for moving West was improvement and opportunity, not injury to others. Few white Americans went West intending to ruin the natives and despoil the continent. Even when they were trespassers, westering Americans were hardly, in their own eyes, criminals; rather, they were pioneers. The ends abundantly justified the means; personal interest in the acquisition of property coincided with national interest in the acquisition of territory, and those interests overlapped in turn with the mission to extend the domain of



Christian civilization. Innocence of intention placed the course of events in a bright and positive light; only over time would the shadows compete with our attention. (36 italics mine)

With Wolf Willow, Stegner announces these “shadows” by exploring his own and his family’s failed homesteading experiences.

Stegner opens this chapter by introducing the “misdirected” reader to the child-Stegner’s initial perception of their homestead. This perspective, albeit from hindsight, allows him, first, to situate the child within the same paradigm that the Pioneer-Garden West Myths place the pioneers’ encounter with the land and, second, to examine how the pioneer marked the land. As in Section III with Cypress Hills’ cowhands and with Ray and Molly Henry’s situation, Stegner highlights the incongruities between the Pioneer Myths’ “free” lands and the economic realities of his family’s homesteading. The *memoirist Stegner* recalls first seeing his family’s prairie acreage at age six when he accompanied his father and eight-year-old brother to the spot that was their homestead—the “free land” Canada and Pop Martin had already surveyed and divided into plots for industrious pioneers like his parents. His father had made an application of deed for the 320 acres allotted to him on, which over the course of the next five years, he was required to make improvements so that he could apply for and receive the deed. As Stegner shows, these “free” frontier lands were anything but free. Embedded in the legal arrangement between settler and government was the implied assumption that transformation of the land by the pioneer meant ownership and possession of the land. In economic terms, ownership depended upon the pioneer’s labor, which he had to give freely for the opportunity to own the land; the pioneers’ ability to purchase the seed and

the equipment needed to plow, care for, and harvest the crop; and the pioneers' ability to pay for the materials necessary to construct a home on the frontier. As Stegner illustrates, the West contained no "free" lands as the Myths promised.

In his father's and his own attempts to mark the land as theirs, Stegner identifies the embedded notions of ownership, possession, control, and transformation that are inherent in Turner's Pioneer-Garden West Myths and are, in Stegner's view, the source of America's destructive habits toward the land. Like the frontier spatiality described by Turner's Pioneer-Garden West Myths, the prairie frontier is perceived by the child-Stegner as absent of human presence and "stubborn" in its resistance to his family's and his attempts to make it theirs. According to the *memoirist Stegner*, their encounter "began as it ended—empty space, grass, and sky" (WW 268). The sheer immensity of the prairie's flatness and vast, domed, and enclosing blue sky only magnified the land's indifference to the invading settler's role as a "foreign and noticeable" thing (269). He recalls how he "did not at first feel even safe" (269) and how "there was nothing to distinguish or divide *our land* from all the others ... to show which 320 acres ... were *ours* (268 italics mine). Thus, against the enormity of the prairie, he and his father created signs to "demonstrat[e] *our* existence" (272 italics mine) and "to demonstrate *ownership*" (269 italics mine). In accordance with the law's requirements, his father erected a tent he eventually replaced with an "ugly tarpaper box" to make the place a "homestead," and he plowed the prairie into wheat fields so they could "prove up" the land and fulfill the government's requirement to own it (273). In their attempt to convert the arid Plains into a wheat farm, as

the Pioneer-Garden West Myths declare they can through hard work and determination, Stegner says his father's agricultural methods contributed to the dust bowl of the 1930s as "quite a lot of the homestead's thin soil lies miles downwind" because they introduced non-native plants that "choked out the grass and ... the old natural range" (273). Stegner does not fault his father for this destructiveness; instead, he blames the notion of progress and conquest that Turner's Pioneer-Garden West Myths advocate in the idea that the pioneer can transform the frontier land into "cities of complexity" (Rereading 32).

Ingrained in Turner's Pioneer-Garden West Myths' is what Stegner labels an "American cult of Progress" (WW 272), a construct that says the pioneer's engagement with the land results in the land's transformation or in some sign of change, growth, or advancement for the pioneer and the nation. For a frontier space characterized by the Myths as empty, wild, virginal, plentiful, or new, progress is evident only when empty becomes populated, wild is tamed, virginal is stained, plentiful becomes barren, and what was new is now tarnished. According to the *memoirist*, this change meant transforming a land that "*seemed creation-new*" to his parents and to his child self "with marks of our identity" (273 italics mine). Thus his father's erecting the shack and plowing the field mirrors what Stegner calls the "satisfaction that *Homo fabricans* feels in *altering to his own purposes the virgin earth*" (272), a "satisfaction" rooted in the Pioneer Myths' narrative of conquest, ownership, and transformation of the land. In this "American cult of progress," Stegner situates the pioneers' aggression and destructiveness toward the land as it is underwritten by a "profit motive" that he has associated previously with the Hudson's Bay Company's lists of furs, the "wolfers" practices of extermination, Young Schulz and Ray's digging out of the coyote pups, and Pop Martin's spreading like "an ink

blot” across the town site. Although the actions of the child-Stegner toward the prairie are on a much lesser scale than his father’s,” Stegner uses the child’s innocent act of “making of paths” to illustrate how his actions mimic Turner’s pioneer in the masculine and aggressive destruction of the land that the pioneer desires to own and transform.<sup>9</sup>

The paths the child-Stegner creates on the prairie make visible the rhetoric of nationalism permeating Turner’s pioneer narrative. They are initially utilitarian paths, ruts, or trails. But they also broadcast his presence and identity against an indifferent, flat, and immense prairie space and thus demonstrate ownership, possession, and transformation of the land. The paths the child-Stegner constructs reflect, according to the *memoirist Stegner*, the “paths our daily living wore in the prairie” (WW 272); they run from the shack to the outhouse and woodpile, to the coulee where they fetched their water, and inside the fence line where the horses and cows were. When other family members “neglected their plain duty to the highway,” the child-Stegner is irritated because these paths are more meaningful to him: they are “ceremonial” and “our own trail” (271), signifying paths “more intimately and privately made” than the roads, paths of others, and trails he finds on the prairie (272). The *memoirist* describes how he received “unspeakable satisfaction” from the creation, maintenance, and visibility of his paths, as they were his signs of identity, ownership, and progress on the flat land as the shack, chicken coop, and privy were his father’s; and like these buildings, his paths declare that in this frontier place “was ‘located’ a homestead” (272). He likens his path-making to the “Indian [who] demonstrated

by his handprint in ochre on a cliff wall” his presence (272). However, his presence is more precarious than the Indian’s because each winter the “mark of [his] identity” was “wiped ... out again” (273) so that each summer, his feet had to remake the paths. This erasure is what the adult *memoirist* feared on his return to Cypress Hills in 1953 and the reason he chose not to go to the prairie homestead but to the town to validate his memories.

In the child-Stegner’s need to mark his existence against the flat and domed prairie, Stegner locates the pioneers’ destructive and rapacious attitudes toward the land that the Myths hide in notions of progress and prosperity. While the activity of “making of paths” denotes the child-Stegner’s presence, it scores the earth and asserts his claimed identity and dominance over the land. As an “extension” of himself, his making paths are not too different from Pop Martin’s real estate dealings that enable him to spread like an “ink blot” across Whitemud. According to the *memoirist*, “those tracks demonstrated our existence ... triumphantly,” saying “We are here” (272) with “an insistence not only that we had a right to be in sight on the prairie but that we *owned and controlled a piece of it*” (271). Through the child-Stegner and his family’s attempt to transform the prairie into a homestead and wheat farm, Stegner reveals Turner’s pioneer story as a struggle between nature and the pioneer and the necessity of the pioneer to conquer the land: construct a path, an outpost, a ranch, a homestead, or a town on the frontier. In the Myths’ paradigm, pioneer’ engaged western lands in a battle to be won to ensure America’s progress, which according to Stegner makes the relationship of the American to the land as one of conqueror and conquered, similar to how the child Stegner sees his father’s single-

minded, “demonic fury” to plow the prairie, plant the seed, and reap the profit promised by the Myths (275).

Analogous to the manner in which he depicts life in the frontier town, Stegner juxtaposes life on the frontier homestead with what the Myths purport it to be. He states that Turner’s Myths told pioneers that they lived in the “Garden of the World” (WW 274) where resources were seemingly endless because easily accessible or precious because limited. Within the context of this Garden West Myth, his family’s hard work on the homestead should have brought bountiful crops. Sometimes it did, he says, as in 1916 when the prairie produced “briefly... twenty acres of bluebells... lush grass and wildflowers,” which “persuaded [them] that [they] did indeed live in the Garden of the World” (274). Yet, 1917 gave them only their “seed back,” 1918 “little better, and 1919 served [them] up such blistering hot winds that [they] didn’t even bother to call in the threshers” (277). He says, the homestead “was never a home” (273), amenities were scarce, and life was “uneventful and lonesome” because they lived “miles from fuel, supplies, medical care, and human company” (274). Due to their scarcity, everyday necessities, not the gold and silver of the Myths, were precious resources at the homestead: they “starved for shade” and a “decent drink of water” (278). During their eighteen-hour long summer days, they were confined inside the shack by spring “soakers” (276) or “searing wind, scorching sky” (278). Even “eating, ordinarily our purest pleasure, [was] no fun,” because the food was often “on the turn” or the weather was too hot to cook (279). In showing the crudeness and paucity of their homestead life, Stegner echoes the fictional Molly’s life and

rejects the Myths' representation of the pioneer living in a prosperous garden. His recovery of this other side of western settlement leads him to confront what Limerick says is "the West as a place and not a process" (*Legacy* 26) and where "history ... is the most dramatic and sustained case of high expectations and naiveté meeting a frustrating and intractable reality" (29).

In the context of Turner's Garden representation of the West, Stegner observes that his childhood activities on the homestead were the inherited practices of earlier whites and employed as theirs to the same end: progress and profit. Thus he identifies a brutality lurking in the word "savage" in his appellation, a "sensuous little savage," that is not unlike the "masculine aggression" he attributes to the fictional Young Schulz in "Carrion Spring" and frontier savagery of the "wolfers" and furriers in Section II. The *memoirist Stegner* states that he and his brother were unaware and unconscious of, or irreverent about the possible effects of their treatment of resources; they thought them unlimited and thus they became like exterminators, except that they lived an "idyll of miniature savagery" (WW 275), suggesting a violence, cruelty, and "callousness" (276) similar to those who came before them. The *memoirist* declares that he and his brother were "predators" who committed toward small prey at the homestead the same "mass destruction our fathers and grandfathers had employed against placer gravels and buffalo and virgin timber and free land" (259). With a .22 rifle or twelve gauge shot-gun in hand, they plundered the coulees, the river banks, and the prairie for rabbit, sage hen, gophers, minks, weasels, frogs, clams, and occasionally beaver, and they were "experts in dispensing death" like the earlier inhabitants of Cypress Hills (275): "all we lacked to put us into the position of the surveyors and hunters who had drunk slough water in that

country in the 1870s was a few buffalo to fill our tank with urine and excrement” (278). From their “hunting, fishing, trapping,” they prepared “savage feasts out in the willows” and were “as blindly destructive as any in the history of North America. Only our opportunities were limited” (259). Their actions, he says, were tied to profit like the “wolfers” because they trapped and poisoned to protect their crop: “in the name of wheat we absolved ourselves of cruelty and callousness” and “were as untroubled by all our slaughter as early plainsmen were by their slaughter of buffalo” (276). As he acknowledges this culturally influenced childhood behavior, the *memoirist Stegner* claims them as his inheritance, along with the “hope” and “failure” he has already claimed as a “pioneer’s child.”

Even as he strips away the assumptions underlying Turner’s Pioneer-Garden West Myths to reveal and recover the failure, violence, hardships, profit-motive, and ideology of conquest and destruction of western lands that these Myths promote, Stegner grounds in the child-Stegner’s innocence and experiences on the homestead an alternative narrative to counter the destructiveness of the Myths. This alternative narrative lies within his child-self’s intuitive need to experience the same “*bond with the earth* that all the footed and winged creatures felt” (WW 272 italics mine). Because he feels exposed in a “country, that hated a foreign and vertical thing” (271), the *memoirist Stegner* claims he believed that by “contribut[ing] his feet to the wearing process” he established a physical and sensory connection to the land (272). Whereas the rodents burrow into the land and the birds blend with the sky, the child-Stegner “sit[s] baldly on the plain,



something the earth refused to swallow” (269).<sup>10</sup> He recalls how his “making paths” with his bare feet “lift [his] heart” as the paths “move across the prairie like an extension of [him]self” (271), leading the *memoirist* to claim that “wearing any such path in the earth’s rind is an intimate act, an act like love” (273). However, alongside the child’s innocent desire to unite with the prairie like the birds and rodents are the hidden cultural notions of possession, destruction, and ownership that causes the *memoirist Stegner* to acknowledge his shared guilt in the “savage” rape of America’s western lands.

Countering Turner’s pioneer narrative of conquest is an approach to the land that places Stegner within a literary and environmental tradition emanating from Thoreau together with wilderness preservationist and Sierra Club founder, John Muir.<sup>11</sup> According to Dan Flores, Stegner’s desire to “bond with the earth” and the “unspeakable satisfaction” he says he receives from his bare feet touching the earth to make his paths explains the adjective “sensuous” that the *memoirist* attaches to his child-self’s descriptor. In the child-Stegner’s desire to be with the land as the animals are, Flores sees Stegner’s emerging philosophy of “organicist adaptation” of humans toward the land (118). This alternative narrative of bonding becomes a part of Stegner’s Other West as have the narratives of cooperation, compassion, and social responsibility he associated with Cowie, Dumont, and Walsh. In his 1980 essay “The Sense of Place,” Stegner succinctly defines the kind of relationship he wishes people (not just Americans) had with the land: he calls it a “sustainable relationship between people and the earth” that is built not on the “raiding and ruining” we have been doing but on “learn[ing] to be quiet part of the time, and acquir[ing] the sense not of ownership but of belonging” (206). In the child-Stegner’s desire to “bond” with the land lies the heart of his environmental

philosophy and his notions of social responsibility to the community, a community that includes the land, animals, and people. In the Epilogue, Stegner returns to this notion of “bonding” with the land as a sign that the West has the potential to produce a native art.

Despite their efforts, the pioneering experience of Stegner’s family is one of “failure” and loss of “hope,” therefore placing them outside Turner’s mythic narrative and America’s understanding of western settlement. Even though his family sought the promises of the Myths, maintained their “hope” and determination to succeed over four years, did not question the land laws and farming practices given to them, and attempted to transform the land with their paths, buildings, and wheat fields that signaled their “ownership” (269) and “existence” (272), Stegner says they missed “proving up” on their homestead deed by less than one year and became part of the area’s statistics of those who left to seek second chances. Like other pioneers betrayed by Turner’s promises, the Stegners leave their homestead in the summer of 1920 with his mother’s pronouncement of “better luck next time” and their frail, barbed-wire fence tied shut to keep out the animals, roaming stock, and the “encroaching emptiness” of the prairie (283). The overt sign of their failure, the *memoirist* suggests, is the land’s ability to erase their presence. For his mother’s “sake,” the *memoirist* Stegner says, he has “regretted that miserable homestead, and blamed [his] father for the blind and ignorant lemming-impulse that brought [them] to it” (281). For himself, however, he declares, “I would not have missed—could not have missed

it and *be who I am, for better or worse,*” thus acknowledging how the homestead, like the town’s Cowboy culture, shaped his western identity (281 italics mine).

More importantly, Stegner argues that his experiences as a “pioneer’s child” give him the narrative authority to address the central focus of Section IV—“to understand the shape and intensity of the dream that peopled a nation” (WW 281). He claims this narrative authority to challenge Turner’s Pioneer-Garden West Myths on the basis of his being “one who has lived the dream, the temporary fulfillment, and the disappointment ... the full course” (282). Thus he positions lived experiences as the foundation from which to challenge the dominance of the Myths, just as he suggested earlier that history (Section II) and story (Section III) and memory (Sections II and III) can be used to fight the Myths’ defining control of what is “western.” He presents an essentialist argument not unlike that used by feminists and African Americans in the 1970s who too grounded their challenge to dominant cultural narratives in the personal, the specific, and the experiential. Using the same construct as Turner’s Pioneer-Garden West Myths to tell his pioneer story of attempts to transform the fertile frontier into a civilized place Stegner writes against the grain of the Pioneer-Garden West story to present his family’s encounter with an arid frontier and their failure to best the land to recover what the Myths’ gloss—the defeat, the destruction of the land, the personal and financial expense, and the failure many experienced. He grounds his understanding of the “shape and intensity” of the dream in the remembered experiences of his pioneer child self or in the experiential-sensory knowledge of the authorial “I’s” experiences in a specific, local, and western place that he has shown to be a part of and shaped by larger historical-cultural-geographic influences discovered in the place’s past. At the same time, by relying strictly

on recollections of his and his family's experiences on the homestead and without references to the diverse, multi-vocal "rich" past of Cypress Hills that he has recovered, Stegner endangers his critique of Turner's mythic pioneer narrative with the exclusivity of his story.

In his singular focus on the experiences of his child self, Stegner has not in this chapter, as he has done before, connected memories of his childhood self to the historical-cultural past of Cypress Hills even though Cypress Hills' rich, diverse past is evident in the child-Stegner's awareness that other "paths" exist on the prairie and this richness and diversity is part of Stegner's challenging Other West. The existence of these other "paths" clearly undercuts the notion of the frontier as a pristine, new, and untouched space. For the "misdirected" reader informed by the previous sections of Wolf Willow, these paths carry traces of the Blackfeet, Crow, Gros Ventre, Snake, Sioux, and Assiniboine nations as well as the Dumont and the Métis, Cowie and the Hudson's Bay Company, the wolfers, the Mounties, and the cowboys and the buffalo, deer, and a host of other native animals that have lived and walked in this place before Stegner. In contrast to the palimpsest's view of the prairie's history residing in the land as Wolf Willow has advocated, Stegner has his child self dismiss these paths in favor of those he creates on a frontier "untouched" (282). In the "Capital of an Unremembered Past," the *memoirist* specifically connects the child-Stegner sitting in the coulee with Marmaduke Grayburn, Sitting Bull, Walsh, Cowie, Dumont, and the others who had walked this same earth to claim the land, or specific western places, as the conduit to a very rich, creative source for his *writer's* self. In "Making of

Paths,” Stegner seems to overlook the opportunity presented to demonstrate his child-self’s connection to the layers of history in the land to emphasize instead his child-self’s emulation of the acts of savagery toward the land committed by earlier whites, thereby calling attention to how America’s cultural Myths shaped his actions toward the frontier landscape in opposition to his child-self’s desire to bond with the earth. Although Stegner avoids the opportunity to link the child to the larger, richer historical West, the exploration of his personal story as a “pioneer’s child” exposes the “shadows” that Limerick alludes to, those between “hope” and “failure,” ownership and bonding, past and present, and myth and history that dwell in the West’s past.

In “The Making of Paths,” Stegner positions his personal story as the basis from which he can explain to the “misdirected” reader how to understand the pioneers’ settlement of a frontier West and the role Turner’s Pioneer-Garden West Myths, “hope,” and a “faith in the future” had in this settlement. From the parameters established in Section II for telling the West’s story “properly,” Cypress Hills’ pioneer story is Stegner’s personal “epic” because he is “emotionally committed to” it (111) and thus “one who knows it right” (112). Even though he says there may be other “good ways” to explain the “shape and intensity of the dream,” Stegner claims his interpretation is “one good one” because he knows “*in his bones* what this continent has meant” to the pioneer (281 italics mine). He says that, as a “pioneers’ child,” “he has known the raw continent, not as tourist but as denizen”; “he has alter[ed] to his own purposes the virgin earth”; “he has made trails ... on an untouched country”; “he has shared in the guilt of wastefully and ignorantly tampering with [the land] in the name of Progress”; he has known “regret” and “melancholy” in “the fulfillment of the American Dream [which] means the death of the

noble savagery and freedom of the wild”; and he has “renewed himself in Eden and then set about converting it into the lamentable modern world.... even if the Eden is, as [his] was, almost unmitigated discomfort and deprivation” (282). What Stegner presents in this description of his lived experiences is both the mythic West that the American cultural imaginary accepts as the story of its western pioneer past as well as the recovered narratives of his Other West drawn from history and memory in an expanded western spatiality that includes at once the mythic, the historic, and the experiential that he considers the more authentic narrative of the West.

This dichotomy of the mythic and the non-Myth is the western regionalist writers’ and Stegner’s cultural, historical, and experiential inheritance, though what is mythic dominates the western spatiality as Stegner illustrates in Wolf Willow. But he attempts to disrupt the mythic through his recovery of a usable, non-mythic past, then returning it to the American cultural imaginary so that the present can construct a future on the building end of the pontoon. Therefore, next to the mythic (the virgin earth, raw continent, untouched country, Dream, Eden, noble savagery, and hope), Stegner positions the non-mythic (altered land, guilt of wastefully and ignorantly destroying the land for progress/profit, discomfort, deprivation, and failure). As a cultural narrative of the community that is America and to which the pioneer belongs, Stegner argues that America betrayed its citizen-pioneers with its “folklore of hope” that the Myths advocated while silencing others. The recovery of his parents’ failed homesteading story re-inserts

“failure” into the pioneers’ story because, he argues, it is as much a part of the larger historical narrative of white western settlement as is Turner’s “hope.”

In the final image of “The Making of Paths” that closes Section IV, Stegner locates his understanding of the pioneers’ experience amid his child-self’s inheritance of male-aggression and violence toward the land and his mother’s ironic comment—“better luck next time”—that acknowledges their “failure” and their diminished “hope” as they leave their homestead. His mother, he claims, knew “it was not a farm, and we were not farmers, but wheat miners, and trapped ones at that” (WW 280). Even though he says she recognized that “it was failure they were living” while his father, his brother, and he did not, his mother, like Molly, did not give up. He describes how she had “impulses toward a richer and more rewarding life, and ambitions for her sons” (281) and suggests that her Iowan background gave her the “character and the skills” to know they were not farmers and the desire to “become one of the stickers” if she had found better land in Cypress Hills (280). While he regrets the hardships his mother suffered at the homestead, something he addresses later in his life in “Letter to My Mother,”<sup>12</sup> Stegner uses his mother’s irony to challenge the promises of Turner’s Garden Myth and to show that his “disjunct, uprooted, cellular family was more typical than otherwise on the frontier . . . [and] had our place in a human movement” (20). Her statement of “better luck next time” as they leave their “plot of failure” to find a “second chance” on the next frontier reflects “how such a departure should be taken” because it reveals the cultural dominance of Turner’s Garden Myth under which they and other pioneers’ lived—a culture of mostly unquestioned “hope” (283). Through recollections of his child-self’s experiences

on the homestead, he captures an Other West that contains the innocence of his child-self's desire to bond with the land and his mother's sense of doubt and pragmatism.

