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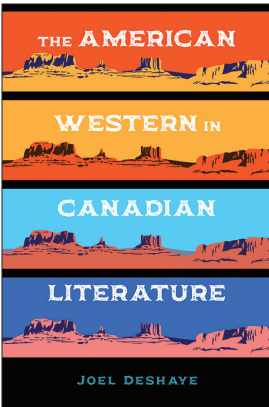
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THE AMERICAN WESTERN IN CANADIAN LITERATURE

by Joel Deshayé

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CanLit's Postmodern Westerns

Ghosts and the Cowgirl Riding Off into the Sunrise

Whereas the previous chapter illustrated, through the character of Smokey Carmain, a few premonitions of a historical period that Jean-François Lyotard describes as “the postmodern condition” in the 1979 book of that name, the books we turn to in this chapter tend to illustrate a more postmodern *intention* that we can infer from stylistic experimentation. In other words, I discern two facets of postmodernism: first, the almost unavoidable situation of living in a world where media and communications have dramatically changed how we think, what we know, and what we make; second, our creative responses to that situation, including literary simulations designed to call attention to and dramatize that same situation.¹ Luke Price’s Smokey Carmain is a typical but early, and thus prototypical or emergent, anti-hero of the Canadian Western genre,² and his parodically self-referential self-naming gives me reason to suggest that he is on the train toward the derailment that is postmodernism. But he is not resistant to genre; he affirms it from within, rather than questioning it from within as postmodernists usually try to do (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 20;

1 I am not always strict about separating these facets, because they soon overlap, but we could identify writers as either “postmodern” or “postmodernist” to imply the difference between condition and intention—when we are confident that we can tell the difference.

2 Beyond the Western, the anti-hero is not only a postmodern figure, of course. Ronald Sutherland in *The New Hero* (1977) finds several examples of anti-heroes in the literary fiction of his day, but this “loser” (4) is not new; the anti-hero goes through cycles of dormancy and awakening.

D'haen 184). The American Western seems more ready for postmodernism when the 1970s roll around—for example, after Ishmael Reed's novel *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969) and with the films *Little Big Man* (Penn, 1970) and *Blazing Saddles* (Brooks, 1974).³ Linda Hutcheon claims that the postmodernism of that era thrives on “the periphery or the margin . . . [which is] also the frontier, the place of possibility” (*Canadian* 3); “the border is the postmodern space *par excellence*” (4)—hence the importance of Robert Kroetsch to Canadian literature of the West, if not the Western.⁴ The postmodern intention in the Western is not only stylistic. Although readers since Fredric Jameson have found evidence of postmodern literature's complicity with late capitalism, other readers have discovered a resistance that at least attempts to question everything, including capitalism and its development of neoliberalism. It is coincidentally a resistance to the status quo of genre, an interrogation of the American hegemony of the genre, even and often *by* writers in America—including texts such as Clint Eastwood's arguably postmodern Westerns, perhaps especially his film *Pale Rider* (1985). Just as arguably, however, his *Unforgiven* (1992) backslides into the myth of regeneration through violence that I consider in more detail in the next chapter. For now, I will look at the following Canadian examples: briefly at Margaret Atwood's “Backdrop Addresses Cowboy” (1968) and bpNichol's *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid* (1970), somewhat more closely at Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), and more thoroughly at Frank Davey's *The Louis Riel Organ and Piano Co.* (1985), George Bowering's *Caprice* (1987), and Paulette Jiles's *The Jesse James Poems* (1989), which I will read alongside Ondaatje's book.⁵ They culminate in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993), but that was the centrepiece of chapter 2. These examples reveal that Canadian writers chose postmodern, resistant positions from the beginning of America's own trend toward questioning that quintessential

3 Notable, especially in the context of Reed, are African-American Westerns such as Sydney Poitier's *Buck and the Preacher* (1972) and the Blaxploitation Western of Gordon Parks Jr.'s *Thomasine and Bushrod* (1974).

4 I would love the time and space to consider Kroetsch's *The Studhorse Man* (1969) as a Western, but even more obviously germane is *The Man from the Creeks* (1998), a gold rush Northern or Northwestern, which I examine in this book's conclusion.

5 Also because of time and space, I have left out Bowering's *Shoot!* (1994), but for a recent interpretation see Fehrle (251–70).

American genre and its assumptions about topics such as region, race, and gender. These moves countered not only American Westerns but also the complicit Canadian Westerns that had been published since the turn of the century.

Thinking through “the postmodern relationship to genre” (Hoberek 341), Andrew Hoberek argues that postmodernism “construes genre as a form of . . . formulaic mental labor that authors must work through rather than simply rejecting” (341). Although a postmodernist responds to a popular genre’s seemingly simple and even “degraded mental labor” by doing different intellectual work, “postmodernism itself becomes institutionalized and takes on modernism’s elitist values” (Hoberek 342; see also Toth 112). Partly for this reason, postmodernism is the paradox that Linda Hutcheon observes throughout her many studies on the topic. (Much of what I want to say about Hutcheon and postmodernism and the Canadian Western appeared in the previous chapter, because of the prototypical postmodernism that I detected in Luke Price’s main character, Smokey Carmain.) It does not have easy answers, and it is full of contradictions and inconsistencies. By creating puzzles, inviting questions, and acting politically, postmodernism is a fundamentally intellectual genre or mode, and therefore it is a strange bedfellow with the Western, which is usually considered to be escapist entertainment (D’haen 185) and even anti-intellectual, in keeping with Richard Hofstadter’s view of the demotic populism in Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis (Bledstein 52). This paradox especially—of an intellectual, high-cultural genre or mode such as postmodernism, and an anti-intellectual, low-cultural genre such as the Western—is one of my own fascinations here.

Postmodernism tends to fit uneasily into the generic categories that it alludes to, and one of the entertaining results of postmodern literature and film is that the audience is drawn into a conversation about which genres are at work. Monika Fludernik believes that “[w]hat readers really do when they read a text largely depends to start with on the observable generic alignment of that text” (289).⁶ Fludernik speculates that texts—such as

6 Fludernik is echoing a quotation from the introduction to this book: “an interpreter’s preliminary generic conception of a text is constitutive of everything that he subsequently understands” (E. D. Hirsch qtd. in Scholes, “Towards” 103).

postmodern texts—that “defy categorization . . . force readers to decide” (286); “we read literary texts quite differently when [we recognize them as one genre rather than another]” (286). In the introduction to this book, I conveyed Rick Altman’s observation that the adjectival modification or description of a genre—for example, Western scenics, Western melodramas, Western romances—can eventually become a genre of its own (*Film/Genre* 36, 52). After we have recognized postmodern lyric, postmodern science fiction, or postmodern Westerns, we can separate postmodernism from mode into a genre of its own. David Lodge in *Modes of Modern Writing* (1977) might still call it a mode; so might Frank Davey, who calls postmodernism a way of thinking, not a description of content (“Canadian” 10). But a way of thinking can soon rather easily be understood as the content of a text. Does it “have” this way of thinking? Does it also have cowboys? I am uncertain what is gained when we insist that form/style and content/substance are entirely separate or in what Fludernik calls “[a] one-to-one relationship” (280). If we insisted on their separation, the existence of a postmodern Western would be impossible because of the aforementioned difference in the intellectual demands of postmodernism and Westerns. And we simply have the fact of Westerns that readers and viewers can and do identify as post-Western and postmodern.

