



“DRIVING WYOMING INTO MY BLOOD AND  
MALLOW AND FIXING IT THERE”:  
THE MALE BODY AT THE IMPERIAL FRONTIER  
IN THE FICTION OF OWEN WISTER

This article examines how concerns about American interventions in Cuba and the Philippines in 1898 are figured through the White male body in Owen Wister's novels. *Lin McLean* and *The Virginian* are contextualized within a contemporary discourse employed by Theodore Roosevelt that connected a corporeal construction of masculinity with strong nationhood. However, Wister's fiction demonstrates problems in defining the White male body at the frontier and suggests that the desire for conquest stems from fears of bodily weakness, rather than the virile male form. The evasion of violence against the male body throughout both novels suggests that Wister was troubled by the effects of imperial activity on the male body politic and the bodies of individual men.

*Keywords:* American literature; Wister, Owen; nineteenth-century masculinity; Western fiction; imperialism

“As it is with the individual, so it is with the nation,” Theodore Roosevelt told the Hamilton Club, Chicago, in April 1899 (1902b, p. 4). In this address, “The Strenuous Life,” Roosevelt figured American imperialism in Cuba and the Philippines as an expression of personal and national virility. Roosevelt imagined colonizing as a weightlifting competition between nations, in which America must prove its might, or else “some stronger, manlier power would have to step in and do the work, and we would have shown ourselves weaklings” (p. 9). Roosevelt's rhetoric utilizes the inherent connection between imperialism and masculinity theorized by R.W. Connell: “Empire was a gendered enterprise ... initially an outcome of the segregated men's occupations of soldiering and sea-trading” (1995, p. 187). Gail Bederman argues that Roosevelt's gendered construction of imperialism as “a prophylactic means of avoiding effeminacy and racial decadence,” successfully masked the fact that imperialism was “a new departure in American foreign pol-

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icy" by connecting it to a martial form of White manhood that was particularly popular in late nineteenth-century America (1995, p. 187).

For supporters of Roosevelt's policies, the Spanish-American War of 1898 provided a new frontier on which White men, too young to have taken part in the Civil War and the winning of the western frontier, could establish their masculinity. This colonial expansion would allow American men to take up the "white man's burden" that moulded their European counterparts (see Rotundo, 1993, pp. 233-235, and Greenberg, 2005, p. 280). Victory would also further White supremacy by proving the explicitly racial construction of both civilization and manhood that had emerged alongside wider acceptance of Darwinism (Bederman, 1995, p. 25). This led to the pervasive construction of the American body politic as that of a White man—Roosevelt goes so far as to claim that "we gird up our loins as a nation"—connecting the two entities in the American psyche and establishing the male corporeal form as a figure for national concerns (1902c, p. 296).

It was in the midst of this popular association of manhood and empire that Owen Wister published his western fiction. For Wister, writing is a method of establishing a White male hegemony by connecting the White male body with the American landscape. In 1930, he writes that, on his first trip to Wyoming, he "kept a full, faithful, realistic diary.... I had no purpose in doing so, or any suspicion that it was driving Wyoming into my blood and marrow and fixing it there" (*Roosevelt*, p. 28-9). Wister appears surprised at the ability of his writing to appropriate the frontier space, yet this literary appropriation of land is central to Wister's novels *Lin McLean* (1898) and *The Virginian* (1902). Through narratives in which tough landscapes are tamed by White men whose virility initially seems unquestionable, Wister's fiction re-enacts the winning of a frontier that was, by the turn of the twentieth century, already closed. Such writing is a form of conquest devoid of actual violence, and therefore can be productively read against contemporary imperial activity, and the ideologies of martial manhood and nationhood by which it was fuelled.

Whilst Roosevelt, a close friend of Wister, was pleased by "the note of manliness which is dominant throughout the writings of Mr. Wister," later critics have disagreed over the extent to which Wister's fiction reflects late nineteenth-century orthodoxy concerning manhood (quoted in Watts, 2003, p. 146). Barbara Will claims that *The Virginian* articulated a new and urgent literary vision of masculine potency and conquest, while Jane Tompkins finds Wister's portrayal more challenging, claiming that *The Virginian* unconsciously reveals Wister's homosexual desires and "hostile and twisted" feelings towards women (Will, 1998, p. 294; Tompkins, 1992, pp. 151-1, p. 140). I am closer to Tompkins in arguing that Wister's problematic depictions of frontier manhood display unease with the location of imperialist ideology in the male body and the realities of imperial practice on the male body. If imperial conquest strengthens the personal and national bodies, then the continual desire to conquer testifies to a weakness that cannot be healed; a weakness that is then radically reiterated in the violence wreaked upon bodies and landscapes by frontier conflicts. This tension is articulated through Wister's contradictory and self-effacing images of whiteness, his fixation on the fragility of the White male body, and his aversion to the portrayal of violence against that body. As such, Wister's fiction gestures towards the paradoxical necessity of the weakened body in Roosevelt's theories of muscular nationhood observed by Sarah Watts: "[Roosevelt's] vision of manhood rested on the notion of a once strong but now fragile and weakening American male self" (2003, p. 172). Through images of the male

body under strain, *Lin McLean* and *The Virginian* portray an ambivalence towards American imperialism that can be neither entirely articulated nor entirely suppressed.