#### Epilogue: The West as a False-Front Athens

From the position of one whose own story has been erased by the mythic West and one who knows that the narratives of others have been excluded, Stegner uses the Epilogue: False-Front Athens to assess whether or not Whitemud and the West have achieved what America's cultural metanarratives of the West have promised in their narrative of conquest and triumph over the western frontier. In the Epilogue, Stegner comments on the primary concerns of Wolf Willow, which are America's cultural acceptance of the West's Myths to define his own, his family's, and other westerners' past and present and his interest as a western regionalist writer in whether the West can cultivate and sustain a distinctive literature of its own. This latter concern about the West's ability to nurture and sustain a western art and artist and the relationship of place to this western art is the primary focus of the Epilogue and Stegner's 1960's critical essays. In the Epilogue, Stegner explicitly identifies the type of environment a native art requires, the role the western town and region have in nurturing an artist, and the traits and values requisite to the western artist. By anticipating the major concerns of his 1960's essays in the Epilogue and by practicing many of the approaches articulated as "chores" in those essays, Wolf Willow becomes a



textual “seedbed” for the theory of western American literature that Stegner expresses in the 1960’s critical essays (WW 306).

In the Epilogue, Stegner dismisses the dominant voice of Section IV, the *memoirist Stegner*, for the voice of the *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner* who opens Wolf Willow so that he can comment on the present West from the insider, analytic, and instructive point of view this persona claims in Section I. Having accomplished his goal of recapturing his child-self’s story, Stegner now states that the needs of the *memoirist Stegner* have been met: the “nostalgia” for old places and images has been “corroborat[ed]” and he has “no *personal* excuse for extending [his] return to Whitemud” (WW 287 italics mine). Yet, the *memoirist Stegner* remains for a few days to pursue his other interest—the realization that neither in his 1953 present nor as a child living in the area between 1914 to 1920 did he know who “lived there before him” (27). To gain the “knowledge of the past, knowledge of place” (28) he lacks, he proceeds to copy old newspaper files and talk with the old-timers, specifically Corky Jones, to gather this “knowledge,” a knowledge that the *writer, historian, and critic-theorist-teacher Stegner* uses to construct the multi-genre Wolf Willow. Thus he begins the process of discovering and recovering the “unremembered” history of Cypress Hills that he researched further upon returning to his Palo Alto home. During his 1953-1954 academic year fellowship at the Center for Advanced Studies near the Stanford campus, Stegner drafted the stories for Section III, conducted research in secondary sources on Cypress Hills’ history, and recovered the childhood memories that became the content for Sections II, III, and IV.<sup>13</sup> He worked intermittently on the “Saskatchewan book,” as he

calls it, for the next six years until 1959 when he prepares the manuscript for publication in 1960 as Wolf Willow: a History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier.

For the *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner* of the Epilogue, there remains one final task to complete before he departs: to take one more walk through the present 1953 Whitemud to answer two lingering questions that have emerged from the tension between, one, America's cultural Myths of the West that indoctrinated him and others into thinking the West was and is a "romantic, gun-toting" Wild West of the s cowboy hero and successful pioneer and, two, the history and memories recovered in the previous sections that dispute this representation of the West's past (WW 4). The first question involves how closely the frontier town of his childhood has fulfilled the "dream" or promises embedded in Turner's Pioneer-Garden Myths, as this "dream" was America's cultural story that drove white settlement of the West and lured pioneers like his parents to pursue this dream. He asks if whether the town "in its less than fifty years ... [has] become" (287) the "sun-kissed prairie Athens" (299) the Myths promised, or whether it has merely completed a "pilgrimage from savagery through barbarism to vulgarity" to reach the present (287)?<sup>14</sup> The second question is whether the present 1953 Whitemud and West can nurture and sustain a native art and artist. Has it, he wonders, achieved "its voice in unmistakable native arts" (288)? The answer to this last question is critical to the *writer Stegner*, as it poses the question of whether the West can be a creative as well as literal home to the western regionalist writer or simply home to the stories of the Myths that

dominate this literary and imaginative spatiality that he and his contemporaries confront in the 1950s and 1960s.

After a walk through the town, examining its structures, its habits, its economies, and its people and looking for visible signs of permanence, growth, and success, Stegner initially responds to these two questions: the town does not represent what the “dream of the new world promised” nor is it a place that can be a sustaining home to “native arts” (WW 228).<sup>15</sup> However, he does locate some small “adaptation” (301) to the western environment by Cypress Hills’ citizenry that leads him to conclude that this small town and western place is “not unhopeful” (306) and therefore might be a “*seedbed* whose transplants will have to mature elsewhere” just as he did (300 italics mine). While these two questions are the thematic focal points of the Epilogue, the conclusions the *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner* draws provide him with the basis to claim a guarded sense of “hope” for a modern West’s ability to nurture and sustain the West’s “native” arts, a hopefulness that becomes in the essays a charge to his contemporaries to step forth to find their creative source and sustenance in a place based and realist literature so they can write “another kind of western story-telling that is not mythic but literary” (HMWW 187). In the 1960’s essays, Stegner pursues the questions raised in the Epilogue by analyzing the inhibiting influence of the mythic depiction of a simpler, more rural, and heroic West on contemporary western regionalist writers and by offering correctives modeled on “knowledge of the past, knowledge of the place” articulated in Wolf Willow.

By calling Whitemud an American Athens, even a “false front” one, the *critic-theorist-teacher Stegner* ironically echoes Turner’s proclamation about the frontier’s importance to America’s nationhood and character. Turner closed his essay with a

comparison between the new world and the ancient world to suggest that America's western frontier and its untapped resources, free lands, and garden-like environment provided the nation the potential to become a great cosmopolitan center just as the Mediterranean region nurtured the greatness of Greece. For Stegner, the present Whitemud is clearly not a "rural Athens" in any shape or form (WW 288), nor will it become Turner's "city of complexity" (Rereading 32), because of the flawed assumptions underwriting Turner's vision. Instead of being in the "garden of the world" as Turner declared, the pioneers' frontier was an arid Plain with an uncooperative nature in which greed, inappropriate land laws and farming methods, and constant migration led more often than not to the pioneers' failure to achieve the promised "dream." However, pioneers like Stegner's parents stayed the course because of their unquestioned "faith in the future" that the Myths promoted and that left them feeling cheated when they did not succeed by "bad luck" instead of by a false cultural narrative. They then moved on to the next frontier to try again. Stegner claims that the pioneer was "victimized by the folklore of hope" (281) embedded in this "dream" and that this Pioneer-Garden West Myth contributed to the land's destruction, the failure of his family's and other pioneers' attempts to settle the West, and the ruin of one native and one hybrid culture that offered potential. Consequently, the modern West is left with a legacy of constant migration, a discontinuous past, notions of heroic individualism, and a lot of small western towns like Whitemud still struggling to be something more than dull, vulgar, and ugly.

In the Epilogue, Stegner confronts a western spatiality dominated by what is mythic, which his non-mythic West cannot completely displace. Even though the Other West that he has constructed from history, experience, and the local challenges the mythic West in its positing of narratives of “failure” and doubt; its assertion of compassion and social responsibility in contrast to the prejudices, hierarchy, and exceptionalism of the Cowboy code; its depiction of racial diversity in contrast to the Anglophobic West of Roosevelt and Wister; and its insertion of the western woman into the exclusivity of the solitary white-male narrative of the Myths, Stegner cannot fully reject the mythic West’s construct of the American’s engagement with the western environment (“altering the virgin land to his own purposes”) and the outcome of this engagement—the signs of presence, ownership, alteration, and even adaptation—as the basis upon which progress is to be determined. Because he sees himself as the “child of a pioneer” (15) whose “heritable” traits are “hope” or a “faith in the future” (255), he is trapped much like he claims many westerners are in a cultural construct that still defines him and the West in terms of a mythic past that has its roots in America’s cultural sense of self as defined by its Founding Fathers.

In a Bakhtinian sense, Stegner’s rebuttal of the dominant mythic discourse of the West that permeates the American cultural imaginary results in some change in this metanarrative because, once confronted, a dominant discourse, according to Bakhtin, is never the same, because it must either reject, absorb, or make modifications to address the challenger.<sup>16</sup> Even though Stegner is unable to step outside the Myths’ basic paradigm of the American’s engagement with a western spatiality to locate a new way to assess the modern West’s progress and ability to produce “unmistakable native arts”

(WW 288), the alternative narratives included in his Other West open a door for others to critique the Myths, as he has, from the positions of the insider (westerner) and from one whose narrative has been excluded.

“As unsatisfying a place to be ... as one could imagine”

For the first three-quarters of the Epilogue, Stegner attempts to judge Whitemud’s progress and ability to produce a native art by comparing the town of his childhood with that of the present in terms of Turner’s notions of what the pioneer story promised the West and America. He again critiques the Myths’ construct of the American’s engagement with a frontier spatiality with Whitemud’s experiences as a small western town representing those of the West as a whole. This generalizing of experience problematizes Stegner’s critique, just as it does with “his” childhood story in Section IV representing the pioneers’ story. Additionally, his conflation of his Canadian childhood home with America’s western experience denies the differences in place and region that previously he has been careful to distinguish between Canada’s West and America’s West. As Robert Thacker points out, while the history and the Myths of the West have been seen largely as a closed entity from the “American point of view, no Canadian imagines seeing Canada’s West without references to the United States” except for Stegner in Wolf Willow who describes various “incursions into Canadian territory from the United States” (Impenetrable Foreignness 69-70).<sup>17</sup>

Stegner objects to mythicizing the West by others (easterners and westerners) who have transformed the West as a physical place into the West as idea and ideology of American exceptionalism, progress, and profit. This Eastern constructed mythic West, he argues, became the locale for the nation's hope, opportunity, and prosperity, or the literal as well as imaginative place where the goals of the Declaration and the Republic could be fulfilled. Because he demonstrates how his childhood frontier home is built on a flawed "faith" in the promises of opportunities, profits, and progress, Stegner states that the present Whitemud is "an object lesson in the naïveté of the *American hope of a new society*" (WW 287 italics mine), reiterating his position that America's national stories and cultural endorsement of Manifest Destiny, profit, and progress drove white settlement of the West. He says, Whitemud's pioneers "*hope[d]* to develop to a state of civilization as high as that which some of its founders abandoned" (288 italics mine) in the Old World, a "hope" that demanded of its citizenry a willingness to relinquish a "heritage of some richness to become part of a backwater peasantry incapable of the feeblest cultural aspiration" (288) on a frontier environment whose "iron inflexibilities" of weather, growing season, and aridity "limit the number of people who can settle and the prosperity and contentment of the ones who manage to stick" (287). As he searches the present Whitemud for signs of this "new society" and the creation of "new gods, appropriate to the time and place" (288), Stegner finds little in Whitemud to suggest that the town has achieved the goals of America's cultural narratives.

Stegner has no discernable method for evaluating Whitemud's progress except within the parameters of Turner's Garden Myth. Thus he looks for signs of progress and change, only to discover, instead, a disjuncture between what the Myths project and the

town's failure to sustain its development and sense of community. Contrary to the Myths and Turner's notion that the frontier freed the pioneer from the bondages of the past and enabled them to create something "new," Stegner says pioneers used "the past as a template by which to cut the future," carrying forward old prejudices, traditions, and methods that his childhood memories and actions verify (WW 288).<sup>18</sup> Even though Whitemud's founding fathers had a "dream of the full life as well as the dream of material success," Stegner observes that nothing in the present town indicates that their dreams have been realized (298). The dominating ethos of his childhood town, he says, was a "democratic-cooperative politics, the English language, and Protestantism," with the pressure to "join or be excluded," as the intent was "to bend immigrants from other cultures to those patterns" (289-90). While their school was a "stabilizing and traditional element in the town's life" (290), it connected them to an English past that was "out of joint with ... [the] very essence of the frontier experience" (291). What it gave them was a "heavy steeping in the growth-and-progress gospels" to promote their "unquestioned faith" in the frontier "success story" but obscured the disjuncture between actuality and the promises of their cultural narratives (291).

Out of this past Whitemud, Stegner finds little promise in present Whitemud's ability to nurture a native artist, given little if any sense of community, a value important to Stegner as demonstrated in the previous sections. In fact, he insists that the present town has slipped behind that of the past, as if nostalgia for the good ol' days skews Stegner's comparisons of then and now: "the town can show less than it could when it was two years old" (WW



297). In 1953, “no library in Whitemud” exists and “few reading circles, and within the reading circles few young people” (297). Additionally, the reading habits of Whitemud’s youth exhibit the same “cultural collapse” he sees in the United States at large, as “comic books” are the youth’s choice for intellectual stimulation (297). He laments that no traveling events grace the present Whitemud, as he remembers the “Chautauqua” arrivals in his youth.<sup>19</sup> Even the town’s music is at a “minimum,” as the present Whitemud has fewer bands, musicians, and orchestras, and no music teachers for the “occasional child who wants to study music” (297). In his youth, he says, “several good garden-variety musicians” (297) conducted bands and gave lessons to children (such as himself). He accuses Whitemud’s second and third generations of being deficient in “initiative,” for they have failed to establish a Provincial Library site or a “college or academy” (297) to cultivate “talented young people,” as he claims in “pioneer years... people of intelligence and education” did in “the service of the community” (298). Obviously, Whitemud’s failure to rally behind the goals of a sustainable community makes Stegner doubt its ability to nurture the artist and a native art.

In his assessment of the present Whitemud, Stegner presents the town and the West as unable to be either a literal or imaginative home for the western artist. Because the present citizens face the same problems as did their grandfathers and fathers with regard to making a life on the arid Plains, they cannot economically or culturally support the western artist. Rather than a “home” to the artist, Whitemud “has become an exporter” of people and talent “to the places where real opportunity exists” (291), as its “brightest and most energetic” have left to find success elsewhere (299). He contextualizes this discussion of the present Whitemud’s ability to develop a sustainable

cultural, intellectual, and economic community for the western artist within American literature's thematic presentation of the drudgery, limitations, and restraints that small-town life imposes on the artist. Referring to works published between 1883 and 1923 by mid-westerners Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and Willa Cather, he suggests that, for western artists to survive, create, or find meaning in America's provincial small towns, they must leave these rural western towns if they can. Stegner's own life modeled this theme of westerners expatriation to the East: he left Whitemud in 1920 after his parents' failed homesteading, he left Salt Lake City for the University of Iowa and graduate work in English in 1930, and he left the West in 1938 when he departed the University of Utah to join the Breadloaf Writers Conference faculty and the position he began with Harvard in 1939.<sup>20</sup> Stegner would not return to the West until 1944 to take the position in 1945 with Stanford where he finished his career.

In its present condition, Whitemud can provide no means for an "artist to make a living" (300). From his travels across the West, Stegner encountered many small western towns similar to Whitemud that appeared to offer little to its citizens in the way of cultural and intellectual life, particularly in the late 1940s to the 1970s in Nevada, Idaho, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Montana, and the Dakotas, where many "ghost towns," the relics of boomtowns, mining towns, and trail stops had not yet been cleared for development, preserved by historical societies or the United States government.<sup>21</sup> While he insists that the "only alternatives for the intelligent and talented young will be frustration ... or escape" (288), he also laments that these "are not particularly happy conclusions

for I like this town” (300). But the absence of any noticeable cultural activity in the present Whitemud leads him to conclude that “the town’s life... [is] dead, dead, dead”; its third generation children are a “softer generation” (296); and the town is drifting into communal “apathy” (300)— conditions that Stegner sees as discounting Whitemud’s and the West’s ability to produce and nurture a “native art” and artist. For Stegner, Whitemud seems to reflect in its present the failed potential to achieve what Turner and the Myths claimed for the West, because it can provide no means for the western artist to live, no training in the arts, no continuing cultural sustenance, and no dependable audience. In many respects he confirms the non-westerners’ view of the West as a provincially limited place—primitive, unsophisticated, and culturally backward.

“Models of conduct that may be limited but are never ignoble”

If he were not the inheritor of “hope” as a westerner, Stegner could at this point in his argument accept what he has concluded about Whitemud’s and the West’s ability to cultivate a native art: that it cannot do so. On the one hand, he could pass off Whitemud’s lack of progress as one of the regrettable consequences of Turner’s Pioneer-Garden West Myths: the West and Whitemud are victims, as were his parents, of a false “hope.” To accept this interpretation, however, Stegner would need to deny his western roots and the lessons learned from frontier hardships and accept a kind of modernist anomie he vehemently opposes in the 1960’s essays. On the other hand, because he is the inheritor of a “faith in the future” (WW 255) and stubbornly opposed to an ethos of despair, Stegner does not and cannot accept his conclusions about Whitemud and the

implications for the current, modern West. He frames his attempt to salvage the western artist and the West's potential for a "native art" from his rather bleak assessment of Whitemud's and the West's progress with his response to non-westerners' criticism of westerners' seemingly unquestioned embrace of the mythic West.

Specifically, Stegner addresses the perceived behavior of the westerner as presented by his foil in both Wolf Willow and the 1960's essays, Jewish-American, literary scholar and transplanted easterner, Leslie Fiedler, who was teaching at the University of Montana when Stegner was writing both Wolf Willow and the 1960's essays and who assigns the West and westerner a lesser cultural-intellectual status because of what Fiedler claims is the westerner's unquestioning acceptance of the values and past promoted by the West's Myths. In 1941, Fiedler began his academic career at the University of Montana, where he had a tumultuous career until leaving for SUNY-Buffalo in 1964. According to his biographer, Mark Roydon Winchell, Fiedler was himself something of an outsider. While he hoped to join the Ivy League, he was unable to do so because of inadequate financial resources, his early socialist leanings, his Jewish-New Jersey background, and his temperament. After obtaining his undergraduate degree at New York University Heights, poor recommendations denied Fiedler admission into the elite eastern schools to which he applied, so he completed his graduate work at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, receiving his doctorate in 1941 on Donne's poetry as it related to medieval thought. An ardent civil rights activist, as was Stegner who fought against unjust housing prohibitions in the Los

Altos area where he lived, Fiedler fought for the hiring of an African American professor in 1955 and, because of his defense of Native American rights, was named Chief “Heavy Runner” by the Blackfeet nation in 1956. Before Stegner began writing Wolf Willow in 1954, Fiedler had already created quite a stir among Americanists and westerners with two articles that appeared in Partisan Review: “Come Back to the Raft Ag’in, Huck Honey” in 1948 and “Montana; or the End of Jean-Jacques Rousseau” in 1949. In addition to these two essays, Stegner may have been aware of two other works by Fiedler: his 1955 The End of Innocence, in which he argued that America needed to “grow up” and move beyond its pretense of innocence to a position of adulthood and responsibility, and the 1960 Love and Death in the American Novel, revised in 1966, that discussed the American novelist’s obsession with the themes of love and death.

At the opening of the Epilogue, Stegner states that the West cannot be judged fairly by either of two extreme positions: the outsider (Fiedler) who brings the “scorn of the city intellectual” or the insider (Stegner) who possesses the “angry defensiveness of a native son” (WW 287). Thus he proposes that somewhere in-between these two perspectives lies a vantage point for a more balanced view of the West, the westerner, and western American literature. From the issues that Stegner discusses, it seems clear that he is addressing Fiedler’s perception of westerners as stated in the 1949 essay, “Montana; or the End of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.”<sup>22</sup> He uses his engagement with Fiedler to make overt his concern that the West and westerner are too often misperceived, a claim he makes at the very start of Wolf Willow in regard to the “misdirected tourist” who does not see, as does the native inhabitant, the beauty and life in the seemingly desolate, forbidding Cypress Hills landscape. Fiedler does not represent the modernist despair or

literary nihilism that Stegner opposes in the 1960's essays, and he makes several prescient comments that align with Stegner's own criticisms about the West's relation to its Myths. In the "Montana" essay, Fiedler suggests that westerners have become models of models because they fashion themselves after Hollywood heroes and the mythic Noble Savage, as evident in their aping a historically false past in their Pioneer Day celebrations, their Rodeos, their Frontier Days parades, and their clothes. According to Fiedler, they deny their connection to Europe and the Old World, claiming instead as their western inheritance the exceptionalism that the Myths and Hollywood have created for them. Westerners have latched onto, mightily defend, and accept as their "true" history a mythic West and the story it tells about how they have come to possess the West, despite the presence, Fiedler claims, of a more accurate history presented to them daily in national landmarks across the West, the situation of the modern Indian, and the visible ravages done to western lands.

Having lived in and outside the western spatiality—East and West, Harvard and Stanford, the frontier and civilization—Stegner claims the more authoritative position in this argument. His primary objective is to dismiss the snobbish, disdainful point of view of the East and an Eastern literary establishment that Fiedler symbolizes, which positions itself as the vessel of Culture to a West it sees as brutish, arrogant, and pretentious or dull, dreary, limited, and uncultured, so that he can reclaim the West as a potential home to a "native art" (WW 288). Stegner admits that he and his western companions were "not well-bred young gentleman" but "junior Boones and Bumpos, self-reliant

individualists” (292) who participated in “barnyard pornography” (293) and discussed sexual matters “frankly enough, and with frank sniggers” (294); however, the injunctions of their “mothers, ... Sunday School” (292) and “conventional prudery” tempered their behavior (293). Moreover, he states that Fiedler’s interpretation of the westerner’s silence as a sign of ignorance or arrogance is most likely not the case, because on the “subject of our personal hurts our morality told us to be as taciturn as stones” (294). He claims that most westerners are far more aware than Fiedler suggests that “a snake grew in the pioneer garden” (292) and that violence and destruction that are their legacy. Therefore, what Fiedler takes to be callous, crude, prudish, and unsophisticated are, according to Stegner, the result of the hard lessons learned from a life lived close to the land.

Stegner replies to Fiedler’s observations by addressing the primary problem both he and Fiedler see with the West and westerner: the cultural power that the Myths have on the representation of the West’s past. He admits that Fiedler is correct: westerners are “prone to glorify the pioneer time” (WW 292). But they do so, Stegner retorts, because these Myths are the only past America has given the West: the mythic western past is more “intimately theirs” than any other history (292). Even though these traits carry traces of the mythic Cowboy hero and Wild West, Stegner argues that they are not necessarily “ignoble” “models of conduct” for the westerner (292). When applied within the context of an outdated Cowboy code or his father’s vision of manliness, he acknowledges that the “stiff upper lip” attitude can be callous, exclusive, and prejudicial. But, when it is the kind of behavior seen in the cowhands in “Genesis,” Molly in “Carrion Spring,” and his mother, it carries a different meaning. In Stegner’s view, these qualities

and traits (such as determination, the “stiff upper lip,” self-reliance, courage) when understood within their historical-cultural context can be positive models and values for a present West. The problem, however, is that, for the American cultural imaginary and the westerner, the behavior and values that he claims as “western” carry the connotations of the Myths (such as exceptionalism, heroism, and a hierarchical individualism) that denies them their historical-cultural context.<sup>23</sup> Stegner asks Fiedler and the “misdirected” reader to wipe away their disdain and scorn and come to see the West and westerner within the context of the conditions that America’s cultural narratives of the West have given them.