Audiences seem to be interpellated such that readers who are very different from each other suddenly find themselves reading the same books. Hoberek follows Leslie Fiedler’s canonized essay “Cross the Border—Close the Gap” (1970) by explaining that postmodernism crosses the border between literary and popular cultures, high and low, and that its earliest writers chose the Western, sci-fi, and pornography as their genres. Commenting on his 1987 novel *Caprice*, George Bowering stated that “I noticed two things about the western: one, that they were all very male-centred, and, two, that it always has something to do with dry land. . . . And so I said O.K., I want to make a western which is female-centred. I would just turn everything around—that way it is not just a parody but an investigation of a western, putting it on trial, almost” (qtd. in Carrera 434). Bowering’s intellectual work, here, is that of a detective, police officer, lawyer, judge, or jury. In that vein, his reference to writing “not just a parody” helps to explain the usually serious tone of a novel that can otherwise be quite comic. His reference to a “trial” furthermore implies

that he is writing an anti-Western, something as oppositional as a case in a court of law. John Cawelti generalizes that “after [Sam] Peckinpah most successful Westerns have either been outright parodies of the genre . . . or attempts to produce anti-Westerns which have the same moral ambiguity as the urban adventure of the modern spy story” (qtd. in D’haen 190). Thus, *Caprice* and others among CanLit’s postmodern Westerns are involved in the two major trends in Westerns after the 1970s, doing a sort of “upgraded” mental labour that involves “turn[ing] everything around,” or if not “everything” then at least the norms of gender and sex, geography, plot, and time. (There seem to be exclusions, such as class; for context, see Hoberek 342.) The very ambition of this postmodern intention of dealing with “everything” suggests that any project constrained by time and space would necessarily fail to do it all. And this happens to be a strange sub-genre of CanLit’s postmodern Westerns: the text that projects beyond the project.

Ghostmodernism and the Canadian Western

I mean beyond what Cawelti calls the “anti-Western” and into what has more recently been called the “post-Western,” because both align with postmodern, oppositional intentions. The post-Western is an area of inquiry staked out by the University of Nebraska Press, which has a series that includes recent books such as Neil Campbell’s *Post-Westerns* (2013) and Lee Clark Mitchell’s *Late Westerns* (2018). In the ever-expanding discourse of postness—postmodernism, post-colonialism, post-humanism, post-feminism, post-racism, et cetera—we are thinking of different kinds of afterlife. Wolfgang Funk explains that

the concept of haunting in general, and [Jacques] Derrida’s notion of “hauntology” as a form of spectral epistemology in particular, mirrors/speaks to a contemporary fatigue with postmodernity’s perpetual, rationalised scepticism and constitutes an attempt to reintegrate the supernatural, in the shape of epistemological uncertainty, into cultural and academic discourse. (148)

The Westerns with which I begin in this chapter already contain “the supernatural” in their “discourse.” In some of CanLit’s postmodern Westerns—namely, those of Ondaatje, Jiles, and King—there are a surprising number of ghosts. This would not surprise Jane Tompkins in her book on American Westerns, *West of Everything* (1992), who gets her title from Louis L’Amour’s “The Gift of Cochise” (1952), which was adapted into film as *Hondo* (1953), and echoes: “To go west, as far west as you can go, west of everything, is to die” (Tompkins 24).⁷ Rather than dwell too much on a Derridian “hauntology,” I am drawing on a concept that attempts to see ghosts in terms of genre or mode—the concept of ghost-modernism, a relatively new coinage from literary critic Sylvia Söderlind (2010).⁸ Ghostmodernism simply means postmodernism with ghosts, or Gothic postmodernism, an oversimplification to which I will return. Ghostmodern Westerns are a sub-genre of the post-Western that is also a crossover with the horror genre, but not scary. In this section, my main question is why ghosts might make sense in the genre of the Western, and I offer two provisional answers that deepen our inquiry into the development of postmodernism as it relates to the Western.

My first answer is that hauntings involve the return of the dead or the return of the repressed, which is weirdly consistent with Richard Slotkin’s theory of the myth of regeneration through violence in American Westerns: ghosts scarily regenerate our attachments to the past, and we often violently reject both the attachments and the ghosts. The ghosts in these texts tend to be our heroes, anti-heroes, or enemies; the postmodern intention seems to be to break us away from concepts such as heroism, or at least to destabilize the moral grounds on which we maintain concepts such as heroism. We do not quite reach this point in a film such as John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956), in which Ethan (John Wayne) regenerates his family by vindictively murdering the Comanche warriors (and their more innocent neighbours) who kidnapped his niece, though Ford

7 Aritha van Herk seems to comment on this line from L’Amour and Tompkins: “We live in a corner of the universe where the sun sets instead of rising, and yes, going west is a metaphor for death” (*Stampede* 92).

8 The term “ghostmodernism” also comes a little later from an entirely different context, an artists’ collective called Art Codex, but I don’t think that the coinages—those of Art Codex and Sylvia Söderlind—are strongly related.

is wise enough to include a former schoolteacher in the plot who predicts that we will eventually see Ethan (and perhaps Wayne) as retrograde and incompatible with the present. Ethan's heroism is pre-modern because it is epic (the parent genre of the Western), but many of the epic's journeys and quests are at least implicitly colonial. In an infamous scene, Ethan desecrates the grave of a Comanche warrior by shooting the eyes out of the body, and he justifies his actions by saying that "[if he] ain't got no eyes, he can't enter the spirit land, has to wander forever between the winds." In this case, regeneration through violence is making ghosts of his enemies. However, there are signs that he is making a ghost of himself too. Ethan survives the film, but wounded; he had been shot by a supposedly poisoned Comanche arrow some days earlier. He is rarely immune to harm, but he usually survives. Discussing the film with me, my wife observed that, when Ethan is shot by the arrow, Martin tells him, "Sure beats me, Ethan, how you could have stayed alive this long." Ethan interrupts to demand that Martin read his last will and testament. Usually, a will is not read aloud until after its writer's death. Symbolically, perhaps, Ethan *is* dead. He enters the afterlife but continues his search. When Martin says, "I hope you die," Ethan can scoff, "That'll be the day," because Martin doesn't realize he is already haunted.