On April 21<sup>st</sup> 1898 the Spanish-American War began, and Owen Wister married Mary “Molly” Channing. Whilst the Wisters honeymooned, Roosevelt formed the Rough Riders and their friend Frederic Remington, who had illustrated many of Wister’s works, went to Cuba to report on the action. The timing is coincidental, but Wister’s choice of domesticity over the new frontier mirrors the uncertainty of his attitudes towards the war in comparison with those held by his friends. These attitudes are revealed in Wister’s only sustained and direct treatment of the conflict, “My Country: 1899” a poem he delivered to the Phi Beta Kappa society at Harvard. The long poem is a dialogue between Uncle Sam, representing the government of the day, and Columbia, who is the national spirit of America. Uncle Sam envisions the war as a refiguring of the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, and as an illustration of American prowess:

And Santiago’s drop will serve to hold  
Emblemed my steel and temper of my blood,  
Changeless, with Lexington and Gettysburg one flood. (p. 640)

Columbia, however, argues that America should not her “separate path entwine/With alien tangles” (p. 641), reflecting Wister’s own ill-feeling towards non-White peoples, before levelling this accusation at Uncle Sam:

Your camps and carrion filled more graves than Spain.  
Inquire, ignore, pretend: paint out the stain  
With varnished falsehood—let the trick be sure;  
Prevent, deny, defend; do anything but cure. (p. 641)

Wister transfers the sickness of the American soldiers in the camps onto the body of the nation itself, so that this imperialist activity does not strengthen America but sickens her instead. Uncle Sam responds with racial justifications for war, arguing that the Filipinos are too backward to consent to government (“Unripe yet rotten, what consent know they?”; p. 641), and finally, with an irony that seems lost on the speaker, figures the war as an anti-imperialist statement: “so I’ll still provide/That racing Empires from my glebe shall turn aside” (p. 641). The poem concludes with the two figures accepting each other’s arguments and setting forth together to begin a new golden age for America and her new-found colonies, but it is unsatisfactory. Uncle Sam’s hackneyed generalizations about White supremacy and foiling European empires seem weak when compared to Columbia’s vivid and local depictions of destruction. In Columbia’s vision, both personal and national bodies are maimed in a conflict that gains America only the problem of new, non-White populations. “My County: 1899” is a poem that is at least deeply ambivalent, and at times actively hostile towards American imperialism.

Although Wister’s fiction does not address the Spanish-American War directly, the two can be related through the links between the conflict of 1898 and the western frontier that existed in the zeitgeist of fin-de-siècle America. Both western fiction and imperial ambitions provided spaces in which a form of masculinity based

in the virile body and in martial action could be articulated. Moreover, Remington referred to the war in Cuba as "The Cowboy War," conceivably prompted by the Western-styled uniform that Roosevelt had chosen for his regiment (Watts, 2003, p. 161). Indeed, as Bederman notes, "by nicknaming his regiment the "Rough Riders," the nation showed it understood the historical connections Roosevelt always drew between Indian wars in the American West and virile imperialism in Cuba and the Philippines" (Bederman, 1995, p. 191). There was an irony in the Pacific and Cuba being imagined as the new West; many volunteer recruits "wound up drilling in the hot Texas sun for a moment of combat that never came" (Collin, 1985, p. 131). The conflict was so brief that would-be soldiers practised pretend military manoeuvres at a frontier that was already closed. This process of linking the western frontier to the Philippines and Cuba also made the new conflict consumable for the public. Remington's depiction of the Rough Riders at San Juan Hill is both stylistically identical to his illustrations for Wister's western fiction, and was based on a re-enactment, a fictionalization performed after the fact. Even more overtly, William F. Cody, better known as Buffalo Bill, transformed the charge at San Juan Hill into one of his western shows in which Cody himself played Roosevelt (Watts, 2003, p. 144). The deeply held connection between the West, and the Pacific and Cuba, and the need to transform imperialism into the easily palatable consumable that the western frontier had become, allows us to read the "colonial romance" of *The Virginian* (as Wister himself referred to it) as not only an historical fiction at a frontier that was now closed, but an expression of attitudes towards a frontier that had just opened (*Virginian*, p. 6).

Wister's essay "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher," crafted as a response to Roosevelt's 1894 essay "What 'Americanism' Means," is a statement of the White-supremacist ideology that was a foundational component of American imperialism. To argue for the dominance of the White man, Wister constructs a lineage between Anglo-Saxon adventurers of the past and the modern-day cow-puncher whom he perceives as the embodiment of American values; their Saxon heritage is "the bottom bond of race [which] unified the divers young men, who came riding from different points of the compass" to be cowboys ("Evolution," p. 336). As such, whiteness is the clearest indicator of the "quality" that Wister describes as marking the "true aristocracy" in *The Virginian* (p. 101). When non-White characters appear in Wister's fiction, and they rarely do so, it is to prove the superiority of the White man. In the short story "Specimen Jones," two White cowboys are able to save themselves from a party of Indians by pretending to be insane. The irony of their plan is obvious; by playing at losing their minds, the White men's cunning shows their superiority over the Indians, who are too stupid to be able to distinguish between feigned and real madness.