For the “misdirected” reader and for the westerner, Stegner attempts to reclaim the westerner’s historical past from the past that the Myths depict through his recovery of Cypress Hills’s “unremembered past” (112) so that he can reclaim values the Myths, Hollywood, and the American cultural imaginary have perverted in their unquestioned application of them in the present, and thus outside their historical and cultural period. In the 1960’s essays, he charges his contemporary western regionalist writers with uncritically accepting the Myths’ version of their past and asks them to “take a hard look at [the West] and acknowledge some things that the myths have consistently obscured—been *used* to obscure” in order to locate for the modern westerner an unmythicized and thus more usable past for the present (HMWW 183). Stegner’s engagement with Fiedler enables him to reject the scorn, but not the criticisms, of the Easterner and to position the West and native artist in the best position to critique the



westerner's faults and to identify how the West can potentially be a home to "unmistakably native arts" and artists (288).

### Rescuing the Western Artist

In Section I, Stegner describes the western artist as straddling the environmentally shaped folk culture of the West and an imposed "culture" shaped by the East and Europe that presented the westerner with problems of audience, voice, and identity. In describing each, Stegner registers his complaint against Eastern literary tastes and publishers who classified western American literature as "low-brow" art.<sup>24</sup> Instead of being exposed to traditions, relics, customs, history, and knowledge found in eastern homes, in museums and at historical landmarks, and in books and music, westerners received knowledge and culture from "oral traditions" (WW 26)—what could be memorized and done out of habit. Formal schooling was at best seasonal and sporadic, inconsistent in quality, and "unreal" in its being "separate from life," thus leaving the westerner "speaking one dialect and reading and writing another" (26), which from Stegner's perspective causes the westerners' "folk culture" to compete for relevancy with the more formal, cultured learning of America and the East. In recalling this previous discussion, Stegner affirms what he has been suggesting all along—the western artist (as he is) is "a product of the American earth shaped by the western spatiality and the West's art is place-based, realistic, and engaged with history" and lived experiences (23).

Out of this tension between the western artist's folk culture and an eastern civilized culture, Stegner claims the western writer has two audiences to please: the

internal, western (folk) community and the external, eastern (cultured) community of academics and publishers. The more cultured Eastern audience (and publishers) disparage, states Stegner, the western artist's "*writing by ear*," thus marginalizing western voices to regionalism and local color. More problematic, however, is the westerner's own "natural audience" which, Stegner claims sardonically, shares the western writer's experiences but "doesn't read" (WW 26). Thus the dilemma western artists face is that, if they resist the formalized language of the East and its publishers, they have no audience and publisher, but, if they succumb to cultural pressure and mimic what the East wants, they may get published and have an audience but they deny their "native voice" and their western culture. Only a few writers have bridged this divide and been able to capture what Stegner calls an "authentic American tone" (26): Mark Twain, Willa Cather, and Robert Frost.<sup>25</sup> In the Epilogue, Stegner aligns the West's "native arts" with an "authentic American tone" that issues from the westerner's response to a western place and the conditions of that place that shape the writer and the writer's experiences to make the writer "western."

In the Epilogue, Stegner looks for "signs"—visible markers in the present Whitemud—that exemplify the idea that the West's "native art" issues from the conditions of the western environment and the westerner's engagement with this western place. By grounding the West's native art in Turner's model, a model he has shown to be flawed but cannot seem entirely to escape, which says that the American's encounter (struggle) with frontier land results in some alteration to the land, Stegner looks for "signs" of engagement by present Whitemud citizens

that are non-aggressive, sustainable, and communal. He finally detects a “few signs of *native growth*” in the present Whitemud that gives him “real and personal pleasure” (300 italics mine), a feeling reminiscent of the “unspeakable satisfaction” he had as a child “making paths” with his bare feet (272). Not only do these “signs” of “native growth” suggest the possibility that the West can be home to a western art, but they affirm Stegner’s ethos of cautious hope and social responsibility, as they arise from the citizens of Whitemud engaging with their environment in terms of “adaptation” rather than conquest (300).

The first level of “adaptation” or “native growth” comes from Whitemud’s farmers who, like his father, the ranchers, fur traders, and explorers before them, engage directly with the land and thus provide Stegner with a historical link between past and present that locates these “adaptations” in the westerner’s experience with the western environment. Whereas past attempts at wheat farming (like his father’s “ferocious activity”) caused more harm than good to the land by introducing non-native plants that strangled the native vegetation and contributed to the 1930s Dust Bowl, present farmers receive Stegner’s applause for their “continued experimentation” with new dry land techniques, machinery, and strains of wheat better suited to the region (300). Their “inventiveness” and “adaptation,” he says, are in tune with the region’s arid Plains and counter the strong sense of individualism that the Turner Pioneer-Garden West Myths promoted, because their “adaptation” comes from a cooperative and community effort (300). Instead of the Myths’ “single-handed assault on the wilderness” (300), Stegner says, Whitemud’s present day farmers are a “society militantly cooperative... because the country tolerated settlement on no other terms” (301): “what began in individual effort

remained... to cooperate” (300). Their “adaptation” to the land has led to the town’s “economic and political structure” (300), which Stegner says reveals a “*human and institutional flexibility* in the face of inflexible conditions” that is “truly a part of *the forming of a native culture*” (301 italics mine). Even as his statement echoes Turner’s claim that the American’s engagement with the frontier creates “a new product that is American” (Rereading 34), Stegner’s “native culture” emphasizes the values of cooperation, compromise, and social responsibility rather than the conquest, control, and individualism that Turner and the Myths advocate.

Stegner appropriates this notion of farmers’ “adaptation” to the western spatiality to define the West’s “unmistakable native arts” (WW 287). His use of the word “native” is not suggestive of indigenous peoples or of the western artist having to be “born” in the West. Rather Stegner adopts Coleridge’s notion of art as organic, a plant, as his phrase “native growth” implies (300), while remaining within Turner’s paradigm of the frontier experience resulting in a uniquely American “product” (23). He replaces the assertion of his identity and the ownership and “savagery” against the land he associates with his childhood activities of hunting and making paths with the wheat farming activities of his childhood—the necessity of sowing, tending, protecting, and harvesting the wheat—and his child self’s desire to “bond” with the earth. Even though he remains fairly locked in Turner’s and the Myth’s construct of the pioneer’s engagement with the frontier, Stegner subverts their promotion of conquest, ownership, and control evidenced in the pioneers’ transformation of the wild to

something civilized with a present-day narrative of cooperation, adaptation, community, social responsibility, and belonging. The presence of this “native growth” and “native culture” in the present Whitemud gives him some hope that this dull, dreary small-western town can “grow” a native artist (301).

Stegner discovers two Whitemud citizens whose response to their western environment exemplifies the idea of “adaptation” and affirms the presence of a “native growth” in the modern West. The first example is Corky Jones, the son of an English doctor and one of the town’s original pioneers who immigrated to Cypress Hills in 1898 and the named “old-timer” in Wolf Willow’s Acknowledgements. From Stegner’s description of Corky, the “misdirected” reader learns that some of Corky’s history formed the background for the character Rusty in “Genesis,” the young protagonist who sheds his notions of heroism and exceptionalism for those of community and camaraderie. The real Corky, like the Whitemud farmers, has adapted to his western environment, changing from cowboy to ranch-owner to livery stable owner (until automobiles arrived) to maker of violins and finally to operating the town’s electric plant in partnership with another.

In Corky, Stegner finds the intellectual turn of mind important to his notion of the artist: he “never scorned learning” but tried “importing it” and “hunting for [its] native varieties” (WW 301). He illustrates “knowledge being loved for its own sake” (302) and a refusal to be limited by the conditions of his western place. Stegner tells how Corky becomes out of his own volition Cypress Hills’ historian, paleontologist, and archeologist and a maker and player of violins because he wanted to know if he could. Stegner specifically points out how Corky’s “history-gathering” is motivated by “car[ing] about

what has happened” as much as by simply “want[ing] to know” (302). In his collections of petrified bones of pre-historic beasts along with arrowheads and medicine bags, Corky has retained Cypress Hills’ geologic, anthropologic, and historic past. After discovering remnants of chimneys on his ranch that local lore and Stegner’s father said were from the Mounties’ cabins, Corky sought out a Métis old-timer who explained how these chimneys designated the living cells of the Métis’ long cabin dwellings. Corky provides the necessary nurture of a child’s imagination that Stegner could not find initially in the town. In Corky’s “adaptation” to a changing West, his desire to know the area’s past, and his extraction of the land’s treasures Stegner finds possibilities for a “native” western art that grows from the western artist’s engagement with western places and his own methodology of the “dump ground.”

The second Whitemud citizen possessing intellectual and cultural possibilities similar to those of Corky Jones is Jack Wilkinson, a machinist and general repairman whose response to the western spatiality also shows a similar curiosity and “adaptation” that provides the community with knowledge and learning. Instead of looking to the past and to the land as Corky did, Jack looks to Cypress Hills’ night sky and to the future. According to Stegner, in 1949 Wilkinson “put together for his own edification a six-inch reflector telescope” that a few years later he enlarged to an eight-inch telescope and that he then enclosed in an observatory and invited the town to use (WW 303). With Wilkinson’s recent death a few months prior to Stegner’s arrival, Stegner notes how Corky and a few others “unwilling to see a light go out” form the Whitemud Astronomical

Society and sell memberships to keep Wilkinson's observatory viable (303). The untrammelled weeds growing around its entrance, however, illustrate for Stegner the "difficulty of keeping the flame alive" in small, western towns like Whitemud (303). Nevertheless, the very presence of Corky Jones and Jack Wilkinson encourages Stegner to believe that the West might be able to inspire and cultivate the intellectual imagination of a child, or the West's "native growth" (300).

As presented in the Epilogue, Stegner's western artist is gendered male, racially white, and representative of a "native growth" that he locates in the individual's "adaptation" to and intellectual curiosity about the western landscape. His failure to locate, or even suggest the possibility of a female western "artist" after his walk through the present Whitemud, exposes the narrowness of his conception of the western artist. At the same time, allegations of Stegner's wholesale promotion of a western art singularly white and male are mitigated somewhat by his references to Cather in Section I as an important western artist; his use of his mother to represent a love of books, learning, and dreams of something better; his call for others, specifically those of Métis and Native Americans, to write their "epics" in Section II; and his insertion of Molly's voice into the western story in Section III. In The Extraordinary Work of Ordinary Writing: Annie Ray's Diary (2002), Jennifer Sinor suggests that western women, particularly pioneers, often responded to their western environments in very individual and creative but ordinary and tangible ways, as seen in the gardens, journals, letter writing, cooking, and sewing they produced. Thus Stegner's mother's and his fictional Molly's artistry, though unacknowledged by Stegner, might lie in their daily responsibilities (darning socks, cooking, sewing) on a limiting and difficult frontier. More significantly, Comer suggests

that minorities have used Stegner's notion of the individual's response to the western landscape "to write their own relationships to western history, mythology, gender relations, the environment, and, significantly, to national literature at large" (Landscapes 42). While his limited perspective of a western artist must be acknowledged, Stegner reflects the limitations of his time, a period when the pronoun "he" went unquestioned as to whom it represented in nearly all forms of writing. Unfortunately, Stegner's vision of the contributions of western women writers was not as broad in 1954/1962 when he wrote most of Wolf Willow as it was in the introductions to anthologies and essays that he wrote during the 1950s and 1960s.

#### A Community Responsibility: A privy for "Ladies"

As he completes his final walk through Whitemud, Stegner concludes that the present West is neither as ugly nor as vulgar as the Myths suggest, nor is the past West as beautiful and heroic as the Myths declare. He "decide[s] not to fault Whitemud for not being what *only centuries of growth* and the *accidents of wealth and human genius could make it*" (WW 306 italics mine). "For better or worse," he and Whitemud have been shaped into what they are in the present by the experiences of the past that have shaped their present, a past he has recovered and will return to cultural memory upon publication of Wolf Willow, one that challenges the Myths' exceptionalist, singular story of white-male conquest and triumph over western lands. In the final image of Wolf Willow and the Epilogue,



Stegner rejects this singular, individualist, and masculinist story of conquest and triumph of the West's Myths' for a "purely native," socially responsible, and communal answer to a "local need" of a rural western community that opens the westerner's narrative to other voices (305).

Stegner closes Wolf Willow and the Epilogue by declaring that he finds in Whitemud's 1953 present that renews his pioneer "faith in the future," that the town is "a *community*, and a very much *less ugly one* than the bare, ditch-cut, shack-strewn, sweet-clover-smelling village of [his] youth" (304 italics mine). With a high school, several churches, a hospital, and town memorial hall—all "accomplishments against real odds"—the town has "a *solidity and permanence* that were notably lacking" on the frontier (304 italics mine). He ends his walk standing in front of a house that was once a pioneer's home but is now a "Farm Wives' Rest Home" with an outhouse around back marked "Ladies" (305). For a town that does not yet have a "service station with a toilet to which a woman from the country can take a desperate child," this Ladies privy, "a superannuated false-front shack," is, he declares, the "*most humane institution* in all that village, and it is *purely native, the answer to a local need*" (305 italics mine). In its shabby ordinariness and "adaptation" to the western environment, this outhouse silences the Myths' notions of the heroic, self-reliant, rugged male individualist, and Turner's vision of the frontier, offering instead the reality of the modern, rural West and its lingering hardships and crudeness. This "privy" demonstrates the community, cooperation, family, feminine, and "pragmatic meliorism" that links the frontier town of Stegner's youth to the town of Whitemud of his middle-aged present, creating an historical continuity existing at the beginning of Wolf Willow (306).

Stegner's image subverts most dramatically the notion of a masculine, triumphant West; for where are the men? They are noticeably absent from his closing image of this western place. Stegner suggests that those who endured the conditions of the frontier are the "Farm Wives." However, even this category omits the single and working women Stegner mentioned in his history of Cypress Hills, such as the Martin's maid Irene and the gambler's mistress. If Stegner's mother had become a "sticker" and Molly had been real instead of fictional, they would reside at this Farm Wives' Rest Home, having survived their husbands' dreams of conquering the frontier. With the "Ladies"—not "Women's—outhouse and with his comment about its meeting a mother's need suggest, Stegner highlights the importance of family to the West's settlement that the Myths gloss. In the town's women, dignified ladies like his mother and the fictional Molly, Stegner places his "faith in the future" (WW 255) because they have the necessary nobility, doubt, pragmatism, tempered determination, and humanely applied "stiff upper lip" world view he values.

For Stegner, this Ladies outhouse reflects the community's response to the town's western environment, much like Corky Jones's history and Jack Wilkinson's astronomy demonstrate their response to their western environment. Even though it took the community forty years to achieve what may yet "fall short of its intention," Stegner applauds the gesture of the privy for its being "a human institution, *born of a compassionate and humane impulse, tailored to a felt need*" (WW 305 italics mine). He says, "It exists now to acknowledge a community responsibility" that its very existence suggests "it can be improved, and will be"

(306). In this humane, compassionate response to the needs of others, Stegner locates a guarded hopefulness for the town and the West's future. Like the experimentation in new agricultural methods, the move from self-reliant individualism toward communal cooperation, and Corky's "history-gathering" and love of learning, this "'Ladies' privy" is an undisputable sign—like his child self's "making of paths"—that there is a town here, something more civilized than wild, more permanent than impermanent on the prairie (302). The community commitment Stegner identifies here reflects the commitment Rusty made in "Genesis" and anticipates the "personal, family, and cultural chores" he outlines for the western regionalist writer in the 1960's essays.

At the conclusion of Wolf Willow the "misdirected" reader recognizes that the Epilogue both completes and begins the journey Stegner proposes in Section I: The Question Mark in the Circle to understand the shaping of his "western" self. He locates these influences in a specific western place that was shaped by the West's Myths and those who lived there before him and in his engagement with this physical and imaginative western spatiality. In the relationship between the West's Myths and the West's history that he discovers in the unknown history of Cypress Hills' past and that inform the memories and stories in Sections II, III, and IV, Stegner recovers a non-mythologized western past that becomes an alternative narrative—or Other West—that he uses to challenge the narratives, assumptions, and values of the mythic West. He finds in this Other West the explanations that underlie the sweeping claims he makes about the place, the people, and his family in Section I. And from the gained "knowledge of place, knowledge of the past" (28) that he and the "misdirected" reader come to possess, Stegner learns how to understand his family's story of "failure" within the context of

America's self-defining cultural narratives of the Cowboy and Turner's Garden Myth of frontier triumph and the geographic, historical, and cultural influences that have made him a "westerner." This "knowledge" enables him to suggest, with guarded optimism, that the West can be a "seedbed" for an emerging "native art" and that he can claim the West as his creative home.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Capital P denotes Myth; small p denotes people as pioneers

<sup>2</sup> My summary grossly oversimplifies Royce's notion of Community but Stegner is certainly adopting some of Royce's tenets, especially in relation to Stegner's notions of stewardship and a commitment by westerners to a sustainable and respectful relationship toward living on western lands. I am also unclear as to how familiar Stegner was with Royce's works, both philosophical and novelistic, as that lies beyond the scope of this dissertation. In Stegner's investigations into western American writers for his various introductions and essays, he may well have been quite familiar with Royce's works.

Josiah Royce, 1855-1916, was a westerner who grew up in Grass Valley, California, who was an American philosopher at the University of California, Berkeley and Harvard who also studied and wrote histories of America's West as well as some western novels he used to express his philosophical ideals. He was a friend and colleague of William James, though they disagreed on many points, and through letters to each other they argued back and forth on philosophical points. Committed to the notion of idealism into his later years, he also became committed to the idea that "Knowledge is not at bottom merely the accurate and complete perception of an object, as empiricism would have it. Nor is it the accurate and complete conception of an idea, as rationalism maintains. Knowledge is instead a process of interpretation: the true idea selects, emphasizes, and re-presents those aspects of the object that will be meaningfully fulfilled in subsequent experience. Royce's 'absolute pragmatism,' like other versions of pragmatism, thus offers an alternative to rationalism and empiricism.... In this late period Royce remained firmly

committed to idealism. He renounced the notion that the Absolute is complete at any actual time, though, and instead preferred to think of the possible totality of all truth simply as the eternal.” (Parker, Kelly A., "Josiah Royce", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), accessed July 30, 2011: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/royce>)

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, I could not find any evidence of the order in which Stegner wrote the sections in Wolf Willow, except that the stories were written in 1953/54 or the year of his grant that allowed him time in Canada to return to his home and do research.

<sup>4</sup> See Slotkin particularly for discussions of this figure in America. The pioneer is not Lewis’s American Adam but part of the male mystique that dominated the literary canon that Baym critiques in “Beset Manhood”

<sup>5</sup> Given his previous research for the Powell book, Stegner would be aware of the economic drivers existing behind homestead laws, railroad development, and land acquisition. See Continental Vision, biographies, and essay on the Powell book that describes Stegner’s growing understanding of this situation that DeVoto urged him to pursue.

<sup>6</sup> See also Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen’s Ideology and Classic American Literature for more on America’s early cultural narratives.

<sup>7</sup> This may also be the kind of past Royce suggests his community accepts in order to construct its future.

<sup>8</sup> See Stegner’s essay “Sense of Place” for the best description of this view, along with The American West as Living Space monograph.

<sup>9</sup> Scholars such as Limerick, Slotkin, Johnson, Nash, Kolodny and Bridgette Georgi-Findlay have all demonstrated how men and women pioneers participated in the same desires of ownership and possession as they created fields and gardens in order to transform the frontier land through their home sites.

<sup>10</sup> This sense of separateness and alienation also has deep seated roots in early narratives of America, particularly William Bradford and the Puritans Cotton Mather and later Jonathan Edwards. See Roderick Nash's Wilderness and the American Mind especially and Michael Johnson's Hunger, pg 51.

<sup>11</sup> For more on Muir's and Thoreau's contributions to this environmental literary tradition, see Lawrence Buell's Environmental Imagination and Johnson's Hunger for the Wild.

<sup>12</sup> Comer suggests that this essay of Stegner's, published in 1989, reflects Stegner's growing awareness of the political and cultural struggles of women (Landscapes 43).

<sup>13</sup> He also travels to Denmark from April to August 1954 and pursues his interest in the New England village experienced during his early years in Harvard as part of his proposed investigation into a sociological comparison of three small, rural villages. Only the work on Saskatchewan survives as it became Wolf Willow.

<sup>14</sup> Stegner says the phrase is borrowed from Clarence King, an historical figure Stegner would have known from his research for the Powell book.

<sup>15</sup> Stegner visited many of these towns on his travels across the country and around the West. See essays in Sound for a sense of his travels; many were articles done for magazines to earn money.

<sup>16</sup> See Bakhtin's Dialogic Imagination.

<sup>17</sup> In his essay review of Walter Hildebrandt and Brian Hubner in The Cypress Hills: An Island by Itself, Thacker says that, much like Stegner, they could not tell the history of the Cypress Hills without noting its relationship to America as Stegner did. Thus, Stegner and these Canadian scholars offer what Thacker calls the contingent duality of the Canadian point of view.

<sup>18</sup> He recalls how the immigrant English tried to keep tennis alive but failed and how, of all the sports possible for the area, the Scottish activity of curling survived even though it has none of the "vigorous exercise or the exhilaration of body contact that a tough frontier town should like." Indeed, the selection of curling over more vigorous sports causes him to remark that the present generation of Whitemud seems a "softer generation" (WW 296).

<sup>19</sup> Chautauquas were traveling entertainment of theater, music, and public speaking.

<sup>20</sup> He opens Wolf Willow's Epilogue with an inscription from Sinclair Lewis' Main Street and the stifling atmosphere of small towns in the West. In this section of the *Epilogue*, he references Edgar Watson Howe's 1883 The Story of a Country Town and Harold Frederick's 1896 The Damnation of Theron Ware. Both books blend realism and naturalism to describe the narrow life of a mid-western community and the protagonist-artist's challenges and intellectual suffocation within their respective communities.

These are the four texts and authors of the early twentieth century Stegner mentions: The Spoon River Anthology (1915) by Edgar Lee Masters, Winesburg, Ohio (1919) by



Sherwood Anderson, Main Street (1920) by Sinclair Lewis, and One of Ours (1923) by Willa Cather.

<sup>21</sup> He captures these experiences in several essays collected in The Sound of Mountain Water (1980) and Marking the Sparrows Fall (posthumously in 1998); the writing in many of these essays is exquisite and evocative of the western landscape's beauty and the challenges westerners face.

<sup>22</sup> Stegner was aware of Fiedler's Partisan essays, quoting from the Montana essay in Wolf Willow and referencing Fiedler specifically in the 1960's essays. Also, he specifically addresses him in a 1978 essay called "Rocky Mountain Country," published in Atlantic and written with his son Page Stegner. See also his comments in Conversations, in which he says Stegner says he "doesn't think [Fiedler] should have been teaching in Missoula, ever" and that Fiedler has "left a bad legacy" (180). Benson, who also lists Fiedler as another example, like Irving Howe, Bernard Malamud who "made fun of cowboys ... and colleagues" (340).