King's *Green Grass, Running Water* inverts the pattern of Wayne's Westerns by plotting the invasion of one of Wayne's movies by the Indigenous "ghosts" who rewrite the ending so that Wayne loses. Crucially, for King the regeneration is through *metafictional* violence in a movie within a novel. Although there are frame stories within *The Searchers* too, it still promotes the myth of regeneration through *real* violence. The ghost generated in *The Searchers* is the ghost of the Comanche, the Vanishing "Indian," who represents the pre-modern world that the Western idealizes only when that world is controlled by colonial forces. In killing the "Indians," the Western regenerates an attachment to the pre-modern, social-Darwinist world in which "Indians" are doomed and only the colonist remains fit for the Hobbesian state of nature.

At the risk of detouring too much in this preamble, I want to indulge for a moment in another way of thinking about the state of nature, which is the ecology of the Western landscape. When Ethan in *The Searchers* blasts at the Comanche warrior in his grave, he is both literally blasting the land

(an image that will return later with *Pale Rider*) and blasting a symbol of the land, the “Indian.” I might be over-reading, because Atwood does not mention Indigenous people directly, but she seems to be identifying one problem of the Western as the reconstruction of the landscape into the movie set of her title, “Backdrop Addresses Cowboy.” Acknowledged or not, this reconstruction or simulation is violence against Indigenous people who did not cede their land to colonists in a fair deal. In the poem, the speaker says that it (the speaker, who is the backdrop and “the horizon”) “ought to be watching” the cowboy “in admiration / but I am elsewhere” (70). The “elsewhere” is haunted in the sense that the “I” or perhaps even the Comanche’s “eyes” are all around: “Then what about the I / confronting you on that border . . . ?”; “I am also what surrounds you . . . the litter of your invasions” (70). Atwood concludes by describing the landscape as “the space you desecrate / as you pass through” (70). Making the I/eye connection to *The Searchers* might seem obvious, but less obvious is the implication that the cowboy too will “pass through” to the other side of a “border.” For Atwood, it is the Canada-America border through which the “[s]tarspangled cowboy” will return. But it is also the life-death border (not necessarily in that order) implied by the poem’s macabre invocations of “bullets” and “skulls” (70). Despite all its critique, the poem can be read as a lament for a pre-modern time—that state of nature again—before the reconstruction or simulation or terraforming of the Western landscape.

Thus, my second answer to the question of why ghosts make sense in the Western is that ghosts symbolize the past and thus align with the traditional anti-modernism of the Western (a term that I do not mean to imply is synonymous with postmodernism, which is an innovation rather than a tradition in the genre), including the nostalgia for a time when you could still run to the West (or the North) from modernity. To clarify: the Western is a genre in modernity that serves a desire for a pre-modern or nearly pre-modern time, and so it tends to critique modernity—its own time—in forms such as modern law, modern technology, modern social mores, and even modernism. Hence, its “natural law” of social Darwinism (Tranquilla 78), its preference for the horse over the train, and its obstinate patriarchal heroes. The anti-modernism is partly a feeling of dislike for the modern, and partly a feeling of longing for what “we” supposedly once had but then lost. Think of any ghost town as an invocation of this nostalgia.

(There's a 1987 episode of Disney's *DuckTales* about Scrooge McDuck prospecting in a ghost town, one that acknowledges the Gothic in Charles Dickens's 1843 tale *A Christmas Carol*.) With places such as ghost towns—dead but still liminally there—we have what Matt Foley calls the “purgatorial model of haunting” (1) in modernist texts. Very few Westerns are modernist, to my knowledge, but those by Atwood, Ondaatje, Jiles, King, and others are definitely on the spectrum toward postmodernism.

Why, then, can ghosts still make sense in the *post-Western*, which should be “over it”? The easy answer is that there is continuity between modernism and postmodernism, and that postmodernism will always be haunted by its forebears, in spite of its attempt to break more radically from the past than modernism could. In fact, it makes sense that the more radical the attempted break, the deeper the repression, the more powerful the ghost. In the context of what he calls “the aftergothic,” Fred Botting explains that Gothic horror was “[o]nce the dark underside of modernity, [but] Gothic horror now outlines the darkness of the postmodern condition” (281). According to Josh Toth in *The Passing of Postmodernism* (2010), “postmodernism . . . was *haunted* by a certain teleological aporia, a promise of the end represented by a type of humanism, a certain faith in historical progress, a sense of justice and/or meaning” (4, original emphasis). In other words, it was haunted by everything that its earlier incarnation of modernism was still trying to recuperate or regenerate.

Relative to Botting and Toth, Neil Campbell has an answer more specific to the Western. In his book *Post-Westerns*, Campbell explains that “post-Westerns are concerned with the afterlife of the classic Western and the regional mythos and with their consequences and reverberations in the contemporary world” (332). In his reading of Cormac McCarthy's 2005 novel *No Country for Old Men* and its 2007 film adaptation by the Coen brothers, Campbell hears Sheriff Bell refer to the assassin Chigurh as “a ghost,” and he notices that the figures of the outlaw and the lawman are “uncanny . . . as haunted and haunting presences of the West” (335). According to Campbell, the sheriff is “a critically posthumous being who lives the past in the present, [and] his perspective . . . always *comes after* the event” (333, original emphasis). Bigger than the sheriff, the genre itself is “a ghostly figure” (335). If the genre once meant control over the frontier and the resulting destruction of the wilderness, then control is dead, and what

comes back to life is only powerlessness and uncertainty (336), and not, in this version, even the wilderness. We can imagine the flood that breaks the dam in King's *Green Grass, Running Water* as a wilderness-as-rev-
enant, and a symbol of the Indigenous Renaissance, but here it is bleak for everyone but mercurial anarchists. Linking to a diegetic story of an "Injun" but without commenting on Chigurh's or anyone else's racialization, Campbell nevertheless understands that the ghost is figurative, a stand-in and crucially a cypher for something else that has been made to "vanish." In terms of affect, the implication is that a creepy feeling—and possibly an anxiety and a guilt—has overcome nostalgia, which is otherwise the emotional core of the genre.