Yet the ease with which Wister argues for an inherited White supremacy is problematized by the pains taken to establish the whiteness of characters in *The Virginian*. At the Swintons' barbecue, Molly Wood, pointing at the unnamed protagonist, asks her dance partner, "Who is that black man?," and receives the response "Well—he's from Virginia, and he ain't allowin' he's black" (p. 81). The qualification is unnecessary, because Molly is clearly referring to his hair colour. The same over-enthusiastic assertion of racial identity is made by Scipio Le Moyne, the cook hired by the Virginian as he travels through Omaha, on account of his typically black name: "Yes, you're lookin for my brass ear-rings. But there ain't no ear-rings on me. I've been white for a hundred years" (p. 111). Whites are clearly considered

superior, but these instances show an anxiety about establishing who is White, indicating the instability of whiteness as a category. Furthermore, Scipio displaces the marker of race from skin colour onto the ear-ring, an accessory that pierces the human skin but is not part of it. This undermines the racial biology that Wister constructs in his essay by suggesting that race is distinguished by artificial tokens of appearance, rather than biological essentialism.

This is problematic because Wister relies on racial essentialism to legitimize the position of the cowboy on the frontier, through his descent from the Anglo-Saxon explorer and the whiteness he shares with the Eastern gentleman. "The Evolution of the Cow Puncher" suggests that the Easterner and the cowboy differ only through their clothing, and *The Virginian* ends with the hero donning a "Scotch homespun suit of a rather better cut than most in Bennington," implying that this makes him indistinguishable from any Eastern gentleman ("Evolution," p. 366; *Virginian*, p. 324). This interchangeability of White men is exemplified by the figures of the Virginian and the narrator. Both nameless, they begin as antithetical figures—the paradigmatic cowboy and the "tenderfoot"—contrasted by their clothing; the English clothes of the narrator led him to be nicknamed "the Prince of Wales," whilst the first description of the Virginian focuses on his "loose-knotted, dull-scarlet handkerchief" and "the cartridge belt that slanted across his hips" (p. 32, p. 13). However, by the climax of the novel, the two men are able to "change places" as the narrator comforts the Virginian after he has lynched Steve, even having "the sense to keep silent," a central attribute of the Virginian's manliness (pp. 260-1).<sup>1</sup>

Wister suggests that such exchanges are possible because the two men are the same racial type; the Eastern gentlemen and the cowboy are both members of the "quality," which Wister juxtaposes with the less-than-equal "equality" in *The Virginian* (p. 101). Yet, as with racial identification, Wister feels the need to stress that point by giving his cowboys origins outside of the West; Lin McLean comes from Boston and the Virginian's moniker emphasizes his origins in Jefferson and Washington's state. But in literalizing his argument that cowboys are identical to Easterners, Wister suggests that skin colour alone is not the unifying bond amongst men that it appears to be. Both the quality and equality can be White; all quality are White men, but not all White men are quality. Therefore, Wister has to create a specific type of male whiteness that is linked, geographically, to the history of America. Suddenly, being White is not in itself enough to guarantee a place in the Anglo-Saxon succession, and whiteness as a category is destabilised further.

Problems with White male identity also emerge through the curious vacancy of the men's bodies beneath their knotted handkerchiefs and starched collars. When Molly is examining the Virginian's wounds, having found him lying in Sunk Creek, she sees "the slack prone body in its flannel shirt and leathern chaps," as though it is impossible to conceive of his body without its clothing (*Virginian*, p. 215). Like the earring for blackness, chaps become a signifier of the white body, with Wister ignoring the fact that between "25 and 35 per cent of cowboys were black men"

<sup>1</sup> It is also interesting to note that the back-cover blurb to the 1970 Paperback Library edition of the novel mistakenly amalgamates the two characters; 'he was from the soft, effeminate East and that made a tough rattlesnake of a cowboy called Trampas think he could spit filthy words in the newcomer's face. But this man was THE VIRGINIAN'. In the novel, the Virginian is not a newcomer and Trampas does not insult the narrator.

(Kuenz, 2001, p. 103). Using clothing as a marker of whiteness undermines the essentialist view of race by constructing the White man through extra-bodily features. And just as whiteness must be configured through something outside of itself, the namelessness of the Virginian similarly means he must always be addressed through an intervening medium, such as his place of birth or his appearance. This distance allows him to become an everyman—or an every-American—and to swap places with the also-nameless narrator, but similarly threatens him with becoming no-one at all.<sup>2</sup> But the interchangeability of white men, so central to Wister's theories of racial superiority, not only destabilizes Whiteness by effacing its subjects, but also by facilitating exchanges between white men of different "qualities." Having met the Virginian the night before he will lynch Steve and Ed, the narrator stands "awkward and ill at ease, noticing idly that the silent one [Ed] wore a grey flannel shirt like mine" (*Virginian*, p. 249). "Idly" seems disingenuous; if the narrator is so nonchalant about wearing the same clothes as a man who is about to be hanged, then why does he mention it? Here, the interchangeable nature of White male bodies is so absolute that the two men do not even have to change their clothes. That the narrator, an Eastern gentleman who will soon swap positions with the "quality" hero of the novel, can also change places with a criminal, suggests that the very adaptability that makes the White man superior carries with it the risk of destabilising that White identity.