<sup>23</sup> As Robert Thacker reports it in his review essay, Stegner may have been experiencing what Barbara Belyea says Meriwether Lewis encountered in his journals: He expresses frustration in his journals for not having the right descriptors to describe the western land he saw. He was, Belyea suggests, trapped in his "aesthetic acculturation in the picturesque" (qtd in Thacker 69). See Belyea's Dark Storm Moving West.

<sup>24</sup> In the 1920s Van Wyck Brooks raised this issue of high and low brow art forms in American literature, suggesting that the use of the vernacular and specific regional settings designated works as "low-brow" works of local color whose significance was

regional rather than universal or of high cultural value. A graduate student in the 1930s, Stegner would have been aware of these designations. Curiously, Stegner rarely refers to fellow Californian John Steinbeck whose use of the vernacular and regional and present-day settings are similar literary goals. Instead, Stegner most often mentions Frost, Twain, and Cather as writers who come closest for him of capturing America's native tongue.

<sup>25</sup> Stegner had significant difficulty finding his own "voice" according to scholars. Not until the uses the character of Joe Allston he find it—see short story for The Women on the Wall collection pub 1950. See Frederick and Margaret Robinson's Wallace Stegner and Benson's Chapters 6, 9,10, and 11 that discusses this period of his life.

# Chapter 7

## The 1960s Critical Essays: Rescuing Western American Literature from the Mythic West

*Narratives remain our chief moral compass in the world. Because we use them to motivate and explain our actions, the stories we tell change the way we act in the world. We find in such stories our histories and our prophecies both, which means they remain our best path to an engaged moral life.*

William Cronon  
“Nature, History, and Narrative” in Journal of American History

*The business of studying the relations between places and people, and the ways in which people’s living is conditioned by the place, is one of the best ways I know of finding out about ourselves.*

Wallace Stegner  
From Wallace Stegner and the American West

*“The true meaning of the West ... resides not in empirical fact nor in myth, but in the conflict between the two.... And ... the dramatization of the agonizing process by which assumption is undercut by experience is the very stuff of literature.”*

--Thomas E. Boyle  
“Frederick Jackson Turner and Thomas Wolfe: The Frontier as History and Literature”

Coming almost immediately after the publication of Wolf Willow in 1962, Stegner's three critical essays appeared: "Born a Square" in the January 1964 Atlantic; "On the Writing of History" in 1965 the journal American West; and his most often quoted essay, "History, Myth, and the Western Writer" in American West in 1967 and reprinted that same year as the "Introduction" to Great Western Short Stories. Stegner selected all three essays to be included in his first collection of essays, The Sound of Mountain Water, published in 1969 and reprinted in 1980. This collection is one of Stegner's most popular and often reprinted works, giving the essays a significant readership. Taken together, these essays present Stegner's informal theorizing on the western writer, the literary western, and western American literary historiography. While scholars call upon Stegner's three essays as independent entities to support specific issues within western American literature—such as western regionalism, western realism, the western writer's relationship to the mythic West, western historicism, and Stegner's strategies for moving beyond previous conceptions of western literature—the three critical essays have not been discussed in relation to Stegner's earlier Wolf Willow. These essays continue the aims of Wolf Willow in their challenge to what he saw as a culturally and mythically defined American West that wrongly characterized his personal past as a westerner and the history of America's western region that provided America a sense of cultural identity and confined his imaginative spatiality to a nostalgic, heroic, and romanticized wild West of the 1890s. The essays expand this challenge beyond the recovery of his personal past and his role as a western regionalist writer to pursue his guarded

optimism at the end of Wolf Willow that the modern West could nurture and sustain wholly “native arts” and artists. He argues that the West is both a literal as well as an imaginative home to a distinctive regional literature, literary tradition, and community of writers who write against the grain of the Eastern academic and publishing communities and the expectations of the American cultural imaginary in their “another kind of western-storytelling that is not mythic” (HMWW 187). From the application of particular narrative strategies, notions about history and its continuity, and a methodology of discovery and recovery to reclaim his personal past and to locate a source for his writerly self in Wolf Willow, Stegner develops a theory of western American literature that offers hope to a community of regionalist writers that their realist, place-based, and historically informed literary western deserves acknowledgement; it is relevant to a modern America that still largely accepts the cultural narratives of a mythic West that have been America’s defining national symbolic.

In the essays, Stegner reframes the strategies he uses in Wolf Willow to recover his personal past from the Myths by situating it into a set of community tasks, which he calls “personal, family, and cultural chores,” that contemporary western writers need to complete if they are to stave off the irrelevancy and marginalization he saw the literary western becoming in mid-1960s America (HMWW 201). During a period when American culture was in turmoil and questioning its values because of recent events, such as McCarthyism and Cold War paranoia, and with social movements emerging to address questions regarding civil rights, women’s rights, sexual norms, the Vietnam War, urban conditions, and environmental problems, Stegner calls on his contemporary western regionalist writers to challenge how the mythic West defined for the American cultural

imaginary their perception of the West, treatment of western lands, and opinion of the West's literature. Within the 1960s social climate of dichotomous antagonism—age versus youth, white versus non-white, men versus women, us versus them—and the questioning of accepted cultural narratives—patriarchal systems, white dominance, gender roles, and the American literary canon—Stegner appropriates the position of the Other, or subordinate, to offer an argument for recognition of a non-formulaic, literary western. Having connected strains of violence, aggression, and exceptionalism in the West's Myths to cultural narratives of America's Founding Fathers and illustrated their affect on the land, Others, and himself and his family's pioneering experiences in Wolf Willow, Stegner not only sees these destructive themes present in the culturally popular formulaic westerns that continues to popularize these Myths but also recognizes how the “another kind of western story-telling” that he and his contemporary western regionalist writers are producing is equally under the influence of America's western Myths as reflected in the literature they write (HMWW 187).

Although he maintains that America's Myths of the West are the dominant lens through which America views the West, in the 1960s essays, Stegner's primary audience is not the “misdirected” American cultural imaginary, a “scornful” eastern academy, or westerners who perceive the West through the parameters of the Myths and therefore must be instructed on the “real West.” Instead, his intended audience is specifically those western writers who create “another kind of western story-telling,” which he christens the “small w” literary

western that can be different from and opposed to the popular, formulaic Western with a capital W to the extent that it is realistic, place-based, and historically informed about the present as well as the past West (HMWW 187). Retaining the persona of the *critic-theorist-teacher* from Wolf Willow, Stegner acknowledges that this literary western is becoming increasingly irrelevant to modern readers because it is far too similar to the formulaic Western it supposedly opposes, thus empowering the Myths to silence and relegate their “small w” literary western to a marginal status in the canon of American literature. To change this situation, critical to the health and growth of the West’s literature, Stegner identifies several “chores,” which he couches within the same blizzard imagery and life-saving urgency described in Wolf Willow for the cowhands and the pioneer community, and which he and his community of western writers must complete. He positions these “chores” as their “string of lariats ... from shelter to responsibility and back again” and himself as their foreman, Ray (201).

In these 1960s essays, Stegner wants to teach the western writer, the modern reader, and the eastern literary critic how to understand the characteristics and value that the small-*w* literary western provides a modern, urban West and America. Since western literature had no “totalizing theory” in the 1960s, Comer claims that “Stegner’s was a welcome metanarrative” and should be considered “representative of western literary history’s dominant spatial field at its most dynamic and sophisticated” (Landscapes 40-41). She argues that he positions the western writer and western American literature as a strong regional voice, cognizant of its literary tradition, aware of its past but especially its present concerns, and engaged in building a new, more comprehensive literary tradition and literature through the small-*w* literary western that will become recognized as a part

of the larger American literary canon because of its own merits. And, by promoting the “small w” literary western as a place based, realist, and historicist literature, grounded in the western experience of its author, Stegner suggests that the “small w” literary western will be able to perform the cultural task of rescuing modern America from the nihilistic, chaotic, and hyper-sexual attitudes promoted by Eastern writers and publishers. At a minimum, Stegner participates in discussions among western writers, scholars, and even historians on the relationship between the historical West and its Myths, on western literary regionalism and its relationship to American literature, and on the relationship of the western writer to his or her western place, to other westerners, and to America—ideas and positions he presented in germinal form in Wolf Willow.

#### Stegner’s Theory of Western American Literature: Establishing the Context for the 1960’s Critical Essays

In the first substantive critical study on Stegner conducted by Forrest G. and Margaret G. Robinson for the Twayne United States Author Series in 1977, the Robinsons note the importance of these 1960s essays to Stegner’s interest in and representation of the American West. They consider the essays “crucial” to understanding how Stegner reflects on “ways of remembering” (51) and how his “imaginative renderings of Western persons, places, and events... help to unveil the continuities between past and present which have remained obscure” (52). By the 1990s, critics acknowledge the importance and influence of the essays in



regard to the ways in which western American literature has become more wide-ranging. Comer claims Stegner belongs to “one of the most powerful cultural legacies in place in the early 1970s” and is “one of the few comprehensive theorists of western regional culture and literature,” thus earning him the appellation “Dean of western literature” in the early 1970s because of his twenty-five year tenure as director of Stanford’s creative writing program—his students becoming the “who’s-who” of western writers.<sup>1</sup> Because he called for recognition of the literary western by the academy and by publishers and charged western regionalist writers to attend to the concerns of their present West, Comer argues that the “Stegnerian Spatial Field,” or Stegner’s own topographic mapping in the essays of the singular West into a “dizzily heterogeneous” space with “varied regional literary development,” must be confronted by western writers and scholars alike (40). Given his critical writings from the 1960s to 1993, she claims that Stegner “mapped the broader spatial field of ‘the West’ more influentially than has any other single individual in contemporary times” (39-40). Several decades ahead of others in providing a theoretical perspective in these 1960s essays on America’s literature of the West, Stegner provided critics with a “blueprint” for a theory of western American literature (42).

As mentioned, these essays are typically treated as separate entities and with little or no critical attention paid to their relationship to Wolf Willow and how it might be their germinal precursor (or “seedbed”) for the ideas Stegner offers in the essays. The very “chores” he mentions in the essays are those he practiced in an effort to construct the content and form of Wolf Willow, as evident in its focus on the West’s problematic legacy, its emphasis on rescuing the West from America’s cultural Myths, its call to writers of varying ethnicities to submit their stories, and its identification of a western art

grounded in western places and a western landscape. However, because Wolf Willow received very little critical attention from the time it was published to Stegner's death in 1993, unlike the often read three critical essays, Wolf Willow's influence on others was limited.<sup>2</sup> Since his death in 1993, a new appraisal of his work has been underway and Wolf Willow's status in his canon may become far more significant than previously thought. Alongside Henry Nash Smith's Virgin Land and historian Earl Pomeroy's "Toward a Reorientation of Western History" in the 1950s and Richard Slotkin's Regeneration Through Violence and Annette Kolodny's The Lay of the Land in the 1970s, Stegner's 1960s critical essays (and their precursor Wolf Willow) have helped to "enlarge," as he said it would, the possibilities and viability of a western American literature by anticipating the literary, cultural, and historical revisionism of the American West to come in the 1970s by writers, literary scholars, historians, and cultural critics.

In Wolf Willow Stegner creates a new western subjectivity that is contextual in its reliance on the geographic, cultural, historical, and spatial influences on that subjectivity to challenge a narrative of white-male individuation and America's triumph over western lands and racial others. He defines the West in terms of its geographic, historic, social, and cultural spaces and the tensions between what is mythic and what is historical, what is eastern and what is western, what is American and what is Canadian, what is "hopeful" and what is "failure," while granting that the dominant discourse of this western spatiality remains that of the Myths. Against this culturally dominant mythic West, he positions his mother's and Molly's doubt, the collaboration of the

Indians and Mounties, the responsibility to the community of the cowhands and the pioneers, the desire of the child Stegner to bond with the earth even as he marks its surface to define his presence and possession of the land, and the “adaptation” of the present Whitemud and its artists, Corky Jones and Jack Wilkinson, to their western environment. Most of his narrative energy focuses on exposing the faults and challenging the assumptions of the Myths through the construction of an Other West containing the glossed and silenced voices and experiences he discovers in the history of Cypress Hills and his lived experiences there. His intent is to “recover” what had been lost and obscured by the Myths (the “unremembered past”) and return this learned “knowledge of the past, knowledge of place” to cultural memory so that erased voices, like those of the Métis, Native Americans, and his parents, can become a part of the West’s settlement narrative so that the past and present West can be looked at anew (WW 28).

Drawing from Cypress Hill’s history and his personal past the values of community and social responsibility that characterizes the Other West he uses to challenge the Myths in Wolf Willow, Stegner uses the 1960s critical essays to urge his contemporary western writers to become a community of writers and to confront head on the powerful lure and trap of the mythic West that endangers the relevancy of the literary western. Against the formulaic western narrative, Stegner situates his “small-w” literary western, claiming that “another kind of western story-telling” exists just as he argues in Wolf Willow that an Other West exists in the recovered history, memory, and story of this western place (HMWW 187). His purpose, as he defines it in the essays, however, is not to attack the Myths directly but to create a space in the spatiality they dominate for

his “small-w” literary western by examining its current faults and offering suggestions for improvement so that eventually the space that opens enables the literary western to become a viable, if not the dominant, discourse of western American literature. He defines the traits and challenges of being a western writer in the 1960s, the “literary” tradition the western writer inherits, the complexities impeding a western literary regionalism, and the obstacles confronting the contemporary western writers’ attempt to unburden the literary western from America’s Frontier, Cowboy, and Pioneer-Garden West Myths in order to correct its marginal status in American literature.

To address these challenges, he urges his western writers to accept the social responsibility that the individual has to a community (to the kind of western writing they write, to the West, and to America) to ensure the community’s health and well-being. The “personal, family, and cultural chores” he outlines across these three essays issue from the strategies and approach he uses in Wolf Willow to reclaim his personal past and the place’s historical past. These “chores” are to recover what the Myths have “consistently obscured—been used to obscure” (BS 183); to admit the inadequacies and limitations of the “many Wests” (HMWW 188); to find one’s own “personal and possessed past” and use it to create an historical continuity between past and present (HMWW 199); to establish “a usable continuity between past and present” for the western individual and society (BS 178); to locate “a present and living society that is truly ours and that contains the materials of a deep commitment” and to discover how western society and the western individual are entangled (BS 178); and to remain true to

the basic values, particularly to the hope he still has at his point in his career, that the West embodies. Through these “chores,” Stegner challenges the Myths’ “horse opera” of the Wild West, or the story everyone knows and accepts as what defines the West, especially its past, and as Fiedler pointed out even its present.

What Stegner perceives in the 1960s is that this “western horse opera,” as depicted in the formulaic westerns of Zane Grey and Louis L’Amour and the Hollywood western films and television series of the 1950s and 1960s, has nearly silenced their “small-*w*” literary western. As he argues with Fiedler in Wolf Willow and acknowledges in the essays, the mythic American West, with its place in the national psyche and role in national identity, has been the “history” the westerner has been given by America, a false “history” that denies, as he discovers in Wolf Willow, the failure, the violence, the savagery and loss, as well as the compromise, cooperation, and peace that also exist in the story of white western settlement. In a later essay he remarks, “It gets me nowhere to object to the self-righteous, limited, violent code that governs [the mythic West], or to disparage the novels of Louis L’Amour because they were mass produced with interchangeable parts. Mr. L’Amour sells in the millions, and at times has readers in the White House” (Variations 111).<sup>3</sup> In the essays, Stegner suggests that only through communal effort and a hard look at their current “small-*w*” literary western can they accomplish what the community of Whitemud did—provide a “purely native answer... to a local need” (WW 305). Because they are “westerners,” he also draws from the “hope” he claims as “heritable” in Wolf Willow to encourage and sustain his community of western regionalist writers in a battle with the mythic West that they cannot, he admits, entirely win (255). Instead of rescuing his own personal past for his middle-aged,

*memoirist* and *writerly* selves from the romanticized, heroic, singular story of the solitary white-male conquering and altering the West to his will as he does in Wolf Willow, in these essays, Stegner takes on the task of rescuing or differentiating the “small-*w*” literary western from America’s cultural Myths of the West that dominate, if not control, the spatiality in which the western writer and “small-*w*” literary western reside.

In these essays, Stegner is no longer cautious and guarded in the “hope” he has for the growth of the literary western. Rather, he exhibits the “angry defensiveness of a native son” at what he perceives to be the western writer’s and literary western’s current disregard by publishers, academia, and the reading public (WW 287). He directs as much frustration internally toward his community of western regionalist writers as he does outwardly toward Eastern publishers and the academy for the state of things in the 1960s. As Comer notes, Stegner’s observations of western literature’s limitations were “not only astute but politically strategic, for it authorized him to revise and renarrativize what constituted ‘western’ itself” (Landscapes 41). With the “small-*w*” literary western branded by the American cultural imaginary as one and the same as the capital-*W*, formulaic western and existing within the same geographic, literary, and cultural spatiality, Stegner confronts in the essays a situation similar to what he faces in Wolf Willow: America’s cultural Myths have trapped and perverted the West’s and westerner’s past, identity, and story within its singular national and cultural metanarrative of the lone, white-male cowboy-pioneer hero triumphing over the western spatiality. While strategies of recovery, reclamation, and exposure are

again part of his toolkit, Stegner plants new “seeds” or strategies to view western American literature by suggesting that the western story should be written by westerners and not easterners; that the literary western’s focus should shift its orientation from a past, mythic West to the concerns of the present West; and that the literary western should express a diverse, multi-vocal West rather than the singular voice of the Myths’ West. He calls for a new western literature that engages both the present and the past in its realist, historical, and place-based orientation that then creates a hope for a future West, environmentally, culturally, historically, and literarily.

#### Stegner’s Intended Audience and Authorial Authority

As he does in Wolf Willow, Stegner positions the authorial “I” as an insider to frame his argument in the essays. In Wolf Willow, he situates his authorial “I” as an insider—a westerner and western writer—whose view of the West’s history and his experiences differ from the view of his audience, the “misdirected” reader or American cultural imaginary who perceive the West through the lens of the Myths. Similarly, Stegner claims an insider status for his authorial “I” that enables him in the essays to claim the authority and authenticity to grant certain views, clarify others, and challenge his audience’s notions of the western story, the western writer, and western American literature. While this insider perspective can be limiting and exclusive, it allows Stegner to differentiate his view of the West from four others: first, the primary audience of other western regionalist writers who are westerners like he is and whom he is asking to examine the “small-w” westerns that they write; second, the American cultural imaginary

that dismisses the literary western because it is not the formulaic western they expect;<sup>4</sup> third, the academic scholars who consider the literary western second rate; and fourth, the eastern publishers looking for the experimental fiction he believes they want. Thus he critiques and instructs these audiences in regard to the “small-*w*” literary western’s approach to the West as subject and educates them regarding his revisioned western American literary spatiality.

As he explores the literary historiography of western American literature, or “dump ground,” in the essays, Stegner locates several “treasures” he can use to reshape the West’s literary spatiality, such as the new themes residing within a non-mythic and historicized West, a more inclusive and gendered western literary tradition, a diversity of geographic and topographic locales that contest the Myths’ claim for a single region, and the possible narratives to be mined from a modern urban West. The discovery of these “treasures” enables him to ask his audiences to reject the mythic West’s monomythic narrative and to accept the possibility that “another kind of western story” with the “small-*w*” exists in the same western spatiality with, but opposed to, the formulaic western story with a “capital *W*” (HMWW 187). In order to claim legitimacy for his family’s story in Wolf Willow, Stegner uses his insider perspective to construct a historically, culturally, and geographically contextualized narrative. In the essays, he uses his insider point of view to create a space for the “small-*w*” literary western and its relationship to the capital-*W* western through the contexts of history, culture, geography, and the literary historiography of America that explodes the notion of a singular, western story by constructing inside this monomythic western



spatiality a home for the “small-*w*” western story. As the remaining discussion of the essays will show, Stegner’s insider perspective allows him to refashion several strategies used in Wolf Willow to challenge the mythic West’s suffocating hold on the “small-*w*” literary western. These repurposed strategies offer correctives he sees as necessary so that “the term ‘western literature’ . . . and its accomplishments” will not be “so easily overlooked” (HMWW 201). At the same time, the approach he suggests is a rather limited definition by today’s critical standards, which led later generations of western writers, particularly women and minority writers, to challenge and thus expand his theory in the 1980s and 1990s.

#### The American West as Many Wests

The American West for Stegner is geographically diverse, contextual, historical, and ever-changing. In Wolf Willow, he draws from his notion of history as a pontoon bridge, specifically the palimpsestic layering of history that creates a continuity between past and present, to counter the Myths’ representation of the West as frozen in the 1890s, a West with one narrative and set of values governing all that is western in the past and in the present. His recovery of Cypress Hills’ “unremembered past” gives him a personal past grounded in a specific place that was multi-vocal and multi-cultural and that he feels “cheated” and “betrayed” for not having known (111-112). In the essays, Stegner denies the mythic West its singularity of narrative, region, and perspective partly because of his infusion of history but more significantly because of the topographic and geographic diversity that makes it, he says, “several Wests” with multiple yet distinct literary

traditions (BS 171). While he argues for the West's diversity based upon its topography, he also notes some commonalities: "aridity above all else, and the special clarity of light, the colors, the flora and fauna, and *the human adjustments that have resulted from aridity*" (HMWW 188 italics mine) and the fact that each region has been "touched by the magic figure of the horseman" (190). These "human adjustments" to the West's "aridity" echo the "adaptation" he notes in Whitemud's present in Wolf Willow and denotes change, difference, and the specific conditions of western living, instead of the stasis and singularity indicated by the Myths. Even as he suggests the existence of similarities to make the West one spatiality, Stegner disrupts them by emphasizing the differences in culture and tradition contained in his "many Wests" (188).

Stegner uses this difference to propose that instead of one geographic, imaginative, and mythic entity, his "many Wests" are regional, specific, and historicized (HMWW 188). They are, he claims, "almost as divergent as convergent" (188) and inscribed by "variety, dispersion, and constant immigration" (191) and continual "change" (192), traits he argues marking the pioneers' frontier condition in Wolf Willow. In the essays, he argues that each of these "many Wests" has grown out of its own spatial-historical-cultural context and has led to a mining West, a timberland West, a cattleman's grazing West, and a homesteaders West; and he states that each has been "raided, not settled; and sometimes raided for one resource after another, by different breeds of raiders" (191). Just as he demonstrates how Cypress Hills is a product of its specific geologic-historical-cultural context, so he says in the essays how "climate,

physiographic features, resources, characteristic occupations, ethnic mixtures were so various that they began to produce a Plains tradition, a desert tradition, a lumberwoods tradition, a Californian or Mormon or Mexican border tradition” (190) and all have their “own kinds of vulgarity, ugliness, and social injustice” (BS 171). According to Comer, the vision Stegner offers in the 1960s is not only “conscientiously historical in an era that valued New Critical, ‘text as all’ practice,” but, “by linking his definition of western regional culture to the arid lands west of the 98<sup>th</sup> meridian, Stegner brought a new historicism” and “a realist-based aesthetic” to western literary scholarship (Landscapes 41). What troubles Stegner is that this diversity and physicality are rejected by his audiences for the “timeless West, carefully landscaped, around Sedona, Arizona, and Kanab, Utah—country suitable for ‘cutting them off at the pass’” (HMWW 192), the “mythic petrification” of the literal and imaginative space of the Myths.