Campbell also interprets the genre in post-colonial terms of nation (as would Fredric Jameson or Svetlana Boym or Arjun Appadurai writing about nostalgia). Campbell describes the Western as "an uprising of the buried and repressed legacy of conquest endlessly visited on and challenging the present" (343). We're sensitive to this "legacy" in the context of Canadian literature too. In Canada, the term "ghostmodernism" comes from Söderlind's response to Davey's 1993 book *Post-National Arguments*, which Söderlind turns into an essay entitled "Ghost-National Arguments" (2006). She reprises the theme in a later essay on Leonard Cohen's 1966 novel *Beautiful Losers*. The nationalist versus transnationalist debate inspires bold thrusts from Söderlind and Davey, but I am side-stepping the debate because the transnational dimension of the following texts is so obvious in my case studies here of Ondaatje, Jiles, and King, all immigrants to Canada—King having satirized the debate most memorably in his brilliant short story "Borders" (1993, the same year as *Green Grass, Running Water*). (Jiles later moved back to the United States; Davey writes explicitly of cross-border movements in *The Louis Riel Organ and Piano Co.*) Partly because of the transnationality of the Western, I am including not only a brief reading of *The Searchers* (above) in this chapter, but also a reading of Clint Eastwood's *Pale Rider* (1985). At least one American example is needed to show a potential response to the ghost of Ethan and of *The Searchers* itself. The specific transnationality of *Pale Rider* is less obvious than that of the others in this chapter, but in my essay in *Film-Philosophy* on Eastwood's transition from Westerns to cop movies, I tracked him from the regional to the cosmopolitan (read: global), and that essay could

well be repurposed to show a transnational movement or at least presence in Eastwood's films ("Do I Feel Lucky?").

But Söderlind argues that "Canadian ghosts tend to be personal or, at the most, regional" ("Ghost-National" 276), a claim that affirms the applicability of the concept to the regionalism of Westerns. Söderlind defines ghostmodernism very generally as "writing . . . produced in the transition between modernism and postmodernism" ("F" 270), which nevertheless makes sense to me because ghosts are transitional or liminal figures. When you turn away from modernism, you might become afraid of the ghost over your shoulder; ghostmodernism is also simply postmodernism haunted by modernism. More than that, however, Söderlind implies that ghostmodernism is synonymous with postmodernism's project of "ignor[ing] or at least abandon[ing] the futile [modernist] attempt to articulate that which cannot be articulated" ("F" 270). It responds also to the futile attempt to *visualize* that which cannot be *visualized*. This is where the ghosts come in. We struggle to visualize them—they are vaguely "between the winds"—and we struggle to renew the effort to express the political positions that serve to counter the remarkable aesthetic and ideological powers of the Western. Among those powers are the myths of open country and Vanishing "Indians," and the regeneration of these myths through new conquests and surrogate violence against Indigenous peoples and lands.

The Ghosts of Billy the Kid

Ondaatje's 1970 collection *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* emerges from a postmodern context in which both Ondaatje and his friend and peer bpNichol were evidently having a lot of fun (though Ondaatje's work on Billy is far more serious—more brutal and ruminative and deeply felt—than Nichol's). Nichol's unpaginated pamphlet *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid* (also 1970) once led a student in one of my classes to exclaim, in epiphany, that she now understood postmodernism: as modernism by teenagers. Indeed, it is ribald:

bill was born with a short dick but they did not call him
richard.

bill might've grown up in a town or a city. it does not matter. the true story is that bill grew & his dick didn't. sometimes he called it a penis or a prick but still it didn't grow. as he grew he called others the same thing & their pricks & penises were big & heavy as dictionaries but his dick remained—short for richard.

billy was not fast with words so he became fast with a gun. they called him the kid so he became faster & meaner. (n.p.)

But *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid* is also signalling a ghost-modernism through this emasculation: “rumour has it that billy the kid never died. rumour is billy the kid. he never gets anywhere, being too short-lived” (n.p.). So, the culmination of Billy’s relevance is that he himself becomes a short-dick joke, in Nichol’s case because his “true eventual story” is only a pamphlet, a short stack, and in Ondaatje’s because Billy ends up “hung from a horse,” which when inverted implies that he is not at all “hung like a horse.” I will return to this phallic amusement in the next chapter, in a post-humanist context, but even then I shall endeavour not to explain the comedy overmuch. Rather, it suffices, I think, to read Ondaatje’s and Nichol’s examinations of Billy as the first truly post-modern Canadian Westerns.⁹ Compared to every other text that *could* be described as a postmodern Canadian Western, Ondaatje’s and Nichol’s works (and King’s significantly later *Green Grass, Running Water*) are as unambiguously postmodern as such texts can be.

Before I interpret *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, it might be worth knowing that Ondaatje follows the same historical outline that Sam Peckinpah does in his slightly later film, *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973). Billy, an outlaw on the run, is being pursued by his old friend, Pat Garrett, who has become a sheriff. In both texts, Garrett eventually tracks down his new nemesis at a cabin at night, and he kills Billy in a scene fraught with sexual tension and self-reflective symbolism. In spite of

9 Precedents of Canadian postmodernism that Ondaatje and Nichol would likely have known include Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers* (1966) and Robert Kroetsch’s *The Studhorse Man* (1969).

clever images of symmetry produced by a pond and a mirror, *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* might be described as formally and visually unremarkable in the context of other A-list Hollywood films and their high production values and aesthetics. Except for its initial prolepsis (a glimpse of Garrett's future, specifically his eventual murder), it has little of the postmodern experimentation with form seen in Ondaatje's book (as described below), though its postmodern condition versus its intention could be debated, perhaps especially in comparison with earlier and aesthetically edgier films by Peckinpah.¹⁰ Regardless, it does raise questions about how legends are made—for example, by making ghosts of them first.

Most of my conclusions about *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* from my first book, *The Metaphor of Celebrity* (2013), are still germane here, so I want to offer a précis, leading to its new contextualization as ghostmodernism. I argued in *The Metaphor of Celebrity* that

Billy is dead, and some evidence [e.g., from Smaro Kamboureli and Dennis Cooley] suggests that at least part of his story is narrated when he is a ghost—[with] strange perspectives, *déjà vu*, and invisibility. . . . His *déjà vu* is to some extent both the return of the repressed and *his* return, as a ghost, to the narrative of his life and his celebrity. (140)

His “invisibility” should not be taken for granted, but it is implied in the “photograph” presented to us on the first page of the book—a frame with nothing in it. The interest in his “empty” image and his related celebrity is part of the postmodern turn away from high modernism toward popular culture and its supposed lack of substance. (The phrase “the postmodern turn” comes from Ihab Hassan and, later, Douglas Kellner and Steven Best.) For Hutcheon, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* is an example