The whiteness-as-absence of the male body in Wister's writing is mapped onto his descriptions of the landscape, connecting the male and national bodies through Wister's attempts to create a White national space. In *The Virginian*, Wyoming is repeatedly portrayed through its emptiness; as he travels to Judge Henry's ranch, the narrator describes being "swallowed in a vast solitude" (p. 43). Wister creates a blank canvas in the West onto which he can paint scenes which reflect his own Eastern values, creating a text that, as Margaret Reid argues, "works to annex a borderland, a previously contested area, to the known and planned" (2004, p. 164). The West that Wister writes is the America that he desires, a White national body devoid of "encroaching alien vermin, that turn our cities to Babels and our citizenship to a hybrid farce" ("Evolution," p. 331). When non-White characters are required by the plot in *The Virginian*, they are pushed to the margins of both the text and the landscape. The Indians that attack the Virginian are "unseen" by Balaam and reside in the Bow Leg Mountains which "lay along the end of the vast yellow distance" (p. 208, p. 190). Whilst Wister needs Indians to exist in order to create the danger of the West, only their deeds, and not their bodies, can enter the text.

A comic episode in *Lin McLean* further dramatizes this absence of Native Americans in a more problematic reworking of the encounter between Whites and Indians in "Specimen Jones." Both Lin and his friend Tommy are determined to win the hand of Katie Peck, who is newly arrived in Riverside. Lin suspects Tommy of lacking bravery, so when reports of Indians reach the town, he hatches a plan to prove it. On a night when Tommy is with Katie in her cabin, Lin and his friend the Virginian pretend to be Indians, exposing Tommy as a coward. In fact, it is revealed that there never were any Indians at all; the reports are dismissed by Lin as "put up

<sup>2</sup> Rather pertinently, Roosevelt referred to the character as 'A Virginian' in a letter to Wister of December 13 1897, the indefinite article furthering this sense of interchangeability (quoted in Wister, *Roosevelt*, p. 55).

by the papers of this section" to bring soldiers and their money to Riverside (p. 64). On the surface this incident supports Wister's fantasy of a White national landscape. Indians are not only relegated to the margins, but are now devoid of any agency at all, being written into existence by White men for their own purposes. However, it also profoundly destabilizes White manhood by suggesting that it cannot be defined outside of an encounter with the Indian Other.

More problematically, the boundaries between White and ethnic Other appear permeable. The men become momentarily savage, "shooting and yelling round the cabin, crazy with their youth" (p. 71). In pretending to be Indians, the men explore a fashionable faux-savage manhood, which was constructed through pursuits like hunting. But the word "crazy" suggests the troubling possibility this may expose real savagery, problematizing the distinction between civilized White imperialists and their subjects on which imperial ideology was based. Furthermore, when the incident is stripped of its masks and the trick is revealed, we are left with a troubling incident of Whites attacking other Whites. In the absence of a real Other as foe, the violence shifts to the "familiar-as-Other": a pattern identified by William R. Handley, as iterating "traces of historical violence on a local, identifiable scale" (2002, p. 18). Victory at the frontier does not definitely indicate an end to conflict, and a healing of the national body. Finally, when Tommy's cowardice is revealed, the Virginian immediately regrets the prank; "if I could have foresaw, I'd not—it makes yu' feel humiliated yu' self" (*McLean*, p. 73). Reflecting the incident back onto himself shows the Virginian's awareness that he has removed the façade of White supremacy; Tommy has proved that White men can be as cowardly as non-White ones.

In contrast with the corporeal absences in Wister's fiction, the physicality of the body was crucial in constructing White male identity in late nineteenth-century America: a period which saw the emergence of a fascination with a muscular physique, thought to be unachievable by non-White races. As Anthony Rotundo argues, "the body itself became a vital component of manhood; strength, appearance and athletic skill mattered more than in previous centuries" (1993, p. 6). Conversely, whiteness was also visible in male bodies that were perversions of this ideal; the weak, neurasthenic body of the White Easterner. In his 1881 book *American Nervousness*, George M. Beard uses neurasthenia as an umbrella term for a variety of symptoms prevalent in the American upper classes, including headaches, depression, nausea and insomnia. He believed the condition was caused by factors which were linked either to the American climate, or to the strains of modern life—like railway travel, the telegraph and even an increased need for punctuality (Beard, 1881, pp. xix-xx). Although neurasthenia was not celebrated, to suffer from it confirmed the patient's racial superiority; Beard defines neurasthenics as members "of the civilized, refined and educated rather than of the barbarous, low-born and untrained" (p. 26). Likewise, it is easy to detect a perverse nationalist pride in Beard's claim that "a fleet of Great Easterns might be filled with our hay-fever sufferers alone; not Great Britain, nor all of Europe, nor all the world could assemble so large an army of sufferers from this distinguished malady" (p. 22). A disease of the White Easterner, neurasthenia is connected to Roosevelt's ideology of American imperialism in two ways; it confirmed the evolutionary superiority of the White body, but it also revealed the need for a new frontier to combat the effects of over-civilization that Roosevelt perceived as a cause for concern.

Like many young, wealthy Eastern men of his generation, Wister was diagnosed

with neurasthenia. In 1885, his health collapsed, apparently due to the strain of being recalled from Europe by his father and set to work in an office. He was treated by Silas Weir Mitchell, a friend of the Wisters, who recommended that Wister go west, thus locating the cure for neurasthenia at a frontier, albeit one that was no longer open (Payne, 1985, pp. 75-76). The direct connection between Wister's neurasthenia and his first encounter with the West has led Barbara Will to read *The Virginian* as a novel of neurasthenic anxiety; the text is "produced by, and inseparable from, a neurasthenic view of the world," but works to overcome the enfeebling aspects of the East whilst retaining the East's entrepreneurial spirit in the West (1998, p. 296). Additionally, the West as a place of bodily restoration is central to Lee Clark Mitchell's argument for the importance of scenes of convalescence in the western genre: "Westerns treat the hero as a rubber doll, something to be wrenched and contorted so that we can then watch him magically recover his shape" (1996, p. 182). These readings share the assumption that, once restored and remade in the masculine ideal, the sick body disappears from the text, in much the same fashion that Roosevelt apparently banished his physical weakness (and his weak public image as a dandy) through sport and cattle ranching. Wister's novels, however, do not always bear this out, suggesting instead that the haunting presence of the weak body is fundamental to the continuous construction of both the martial man and the martial nation, and cannot, therefore, be absolutely healed.