The variety Stegner locates in the West’s landscapes forms the cornerstone of his theory for a new western narrative that his “another kind of western-story telling” will tell (HMWW 187). While he presents in Wolf Willow a recovered, contextualized history to reclaim a usable past for his personal and writerly selves, in the essays he moves beyond the conditions of a specific western place—Cypress Hills—and the Other West he locates in its “unremembered” historical past to posit in the essays that there are “many” Cypress Hills in the West and each has its own geography, culture, unremembered past, and literary tradition that can be contrasted to the petrified West of the formulaic capital-W western story. According to Stegner, the “western with a small w” has “variety ... [as] one of its marked characteristics” (187). Thus his definition of the “small-w” literary western begins to renarrativize America’s western story by embedding in it the diversity

of the West's geography that is necessary for it to include the many yet untold "epics" that he refers to in Wolf Willow and the various traditions and histories of his "many Wests" in the essays.

In the context of American literature within which he eventually wants to create a space for a theoretical western regionalist literature, Stegner uses the regional and cultural diversity of his "many Wests" to address one of the Eastern academy's aspersions toward western American literature—its lack of a unified, regional voice that has characterized the more accepted (privileged) literary traditions in American literature. In his analysis of the difficulties facing the West's growth, nurture, and sustainability of an "unmistakable native art" in Wolf Willow (WW 288), Stegner cites the conditions of western living, specifically the crude conditions of living in a frontier space; the limited economic viability of western lands to sustain families and towns necessary to cultivate the intellectual sustenance for a native artist; and the conditions of constant change and movement that denied any historical continuity due to the Myths' narrative that situated each frontier as a "new country without a history" and with endless frontiers and second chances to fulfill the dream (28).

In the essays, Stegner takes these conditions investigated in Wolf Willow and applies them to the development of a *western* voice, claiming that the conditions of western living have denied the West a sense of cultural continuity necessary to forming a strong intellectual tradition to sustain a native art. He says that westerners lack a "*continuous* community" (HMWW 191) because the West has lived the "shattering experience" of urbanization "hot upon settlement,"

causing in his view any large cultural patterns to be “effaced or blurred, half-formed” (192). The cultural and literary Wests have not experienced what Stegner calls “the standard organic process of regional maturation” that produced “recognizable [literary] school(s) ... in New England, the Midwest, and the South” (BS 176); thus the West lacks a “common conscience, a common guilt, a shared sense of wrong, a Lost Cause” (178) or a critical category of thematic unity that scholars have associated with other regional literary traditions since the early nineteenth century. Because the West’s geographic and cultural diversity has prevented thematic unity, Stegner asserts that the “small-*w*” literary western cannot be judged or viewed in the same terms as those in other regional literatures. Echoing almost verbatim the conclusion reached in Wolf Willow regarding a western native art, Stegner declares in the essays that the West has had “no time for a native character to form and find its voice” (HMWW 191), as it requires a “seedtime of a generation or two” to find “its own native voice” (189). While the West’s geographic variety and the westerners’ experience of movement, change, and discontinuity creates an opening for more than one form of western storytelling, Stegner must delve deeper into the “dump ground” of western American literature to reclaim the westerner’s story from the Myths before he can position his “small-*w*” literary western as a viable voice for the westerner, the West, and America. Then he can grow a “new shoot” from the seed he has planted.

Whose Western Story Is It? Western American Literary  
Historiography Redefined

Having leveraged the geographic and cultural diversity of the American West against the singularity of the mythic metanarrative of the West in order to create the possibility for “another kind of western storytelling,” Stegner positions the “small-w” literary western as an alternative site for western regionalist authors to write their narratives. In Wolf Willow, Stegner indicates that his recovery of Cypress Hills’ “unremembered past” yields his connection to a past constructed by many others who lived there before him and to many “epics” that are a part of his story but have not yet been “properly” told (WW 112). Drawing from Wolf Willow’s recovery of an historical past that the Myths had obscured, in the essays Stegner digs into the literary history of the West to recover silenced and lost *western* voices that he can return to the westerners’ literary tradition.

In Wolf Willow, Stegner agrees with Fiedler that westerners too often accept the mythic past as their own. In defense of the westerner, Stegner claims, “what other history ... [is] so intimately theirs” than that of the Myths and so completely sanctioned by an American culture that it makes these Myths the nation’s own self-defining narratives (WW 292). Westerners, he says, have no other “history” than what the Myths have constructed. However, as he reveals in Wolf Willow, the “history” that the Myths present is false, given his recovery of Cypress Hills’ “unremembered past” and his and his family’s lived experiences there. In the essays, Stegner moves beyond a defense of western behavior due to

the Myths' erasure of the West's past to pursue the constructed quality of the literary tradition that the Myths and America have provided the western regionalist writer so that it can be corrected and revisioned. He states that the westerner's current literary tradition is "inadequate" (BS 170) and promotes certain themes and a particular approach to the American West as subject material that binds the western writer to the perspective of the Myths and situates the "small-w" literary western as out-of-step, irrelevant, and voiceless in comparison to other literatures of 1960s America. The Myths' western narrative with its repeatable, frozen, and exclusive tale of the exceptional and solitary, white-male conquering the western spatiality in the name of democracy, nationhood, and progress is, according to Stegner, a product of the "'fiction factories' that first took hold of the most colorful western themes and characters [and] swiftly petrified them into the large, simple formulas of myth" (HMWW 190).<sup>5</sup> These capital-W westerns are a "representative" story with "interchangeable parts" (190) about "archetypes and stereotypes, and [their] themes are less interesting for their freshness or *their truth to history* than for their demonstration of a set of mythic patterns" (187 italics mine). He insists that "it is *not necessary to be homegrown in order to write*" a Western (190 italics mine). Not only have the Myths denied the westerner and western regionalist writer their history of failure, violence, complicity, and aggression as well as cooperation, compromise, and adaptation that he uncovers in Wolf Willow, but these narratives have been written by non-westerners who lack the knowledge, lived experiences, and "native voice" to write what he calls in Wolf Willow the West's "native art" (255). Thus he dismisses in the essays the Myths' western narrative, just as he rejects the Myths' history as his-story in Wolf Willow, opting instead for a local personal history "for better or worse" of his

western place (Cypress Hills) that is far richer, more inclusive, and more peopled than is the history the Myths provide.

To revise the current western literary tradition, Stegner seeks out, as he did in Wolf Willow, “those who came before” him and created the West’s pontoon bridge of literary history (29). In Wolf Willow, he locates in the examples of Corky Jones and Jack Wilkinson “native” artists whose art came from their intellectual, imaginative, and adaptive response to their western place. In the essays, he returns to the West’s literary heritage to add writers he classifies as “western” because they have spent their “formative years” (or childhoods) living on western lands (BS 170)—the same criteria he uses in Wolf Willow to define his “westernness” and grant him the authority to address what it means “to understand the shape and intensity of the dream that peopled the continent” (281). In broadening the West’s literary historiography, Stegner refashions western subjectivity from one constructed by Easterners, outsiders, and the Myths to one “shaped” by westerners who have experiences living in a western place and know that place’s history, geography, society, culture, and the “adaptation” that has occurred there over time.

By focusing on the “westernness” of these writers and his notion of a culturally diverse West, Stegner not only includes past writers who have been omitted and writers in the present who have been neglected, but also strategically shifts the perspective of the westerners’ literary tradition from the rural, past, and mythic West to embrace the present urban concerns of the West and to expand the West’s literary tradition beyond its Eastern origins. He argues that western



regionalist writers inherited an “inadequate artistic and intellectual tradition” (BS 170) shaped by non-westerners, like James Fenimore Cooper, Owen Wister, Brett Harte, the Mark Twain of Roughing It, and the formulaic “writer of Westerns” like Grey and L’Amour who have left present western regionalist writers a narrative of a romanticized heroism and nostalgia for a simpler, rural western past that causes them to avoid and scorn their present, urban, and complex modern West (HMWW 187). He asks rhetorically: “Why haven’t Westerners ever managed to get beyond the celebration of the heroic and mythic frontier? Why haven’t they been able to find in their own time, place, and tradition the characters, situations, problems, quarrels, threats, and injustices out of which literature is made?” (BS 176). The answer, he suggests, lies in the western regionalist writers’ and America’s unquestioned acceptance of the Myths’ version of their history and their literature, which needs to be corrected because it is a narrative constructed by those lacking any lived experiences in the West.

Thus he returns to the westerners’ literary historiography those writers (men and women) he considers *western*, such as “Willa Cather, Maria Sandoz, Bernard DeVoto, H. L. Davis, Vardis Fisher, A. B. Guthrie, Paul Horgan, and Walter Van Tilburg Clark,” and Wright Morris (BS 178) as well as Mary Austin, Milton Lott, Eugene Manlove Rhodes, Ole Rolvaag, and Fredrick Manfred (HMWW 188). Also included in other essays and introductions Stegner wrote during the 1950s and 1960s are Mary Hallock Foote, Conrad Richter, Frank Waters, John Steinbeck, Harvey Fergusson, Eugene Burdick, George Stewart, Larry McMurtry, and Nathaniel West. And when he is “feeling especially confident,” he includes himself in this revised tradition (BS 178). According to Comer, Stegner’s *western* writers are “not transplanted eastern writers, whose narratives were

shaped for an eastern book-buying market.... They were ‘real western writers,’ born and bred in the West, and what they had to say about the place, Stegner believed, deserved a hearing” (41).<sup>6</sup> And, by peopling his literary history with women writers, Comer says Stegner “exceeds by every measure any other male rendering of the literary past” to that time (46). With the inclusion of writers like McMurtry, West, Richter, Burdick, Steinbeck, and himself who were writing about the present West, Stegner introduces into his revised western literary tradition a focus on present concerns that he claims was missing. Even with his expansion of the western literary canon in the mid-1960s, Stegner’s western literary tradition remains predominantly male and surprisingly devoid of those native and ethnic voices he acknowledges and encourages in Wolf Willow to tell their yet untold “epics.”<sup>7</sup> It was a tradition with male and female voices that spoke to the writers’ view of living in their present West, as is evident in Cather’s Death Comes to the Archbishop, Foote’s mining short stories, Morris’s Nebraska family, Austin’s desert living, and Stegner’s own lived experiences in the San Francisco foothills. Thus new themes, new perspectives, new concerns could be raised to further distance and differentiate the “small-w” literary western from the formulaic westerns that dominated the literary space of the West in the 1960s.

Stegner’s refashioning of western literary historiography posits the literary western’s authorial “I” as “western” because of the author’s having lived in a western place. He claims literary legitimacy for the “small-w” literary western on the basis of its having been written by insiders / westerners who possess a “knowledge of [their western] place, knowledge of [their western] past” and thus

can (re)write the West's narratives for present and future westerners and for America from a position of authority and authenticity. With their experiences, values, and beliefs shaped by the conditions of western living, Stegner argues that these western writers "know" the concerns, the beauties, the hopes and dreams as well as the failures, the doubt, the problems, and the losses associated with the West because their "experiences" result from living in western places. His connection of the authorial "I" to a geographic region aligns him with scholarly approaches of his day that examine America's literatures in terms of the author's association with a region, ethnicity, and/or particular themes—like the Southern Agrarians, New York's Jewish-Americans, the Harlem Renaissance, and the American Romantics and Transcendentalists. For Stegner, the experiential, authorial "I" grounds the writers' perspective in the lived experiences shaped by a specific "western" place. While he initiates a dismantling of the literary tradition of the American West that anticipates the activities of other revisionist movements of the 1970s, Stegner retains the authorial "I's" authority over the text because it is for him a necessary requisite of the "small-w" literary western to express what is "western." Yet, by remaining so tied to his own western experiences, Stegner implicitly defines the "western" authorial "I" as racially white and gendered male and therefore limits in turn the category of "westernness." At the same time, however, with his broadened literary history, Stegner begins a process of revisioning western American literary historiography that feminists and minorities would expand even further in the 1970s and 1980s so that, by Stegner's death in 1993, western American literature was "enlarged," as he claimed it would be to include a racially diverse community of past and present western writers.

## Revisioning the Contemporary Western Writer

Because Stegner conceives of the western writer as a white male with experiences drawn from a rural western environment similar to his own, he paradoxically narrows the effectiveness and range of his revisioned community of western writers. The western writer is, according to Stegner, “some native-white-Protestant second or third-generation-immigrant kind of boy” growing up in some western town, “hopelessly middle-class, parochial, dewy-cheeked, born a square,” and “still half believ[ing] in the American Dream” even in the tumultuous 1960s (BS 176). “Writing what he knew, or thought he knew,” Stegner claims this western writer “filled his book with a lot of naïve belief and health and effort, had made callow assumptions about the perfectibility of the social order and *the fact of individual responsibility*” (173 italics mine). His first novel, Stegner observes, was “about his family or his boyhood, or an epic about how his corner of the continent was peopled and brought into the civilized world,” and contains “a hero, or at least a respect for the heroic virtues—fortitude, resolution, magnanimity” (172-173). Even though Stegner acknowledges in the essays that America is a “pluralist country” and “bound to be of many kinds” (184), Comer notes that the gendered language and examples in Stegner’s essays create a space from which primarily young, white male writers of the West could write (Landscapes 42). For people of color or for women, she says, this space is a lot less inviting and relevant to their western experiences. Moreover, modeling the western writer’s experiences, which are the basis of his definition of “westernness,” too closely to

his own significantly limits his and his audiences' conception of the "western" writer.

In the essays, Stegner implores his contemporaries to leave the West so they can return to it with a broader, more critical perspective, which is exactly the path he took in his personal life. In 1930, Stegner left the West to pursue graduate study in English at the University of Iowa. He describes in "Finding the Place: A Migrant Childhood" how he came to understand "during an endless rainy fall" that he was "a Westerner": "I came from the arid lands, and liked where I came from. I was used to a dry clarity and sharpness in the air. I was used to horizons that either lifted into jagged range or rimmed the geometrical circle of the flat world. I was used to seeing a long way. I was used to earth colors—tan, rusty red, toned white—and the endless green of Iowa offended me.... I missed the color and smell of sagebrush, and the sight of bare ground.... I had left behind the whole West, and I began to realize how lucky I had been to see so much of it. I also began to realize how deeply it had been involved in my making" (17-18). During his time in the East, Stegner was exposed to a way of life and values very different from his own through his teaching at Harvard and its literati social life and his summers in Vermont, as well as through opportunities like the Breadloaf Writers Retreat, where he worked with Robert Frost and others, and the cross-country journey, which he undertook for Look Magazine in 1945 to explore America's race and ethnic tensions that resulted in One Nation. As a western expatriate, Stegner lived what he claims in Wolf Willow happens to the West's native artists—they leave their small towns to escape the provincialism, the ordinary, and the lack of cultural sustenance that these towns afford the young and artistic.

Until western writers put the West into a larger context, Stegner states they will continue to write “Pollyanna” narratives about the mythic West. They must, in his view, come to see the West in relation to other places and not just in relation to themselves and its mythic models. In other words, Stegner encourages western writers to place their West into a larger social-cultural-historical context, as he does in Wolf Willow. In his view, the contemporary western writer’s background is “limited, unusable, or embarrassing” in comparison to others in the literary world of the 1960s (BS 177). He instructs the western writer to “go away and get his eyes opened” (183) so he can reject the lure of the past that has led other western writers to write nostalgically of the “remembered violences, the already endured hardships” (178) that western writers do “not question . . . but celebrate” (173). By stepping outside their insular, rural, middle-class world, western writers can learn more about the human condition: the “doubt, magnanimity, pettiness, the abrasive grind of class and caste struggle . . . alienation . . . and hope” that are “as native to Salt Lake City or Idaho Falls or Minot as to Saul Bellow’s Chicago or Baldwin’s Harlem or Camus’s Oran or Faulkner’s Oxford” (183).<sup>8</sup> While he uses the traditional hero’s quest of leaving and returning to society that is also embedded in the Frontier hero’s narrative of regeneration as Slotkin has observed, more noteworthy is a change: from the guarded optimism in Wolf Willow regarding the West’s ability to cultivate and sustain western artists to the claims in the essays that the West not only has its “native” artists, as Cypress Hills has in Corky Jones and Jack Wilkinson, but also “chores” that will make them a stronger regionalist voice for the West. When his

portrayal of the western writer in the 1960s is not taken literally and placed within the context of “correctives”—his notion of the American West as “many Wests,” his more expansive western literary tradition, and his encouragement in Wolf Willow for ethnic others to “tell” their “epics”—Stegner can be seen in the essays as opening western American literature to other voices and possibilities that challenge the dominant metanarratives of the West.

Chores: Recover what the Myths have obscured—been used to obscure—and  
admit the inadequacies of the West

Stegner opens a space for western regionalist writers to tell narratives through the “small-*w*” literary western. They do not need to borrow issues from other regions, states Stegner, because the West yields material “more to the western writer’s purpose than any that he can borrow” (BS 184). In their examination of the Myths and their recovery of their “unremembered past,” Stegner believes that western writers will be able to reclaim their *western* narrative from the Myths so it can be written by westerners / insiders, not easterners / outsiders, who can expand its narrative possibilities beyond the limitations of the Myths and thus prevent their “small-*w*” literary western from becoming “voiceless” in the modern world—a condition he is unwilling to accept (BS 171).

In Wolf Willow, Stegner states that only after having “learned more” could he reject the Myths’ nostalgia and its “gun-toting past” as his *western* past (4). In the essays, he charges his contemporaries with approaching the past and present West with “their eyes opened” in order to examine it “at the most responsible pitch” because “the West ...

has relied on [its Myths] too long” (BS 183). He asks them to discover what the Myths have glossed because in those silenced voices and stories are their West’s “unremembered past” (WW 111) that he believes the present West needs to know in order for the American cultural imaginary to understand that their cultural past is larger and more complicated than the Myths would have them believe. His contemporary western writers will come to recognize, as he does in Wolf Willow, that their western past is not a “beginning, not a new thing, but a stage in a long historical process” (29). As a “fiction” that currently “asks only the questions it can answer,” which for him “is not good enough” (BS 179), Stegner urges western writers not to allow the “small-*w*” literary western to become a step-child to the capital-*W* Western but rather to make it distinctive and relevant to a modern audience.

In the essays, Stegner instructs western regionalist writers on how to differentiate their “small-*w*” literary western from the capital-*W*, formulaic Western that retells the narratives of the Frontier, Cowboy, and Pioneer-Garden West Myths. From his assessment of their “small-*w*” western, Stegner suggests that their literary western mimics the formulaic Western through its tone of loss and regret, the gendered representation of its conflicts, its presentation of the tension between community and individual justice, and its notions of the heroic. Therefore, their “small-*w*” literary western is only a mouthpiece for the values and themes of the mythic past, which results, states Stegner, in its having “little to say to people whose lives are fully urban and whose minds have grown skeptical



or scornful of heroes” (HMWW 198). Thus he urges them to make the corrections his analysis of the literary western offers.

In Wolf Willow, Stegner rejects the nostalgia for a romanticized Wild West past and acknowledges an “unremembered past” of failure, doubt, and complicity in the destruction of native peoples and the land as well as compromise, peace, racial diversity, social responsibility, and community obscured by the Myths’ nostalgia for the “good ol’ days.” In the essays, he asks his contemporaries to avoid the Myths’ trapping nostalgia by investigating what the Myths obscure so that they too can view the West’s past and the present West in new ways. He grants that the “small-*w*” literary western’s “elegiac tone” (HMWW 193) and sense of loss may show “something quintessentially American”—“our sadness at what our civilization does to the natural, free, and beautiful, to the noble, the self-reliant, the brave” that he observes is found in other regional American literatures (194). Nonetheless, for Stegner this nostalgia too closely associates the “small-*w*” literary western with the formulaic Western.

Western regionalist writers need to discover their cultural and historical *western* past, as Stegner does in Wolf Willow. He suggests they will uncover how Cooper’s pathfinder, Wister’s cowboy, Turner’s pioneer, and America’s nationalistic story of white conquest are a part of their cultural and historical past. And they will also discover, Stegner notes, how “the West is politically reactionary and exploitative” rather than the “last brave home of American freedom”; how America and the West “as a whole [are] guilty of inexplicable crimes against the land”; and how “rootless, culturally half-baked” the West is (BS 183). Once discovered, this cultural and historical past is “not likely to be lost,” as he claims in Wolf Willow (111), and he suggests that it will be their

obligation as writers to return the West's "unremembered past" to cultural memory. Only by challenging the Myths' narratives and questioning their own desire for this nostalgic view can contemporary western regionalist writers move beyond this trapping nostalgia to locate their distinctive regional voice and relevance in something other than the West of the Myths.

In addition to this nostalgic desire for a past, mythic West, Stegner indicates that their "small-w" western apes the formulaic Western in its thematic privileging of individual freedoms over social and community responsibilities. In Wolf Willow, he suggests that this tension between freedom and community issues from America's self-defining narrative of individuation deeply embedded in larger cultural tensions and couched in gender-specific terms that neither the formulaic nor the literary western acknowledges. In the Founding Fathers' unburdening of their historical baggage with the Mother country that America's cultural narratives of nation building present as necessary to the construction of a "new" nation, these cultural Fathers drew upon what Stegner ironically describes in Wolf Willow as an "American Faith" that requires the "new" American to shed the knowledge gleaned from the past and to leave behind social and cultural advances gained elsewhere so they could go forth to conquer a crude frontier sustained only by the hope and promise of future rewards (288). In "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors" (1981), Nina Baym argues that the American literary canon was shaped mostly by white-male literary scholars who privilege this male story of individuation as one of America's self-defining narratives. In the essays, Stegner

asks his contemporary western regionalist writers to consider how this theme of individuation appears in their “small-*w*” literary westerns because it often re-enforces, rather than questions, the values of the Myths.