10 According to Maximilian Le Cain, “[w]hereas the revisionist directors gleefully attacked the genre from outside with often glibly political ideas, Peckinpah used this film to deconstruct not the famous figures of the Western nor its landscape, but its narrative form. Peckinpah allows the oft-filmed characters of Pat and Billy to retain their mythological status unlike, say, [Robert] Altman’s *Buffalo Bill* or [Arthur] Penn’s *Wild Bill Hickock*” (“Drifting”). In spite of maintaining “status,” *Pat Garrett* deconstructs the Western in a number of ways” (“Drifting”). Le Cain gives several reasons why one could consider Peckinpah’s film to be postmodern but not revisionist.

of the historiographic metafiction that she believes to be synonymous with postmodernism in Canadian literature; I noted in the opening pages of this book that a picture of Ondaatje himself appears in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* as a boy in the garb of a cowboy, standing in for the picture of Billy that seems to have been stolen from the frame (or could not be captured). Ondaatje's book is also a "genre paradox" (Hutcheon, *Canadian* 4–5) because it can appear to be biography, fiction, or poetry. I wrote, again in my first book, that

Billy's legend is based on the historical fragments of his celebrity and the missing pieces of his biography. *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* contains many kinds of texts, which all contribute to the impression of a collection of found documents that can only partially represent Billy's history despite the inclusion of supposedly autobiographical poems. Interviews with people who knew him and photographs of them, an excerpt and illustration from the "comic book legend" (as described in the book's credits) of *Billy the Kid and the Princess*, an "EXCLUSIVE JAIL INTERVIEW" promising that "THE KID TELLS ALL" (81)—these texts are more a part of the popular media than they are staid historical documents; indeed, as Dennis Cooley convincingly argues, even Billy's way of seeing is photographic . . . and cinematic. . . . This incompleteness is conducive to legend—and a legend, like a ghost, is never fully there. (143)

Notably, this "incompleteness" means that the narrative line is broken. The pieces of his cinematic and fragmentary narrative line are easy to rearrange into non-linear, non-chronological forms, as Ondaatje does in things like deft poem-sized palindromes and intriguing retakes of the same scene. Ondaatje had once called his book the film that he couldn't afford to shoot. It is not merely cinematic; more than that, as Cooley (qtd. in Hutcheon, *Canadian* 46–7) and I understand it, Billy is effectively able to rewind, pause, and fast-forward through his own biopic.

This fragmentation of time is a hallmark of modernism that becomes, in postmodernism, the supposedly ahistorical moment. For Söderlind,

ghostmodernism is preoccupied by temporal concepts such as firsts, precedents, antecedents, and belatedness (“Ghost-National” 674–5). In ghostmodernism, the ghost is the ahistorical figure—usually a figure of the past, yes, but one whose pastness has ceased to matter in one crucial way: the ghost lives on, superimposing temporal concepts with uncanny effects on what is familiar and what is strange.

Zerelda James and the Ghost of Her Son Jesse

Given the anachronism or atemporality of ghosts, there is little reason to proceed chronologically, so I will proceed comparatively and jump ahead from 1970 to 1988. In scope, form, and choice of main character, the most similar Western to Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* is Paulette Jiles’s 1988 collection *The Jesse James Poems*. Jiles, like Ondaatje, moved to Canada in her twenties (but in her case from the United States) and established her career by publishing here, including *The Jesse James Poems*, with Polestar Press in British Columbia. She followed this book with the more conventional novel *Enemy Women* (2002), which focuses on a young woman’s imprisonment during the Civil War and her aided escape back to the South. Although *The Jesse James Poems* is about Jesse and is narrated first by his father and then mainly by members of his gang, the book disrupts the patriarchy through a ghostmodernist critique.

Like *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, *The Jesse James Poems* features a series of set pieces that sometimes touch on events in the biography of the titular historical figure. The storyline involves Jesse’s criminal history and his eventual murder, and it goes beyond the murder into Jesse’s “afterlife” as a corpse on display and a photograph of that corpse. As with Peckinpah and Ondaatje (but not Nichol), Jiles treats her subject with great sympathy, in two particularly relevant ways: first, by reflecting on how American gun culture affects boys and men; second, by contextualizing Jesse’s short life with the longer but still tough and complicated lives of his parents, particularly that of his mother. Arguably, *The Jesse James Poems* was the first book-length Canadian Western by a woman (Atwood’s single poem “Backdrop Addresses Cowboy” coming around two decades earlier). Unlike Ondaatje’s book, it appears to have been ignored in the scholarship, except in book reviews and interviews.

A more meaningful difference is that *The Jesse James Poems* has an introductory focus on the outlaw's mother, Zerelda James, and a more obvious critique of the myth of regeneration through violence that Slotkin has illustrated in such depth. Quite unlike the regeneration of the family and the patriarchy that we see in American films such as *The Searchers* (1956), *High Noon* (1952), and *Shane* (1953), for Zerelda, violence is mainly destructive. Notably, without the right to vote, she cannot "speak aloud of anything she knows to be true; / she is alive and yet without / a legal existence" (14). Because of the "yet" that follows the statement that she is "alive," she is a symbolic ghost—an implication, perhaps, that the Western is haunted partly by women who have been silenced. Indeed, Zerelda is presented sympathetically until we realize that "[i]n her mouth human speech becomes a skinning knife: / they're going to take our niggers away" (14). In spite of her racism and her Confederate reliance on the slave trade, her voice echoes throughout the book as her family breaks apart because of the robberies and murders perpetrated by her sons Jesse and Frank. When Jiles wrote the book in the late 1980s, incidents of urban gun violence in the United States were mediatized at rapid fire. Given a context in which so many young men in the United States were being killed in gang violence, Jiles's critique of urban gun violence is arguably a motherly critique. It has an added dimension too, in a set of anachronistic parallels between late nineteenth-century gun violence and the "critical mass" (25) of nuclear "warhead[s]" (80), a concern still present at the end of the Cold War in the 1980s when she was writing (and it haunts us still, as do guns).¹¹ This anachronism and other non-linear developments in *The Jesse James Poems* combine with uncanny representations of people's lives and deaths to produce a ghostmodern Western that is critical specifically of guns and idealized notions of independence related to gun ownership—that vaunted right that functions as a consolation for the increased federal powers that came with the Union.