In places, Wister's fiction does illustrate the restoration of weak male bodies through the healthy activities of the frontier. The Virginian is correct when he tells the narrator that he "will be well if you give over city life and take a hunt with me"; by the end of the novel the narrator is as hearty as the eponymous hero (*Virginian*, p. 63). But as Jane Tompkins notes, *The Virginian* is a novel that "states so openly the counterargument to its point of view" (1992, p. 155). If the West is a place of healing it is also inhabited by the spectre of the sick body. The narrative space devoted to the Virginian's feverish illness following the Indian attack means that not only is the process of recovery emphasized, as Mitchell argues, but also the experience of being sick. It is in this moment of sickness that the White body is most realized, evading the characteristic bodily vacancy previously discussed. Having laid the Virginian on her bed, Molly undresses him, exposing the whiteness below the clothes and subjecting the sick body to an erotic gaze that combines its virility and weakness: "the whole body, the splendid supple horseman, showed sickness in every line and limb" (*Virginian*, p. 219). The splendour and the sickness cannot be separated as it is only through the latter that the former is exposed. To form the virile masculine ideal, its weak counterpart must exist, like the non-White Other, to define its boundaries.

For men like Roosevelt, masculinity was constructed by constantly excluding from themselves any weaknesses that contradicted the virile ideal; Roosevelt literally fought off his asthma with boxing training. This formation of a healthy body physicalizes the process of gender construction theorized by Judith Butler: "the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, "inside" the subject as its own founding repudiation" (1993, p. 3). Moreover, the need to continually establish the virile body suggests that the weak body is never truly cast out, but remains, as Butler argues, inside the subject as a threatening spectre. The foregrounding of sickness in Wister's writing reflects this; the prominence of the sick body in the narrative negates the text as a space in which absolute



healing can take place. Furthermore, this latent weakness is depicted in the character of Lin McLean who, having broken his leg before the narrative takes place, has “in his stride the slightest halt possible” (*McLean*, p. 120). Although barely visible, Lin’s bodily defect can never be entirely forgotten. It marks both the fragility that defines him as a White man, and the weakness that paradoxically provokes the creation of martial manhood.

Martial manhood and imperialist ideology are connected by a shared need to expel weakness from the male and national bodies respectively. Whilst figured as an expression of national strength, American imperialism is driven by a profound fear of national malaise, with Roosevelt claiming that “we must ever keep the national core of our being sound” (1902c, p. 287). If American imperialism is driven by a fear of weakness, then the national body can never be fully healed, because to do so would remove the need for further imperial expansion; weakness becomes, therefore, paradoxically and subconsciously desirable for those who advocate muscular nationhood. Whilst Wister is able to foreground the Virginian’s illness in order to more fully establish his healthy masculinity, the idea that sickness is desirable is so subversive that it can only be partially articulated; as the Virginian tells Molly “I have never had a right down sickness before.... If any person had told me I could *enjoy* such a thing—” he is prevented from completing the statement by a kiss (*Virginian*, p. 236). Normative heterosexual behaviour swiftly disguises the emasculating utterance, but is also prompted by it. This scene is a microcosmic reassertion of the necessity of the Virginian’s sickness in his conquest of Molly. Rather than his displays of heroism, it is this spectacle of physical weakness that secures both Molly, and, as Handley correctly argues, “democracy’s perpetuation in the reproduction of a racial type” through their “many children”: Wister’s prevailing national concern (Handley, 2002, p. 68; *Virginian*, p. 327). The Virginian’s period of weakness is instrumental in raising him to the socially acceptable masculinity of the railroad-capitalist patriarch, just as a perceived weakness in America led the nation towards imperial conquest. That Wister begins to express this link, but does not allow himself to fully realize it, implies an anxiety over these foundations of American imperial ideology.

That anxiety surrounding the connection between imperial ideology and corporeal weakness is further manifest in Wister’s evasion of violence against the body in *The Virginian*. From reading both his fiction and his biography of Roosevelt, Wister appears perturbed by the damage to bodies, and especially male bodies, that inevitably accompanies imperialist activity. In the Roosevelt biography, Wister refers to the former President’s celebrated involvement in the Spanish-American War only perfunctorily: “We lost but few lives in battle during that brief war, compared to the young men who died in swarms from foul conditions in camp. Nevertheless, that brief war opened a new chapter for us. The whirl of history put us among the world’s great nations” (*Roosevelt*, p. 59). The swift “nevertheless” with which Wister turns from the deaths of soldiers—signifying a refusal to linger over both “few lives” that were lost and the “swarms” who died of disease—suggests a profound unease with this effect on the body of both illness and conflict. Elsewhere in this section of the biography, a lexicon of disease permeates Wister’s writing. He describes how the 1898 campaign “cleaned the yellow fever out of [Cuba]” (clearly neither America nor Roosevelt’s own priority in the campaign), and portrays the crisis over the gold standard that shaped the 1896 election campaign as a “quantity

of symptoms" that threatened the health of the nation (pp. 59, 54). Despite ostensibly describing victories, both in Cuba and in the election, Wister does not seem to be able to dismiss the threat of decay to both personal and national bodies, even as he tries to frame these events within America's movement forwards through the "whirl of history."