In Wolf Willow Stegner challenged this myth of individuation by locating in both men and women the values of social responsibility, community, and compromise to counter the Myths’ narrative of the solitary white-male’s exceptionalism and conquest of the West. In the essays, he says that this privileging of the self over the community is “inescapable” and appears in America’s and not just the West’s literature in the form of what he describes as a gendered tension between “the freedom-loving, roving man and the civilizing woman” signaled thematically in the small-*w* and capital-*W* westerns by their representation of narrative conflicts between “male freedom and aspiration versus female domesticity, wilderness versus civilization, violence and danger versus the safe and tamed” (HMWW 195). Whether this narrative tension appears in “mythic terms or done as realistic fiction” in the West’s literature (196), Stegner suggests that it resulted from the conditions of western settlement—the deculturation, rawness, and hardships individuals encountered on the frontier—and reflects the “legitimate inclinations of the sexes” in the western spatiality of lived experiences (195). Citing examples from Wister, Crane, Cather, Fisher, Guthrie, and his own The Big Rock Candy Mountain, Stegner claims, “Almost every writer who has dealt with family stresses on the frontier has found it in his hands, because he probably grew up with it in his own family” (195). While he has been taken to task for his notion of “the legitimate inclination of the sexes,” he grounds these gender differences in the individual’s lived experiences in western places. For example, in Wolf Willow, Stegner reveals in his presentation of the fictional Molly

Henry how her relationship to the western frontier is shaped by her situation as a pioneer woman who desires a community of women similar to the “brotherhood” the cowhands experienced on the frontier (219). For Molly, the scarcity of women on the frontier causes her to want to return to her hometown in order not to sacrifice her feminine identity to become one of the boys as means of having a community to belong to on the western frontier. Moreover, Stegner places the desire to settle and make a home in Ray, Molly’s husband, as well as in Molly to subvert further the Myths’ traditional notions of home, freedom, and the frontier.

Another theme that aligns the “small-w” literary western with the formulaic Western is one particularly important to Stegner because of its societal implications: the tension between “book law” and “private judgment,” or the intertwining of violence and social order in western settlement (HMWW 196). In Wolf Willow, he rejects the Wild West violence depicted in the capital-W Western and Hollywood film in the correction of his childhood memory of Buck Murphy having been killed in a high-noon shoot-out with a young Mountie after having “learned more” about his historical past (4). Stegner does not deny the violence of the West’s past in Wolf Willow; rather he disrupts the Myths’ glorification of violence by exposing the destructive outcomes toward others, the land, and the community that it brings. He links this western violence to a strain of individualism in America’s cultural narratives of the exceptional American, nation-building, and male individuation that the Myths’ endorse. Stegner reveals how the Myths mask the aims of progress, profit, and self righteousness that lie behind white conquest of the frontier and the Other that, he states, can manifest

themselves in more dangerous, extreme, and brutal ways than the Indian battles and massacres he describes in Wolf Willow.

In the essays, Stegner confronts the implications of this *western* violence that the Myths glorify and its appearance in both kinds of westerns. Represented in “all Westerns and some western literature” (197) as the conflict between “book law” imposed by sheriffs and courts and the “handmade personal justice” or “vigilantism” justice “enforced by gun, fist, or rope” (196), Stegner faults Wister’s The Virginian, specifically Wister’s perversion of the Johnson County War situation, for helping to sanction this kind of violence in western narratives.<sup>9</sup> Because he sees the “small-w” literary western as instructive to readers in its awareness of the West’s problems, Stegner cautions both writer and reader to be clear on how the tension between “private judgment” and “book law” is resolved given that neither America nor the West in the present is a frontier society. Thus the use of this western violence that the Myths’ advocate—if it was ever warranted even in the past—lies outside the present cultural and historical context and thus is inappropriate, even though the Myths suggest otherwise. If both types of westerns are understood to be imaginative renderings of society, Stegner says vigilante justice is a “harmless” exhortation of “the aggressive ego” (197). However, if they are not seen as fantasy but as representations of the real, he argues that they can be “unconsciously immoral, and perhaps dangerous” in their promotion of private judgment over societal law (197). He questions whether the reader and writer truly understand this difference.

Stegner’s concern with how personal justice and individual freedom impacts society is not new. Early American writer, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur noted in his Letters from an American Farmer in 1782 that the self-reliant, fringe pioneer was a

danger to society because of an unchecked individualism and the violent defense of personal rights. As Slotkin, Nash, Lewis, and others suggest, the traits associated with the frontier hero in the wilderness context as pathfinder and protector are the very same traits that often make him dangerous to the community when he is in society. In the essays, Stegner wants western regionalist writers to question their representation of the Myths' advocacy of individualism and exceptionalism because their naive use of it aligns their literary western with the values of the Cowboy that enamors the American cultural imaginary.

The problem Stegner identifies in his analysis of the “small-w” western is that western regionalist writers have too often accepted without challenge the values of the West's metanarratives and that this similarity to the capital W Western is rendering them silent in the 1960s. They have become, he states, “to some modern critics ... remote, unreal, uncontemporary, anachronistic, belated” (HMWW 198) and “unfashionable ... [and] practically voiceless” to readers because their “small-w” western remains mired in the romanticized, heroic, and rural past though they live in the present (BS 171). Their nostalgic regret and unquestioned acceptance of the Myths' values leads Stegner to accuse his contemporaries of not seeing how intimately their protagonists evidence the Myths' representation of the “heroic virtues, horseback virtues” of the formulaic Westerns (HMWW 197). He remarks that, even when “fine and honest writers take a hard look at the myths,” ... *they do not ever question the validity of heroism,*” choosing to believe instead that “heroism does not survive into modern

literature,” a claim Stegner rejects (198, italics mine). The modern West has its heroes, he suggests; contemporary western regionalist writers have not yet found them. Instead, because their works remain tied to mythic past and they fail to question the Myths’ cultural paradigm, western regionalist writers have pushed the “small-w” literary western closer to the calcification and fantasy of the capital-W Western, which concerns Stegner. Thus he warns 1960s Americans, westerners, and western regionalist writers during the hey-day of the western film and television series: “we will all sit and watch Westerns on TV, testing ourselves only in fantasy and by standards we no longer think applicable to our real lives” (200-201). His “corrective” (BS 178) in the essays is to challenge his contemporary western writers to “learn more” (WW 5) about their western past and place and to reject the “romanticized, gun-toting past” the Myths advocate. He encourages his contemporaries to search for their unmythologized “knowledge of place, knowledge of the past” as he does in Wolf Willow (28).

Stegner recognizes that within the cultural context of 1960s America—in which the youth movement, Civil Rights, and feminism were causing Americans to question previously accepted morals, traditional roles, and cultural narratives—western regionalist writers can no longer “tell their Pollyanna stories about noble pioneers” (BS 183) or remain ensnared by the Myths’ “nostalgic regret” (HMWW 199) that leads them to “love the past [and] despise the present” (195). To correct their “Pollyanna” presentation of the West and prevent their literary western from drifting even “closer and closer to the stereotypes of the mythic” (199), Stegner charges his contemporary western regionalist writers with dismantling the Myths that have formed the core of their literary and cultural past, as he does, for example, in Wolf Willow when he reveals the prejudices,

exclusivity, and brutality of the Cowboy Code he admired as a boy. In other words, they must do what Fiedler accused them of not doing: they must question their models and participate in a critical assessment of their cultural metanarratives.

Stegner seems to understand that the reduction of the westerners' experience into stereotypes, formulaic stories, and Wild West and Hollywood extravaganzas leaves modern westerners (and America) with no understanding of how they have arrived at a present more urban than rural and with ecologically devastated western lands, dependencies upon federal land subsidies, and contentious and diverse peoples all calling the West their home. According to Elliot West, what Stegner attempts to point out in the essays is that "Western literature, obsessed with the pioneer tribulations and 'horseback virtues' of the past century, has told a story centered on its own heroism and on events that supposedly ended with a gigantic clang around the opening of the twentieth-century. That story cannot build into any kind of future.... We need (literally) to re-member what is now a dis-membered past. Such remembering, Stegner thought, will promote a more sensible, compassionate approach to western lands" and western concerns (W.S.'s West 86). In his 1986 essay, "The Sense of Place," Stegner describes the kind of "knowing" he hopes the "small-w" literary western will convey: the "kind of knowing that involves the senses, the memory, the history of a family or a tribe.... The knowledge of a place....that poets specialize in" (205). Stegner wants all westerners to locate the kind of "knowing" that the child-Stegner felt in his desire to "bond with the earth" and animals by "making



paths” with his bare feet on the lonely, lovely, and intimidating prairie in their past in a western place. Because the Myths deny any historical continuity of the kind that he constructs in Wolf Willow that connects the present to the past, Stegner claims that, instead of writing about a “present and living society” or the story of the “aftermath” of western white settlement (BS 178), they write about a heroic, romanticized, and nostalgic West. In his call to his contemporaries to challenge the Myths, Stegner anticipates the literary and historical revisionism of the West’s past and its cultural narratives to come in the 1970s by western writers and New Western historians and positions the “small-w” literary western as the site upon which they can re-conceive western subjectivity and western literature and make their “small-w” literary western in which they can explore *new* narrative paths for the present and future West.

A Chore: To find a personal and possessed past and a present and  
living society to be deeply committed to

Stegner’s request for western regionalist writers to create new narratives for the West with an eye to the realities of their historical past that the Myths’ have silenced is his attempt to heal what he sees as a culturally and environmentally fragile West. As Elliot West points out, “Stegner spoke to that deep fracture in the usual perception of the western past—a rift separating the present-day from the imagined West of the nineteenth-century frontier” (“WS’s West” 85). According to West, Stegner’s fictions, histories, essays, along with his public environmental advocacy, are all about “continuities, connections, unity” (88), or closing the divide between the present and the past for the contemporary westerner and for America. In the essays, Stegner says, “I think you don’t choose between the past and the present; you try to find the connections, you try to make

the one serve the other” (HMWW 200). By participating, along with others in the 1950s and 1960s, in the questioning of defining cultural metanarratives through the “chores” he delineates, Stegner enables western regionalist writers to “discover some way in which western society and the western individual [are] entangled” (BS 179). He asks his contemporaries to undertake a “responsible” examination of the Myths’ singular narrative of white (male) conquest of a western frontier and native others so they can stop re-writing the Myths’ and begin to write about the “aftermath” of western settlement and thus their *own* narrative of the West (BS 178). This “aftermath” contains, for Stegner, the concerns of the modern and urban West—whether environmental, social, cultural, or historical. The new narratives of the West will enable the “small-*w*” literary western to achieve a “voice” relevant and meaningful to a mostly urban, skeptical, and diverse western society and American literary culture. These new narratives, he argues, will speak to the realities of living in the present West.

Because the Myths do not “take account of time and change,” Stegner charges his contemporary western writers to locate “a present to come home to,” to discover the connection they have to the western place that has shaped their lived experiences and made them “western” (BS 183). Even though he notes that contemporary western writers reveal “a disinclination, perhaps an emotional inability, to write about the contemporary” because they remain victims of the Myths’ nostalgia (HMWW 192-93), Stegner tasks them with finding a “present and living society... that contains the materials of deep commitment” for themselves and their readers (BS 178). What is lacking in their “small-*w*”

westerns is, he claims, a “sense of conflict that is real, dangerous, and present” (178) and that characterizes the literature by non-westerners of the 1950s and 1960s that he admires: the “passion that animates the best Negro novelists”; the anti-heroes of Saul Bellow and hermetic grotesques of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O’Connor; the portrayal of the “characteristic American figure, the symbolic orphan” (179); and the focus on “victims, not heroes” (HMWW 198). He wants westerners and the West’s writers to understand how “the strenuousness of a hundred western years can be dissolved into strobe lights” and “the pounding of folk rock” or how the “teenage disturber of the peace on the Sunset Strip” echoes yesterday’s Mountain Man or the quintessential American orphan (HMWW 200). To provide their modern audiences and critics with relevant and meaningful literature, Stegner asserts that these *new* narratives must be grounded in the multiplicity of the “many Wests,” the silenced voices in the West’s “unremembered past,” and the lived experiences of their authors in the present West.

In Wolf Willow Stegner concludes with an estimation of the status of the town of Whitemud in 1953, which begins with his dismay that it is a dreary, limited, uncultured, apathetic, and “dead” town (300). As he looks deeper into the town’s present institutions and activities, he moves beyond this rather bleak assessment of Whitemud’s and the West’s progress in the present to locate the West’s potential to be a creative source and literal home to “native arts” (255) and to find in the town models for “native” artists in Corky Jones, Jack Wilkinson, and the farmers’ “adaptations” to their western environment through communal efforts (300). He cautiously advances the idea that the West can be a “seedbed” (306) to a “wholly native” art (301) if the artist and art are

connected to the very rich, racially diverse narratives of an unmythologized, historical past for better or worse than the Myths have silenced. This art / artist can establish what he calls in the essays a “continuous community” that provides modern westerners with a path connecting their historical past to their present reality, just as Faulkner connected Ikkemotubbe the Chickasaw to Montgomery Ward Snopes and as Stegner connected the Spaniards to the early Blackfeet to Sitting Bull, Cypress Hills’ Native Americans to Cowie and the Hudson’s Bay Company and the Métis and Irishman Walsh and the Mounties, and all of them to Star Child and Grayburn and the boy-child Stegner sitting in Cypress Hills’ coulees in Wolf Willow (HMWW 191). He says in the essays that this connection between western regionalist writers and their lived experiences in western places and the “unremembered” history of their western place “remain to be discovered and recognized” (BS 179). In this “discovery,” they will find the new western narratives that will evolve from the “West’s own problems” (184) that exist in the diversity of the western region’s “several Wests” (171) and will provide their “small-w” literary western its distinctive, regional, and “western voice” and the western regionalist writer a “personal and possessed past” from which they can discover how western society and the western individual are entangled (HMWW 199).

Chore: Establish a usable continuity between past and present  
for the western individual and society

Even though he wants contemporary western writers to focus on the present West, Stegner does not reject the importance of the West's past. Knowing one's past is crucial to Stegner, as his search for his personal history in Wolf Willow demonstrates. For Stegner, history creates connections to "those who came before" and helps those in the present understand how actions and behaviors are influenced by the culture, society, place, and history of that place (WW 29). As he discusses in Wolf Willow, not to know the past is to not understand the larger context in which one lives, acts, and is acted upon. In the essays, Stegner claims that America, western regionalist writers and western American literature confront what he calls an "amputated Present," a fracture in past and present similar to what he depicts in Wolf Willow (HMWW 193). Because the Myths trap the westerner and West in an 1890s Wild West period, the values, attitudes, and actions that they advocate are out of keeping with the cultural, social, and environmental realities of the present. In Wolf Willow, Stegner constructs an historical continuity between his past and present through the *historian Stegner's* recovery of an "unremembered past" (110) that contests the Myths' claim that the frontier is a "country with no history" (28). Being history-less, Stegner has no connection to the "very rich" past of Cypress Hills and the lessons for living that the Indians, Métis, the exterminators, Mounties, and cattleman had already learned (112). Nor does his imagination have the stories of Cowie, Sitting Bull, Irishman Walsh, the wolfers, and Blackfeet to draw upon. In "The Sense of Place" (1989), Stegner clearly identifies the importance of providing the "historical continuity" he claims in the 1960s essays that the West lacks: "We need to

know our history in much greater depth” because knowing our history means understanding that westerners and America in settling the West and the nation “did both the country and ourselves some harm along with some good. Neither the country nor the society we built out of it can be healthy until we stop raiding and running, and learn to be quiet part of the time, and acquire the sense not of ownership but of belonging” (206). In their engagement with the West’s mythic and non-mythic past and its relationship to the concerns of the present West, Stegner argues that western regionalist writers will be able to create an historical continuity between past and present that will give their “small-*w*” literary western meaning and relevancy for modern critics, publishers, and readers and enable westerners and America to create a new relationship with western lands and the societies of the “many Wests.”

In the essays, Stegner wants the “small-*w*” literary western to express this “usable past” so that the westerner and America can possess a western narrative far richer and diverse in the stories it can tell and with more relevancy to their modern lives than what the formulaic Westerns present. Therefore, he challenges his contemporaries to “establish a usable continuity between past and present” (BS 178) for the western individual, western society, and for America so they will not be “cheated” (WW 112) of the richness of this historical past. However, he and his contemporaries must first extricate themselves and their “small-*w*” literary western from the mythic West. Until they free themselves from the Myths, Stegner maintains, they will continue to write “a regional success story without an aftermath” (BS 178) that obscures the ravages, losses, and destruction and

silences the compromises, community, and moments of peace that came with white settlement of the West. In “On the Writing of History” (1964), Stegner claims that the “dramatizing of legitimately dramatic true events does not necessarily falsify them” and encourages historians to employ such dramatization when they need to “make a point vividly” (OWH 205). He also claims that “historical fiction, which transposes the fictional into the actual, may have every degree of historical authenticity up to the highest” (205-206) so long as the writer employs the “tools of sound research” (204) and understands that “history reports the actual, fiction the typical” (205). In the essays, he argues that western regionalist writers must separate themselves from the Myths by employing the tools of the historian to locate a “middle ground” that “fuses fiction and history” (206) so that the western regionalist writer can begin to write the West’s “aftermath” in their “small-w” literary westerns.

What the literary West, America, and westerners need, Stegner claims, is for someone to tell the stories that the historical West provides. In the historical West of specific western places and the “knowledge of the past” of those places, rather than the mythic West, Stegner locates the creative source of western American literature’s “small-w” literary western. This “knowledge of the past, knowledge of place” (WW 28) that the western writer needs is to be found in sound research that debunks the Myths’ and focuses on the personal and familial experiences of western authors in their “western” places. What Stegner calls for in the essays is a western regionalist writer who can do “what Faulkner did for Mississippi” (179): such a writer would create “a western Yoknapatawpha County or *discovered a historical continuity* comparable to that which Faulkner traced from Ikkemotubbe the Chickasaw to Montgomery Ward Snopes”

(HMWW 200, italics mine).<sup>10</sup> Because their literary western has “no sense of any continuity,” their “small-*w*” literary westerns (including Stegner’s) are unable to achieve the Faulkneresque-type narrative of the West that associates the actions, behaviors, and events of those who came before to occurrences in the present (199).<sup>11</sup> The intent of Stegner’s “chores” in the 1960s are to provide western regionalist writers strategies with which they can use to break the Myths’ hold on their perspective of the West. His “chores” offer them ways to locate their “very rich past” (WW 112), expand their literary historiography with “western” literary fathers and mothers that enlarges the tradition they inherit, and encourage them to embrace—for better or worse—both their present and their past so they can renarrativize the West’s story.

A Chore: To remember their strengths and retain the  
basic hopefulness of the West

In the essays, Stegner’s “chores” and “correctives,” along with his notion that the West’s topographic differences reflect the cultural diversity of his “many Wests,” are intended to make western regionalist writers aware of an expanded and more inclusive western literary tradition, conscious of their historical past and the concerns of the present, and engaged as a community of regionalist writers in building a new western subjectivity grounded in the westerner’s experiences in a specific western place and participating in the revisioning of their literary tradition and their literature through their production of a “small-*w*” literary



western that has fulfilled the “personal, family, and community chores” outlined in the essays. At the time and context in which he writes these essays—the mid-1960s—Stegner believes that western American literature of the “small-*w*” kind not only deserves attention as a “another kind of story-telling” (HMWW 187) but also that the West and the “small-*w*” literary western are spatial fields of hope, optimism, “old fashioned” values, and a salve for the nation’s pain and chaos of the 1950s and 1960s. As he names it in his now famous “Wilderness Letter” written in 1960, the West is, in his view, America’s “geography of hope” (153). In Wolf Willow, Stegner situates the West as hopeful, young, malleable, and unrealized in its potential as a “seedbed” (306) for “native arts” (255), though his “hope” for this future is infused with the doubt and struggles that his mother and the fictional Molly represent, his own family’s story of “failure” that contests the “hope” the Myths’ advocate, and the narratives of destruction, aggression, and greed that are a part of his recovered “unremembered past” (111). In the essays, Stegner is not just hopeful for the West’s ability to produce and nurture “native arts” (255) but also speaks as a “native son” and regional patriot to proclaim the West as “the New World’s last chance to be something better, the only American society still *malleable* enough to be formed” (BS 184 italics mine). Thus he positions the “small-*w*” literary western as a cultural voice tasked with consciously initiating a re-visioning of the West’s past, present, and future.

With this final “chore” introduced at the conclusion of “History, Myth, and the Western Writer,” the last written of the three essays in 1967, Stegner takes his theory of western American literature beyond the issues and concerns he explores in Wolf Willow and into new territory that invests the “small-*w*” literary western with moral and social

impetus. In Comer's view, "As a concerned and committed citizen, Stegner aimed to wrestle control of the West away from the mythmakers and profit takers" and, in doing so, he enabled western regionalist writers "to conceive of themselves *as* writers" and "to write out their own relationships to western history, mythology, gender relations, the environment, and, significantly, to national literary culture at large" (Landscapes 42). In Wolf Willow, he redefines his past and claims it as "western" by locating this past in the recovery of an historical, non-mythicized past that provides him the "knowledge of place, knowledge of the past" (28) of his childhood home that he needs to reject the Myths' ownership of how his "western" should be interpreted.

In the essays, Stegner revises and renarrativizes the literary western and the West's literary historiography so that the "small-w" literary western presents a story relevant to westerners and non-westerners alike. He claims that the literary western needs "to expand its vision of itself and include things like a Leslie Fiedler lecturing to a class of undergraduates at the University of Montana" as well as the Montana cowboy who may be the "product of a pathetic illusion" (HMWW 199). The "chores" he outlines in the essays have tasked western regionalist writers with locating what makes them "western" through what is revealed when they challenge (and reject) the culturally defining Myths of the West, with disassociating their literary western from the formulaic Western, with re-orienting their literary focus from the mythic past to the modern West in which they live and contribute as citizens, and with establishing for themselves and others a necessary historical continuity between the past and the present so that

“we will find ways of recognizing at least parts of ourselves in the literature and history the past has left us” and the “term ‘western literature’ will be enlarged ... and its accomplishments not so easily overlooked” (HMWW 201). This “chore” situates contemporary western regionalist writers as already evidencing the West’s “native arts” and deserving of recognition by the literary academy and America’s reading public.

To ensure that they continue to grow their “small-w” literary western, Stegner encourages his contemporary western writers to become a “community” invested in the future of their “small-w” literary western. He also urges them to demonstrate their commitment to the type and welfare of the literary western they write by completing the “chores” he outlines in the essays so that their “small-w” literary western can provide modern readers with the moral guidance and “hope” he believes is missing from much of the contemporary literature that eastern publishers are promoting and that is needed by the American cultural imaginary to navigate a changing, increasingly nihilistic and apathetic modern and urban world. He echoes in the closing image of “History, Myth, and the Western Writer” the kind of “community responsibility” he describes throughout Wolf Willow that places the needs of the community above those of the individual and challenges the Myths’ emphasis on the exceptionalism of the individual. His return to the “lariat” image in his conclusion further yokes together the ideas and practices of the essays to Wolf Willow and specifically to the notion of the “lariat” as a “life-line,” used by the cowhands to survive the brutal winter storm and by the town to rescue the children trapped in the school house during a blizzard. He says in the essays that, in the context of “the old days,” it was necessary during blizzards “to tie a string of lariats from house to barn so as to make it from *shelter to responsibility* and back again” (HMWW 201 italics

mine). Stegner positions himself as the leader of these contemporary western regionalist writers that is not unlike the relationship he gave the fictional Ray Henry, the foreman in "Genesis." Stegner, like Ray, assumes the burden of leadership by tasking his community of western writers to complete the "chores" he fashions for them that will rescue their literary western from the erasure and irrelevancy within which the Myths and contemporary Eastern literature have threatened them.