The non-linearity of the book becomes noticeable as a pattern near the middle in the central poem (in both senses) of *The Jesse James Poems*,

11 Jiles's association of hauntings with technology also appears in her significantly later 2002 Western novel *Enemy Women*: "Always in the distance she could hear the sound of the St. Louis and Iron Mountain Railroad engines, their long wailing. Like the beginning note sounded by a choirmaster for a phantom choir that never sang" (166).

and it seems always related to matters of life and death. We have already seen Jesse die—“whereupon Robert Ford / shot him in the back of the head twice / at close range” (38)—and yet the “Wanted Poster” in the middle of the book (45) implies that he is still at large and can die again. The motherly critique gains a curious dimension at the scene of his death. It occurs in a poem entitled “Bandits’ Wives” that focuses on Jesse’s wife, Zee (notably the initial of his mother, Zerelda, and thus a sign of Oedipal conflict), and Frank’s wife, Annie. The speaker says that “Zee never wanted to end up like . . . violent whores . . . diseased or dead” (36–7), and so she and Annie are much more traditionally domestic. Suffering from a bad cold, Zee asks Jessie to help with the dishes, and he does: “a desperate outlaw doing the dishes, wearing that / Navy Colt five-shot . . . singing ‘I’m A Good Old Rebel’ ” (38). Immediately after finishing the dishes, Jesse raises his hands to level a picture frame, and Ford murders him, as if completing a task “outlaw[ed]” by his gender role had to be punished by death—another sympathetic illustration of the demands and consequences of patriarchally constructed roles. Later, the poster-poem describes his strictly delimited life and foretells his future death, which, in the sequence of the book, has already happened: “Jesse James was never confused about anything in his life, which will last exactly thirty-seven years, five months, three days, fourteen hours, and ten minutes” (45). We finally see “[t]he death picture” (76) itself in the poem “Assassination” many pages later. The impression is of experiencing history simultaneously or as synchronicity, implying the cyclical or perhaps continual nature of struggles against *de facto* laws of gender, and effectively subverting the sequence of cause and effect that defines history for most people.

Who could experience history in this way? For Jiles and the narrators of her book, it is a supernatural experience. In the section entitled “Guerrilla Warfare: Missouri 1856–1865,” the narrators describe an eerie situation (here in first-person plural, probably Jesse’s gang members):

Our rifle barrels are hot as pokers
 we can’t stop ourselves
 we are being run by something
 that lives in us as if we were an abandoned house. (25)

The “something” here that cannot quite be described in the “abandoned house” of ourselves is not obvious, which is perfectly appropriate for a ghost; our “house” is not only “abandoned” but also haunted. The narrators return to this image later in the book when they claim: “Nothing makes / Jesse so content as shooting people. We got other people living inside us” (56). The fantasy that our bodies are animated by souls or spirits (or demons) is another echo of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*: “the second narrative of [Billy’s] death scene is narrated by a fused Billy-Garrett, whom we might also think of as Garrett possessed by the ghost of Billy, who has returned from the scene of his future murder to ensure that Garrett, alone, does not have the privilege of the last word” (Deshaye, *Metaphor* 149). These supernatural possessions are also a critique of the ideal of independence, which Jiles had already called into question by contextualizing the singular Jesse James as a son and brother whose reliance on family became eventually a reliance on his gang, which in turn is an extended family that includes his brother Frank. To complicate matters, Jesse’s dependence on the ghost that haunts his body is uncomfortably related to his violence: “If I could have my body back again / I would release the thing that inhabited me / that went out at night, with a gun” (80). Although the “release” is ambiguous, because he claims to have enjoyed “a pistol, the old happy / aggression” (80), I think that the animation of Jesse’s body toward gun violence is “something,” a “thing” that he would be rid of so that he could sublimate his “aggression” and enjoy other activities such as listening to music and playing pool (80). These activities suggest that he wants to be accepted in the social world, not the anti-social world.

He also needs to hide from society, however, because he is an outlaw, a robber and murderer—and his uncanny ability to live in multiple moments of time also enables him to hide, invisible. Various descriptions of Jesse’s position on the spectrum of visibility and invisibility, and various possible allusions to Ondaatje’s Billy, appear throughout in the book. When Jesse is hiding from the law in Tennessee, we learn that “[h]e can think about [the people searching for him] and watch them from under his hat and choose not to appear to them” (63). We also learn that

Jesse is hard to see
he survives

he is sixteen, he knows already to stay very
quiet and
aim for the middle
he operates like an empty space, he shifts. (28)

The “empty space” seems to allude quite directly to the similarly empty frame of Billy’s photograph on the first page of Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. Contrary to these lines, however, Jiles’s book has more actual photographs than does Ondaatje’s book, some of which present the bodies of Jesse’s gang—and Jesse himself—on display after they were shot and killed. Interspersed with descriptions of the actions of these men, the photographs create a dynamic of “shift[ing]” between dead and alive that accentuates the non-linearity that I have already explained. After showing the bodies of two “gang members” (58), the next poem describes the “unhappy outlaws” (59) “[s]itting around the Fire,” and “[s]ome of them have no vital signs” (59). Like Zerelda in their unhappiness (1), they also seem like her in not having a “legal existence.” They are outlaws whose actions drive them to the margins. And although at least some of them already seem to be ghosts fading out of history, through Jiles they express a desire to preserve their voices: “What’s the point of being dead if you don’t / have anything to say to posterity?” (59).

This self-reflective question is related to a crucial ideological self-reflection of the book that appears in the section entitled “The End of the War” when the narrators explain:

This is what
happens to
winners. They begin to believe in winning.
And now the federal government believes in guns.
So do we.
We believe in guns. (31–2)

The passage echoes a classic question: Do you “believe in” ghosts? The alliteration between “guns” and “ghosts” *almost* appears, but the *g* of the ghost is naturally not there. It is there only as the animating spirit behind the guns. On one hand, the guns are simply a tool, good or bad depending

on the spirit of it. On the other, the guns are obviously implicated in conflict and dreams of “winning,” of superiority between parts of the same society.

In sum, Jesse’s “shift[ing],” his invisibility, and his own sense of being controlled by “other people” align with the cultural critique assumed to be postmodern—for example, if we take a basic definition from Brian Duignan in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, in which postmodernism is characterized by “broad skepticism, subjectivism, or relativism; a general suspicion of reason; and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power” (“Postmodernism”). The feminism of *The Jesse James Poems* displays that “acute sensitivity” toward an American gun culture and its associated arms races, and its ghostmodern non-linearity calls into question the extent of American progress.