Wister's difficulties in accepting these threats to bodies emerged before the Spanish-American war had even begun. Wister seems to be particularly troubled by Frederic Remington's illustration *What an Unbranded Cow has Cost*, which accompanied "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher" in *Harper's Magazine*. Remington's painting vividly depicts slaughter, with the maimed bodies of fallen men and horses strewn over the landscape, and a gunman to the left about to shoot the only man still standing. Reflecting on it, Wister wrote: "It is not only vast, it states itself utterly. It struck me dumb" (quoted in Watts, 2003, p. 152). Whilst observing the power of Remington's work, Wister appears in awe; the image "states itself utterly," yet Wister is unable to say anything at all in response. Even though Wister does not explicitly state that the image is disturbing, his reference to its scale places the illustration in the realm of the sublime. Any admiration Wister feels, therefore, appears to be tinged with horror. When considering the portrayal of violence in *The Virginian*, it is notable that Wister did not ask Remington to provide the illustrations for the novel in 1902. Having moved from Harpers to Macmillan before publishing *The Virginian*, Wister apparently offered no objections to Arthur Keller being employed to illustrate the novel (Tatum, 2003, p. 5). Remington had already noted that their styles were beginning to diverge, with the lack of action in Wister's late fiction leading the illustrator to tell the author "you get harder all the while for the plastic man" (quoted in Vorpahl, 1973, p. 279). Keller's illustration of Shorty's death that accompanied the "Superstition Trail" chapter, in contrast with Remington's illustration, masks the violence that has taken place. The dead body of the hapless Shorty is slightly hidden by the thick grass, and he is lying on his back, disguising the shot from the murder that has been "done from behind" (*Virginian*, p. 274).

The refusal of Keller's illustrations to depict the realities of violence against the body is mirrored by an effacing of violence within *The Virginian* itself. Sarah Watts cites Remington's advice to Wister that he should "let the blood be half a foot deep [in his writing]" as evidence for his "foregrounding of violence," but, in reality, the blood in *The Virginian* reaches barely half an inch (2003, pp. 148-150). Violence, like the Indians, is consistently excluded from the narrative. The reader does not see the Indians attack the Virginian, but encounters his injured body at the same time as Molly—after the incident. The lynching of Steve and Ed by the Virginian is also not narrated. As the Virginian rides off with the criminals, the narrator, in his makeshift bed, explains how he "put the blanket over my head," and he remains there until "their hooves grew distant, until all was silence round the stable" (*Virginian*, p. 254). The narrator actively refuses to acknowledge the violence, doing everything in his power not to experience it, and so denies the reader that experience.

Even the shootout at the climax of the novel between the Virginian and Trampas is curiously absented from the text:

A wind seemed to blow his sleeve off his arm, and he replied to it, and saw Trampas pitch forward. He saw Trampas raise his arm from the ground and

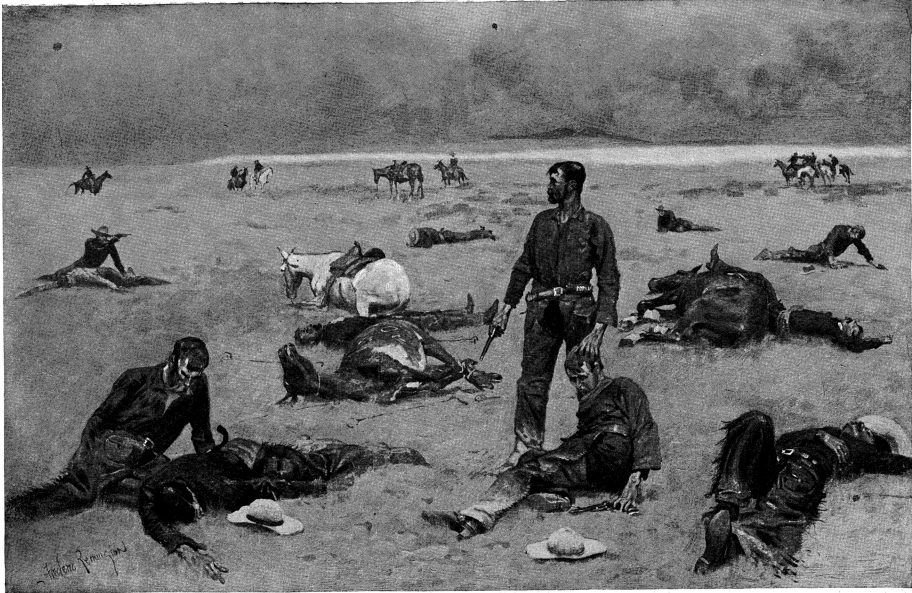


Figure 1. Frederic Remington, *What An Unbranded Cow Has Cost* (1895). Published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 91, p. 609. Courtesy of Cornell University Library, Making of America Digital Collection.