While his "chores" can help prevent their "small-w" literary western from becoming subsumed by the formulaic Western and the Myths, Stegner engages his "western" heritage of "hope" and the place-based, realist, and historicist literature of the "small-w" literary western constructed by and based in the "westernness," the experiential, the pragmatic, and the hopefulness of its author to fight a cultural battle of world views that imperils the fate of their "small-w" literary western. According to Comer, Stegner "believed that the modernist movement assaulted national identity in ways that were both un-western and un-American" (Landscapes 41).<sup>12</sup> By positioning the West as his "geography of hope," she says that Stegner presents it as the "the last stand of American liberal humanism" against a despairing, self-pitying eastern literature (40). As he describes this tension between Eastern nihilism and Western hope, he claims that it is "more dangerous than Comanche country ever was" (HMWW 201), for this Eastern literature is wholly anathema to everything he, western writers, and the "small-w" literary western represent: "I am pretty sure that some part of our most advertised recent fiction is sick, out of its mind, and out of the moral world,

worshipful of Moloch, in love with decay and death” (BS 180). In his view, this kind of Eastern literature evidences a “self-pity, gone out-of-hand” (181) with the modern Eastern writer “giving up on Modern Man,” when, Stegner says, “the point is to do the best one can in the circumstances, not the worst” (184). This Eastern literature goes against “his convictions,” which are grounded in western sensibilities he equates to Hemingway’s “grace under pressure” and “stiff upper lip” attitude (184); in the values of “pragmatic meliorism,” “community responsibility” (WW 306), and “incorrigible, hope” (BS 185); and in a “belief . . . about . . . the fact of individual responsibility” (173). From Stegner’s view, modern “civilization . . . has got[ten] away from us” and has created a cultural landscape of despair and disgust that he claims is more dangerous than Wild West Indian Territory (HMWW 200).

Against this landscape of futility, despair, disgust, and hopelessness that he sees dominating modern fiction from the East, Stegner positions the literary western as its antagonist, just like he situated the “small-w” western to the capital-W Westerns, because western regionalist writers in his view bring a different perspective on how to live. By reclaiming and recontextualizing the values that the mythic West has perverted, western writers can “find ways of bringing some of the historic self-reliance and some of the heroic virtues back into our world” because “giving up” simply goes against the grain of what it means to be “western” and American (HMWW 201).<sup>13</sup> Because western writers “understand” from their experiences growing up in a rural, frontier-like western place that living involves both “failure” and “hope,” hardship as well as success, individualism balanced with community, ego and humility, and a “stiff upper lip” code that prevents one from “giving up,” Stegner argues that western regionalist writers have inherited a

vision of “hope” or “faith in the future” (WW 255) that is an alternative to the “quiet desperation” (BS 184) and acceptance of “a merely ‘bearable’ world” he believes this Eastern literature advocates (HMWW 200). Therefore, he encourages the western regionalist writer to be “grateful for his western upbringing for convincing him, beyond all chance of conversion, that man, even Modern Man, has some dignity if he will assume it” (BS 184). As a “diehard humanist... a believer in the knowability and holism of the individual, the efficacy of individual action, the reliability of meaning, the transcendentalism of art, the progressive nature of history” (Landscapes 45), Comer claims Stegner was “a man who held himself and other men responsible for their actions” (47). Thus he invests the “small-w” literary western with this same world view and tasks his contemporaries with locating and defining new, non-mythic “heroes” informed by a recovered historical past and a life lived in the “aftermath” of western settlement, or a modern, more urban than rural West that is racially and culturally diverse (his “many Wests”) and that is confronting the consequences of past “crimes against the land”; dissociated from their “real western past” by the cultural dominance of the Myths; and struggling to define the virtues upon which to re-narrativize their present and future Wests (HMWW 199).

### A Victim of the Myths

At the conclusion of the story “Genesis” in Wolf Willow, Stegner attempts to reclaim the heroic virtues of courage, bravery, and a “stiff upper lip” from the

Myths by showing how the cowhands and especially Rusty direct their individual efforts toward the welfare of the community—in this case the “brotherhood of men”—to survive the storm (WW 219). While the story clearly shows they could not have survived without their communal and cooperative efforts, Stegner weakens his attempts to reclaim these virtues from the mythic West by asserting that outside the western spatiality the men’s actions “would pass for heroics in a softer world” while in the western world they are “only chores” (219). By differentiating the men’s efforts within a western and non-western world, Stegner makes them unique and exclusive to the West just as the Myths do. Similarly, by locating his understanding of the “shape and intensity of the dream” (281) in his life’s story as a “pioneer’s child” (15), Stegner narrows instead of broadens his challenge to Turner’s Pioneer-Garden West Myths. The more Stegner relies on his story alone to tell the story of the West’s non-mythic past, the more restrictive and limiting his contestation of the Myths becomes.

In the essays, while his “chores” clearly open new narrative possibilities for the “small-w” literary western and enable him to revision western American literature’s literary tradition from one fashioned by non-westerners and the Myths to one written by westerners, Stegner’s alignment of the “small-w” literary western within the Myths’ construct of “hope” makes the literary western a locus of “hope” just as the Myths make the West the nation’s literal and imaginative region upon which to enact its nation-building efforts: the (literary) West becomes the savior, home of the innocent and second-chances, and a new and unrealized space for America to alter it to its will. Along with the gendered language of the essay and the similarity between his definition of the western regionalist writer and his lived experiences, Stegner consciously or

unconsciously positions the western writer in race and gender with the dominant position of the Myths in a cultural battle he likens to Comanche country in which the white-male, middle-class western regionalist writer is the Blue Coat Calvary charged with protecting the pioneer (American culture) from the “Comanche” (nihilistic Eastern literature and scornful academics) through the “small-*w*” western that will return to cultural memory “the historic self-reliance and some of the heroic virtues” that he sees Eastern literature silencing (HMWW 201).

While he recognizes the rhetoric in others and fights against the ideological premises in America’s narrative of conquest and transformation as it applies to America’s destruction of western lands, Stegner seems unable to fully distinguish his own application of the language and imagery of the Myths when he positions the “small-*w*” literary western and western regionalist writer in opposition to the Eastern literature to which he objects. Even as he describes a geo-spatial-cultural-literary vision of the American West that is diverse and pluralistic (his “many Wests”) in its landscapes, its regional cultures, and its literary traditions, he still presents the West’s literary spatiality in the 1960s essays as a space waiting to be conquered (written on) by western writers so that, once marked, it can be “possessed” and transformed by them. Thus his final “chore” that asks western regionalist writers to remain true to the basic values, particularly the hopefulness he still believes in at his point in his career, that the West embodies makes it especially difficult for those outside the white-male, “western” voice—such as women, Native Americans, and minorities—to participate in the re-writing of the West’s narrative, as they remain in the



traditional position of the “Other”—the racial and gendered victim conquered by the Myths’ singular narrative of the conquering white-male Cowboy and Pioneer.

Even as his “chores” are intended to move the direction of western American literature away from the staid and traditional topics the Myths promoted, Stegner remains mired in them, unable to fully defeat the Myths as he tries to create a space for his “another kind of western writing that is not mythic” (HMWW 187). He says in one of the essays that “literature is one of the things that emerge as by-products when you throw people of an advanced civilization into an *unrecorded, history-less, art-less new country*. Western writing is only the *last stage* of what occurred on every American frontier” (189, italics mine).<sup>14</sup> His description has white western writers (the “advanced civilization”) conquering a West absent (unrecorded, history-less, art-less) of any previous presences. In fact, he states that a defining feature of western American literary historiography to the 1960s is that it has been concerned with narratives about “the settlement and mythic past, the confrontation between *empty land and imported populations, which is the salient historical fact about the West*” that neglects the very ethnic Others he recovers in Wolf Willow and is, ironically, the very condition he is trying to alter in the essays by re-orienting the focus to the “aftermath” of western settlement (BS 178, italics mine). He is not quite as guilty as Native American scholar, Elizabeth Lynn-Cook accuses him of in her essay, “Why I Can’t Read Wallace Stegner,” when she says that he “serv[es] the interests of a nation’s fantasy” when he situates the West as an empty, history-less area and his western regional writers as valiant defenders of conquering society (29). In the essays Stegner seems to have forgotten what he learns and expresses in Wolf Willow.

In Wolf Willow, he uses history to show that he is not alone in the West, despite the Myths' christening it a "new country without a history" (28). He comes to recognize that his story is one of many in the West's settlement; thus he encourages ethnic others to tell their yet untold stories to further enlarge this shared past of conflict, white aggression, and resistance (112). In the essays, Stegner's vision of a western literary and historical reality seems much more encumbered by the cultural assumptions of a predominantly masculinist, Anglo-centric perspective inherited from his culture, profession, and academic world. The literature that the academy privileges is written by white men more so than by women and minorities; his students in the 1940s through 1960s were mostly men and mostly white; and his academic surroundings at Harvard and Stanford presented him with few women and minority colleagues. Therefore, in the worst sense, Stegner's theorizing of western American literature can be seen as silencing and oppressing women, minorities, and Native Americans who in America's cultural western spatiality are excluded and viewed as the Other.

In the best sense, Stegner's theory of western American literature can be seen as offering an opening for women and minority writers to write their own stories in the challenge he presents to the dominant discourse of the West with his "another kind of western story-telling" that calls for even more kinds of western narratives that may be possible in the western spatiality than what it currently holds. Moreover, by allowing for different "inclinations of the sexes," or gendered responses toward western lands, and his disruption of the Myths' notion of an imaginary and literal singular West in narrative and region by his "many"

and “several” Wests, Stegner’s theory does provide the potential for other kinds of “western story-telling” than what he proposes (HMWW 187). In “Feminism, Women Writers and New Western Regionalism,” Comer states that, while “Stegner’s West was certainly no ‘melodrama of beset manhood,’ neither was it a narrative that staged women’s historical concerns at its center,” as it “theorized western literature in terms of an implicit masculine norm”—the “he” aligned in the essays with the western regionalist writer (21). While he consistently peopled his fiction with white women who have significant roles in theme and action, Stegner’s women are more often than not moral compasses for his men.<sup>15</sup> Even though he has given western regionalist writers mothers as well as fathers and grants men and women essentialist (“inclinations”) and culturally constructed gender differences that shape their response to western spaces, *western* women, like his fictional Molly, do not yet possess fully realized voices in his western spatiality. In the 1970s and 1980s western women writers would assert their voices into the male dominated western literary spatiality by adopting, as Comer notes, Stegner’s overall “revisionist” position and the position of the “Other”—the challenger—he used to combat the Myths to insert their “another kind of western storytelling” into the West’s literary spatiality to further re-vision western American literature’s traditional values, dichotomies, and tropes.

In regard to minority voices, Stegner’s theory of western American literature as articulated in the 1960s essays does not invite them overtly into the project of expansion and revision of western literary historiography. While he populates the history of Wolf Willow with Native Americans, acknowledges Native American presence on the continent well-before Europeans arrived and accepts his heritage of white destruction of

Native American and Métis cultures, and asks them to tell their stories, Stegner does not include Native Americans and minorities in his re-mapping of a western literary historiography in the essays. Absent from Stegner's western American literary history are such writers as Mourning Dove, Black Elk, D'Arcy McNickle, and Edith Eaton (Sui Sin Far), and even N. Scott Momaday, a former Stegner fellow, to mention but a few.<sup>16</sup> Native American absence is what angers Lynn-Cook when she singles Stegner out for critique because of his influence over western American literature since the 1960s. While acknowledging that "Stegner's imagination of the West, ... is of course not his own invention.... He simply took [Native Americans] as his culture gave them to him," Lynn-Cook argues that "Stegner's reality" of the American West is one in which he simply claims "indigenoussness" as a westerner and western writer. From this position, he creates "the new myths and stories of those newcomers stepping off boats" and in doing so negates "a different continuity and intimacy with the universe" that she claims Native Americans who have (30). When asked by Etulain in their 1979 interview sessions about "which western [Native American] writers deserve our attention," Stegner admits that "you touch me where I am vulnerable and ill-informed on this Indian business," arguing that he has been "preoccupied with other things" (Conversations 138).<sup>17</sup> While *Wolf Willow* presents a more racially diverse West and the essays claim a geographic and cultural diversity for the West, this racial diversity does not appear in Stegner's own fiction.

In his short stories and novels about the West, which he orients to a present, mostly suburban, northern California West, Stegner is more exclusive

than inclusive in the cultures he represents as being a part of the literal and imaginative western spatiality. In “Wallace Stegner’s West, Wilderness, and History,” Elliot West states that Stegner’s Indians are either “ignored altogether, ... appear as vanquished residents of a distant past, or ... are static holdovers from that timeless wilderness world” (91). In another essay, “Stegner, Storytelling, and Western Identity,” West notes that, when Stegner’s fiction and non-fiction are taken as a whole, “Stegner wrote remarkably little about Indians” to the point that there is “little sense that American Indians have had much to do with the West, past or present” (67). For West, Stegner’s failure to confront the presence and role of Native Americans in the history and literature of the American West “is especially ironic” because “Native American traditions offer the kind of *storied connection between today and yesterday* that Stegner called for” in his fiction and non-fiction as a whole (67 italics mine). In West’s opinion, “it is fair to say ... that [Stegner’s] knowledge of Native Americans did not run nearly so deep as in most other aspects of western history and life” (WS’s West 91).

While he challenges the dominant mythic discourse in terms of his own (white) western story in Wolf Willow and broadens the West’s literary ancestry, it seems clear that Stegner like Smith and Slotkin fails to question thoroughly the cultural “model” of the West that he used to shape his own “model.” Thus Comer appropriately faults Stegner for presenting a western literary spatial field that is “to many writers of color (particularly to the men) [a] geographic imagination of western literary history ... no different from that of the dominant geocultural imaginary” that Stegner himself attacks (Landscapes 43). She argues that “throughout the 1960s it did not occur to Stegner that indigenous peoples and nonwhite immigrants of the nineteenth or twentieth century

prospered amidst their own artistic, religious, sociopolitical, and cultural traditions. Nor did it occur to him that the body of writers from whom he formed generalizations about regional literature did not include any of those people,” even though he was well aware of minority voices through his student Momaday (Native American) and his former undergraduate teacher at the University of Utah, Vardis Fisher (Basque), and women writers from his experiences at writing programs, like Breadloaf and his program at Stanford (Landscapes 42-43). While he came to value Native American, minority, and women writers and their contribution to western regional writing later in his life, Stegner’s failure to recognize their presence and contributions in his literary and historical vision of the American West in the 1960s is very unfortunate overall but clearly historicizes his theory. Nonetheless, as Comer notes, Native Americans and minorities appropriated Stegner’s “lesson of alternative cartography” to re-map the predominantly white and male western literary historiography to locate a host of possibilities for themselves (Landscapes 43).

What Stegner’s theory of western American literature in the 1960s does do is to indicate that America, westerners, and western regionalist writers have a fractured relationship with their historical past and to their lived present due to the Myths’ cultural dominance. Despite the limitations of his view on race and gender in the 1960s, Stegner’s theory stands as a “critical paradigm ... [that] remained the dominant trend in western criticism in the 1980s” because it opened the door for others to recover, rewrite, and locate new stories that the mythic West had glossed and silenced (Comer, *Feminism* 20). In the late 1980s, Stegner

articulates what he continues to see as the consequences of America's neglect of its historical past: we need to "know our history in much greater depth, even back into geology," in order to find a "sense of belonging" rather than "ownership," especially in terms of locating a "sustainable relationship between people and earth" (Sense 206). According to Elliot West, Stegner "pictured.... a great unbridgeable break at the start of the frontier [that] ... allows no sense of continuity between the human story on the other side of that break—the story of ancient native peoples—and the story on our side" (WS's West 90). In Wolf Willow and the 1960s critical essays, Stegner argues that by understanding one's history or possessing a "knowledge of place, knowledge of the past" individuals can find connections and relationships that can be used not only to challenge the Myths that had defined westerners, the West, and America, but also to tell the stories needed to alter the aggression, possession, and conquering relationship America and the westerner have toward the Other and western lands. As society, culture, and critics grew more aware of how totalizing narratives like the West's Myths excluded and silenced the voices of others, so Stegner grew more aware and welcoming of other voices into the historiography of western American literature.

In his 1960s critical essays, Stegner develops a theory of western American literature that re-maps the thematic spatiality of western American literature from the romanticized, heroic, nostalgic, and singular vision of the Myths' white (male) exceptionalist hero conquering a wild western frontier and racial Others to a revised western narrative that can contain the cultural multiplicity of his "many Wests" and is informed by the historic past, grounded in the experiences of the western writer in western places, and concerned with examining the issues of the present and future Wests.

The strategies he uses in his search for his own personal “western” past in Wolf Willow: a History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier to recover an “unremembered past” in history and memory, which he used to challenge the dominant mythic West that silenced his family’s pioneer narrative, “cheated” him of a very rich multi-vocal past, and dictated how he and the American cultural imaginary were to view the West and its past, become more fully articulated through the “chores” he presents in the essays so that they offer western regionalist writers several avenues to “enlarge” western American literature as a whole. As the initial textual space in which he practices these “chores” in germinal form, Wolf Willow is the creative “seedbed” for his theory of western American literature.

In the essays, Stegner argues for a re-conceptualized western American literature that contains the “small-*w*” literary western as a strong regional voice, cognizant of its literary tradition and aware of its past but especially of its present that co-exists with and directly contests the more dominant formulaic and mythic capital-*W* Western in the literary spatiality of the West. As he told Etulain in their 1979 conversations, what he observed in the early sixties was that western writers “lack[ed] confidence in our own life as a legitimate basis for literature” and were “fall[ing] back on the thing which is by consequence much more salable: the past. You can always sell romantic western history” (130). Thus, he says, the essays are a “pep-talk” of sorts to counter this “lack [of] confidence” that western regionalist writers have in their western experiences as the creative source for their literature. Rooted in the western experiences of its author in



western places and presenting a place-based, realist, and historicized narrative, Stegner's "small-w" literary western not only challenges a stifling, formulaic, and false western narrative of Hollywood, the capital-W Western, and America's culturally defining Myths but also returns to cultural memory a historicized but forgotten or silenced western past and stories of community, social responsibility, adaptation, and cooperation that contest the Myths' themes of exceptionalism, conquest, and domination over racial others, women, and the land. Stegner strategically situates this literary western in its realism and historicism to look to the present in order to confront the legacy of their historical past (the "aftermath") so they can participate in shaping new narratives for those living in the present and future Wests. The essays, especially after they became anthologized in The Sound of Mountain Water in 1969, became much more than a "pep-talk" as they provided western writers from the 1960s to the 1980s strategies for thinking differently about the topic, setting, and themes the literary western could pursue. By coincidence or by design, Stegner charged his contemporary western regionalist writers with questioning their cultural metanarratives as others were doing during the late 1960s and 1970s so that as a community of writers they could revision and renarrativize the westerner's and America's story and thus "enlarge" the "term 'western literature'" beyond its marginalized and irrelevant status in 1960s America.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Comer is one of Stegner's most critical as well as perceptive readers; she contextualizes Stegner's personal biases and assumptions in the framework of his social-cultural position and his biography. For example, she clearly identifies the predispositions informing his examinations and judgments of western literature, especially those related to race and gender that are limited and biased by today's standards, by turning to his rural and Victorian up-bringing while not excusing him for them.

<sup>2</sup> According to Dick Harrison in "Frontiers and Borders," Stegner's Wolf Willow was an influential text for Canadian writers because it opened new avenues for them to pursue.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, past President George W. Bush was known in the popular press as "Cowboy Bush" for invoking the image of the cowboy and frontier traits for garnering support for the war with Iraq. Political writers skewered him for the more unsavory side of the cowboy, such as reckless individualism and vigilante justice. See Erik Baard's article and the cover of Time for July 17, 2006: "The End of Cowboy Diplomacy" at <http://www.time.com/time/covers/0.16641.20060717.00.html> accessed on April 6, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> When it comes to the formulaic western, past writers have encountered several challenges when they deviate from the formula. According to Blaha, Zane Grey attempted to write something other than the formulaic western during his early career but his readers and publisher rejected these works. Additionally, others like Max Brand wrote under pseudonyms and for money rather than for literary merit, while some like Louis L'Amour gave his audience what it wanted and capitalized on it.

<sup>5</sup> In the essays, Stegner acknowledges that this “horse opera” is so ingrained in American culture that it “has actually been studied in considerable detail” (HMWW 187) with “dozens of people hav[ing] written on cowboy fiction and western folklore” (HMWW 186) in both its film and print forms, as evident he says in such works as Henry Nash Smith’s Virgin Land (1950), Bernard DeVoto’s essay on The Virginian for Harper’s Easy Chair column, and two studies of western film: W.K. Everson’s The Western (1962) and K. C. Lahue’s Continued Next Week (1964). Stegner is also somewhat encouraged by new scholarly activity focused on western writing emerging in the form of a quarterly journal out of Colorado State University with a “stoutly regional title,” Western American Literature, and the appearance of two studies on western writing: James K. Folsom’s The American Western Novel and Robert Edson Lee’s From West to East: Studies in the Literature of the American West.

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, not all of Stegner’s women writers are “born and bred in the West” as Comer suggests, such as Austin and Foote, and some were omitted by design or oversight, such as Californian Jean Stafford.

<sup>7</sup> Missing is M. Scott Momaday who was a Stegner Fellow, though a poet initially with whom Stegner worked periodically for fiction, as well as other Native American and other minority writers.

<sup>8</sup> In Conversations with Wallace Stegner (1983), Stegner aligns himself with Faulkner’s perspective of the individual’s endurance and depiction of the travails of the human condition when he states: “Fiction ought to be concerned with the perception of truth, the attempt to get at the feelings, and human character” (172). He also notes that each of us

carries a kind of social responsibility: “Some kind of responsibility in a social way—to family, to community, to nation, to whatever else—is absolutely essential. . . . I’d like to think I have a small place in the development of the civilization of western America, and hence, in a much smaller way, in the furthering of civilization in the world” (198).

<sup>9</sup> Stegner references DeVoto’s essay on The Virginian in which DeVoto exposes how Wister takes the side of the corporate cattle owners and not the independents and the cowboys. Stegner suggests that this kind of inquiry needs to be done by western regionalist writers in order for their literary westerns to expand the West’s narrative.

<sup>10</sup> In the essays, Stegner can think of only one possible writer who may have been the West’s Faulkner—“Wright Morris in his sequence of novels about Nebraska, and they have a tendency to be hard on both past *and* present” (HMWW 200).

<sup>11</sup> In Angle of Repose (1971), his Pulitzer winning novel, Stegner will come closest to creating his “Faulkneresque” narrative of the West in his portrayal of the Ward family from past to present. At the same time, the events and people in Wolf Willow might have also given Stegner the creative soil to create his own Yoknapatawpha county if he had chosen to pursue it.