I also like the definition above because of how well it describes Clint Eastwood. His trademark squint is to me a perfect expression of his “broad skepticism.” To be “suspicio[us] of reason” is to be open to ghosts, as he is in *Pale Rider*. He plays a similar role in his earlier film *High Plains Drifter* (Eastwood, 1973) as what Peter Babiak calls a “specter” and “ghost” (65) of a murdered man. This chapter moves now to the later example of the 1985 film *Pale Rider* mainly because it is more fun to interpret than *High Plains Drifter*, and not for irrelevant reasons. It is arguably more likely to be diagnosed as a symptom of Lyotard’s postmodern condition. *Pale Rider* is not as postmodern in style as it is in substance, certainly not in comparison with *The Jesse James Poems*; however, in substance, *Pale Rider* destabilizes some of the ideological premises of classic(al) Westerns. Babiak argues that “Unlike Classical Westerns, Eastwood’s Westerns are generally concerned with the disruption of the dominant social order . . . consistently maintaining a critical stance in relation to patriarchal capitalism” (63). I am not entirely convinced that this “stance” is always critical, especially in his late films, in which “patriarchal” features are sometimes exaggerated by his age. Even as early as 1992’s *Unforgiven* (which is not so much “postmodern” as it is in a reactionary mode such as operatic realism), Eastwood’s outlaw comes out of retirement to save the women from the brothel and avenge his African-American friend, but these progressive goals are achieved in a bloodbath that regenerates the aging white man and the dominance of his gun (and the capitalism of the brothel; he

himself becomes a prosperous shopkeeper, as the epilogue implies). He's more critical in *Pale Rider*, but even then the film predictably concludes with a gunfight and an assertion of the gun culture that Jiles would later disapprove of.

Anti-heroic Self-Parody in Eastwood's *Pale Rider*

Although ghosts are slightly outside the realm of Christian orthodoxy and can be found instead in the realm of paganism, they are allowed in as angels—spirits who live on in heaven or on earth as guardian angels—and Eastwood's *Pale Rider* is a good example. In the film, Eastwood's ghostliness is also associated with his religiosity as an angel summoned by prayer and as a preacher in a white collar (but black hat). Thus, almost by definition the preacher is a patriarchal figure, one who succumbs to the temptation to have sex with a middle-aged mother but not her young daughter. Briefly summarized, *Pale Rider* is a film about a guardian angel who is also an avenging angel who comes to protect a community of small-time miners while also taking revenge on the man who killed him, a corrupt marshal symbolized as hellish partly by his name, Stockburn. It need not be interpreted as a ghost story; it could be about a man who only happens to arrive to save the community and kill the man who injured him terribly, but the six bullet-wound scars in his upper torso suggest an attack that no one could survive—hence the ghost story.

Less well-known is the role of Megan, the fourteen-year-old girl whose earnestly questioning prayer calls forth the man known only as the Stranger (in the tradition of Eastwood films made famous by Sergio Leone in his trilogy) or the Preacher, or simply Preacher. (I wish I had space here to consider the horror-Western crossover in the American comic series *Preacher*, 1995–2000.) Megan's prayer involves Psalm 23, which is about walking through the valley of the shadow of death, and it continues to the book of Revelation in its foretold arrival of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, the final of which is Death incarnate on a pale horse—the “pale rider” whose horse's colouring becomes his own identifier.¹² In an

12 The plot of a young woman's prayer being immediately answered by a hero emerging out of the wilderness of the West has a possible origin in Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912). In Canadian Westerns, the most obvious figuring of a cowboy as a Horseman of the Apocalypse might be in Paul St. Pierre's *Smith and Other Events* (1983): “Man and horse moved,

essay on Westerns in relation to Christianity, Biblical scholar Robert Paul Seesengood claims: “If [Megan’s] recitation of the Psalm was imprecation, the reading of Revelation is incantation; Megan has summoned divine Justice, riding down from the surrounding hills (Ps. 121:1–2) to bring God’s deliverance” (193). Unfortunately, the implications of this reading are not developed in Seesengood’s essay, which focuses on the masculinity and Christianity of Western idealism in general. Megan’s “summoning” is much more fascinating than it might appear, partly because of how she associates herself with the land being mined almost as if she were the Gaia or primordial mother of ancient Greek and pagan religions—an allegory that Söderlind would find “inherently ghostly” (“F” 273) as a structure of referring to what is not really there.

The association between Megan and the mined land helps to send the ecocritical message of the film: that the land is innocent, yet potentially fertile, and that big business threatens its sustainability. (I return to this message with various post-Westerns in the conclusion to this book.) This message is one of *Pale Rider*’s “reverberations in the contemporary world,” to echo the previous quotation from Campbell’s *Post-Westerns*. In their research on ecology and Westerns on film, Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann explain that mining narratives usually depict a conflict between big business and community-based business, along with the suggestion that sustainability is more likely to be achieved by the community than by distant corporate offices (“Mining Westerns” 57–8).¹³ In *Pale Rider*, the ecocritical message is complicated by how the filmmakers imply that the mine is a gendered and spiritually meaningful site; the association between Megan and the mined land first appears when the boss of the corporate mining operation, Coy LaHood, mentions the criticism of how his operation is “raping the land.” Murray and Heumann claim that this is “an obvious parallel” (“Eco-Terrorism” 128), and it is, but it also has an

batlike, in an erratic pattern through the trees and across moon-washed meadows, the wind shrieking, the horse grunting. Stettler’s face was white, his teeth were bared. An apocalyptic horseman of no purpose, he fled from nothing, rode to nowhere, and the demons from deep hell came up to cheer them as man and horse went by” (31). St. Pierre’s emphasis on negation here—“no,” “nothing,” “nowhere”—is a sign of ghostliness.

13 Although I do not comment much on Eastwood’s role in *High Plains Drifter* (Eastwood, 1973), that film, too, has a mining company that is exploiting a community and protecting its interests by murdering people opposed to its corporate growth.

unexpected twist that I will return to in a moment. His son Josh, the site manager, literalizes this metaphor in two ways. First, when Megan visits the site, Josh describes the phallic imagery of huge hoses and built-up pressures that shoot fountains of liquid into the earth to expel the gold. She remarks, "It looks like Hell." Second, he then immediately attempts to rape Megan by dragging her from her horse and throwing her to the ground and attacking her in full view of his mainly cheering employees. When Preacher arrives to save her, he raises her onto his horse with him. Their riding together is a cypher. Remember that when Megan summoned him, she quoted the Bible's statement that "his name that sat on [the pale horse] was Death, and Hell followed with him." By riding behind him on the pale horse, she is effectively hell herself, and thus her description of the mine site as "hell" is a moment of anagnorisis or self-recognition. Her sudden change from virginal to hellishly sexual certainly insinuates that the Freudian virgin/whore or Madonna/whore dichotomy is at work in this Western (as it often is—for example, in *The Searchers*, where it tastelessly maps onto the prospective wives Laurie and Look), but it also implies a Christian denunciation of Gaia as a pagan belief—a denunciation that does not, however, stabilize Christianity as we might expect.