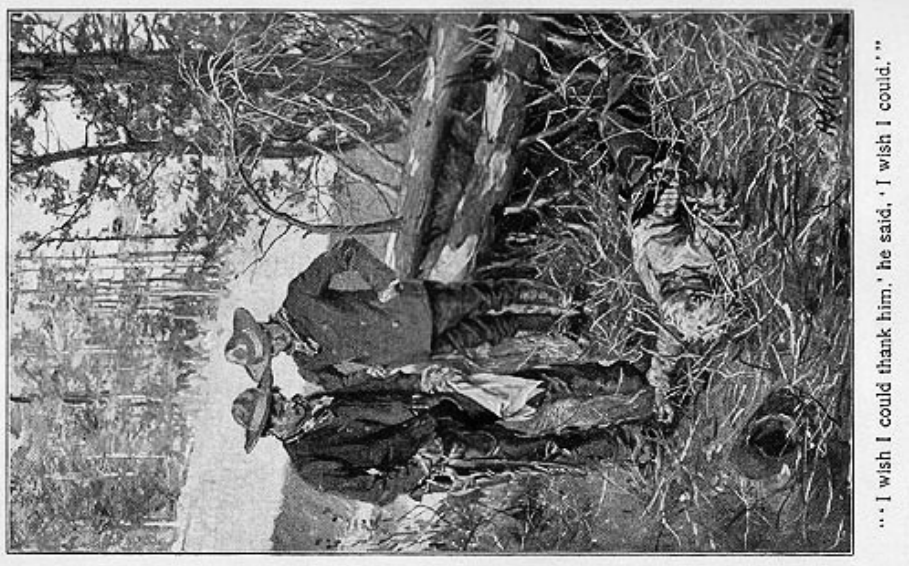


Figure 2. Arthur L. Keller, 'I wish I could thank him' (1902). Published in Owen Wister, *The Virginian*, New York: Macmillan. Courtesy of Professor Stephen Railton, University of Virginia.

fall again, and lie there this time, still. A little smoke was rising from the pistol on the ground, and he looked at his own, and saw the smoke flowing upward out of it (p. 313).

The gunshots are transformed into “a wind,” removing their materiality, and so their ability to penetrate the body, from the text. The idea of the gunshot “replying” also emphasizes how most of the confrontation in the novel takes place through language rather than action. In comparison to this rather muted encounter, the Virginian’s tall-talk battle with Trampas about the fictitious frog-farms of California is a far more vivid episode, and one in which the violence of conflict is more clearly articulated. The Virginian can say “Frawgs are dead, Trampas, and so are you,” because there is no real possibility that Trampas, or anyone will die in this battle of wits (p. 135). Conversely, in the shootout in which Trampas *does* die, it is not explicitly stated that Trampas is dead until the Virginian returns to the hotel where Molly awaits him.<sup>3</sup>

In the shootout, the reader does not see the impact of violence itself—the bullet penetrating Trampas’s body—but only his body responding to it. The smoke that rises from both pistols provides a literal smokescreen that blocks the reader’s vision of the wounded body. The only depiction of the body as explicitly penetrated within *The Virginian* is the Virginian’s shoulder wound from the Indian bullet. As Molly drags his body from the creek, “she saw the patch near the shoulder she had moved grow wet with new blood” (p. 215). Whilst the blood reveals the rupture in the skin, Wister simultaneously establishes the blood as evidence for Molly that the Virginian is still alive. The blood demonstrates that the body is fundamentally intact as well as indicating that it has been harmed; Wister does not allow the Virginian’s wound to only signify destruction.

When violence against bodies can only signify destruction, however, there is a need to efface it that goes so far as to expunge it from the novel. The chapter “Balaam and Pedro,” which describes the mistreatment of a horse at the hands of a cruel cowpuncher, originally appeared as a short story in *Harper’s Monthly* in 1894, and was rewritten before being published in *The Virginian*. In its original form, Wister’s description of Balaam’s brutality towards the horse Pedro, is far more graphic. The gouging of Pedro’s eye that is implied in the text of the novel—“suddenly [Balaam] was at work at something”—is made explicit in the story (*Virginian*, p. 203). “I got an eye out on him” proclaims Balaam, and the Virginian sees “the ruined eye that Balaam’s fingers had blinded” (“Balaam and Pedro,” p. 303). Throughout *The Virginian*, Wister suggests a closeness between animals and humans; Em’ly the troubled chicken is described by the Virginian as having “sort o’ human feelin’s and desires” (p. 60). Violence against animals is not, therefore, sufficiently distanced from violence against humans. The description of the wound to the horse, which is almost a part of the cowboy’s body, has too much potential to reflect onto the rider; indeed, Pedro’s previous owner, Shorty, will also be dead by the end of the novel.

Wister removed the explicit description of the injury on the recommendation of Roosevelt; Roosevelt had always hated the passage, but Wister only removed it after frontier violence had been realized in the war of 1898. The President told the

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion of the talk-battles in *The Virginian*, see Mitchell (1987).

author, according to Wister's biography, that leaving the passage in would "deform the book" (Wister, *Roosevelt*, p. 99). Roosevelt's reaction, or at least Wister's recollection of it, transposes the violence committed against the horse on to the text itself. It is as though allowing a true portrayal of violence into the text will itself gouge a hole in Wister's carefully constructed fiction of a frontier where men solve problems by wounding egos rather than bodies. What is perplexing, however, is that Roosevelt's apparent aversion to violence in art does not transfer to a similar aversion to violence against real bodies, even his own. Writing to a friend after the Spanish-American War, Roosevelt observed that "I have always been unhappy, most unhappy that I was not wounded in Cuba ... in some striking and disfiguring way" (quoted in Watts, 2003, p. 201).