<sup>12</sup> Even though she names it the “modernist movement” and says the “anxiety is visible in both ‘Born a Square’ and ‘History, Myth, and the Western Writer’” (see note 49, page 250 in Landscapes), Comer does not clarify as to whether she means the Modernist movement of Eliot, Pound, Stein, and others or if she means the modern literature of the 1950s and 1960s that Stegner is reacting to in the essays. I am taking it to be the latter because she claims that this literature was informed by a “modernist aestheticism” that

“made American literature hypersexual, angst-ridden, nihilistic,” or traits the Modernist movement did not fully embrace (Landscapes 41).

<sup>13</sup> In fact, he says in “Letter to Wendell Berry” and Conversations that because of who he is it is hard for him to give praise in certain ways, to be tolerant of those who “don’t do the work,” and to treat others in a way different from the way he does, which for many is patronizing and old-fashioned, because the values were formed out of his experiences growing up rural, poor, and without roots or a place to call home.

<sup>14</sup> In a 1978 interview for American West, Stegner describes Western settlement as the story of a “high energy civilization investing and changing and virtually destroying a *virgin continent*” and is adamant about the necessity for westerners to know the history of their place—the American West (Robinson and Robinson 36, italics mine).

<sup>15</sup> For instance, Ruth Alston functions as a moral guide for the protagonist Joe Alston in All the Little Live Things (1967); Shelly Rasmussen serves as a cultural and moral guide to Lyman Ward in Angle of Repose (1971); and in Crossing to Safety (1987) Sally is similarly a touchstone for her husband Larry.

<sup>16</sup> For more on Native American literature, these works can be especially helpful: The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature (2005), Gerald Vizenor’s Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Literature (1993), Arnold Krupat’s The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon (1989), Paula Gunn Allen’s The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions (1992), and Carlton Smith’s Coyote Kills John Wayne: Postmodernism and Contemporary Fictions of the Transcultural Frontier (2000).

<sup>17</sup> Elliot West in “Stegner, Storytelling, and Western Identity” states that “Stegner wrote remarkably little about Indians” (67); Rob Williams in “Huts of Time” indicates that in Mormon Country “Native peoples of the region, including the influential Paiutes, receive only peripheral treatment in Stegner’s story” (129) whereas in Wolf Willow Williams credits Stegner for laying the “interpretive groundwork for many social historians” by “exploring the cultural dilemmas that accompanied the creation of a mixed race of people”—the Métis (132).

# Conclusion

## The End of the Beginning

*“We are the unfinished product of a long beginning.”*

-- Wallace Stegner  
American Places

*“It is exhilarating to me, sixty years after I graduated  
From a western university and forty-five years  
After I made the decision to come back West to live and work,  
To see the country beyond the 100<sup>th</sup> meridian finally taking  
Its place as a respected and self-respecting part of the literary world.”*

-- Wallace Stegner  
“The Coming of Age: The End of the Beginning”

*“We have busied ourselves so long  
exploding assumptions that it is by now  
an interesting experiment to try  
re-assembling them again in plausible forms.”*

--Marilyn Robinson  
Fiction in Review

Even though his theory of western American literature came to be viewed as a significant alteration in the way in which western literary scholars and writers saw western American literature for at least twenty years, Stegner's re-visioning and re-mapping of this spatial field was limited and limiting due to Stegner's own uncritical acceptance of some of the models American culture gave him when thinking about what is "western." When asked in 1979 if he would revise the ideas presented in the essays, Stegner indicated he would change some "because events move on, and opinion with them" (Conversations 128). For example, he "doubts the literature" of the East was "quite as sick as I thought it then." But he says, "the basic stance from which I wrote ... remains the stance from which I still see things" (128), meaning that he continues to believe that the West is integrally connected to the larger concerns of American culture and history and a region that can provide America a better future. By the 1980s, Stegner is re-evaluating his position on some matters, as evident in his conversations with Etulain in 1989 for the updated 1990 edition of Stegner: Conversations on History and Literature; in the 1987 monograph, The American West as Living Space, that reprinted a series of lectures he had given at the University of Michigan Law school; and the essay, "Coming of Age: The End of the Beginning" written in 1990 for the Los Angeles Times Book Review and appearing in 1992 in his second collection of essays, Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs.

What Stegner comes to recant from his original views in the 1960s essays is his estimation that the West is America's "geography of hope." He had spoken as a "native



son” and “regional patriot” in the 1960s essays about the West’s ability to produce a literature confident in its abilities to tell the West’s many narratives. These narratives were to come from the “chores” with which he charged his contemporaries: to contest the Myths’ heroic, nostalgic, and romanticized West through narratives constructed by *western* regionalist writers that presented readers with a gritty, realistic, historic, and localized past and present West, “another kind of western story-telling that was not mythic” but revealed how people more often than not failed, despite hard work and determination, in their attempt to settle and prosper on the historic western frontier, and how in the present they confronted a social, cultural, and environmental legacy of destructive conquest the Myths glossed (HMWW 187). Additionally, these new narratives would not only recover the West’s historic past but also discover in that past narratives of compromise, collaboration, and social responsibility—alternative narratives for the West—that the Myths silenced. Even in the 1960s, Stegner’s West is a far cry from the mythic constructions of the West that Hollywood, formulaic westerns, and the Myths portrayed. By the 1980s, his judgment has grown darker regarding the optimism he invested in the West in Wolf Willow and the essays, as he acknowledges that the assumptions informing his association of “hope” to western spaces (geographic, cultural, and literary) were flawed. In The American West as Living Space (1987), Stegner admits that his earlier view was infected by the Myths: “Sad to say ... the West is no more the Eden that I once thought it than the Garden of the World that the Boosters and engineers tried to make it; and that neither nostalgia nor boosterism can any longer make a case for it as the geography of hope” (60). And when Etulain asks him in 1989, ten years after their initial conversations, about what he thought regarding “the future of the West,”

Stegner replies, “I guess I would be a little more pessimistic than then” (Conversations xxiii). The West as a place and a society had not fulfilled the obligation he once thought it could.

In his “Introduction” to Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs (1992), his last collection of essays, Stegner sums up the change in attitude regarding the American West:

Once I said in print that the remaining western wilderness is the geography of hope, and I have written, believing what I wrote, that the West at large is hope’s native home, the youngest and freshest of America’s regions, magnificently endowed and with the chance to become something unprecedented and unmatched in the world.

*I was shaped by the West and have lived most of a long life in it, .... But when I am thinking ... I remember what history and experience have taught me about the West’s past, and what my senses tell me about the West’s present, and I become more cautious about the West’s future.*

So I amend my enthusiasm, I begin to quibble and qualify.... (xv italics mine)

Stegner is eighty-three when he writes this “Introduction,” and he has participated in and witnessed many racial, generational, and especially environmental battles across the western region that wreaked havoc on people and places, tore families and communities apart, and in terms of western lands was defeated by politics, funding, government bureaucracy, and profiteerism. Although he no longer situates the West as the space that

holds America's hope and future, Stegner continues to base his beliefs in "experiences" and "history"—the primary sources of knowledge he privileges in Wolf Willow and in the essays.

Amid changing literary styles, the disruption of cultural narratives, and the eruption of critical theories that challenge the role of the author, the stability and knowability of the authorial "I," and the relationship of the critic to the text and author, Stegner remains steadfast in the grounding of the authorial "I" and his literary western in the experiential, the realistic, and the history of a specific western place. In fact, in "The Sense of Place" (1986), he concedes that he knows of no other way to "know" the world except through experiences: "The deep ecologists warn us not to be anthropocentric, but I know of no way to look at the world, settled or wild, except through my own human eyes. I know that it wasn't created especially for my use, and I share the guilt for what members of my species, especially the migratory ones, have done to it. But I am the only instrument that I have access to by which I can enjoy the world and try to understand it" (201). The five novels he publishes between 1970 to his death in 1993 exemplify his adherence to his own "chores," as they remain tied to a realist-historicist perspective, cover themes (especially environmental) that issue from living in a contemporary West, and reveal his awareness of how the themes of the mythic West continue to influence the present West.<sup>1</sup>

While he remains tied to an experiential, place-based, and realist-historicist perspective and mode of fiction, Stegner's perspective on the West's literary historiography changes significantly. In essays written since the 1970s, his literary West shifts from its predominantly white-male base in the 1960s essays to include white men

and women, as well as Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanics who represent distinct cultures that he now acknowledges as being involved in the shaping of America's West in the past and the present, culturally as well as literarily. His 1987 lecture series, The American West as Living Space demonstrates an extensive and informed literary historiography that includes past and present works by minorities and western women writers. In a sense, his vision in the 1960s essays of the West as "many Wests" is now readily apparent in the literature produced by a racially diverse group of men and women western writers. As Comer observes, "By the 1990s, Stegner had fundamentally rethought western literary history. Its speakers were multiracial. Its landscapes were often urban. He talked about western culture not as heroic but as a 'cultural battlefield'" (Landscapes 45). In the 1960s essays, Stegner says that western regionalist writers do not need to "borrow" the problems of others for subject material, because "the West's own problems are likely to be more to the western writer's purpose" (BS 184). He theorizes the literary western as a viable, contributing literature in the American literary canon by calling for western regionalist writers to reject the mythic West as their subject and definition of what is western and to pursue instead the West and westerners' concerns of living in a modern West, to know their historic past, and to mend the discontinuity of the West's past and present by finding the ways in which "western society and the western individual were entangled" (179). By the 1990s, Stegner acknowledges that western writers' commitment to exploring the West's cultural, gender, class, and racial tensions have indeed "enlarged" western American literature beyond its

regional stature as readily evident in the scholarly and public readership it now enjoys (HMWW 201).

One of the last essays Stegner wrote before his death in April 1993 was “Out Where the Sense of Place is a Sense of Motion” (1990) that he re-titled “Coming of Age: The End of the Beginning” and included in his final collection of essays, Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs (1992). In this essay, Stegner assesses the status of western American literature in the thirty years since his 1960s essays. He states that the West no longer needs a “regional patriot” because the “small-w” literary western has earned its place in American literature (137). In contrast to the context of the 1960s essays, when he fought against “the shadow of the big hat” (136), Stegner says that western American literature in the 1990s is “a respected and self-respecting part of the literary world” with an “infrastructure” in the West of bookstores, publishers, poetry readings, western reviewers, and most of all a “reading public” available to the modern western writer (136) to support a “native artist” and “literary life” (135). The larger western region, he reiterates, still has the unifying characteristics of aridity, space, and the mobility of its peoples and it still suffers from “raids” on its “extractable resources” (138). More important, he argues that its varying geographies continue to promote the regional and cultural differences that he claims for the “several Wests” in the 1960s essays (BS 184). Indeed, he celebrates this multiplicity when he notes, “What kind of school can you discern in writers as various as Ivan Doig, Frank Waters, Scott Momaday, Edward Abbey, Thomas McGuane, Larry McMurtry, Joan Didion, and Maxine Hong Kingston?” (138). These “western” writers, he argues, “deserve” the praise they and the West have received (137). From his 1990s perspective, the ethnic, class, and cultural

diversity that these western writers exemplify brings to the foreground the “battlefields of culture” he suggests the West contains and has always contained (139). What has changed since the 1960s is that western writers now “tell properly” from a critical and probing perspective the “epics” of their West or the “unremembered past” that the Myths had silenced in their sponsorship of the ideology of American exceptionalism and triumphant conquest and transformation of a frontier space to erect a nation (WW 112).

While he celebrates western American literature and the “western” voices it now exhibits, Stegner suggests that one more critical “chore” remains to be accomplished. He says, “the West doesn’t need to wish for good writers. It has them” (141). What it does not have yet, he claims, is “more confidence in itself,” a problem easily corrected if the West were to “breed up some *critics* capable, by experience or intuition, of *evaluating western literature in terms of western life*” (141 italics mine). He believes that literary critics and scholars have yet to “read” the “small-w” literary western correctly. They evaluate it not on its terms—its “westernness” or the concerns of living in a modern West—but through critical categories of race, gender, and class or its postmodernist or deconstructionist tendencies that tend to elide what makes the text “western,” which he believes lies in the writers’ experiences in western places, their relationship and response to the western landscape, and their connections to its mythic and non-mythic past.<sup>2</sup> Whether “insider” or “outsider,” Stegner still believes in the 1990s that western American literature has not found, as Faulkner eventually did, its Malcolm Cowley, who can read western writing “perceptive[ly] and authoritative[ly]”

(142) as Cowley did Faulkner and perhaps as Cowley did for Stegner, since it was Cowley's comments that helped Stegner reshape Wolf Willow from three disjointed parts into one cohesive text.<sup>3</sup> Even though he remains optimistic that "such critics will come," he encourages western writers to remain a community dedicated to telling the West's stories and to cultivating or "breed[ing]" this Cowley-type critic (141).

Stegner's position on the West's need for scholars who can properly read western literature carries the same taint of uniqueness that he associated with the westerner in Wolf Willow and western writing in the essays, because of his adoption of an exclusive insider perspective that hinders western American literature from breaking through the boundary of being a regional literature to join the ranks of American literature. In a recent review article on scholarly approaches to western American literature, Nina Baym observes that "westernists will continue to be out of step with .... [an] American literary study [that] strives to become global" if it continues to claim difference or being "western, a thing unto itself" (827). Stegner also cautions against too strict of an application of regionalism to western literature. He maintains throughout his life that he desires to be known as a "writer who comes from the West, and who writes from the West," and not a "Western writer," which he says makes one "sound like Louis L'Amour," a writer of formulaic westerns (Conversations 132). What Stegner wants is for western regionalism to be "a springboard or launching pad" that shows "you can be interested in the world; but you're interested in it from, somehow, the Western view, which is different from the East coast view" (124). Given the literature of the West that follows his essays in the 1960s and what the literary academy witnesses in the 1970s with canon-busting movements like multiculturalism, feminism, post-structuralism, and

deconstruction that lead to the questioning and dismantling of other cultural metanarratives in America, Stegner's vision of "enlarge[ing]" western American literature "beyond its ordinary limitations" appear to have been fulfilled (HMWW 201). According to Etulain in Telling Western Stories (1999) social and cultural changes and a growing awareness of the role that minorities and women had in the West's past have influenced the kinds of stories about the American West that are emerging. These new stories, he says, focus on Native Americans, the land, regional and racial conflicts, and clearly avoid sensationalizing the frontier past as Stegner had warned and explored as he demonstrated the darker side of the Myths. Western regionalist writers have and are re-imagining more complexly and inclusively the narratives of the American West (150-151).

In 1962 Stegner published Wolf Willow, a text in structure and content unlike anything he (or other westerners) had written before. He did not write another like it; though clearly it is his "epic" or "personal and possessed past." Other western regionalist writers did not produce something similar until the 1980s when the genre of western autobiography proliferated in westerners N. Scott Momaday, Mary Clearman Blew, Terry Tempest Williams, William Kittredge, Ivan Doig, Juanita Brooks, Pete Sinclair, William Least Heat Moon, and others whose narratives combined local history, family history, memoir, and story as Stegner's did. This group of writers represents a "new western autobiography," according to Robert Maxwell Brown, and are indebted to Stegner who confronted the West's Myths in terms of what it meant to him and what it had done to his life (Courage 56). Though Wolf Willow was mostly dismissed by



critics, Brown suggests that with its multi-sectioned structure, multiple perspectives, and variety of genres, it joins family history with the history of place to provide westerners with a place to locate their personal past and the West's non-mythologized past in the specifics of place and people.

In Wolf Willow, Stegner finds validation of his personal and writerly selves in his experiences in a western place and as a westerner. In the 1960s essays and his 1979 conversations with Etulain, he proclaims that the western writer's "western" experiences are a "legitimate basis for literature" (Conversations 130) and with this argument he re-narrativizes western American literature to provide his contemporaries and later generations of western writers with new strategies and new ways of looking at the American West. In the essays, as in Wolf Willow, he holds to the view that the westerners' experiences in their western places and the West's non-mythic history is the creative and imaginative source that enable him to reclaim the western story from the Myths, from the East, and from America's cultural narratives of conquest and domination. Westerners can thereby re-vision the West's stories to reflect their lives as lived in a past and present unmythologized West, with the aim of creating a relationship Stegner later characterizes as "belonging" instead of "ownership."

Wolf Willow is just beginning to receive the critical attention it deserves, not only for its role in Stegner's oeuvre but also for its place in the canons of western and American literature. This dissertation participates in this re-evaluation of Stegner's Wolf Willow by examining it as a text that attempts to understand and express what it means to be a westerner through Stegner's understanding of his own western past and western experiences and by relating Wolf Willow's narrative strategies, structure, and content to

his 1960s critical essays—“Born a Square” (1964), “On the Writing of History” (1965), and “History, Myth, and the Western Writer” (1967)—in which he presented a new theory of western American literature that re-visions the West’s literary heritage and reclaims the western story for westerners to write. Wolf Willow is Stegner’s “seed bed” for the strategies framed in the 1960s essays as a set of “personal, family, and cultural chores” that his community of contemporary western writers must complete so they could approach their subject—the American West—in new ways that would ensure “another kind of western storytelling... the western with the small-w” with a “voice” and relevancy to modern audiences and thus a future. What Stegner provides contemporary western regionalist writers and scholars then as well as today was a theory that asserts the authentic voice of the western regionalist writer grounded in the experiences of the writer in a specific and historicized western place across the West’s “many Wests” that disrupts the singular voice and values of America’s mythic West, values out of touch with a modern, multicultural, urban as well as rural West in which westerners like himself live. He offers the West and its writers a multi-vocal, historically conscious bridging of the westerners’, the West’s, and America’s past and present that is reflected in the topics, themes, and strategies the literature of the West has produced since the 1970s.

Through the efforts of literary scholars, historians, and writers in the last several decades, western American literature has expanded to include women, minorities, and various ethnic backgrounds so that today the voices engaging with western experience go well beyond that of “the white tradition” that Stegner expanded beyond its eastern

construction. As more is learned about the indigenous peoples of the West's geographic region, as understanding grows regarding the discrepancy between the Myths and actualities of the historical past, and as Americans become increasingly aware of their diversity and the constructedness of their cultural categories, so has western American literature grown beyond a single narrative entity or an idea of continuity in which the story told is that of arrival, conquest, and settlement within an Us versus Them scenario. Within the field of American literary studies, tremendous changes in literary criticism and critical approaches, such as feminist, post-modernist, post-structuralist, new historicist, and cultural studies have brought new perspectives to the study of western American literature. New work by American Studies scholars (Jane Tompkins, Michal L. Johnson, Richard Etulain, Krista Comer, and Nina Baym),<sup>4</sup> the New Western Historians (Patricia Limerick, Donald Worster, Richard White, and Clyde A. Milner II),<sup>5</sup> and those in the environmental and natural sciences (particularly, deep ecologists and ecofeminists)<sup>6</sup> are opening further western American literature to many new voices and new areas of interest. Along with those western writers that Stegner mentions in "Coming of Age" or have been singled out as representing today's western autobiography, many other western writers are expanding the narratives of western American literature by including the voices of its "many Wests" and intertwining the West's history, landscape, issues of family, and even its Myths: in fiction Cormac McCarthy, Sherman Alexie, Victor Vilaseñor, Gretel Ehrich, Louise Erdrich, James Welch, John Keeble, Molly Gloss, Richard Ford, Sandra Cisneros, Amy Tan, Frank Chin, Gerald Vizenor, Ursula K. Leguin; in poetry Garrett Hongo, Cathy Song, Gary Soto, and Wendy Rose; in drama

Sam Shepard, Luis Valdez, David Henry Hwang, and Horton Foote; in nature writing Barry Lopez, Linda Hasselstrom, Rich Bass, and Ann Zwinger.

In his 1982 collection of essays, One Way to Spell Man: Essays with a Western Bias, Stegner states that the West is “not a marginal region but the mainstream, America only more so” (108). Stegner hoped to correct in the 1960s essays what he called in his 1990 essay, “Coming of Age,” a “colonial complex” that Eastern publishers and literary critics imposed on western regionalist writers and western literature because they viewed western American literature for much of the twentieth century as little more than regional, local color literature when it was not the mythic, formulaic western that was not literary but pulp fiction (137). Now eighteen years after his death in 1993, the diverse narratives western writers tell, the literary tradition they inherit, the themes and topics they engage with confidence, the western narratives they construct, and the critical scholarship they have elicited have not only achieved Stegner’s revisioned and renarrativized sense of what the “small-w” literary western could be, which he articulated in the 1960s essays and attempted to locate for himself in Wolf Willow, but also exceeded his vision, becoming a vibrant cadre of literary voices relevant and meaningful to westerners, to the “many Wests” of America, and to a globalized America.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See All the Little Live Things (1967) that covers generational differences and the destructiveness of unchecked individualism; Angle of Repose (1970) in which an understanding the West's past relates to and informs the present; The Spectator Bird (1976) that depicts the environmental destruction of land for a suburban plan and profit that defeats the compassion of its main characters; Recapitulation (1979) a semi-autobiographical novel that returns Stegner to his second home of Salt Lake City, Utah, where he lived as a teenager and young man and to confronting his father's life and death; and Crossing to Safety (1987) about the long friendship between two couples that is closely based on his and his wife's friendship with the Greys whom they met at Harvard.

<sup>2</sup> For more on this perspective of how scholars in the 1980s and 1990s received western American literature see Comer and Kowaleski. Both argue for the need for a regionalist scholarship to emerge.

<sup>3</sup> From my investigations thus far into Stegner's published letters and from his two biographers, Benson and Fradken, the correspondence between Cowley and Stegner on Wolf Willow's drafts do not exist. From Stegner's letters to Cowley it is apparent that Cowley read most of Stegner's works in draft form and supplied Stegner with comments. In regard to his appraisal of Cowley's benefit to Faulkner, see the letter, July 22, 1967 To Malcolm Cowley in Selected Letters (183-184) in which he attributes Faulkner's critical reception to Cowley's critical treatment of him.

<sup>4</sup> Some of the more interesting studies that show the diversity of what is occurring in scholarship are William R. Handley's Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American Literary West; Michal L. Johnson's Hunger for the Wild, Richard Etulain's Telling Western Stories, Krista Comer's Landscapes of the New West, Noreen Groover Lape's West of the Border: Multicultural Literature of the Western American Frontier, Craig S. Womack's Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism; Nina Baym's Women Writers of the American West, 1833-1927.

<sup>5</sup> For a sampling of the various approaches New Western Historians are taking toward the American West, along with Patricia Nelson Limerick's ground-breaking work Legacy of Conquest, see also Trails: Toward a New Western History with Clyde Milner II and Charles E. Rankin; Donald Worster's Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West and A River Running West: The Life of John Wesley Powell, Richard White's Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America and with William Cronon Remembering Ahanagan: A History of Stories, and Clyde A. Milner II's A New Significance: Revisioning the History of the American West.

<sup>6</sup> For a good overview of the concerns of ecofeminism see Karen J. Warren's Ecofeminism: Women, Culture and Nature and Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein's Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism and for ecofeminist literary criticism see Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy's Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy. A very helpful book on ecocriticism is The Ecocriticism Reader, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm.

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