The connection between wounding the male body and wounding Wister's vision of the west is central to establishing that the evasion of violence in Wister's writing is a reflection of his doubts about American imperialism. To register the violence of frontier conquest would be to acknowledge the connection between imperialism and corporeal destruction, thus problematizing the frontier as a space in which idealised male bodies would be constructed. By suppressing both violent acts and their effect on the body, and by transferring competition into the sphere of language, Wister writes violence to the body out of his literary conquests of the West in the same way that he avoids the deaths in the Spanish-American War in his biography of Roosevelt. However, in evading violence so conspicuously, Wister inadvertently calls attention to the very gulf between the ideologies of American imperialism and its practice that he seems determined to disguise. Like the too-neat compromise ending of "My Country: 1899," this suppression does not assuage the problematic aspects of imperialism but works against itself to reveal Wister's doubts.

But why can Wister partially reveal the roots of a desire for imperial expansion in physical weakness, and yet be so determined to disguise the damage to the body that results from such conflicts? Ultimately, this apparent contradiction seems rooted in the racial ideologies that structure Wister's writing. The revelation that imperial ideology is the product of a sick White body is disturbing, but nevertheless it supports the construction of the White body politic, because that fragility is itself a marker of whiteness. However, a *wound* to the White body, when mapped onto the body politic creates a rupture in the nation, through which the non-White can possibly enter. This echoed the central fear of the anti-imperial opposition to foreign expansion which had been growing in the years before the Spanish-American War: fears which Wister himself expressed in "My Country: 1899." Whilst imperialists claimed that the new colonies needed American support for governance, anti-imperialists feared this would allow non-Whites into the nation, thus harming the ideal of the White nation to which they subscribed; the ideology behind the opposition to imperialism was as racist as that which supported it (see Rowe, 2000, p. 8).

The climatic wounding of the White male body in *Lin McLean* manifests these fears of ruptures in national boundaries that are forged by, and then exacerbated by encounters with the Other. In the penultimate chapter, Lin meets his ex-wife Katie Peck—who deserted him for her first husband after Lin discovered their marriage was bigamous—in a saloon in Drybone. She has taken an overdose of opium; the pseudo-Oriental object of her addiction linking her to a dangerous, non-White Other. A doctor advises that her only chance for survival is if Lin keeps her walk-

ing around, and so he is forced to literally hold her up. By this stage in the novel, Katie is a grotesque parody of womanhood who is lascivious and overweight, and whose hyper-feminine dress, decorated with pink ribbons, only serves to exaggerate her unwomanly nature. Her strength and sexual appetites are the gendered challenge to White male hegemony that mirrors the racial challenge of the non-White Other.<sup>4</sup>

As Lin supports her, literally taking on the task that imperialists argued was America's duty in the Philippines, his body is torn apart: "the fingers quivering and bloody and the skin grooved raw beneath them" (p. 262). The erosion of Lin's skin is especially troubling; the Whiteness that marks the body and nation as superior has been obscured. Ultimately, Lin's actions enhance his manhood, but the language in which he expresses this—"I know I am a man now—if my nerve ain't gone"—voices the fear that the opposite, emasculation, may have occurred (p. 262). The reference to Lin's "nerve" seems to conjure the very spectre of the weak, neurasthenic body that such frontier encounters were supposed to dismiss. In the immediate aftermath of this disturbing scene, Lin's masculinity remains uncertain. As such, the novel suggests that the results of violent confrontations with the Other cannot be easily codified, and nor are they entirely safe.

In his political rhetoric, Roosevelt constructed the new imperial frontiers of Cuba and the Philippines as places in which the bodily weaknesses of White men could be remedied, thus stabilising White male identity and establishing the superiority of the White race. Problematizing Roosevelt's notion of the healing frontier, Owen Wister not only gestures towards bodily weakness as a necessary precursor to imperial conquest, but also indicates that such conquests do not ultimately heal this weakness. Instead, the imperial frontier is, potentially, a place at which encounters with the Other damage, rather than restore, the body personal and the body politic. In such encounters, whiteness, never a stable category in Wister's fiction, is not confirmed, but risks being effaced altogether.

It would, however, be incorrect to restate this ambivalence over American imperial activity as either a clearly articulated critique of *fin-de-siècle* American foreign policy, or an expression of sympathy towards the colonial subject. The hesitant anti-imperialism expressed in Wister's writing stems from a fear of the non-White being forced upon the exceptional White nation, and is as motivated by racist ideologies as the opposing desire for colonial expansion. And it is perhaps this hesitancy itself that is most characteristic of Wister's writing. Unlike his address to the Phi Beta Kappa society, Wister's fiction shies away from overtly addressing contemporary political issues, instead figuring them through "colonial romance" and manifesting responses to such issues in what is suppressed as much as what is articulated. If, in *The Virginian*, being a man consists of being silent, Wister's fiction uses the same methods as its hero in its attempts to bolster a conception of White masculinity that seems increasingly fragile—albeit with far less success.

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<sup>4</sup> Citing Leslie Fiedler, Handley notes that, following the end of the Indian wars, ethnic Others are often replaced by gendered Others in Western fiction: "heterosexuality becomes the structure of difference, and often men are 'Other' to women who are imagining their own destiny" (Handley, 2002, p. 15).

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