Instead, Megan as a Gaian figure diminishes Preacher. Megan's inspiration for summoning Preacher is the killing of her dog in the opening scene. Her feelings for her dog generate her questioning of the psalm: "[the still waters] restoreth my soul—but they killed my dog. . . . I *am* afraid." The killing of dogs in Westerns would be worth considering further, but for now my comments on dead dogs in chapter 2 will have to suffice. In *Pale Rider*, the dog is small and white, possibly a terrier. Immediately after she buries the dog, the shot dissolves to the sun behind the clouds, and a pan down to the mountain from which Preacher rides in a later dissolve. The choice of dissolve implies a fluid transition between the white dog and Preacher's pale horse—and obviously they are parallel four-legged animals, just different sizes. Given Preacher's metonymic association with his horse—as "pale rider"—I have to conclude that he is effectively her new lapdog. This interpretation gains credence when Megan calls to him at the end of the film, "Preacher! Preacher!," echoing the boy calling for Shane at the end of *that* preceding film—but Preacher doesn't come back either. He's a disobedient little dog, as when he passes his own "test" and refuses

Megan's temptation when she asks him to have sex with her and marry her. The true scandal of the scene of temptation is not the smoldering sexuality of a fourteen-year-old girl or the emasculation of the hero but the implication of bestiality—or, less scandalously, a post-humanist, ecocritical vision of interdependent species, thwarted ultimately by Preacher's departure. Otherwise, Preacher does what she summoned him to do, and then he leaves because, like other cowboy heroes, he does not belong in the social world.

Although Megan's Gaian powers have some sway over Preacher, his own supernatural powers—against other men—are still considerable. Murray and Heumann explain that "Preacher easily kills Stockburn's deputies one by one in ghost style, able to appear and disappear at will—demonstrating his seemingly supernatural status" ("Eco-Terrorism" 139). Similarly, Kathleen Murphy describes Eastwood's performances in a way that identifies a trait of his "ghost style": "His gait is that of a ghost or a predator, his poncho'd torso [or duster'd, in *Pale Rider*] remaining strangely still, propelled ahead by the long legs, as though swimming upright in slow motion" (16).¹⁴ In fact, as she hints by mentioning "slow motion," what she describes is also the way a dolly moves, as Spike Lee has demonstrated in many winsomely absurd tracking shots in his films. As with Ondaatje's representation of Billy the Kid, Eastwood's performances of the Man with No Name suggests that he is like a camera on a dolly, the personification of a tracking shot—tracking with all its connotations of investigation and exploration. He is beholden to the landscape or location symbolized by Megan, but the major implication in *Pale Rider* is that Preacher is "behind the scenes" or behind *the seen*, possessing a power akin to that of the filmmaker. This is a subtle metafictional—or at least self-conscious—feature of the film that gives it some of its post-modern and ghostmodern substance: a display of auteurship all the more self-reflexive because Eastwood is both actor and director of *Pale Rider*, and yet all the more self-deprecating because the auteur is such a dog. He's not just the ghostmodern death of the author (as in Roland Barthes)

14 A likely influence on Eastwood's performance here is Errol Flynn at the gallows plaza in Michael Curtiz's *Dodge City* (1939).

but the dogging of the author. He's an unexpectedly postmodern figure of anti-heroic self-parody.

I choose to interpret Preacher as a post-industrial figure rather than an anti-modern figure whose terrorist attack on the mine is meant to revert mining to an earlier phase. True, the classic Western is repressing modernity, repressing a technologically enabled globalizing process that Westerners might not want to acknowledge. It is also repressing modernism to maintain the conscious simplicity of the style of the genre, which we see in the plots with less talk, more action (instead of laconic modernism), the decisive shootouts, and the racialized and gendered binaries. *Pale Rider* generally maintains these, whereas *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *The Jesse James Poems* are obviously more postmodern in style, with their non-linearity, their intermediality, and their polyphony. In its substance, however, *Pale Rider* has the subtle complexity of all the aforementioned destabilizations: of heroism, of authorship, of big business. Ondaatje and Jiles seem to work toward a more radical critique that reshapes even the way in which the story of the cowboy is told and retold. As ghostmodernism, these texts are revisionist but also palimpsestic, not quite able to erase the troubles of the past that they also find so hauntingly exciting. This, in fact, is an apt explanation of the Western in general.

Dav(e)y Crockett and Louis Riel

If Eastwood can be what I just described as an unexpectedly postmodern figure of anti-heroic self-parody, we might in contrast *expect* a postmodern writer such as Frank Davey to be curious about the same potential of anti-heroic self-parody, if he were to deconstruct the Western. Davey's 1985 collection of poems, *The Louis Riel Organ and Piano Co.*, questions the representations of the historical Métis leader and founding figure of Manitoba, Louis Riel, alongside heroes of the Western in popular culture. Thus far in this chapter, none of CanLit's postmodern Westerns has focused on an Indigenous figure, but Indigeneity is significant to my selections from both Davey and George Bowering (next in line), who were friends and colleagues at the *TISH* magazine in Vancouver in the 1960s—a history told by Davey himself in *When TISH Happens* (2011). Although *The Louis Riel Organ and Piano Co.* might be one of the texts that shows “a profound need on the part of non-Natives to connect to North America by

associating with one of its most durable symbols, the Imaginary Indian” (Francis 223), it is also a remarkably self-reflective book about Davey’s own imagining of this “Indian” and his own status in contrast with Riel and the much better-known American historical figure Davy Crockett, “King of the Wild Frontier.”

Davey’s 1985 reflection on the North-West Resistance of 1885 is the only interpretation besides *Gabriel Dumont’s Wild West Show* (2017/2021) that I’ve found, so far, that puts Riel in the context of celebrity, the mass media, and the genre of the Western, a genre that has appropriated and usually distorted Indigeneity.¹⁵ (Thus, this section would have also made sense in chapter 2, especially for its resonance with John Wayne in King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*, but Davey is not an Indigenous writer offering an Indigenous perspective on the Western.) In fact, the developing late nineteenth-century genre of the Western was perhaps an inspiration to the news media when the historical Riel fled to the United States and was branded an outlaw with “a reward of \$5,000 . . . offered for his arrest” (Stanley and Gaudry, “Louis Riel”). The reward implied to the public that Riel was responsible for murdering Thomas Scott, who was in fact executed by the provisional government of Manitoba, not by Riel personally. Although the mass media in Riel’s lifetime were primarily newspapers, and some of them helped to create the infamy of Riel in Ontario (and to a lesser extent Quebec), Davey deconstructs Riel alongside Hollywood creations. Although his book is not an example of ghostmodernism as I understand it, *The Louis Riel Organ and Piano Co.* is a postmodern destabilization of our sense of being grounded in a historical reality, as ghost stories usually are. And it is “paranormal” as postmodern texts usually are, “para” meaning adjacent to or distinct from, and they expose how normality and historical reality are compromised by mass media and popular culture in the postmodern condition.¹⁶

In contrast with Hollywood creations, specifically the fictionalized Davy Crockett from television and film in the mid-1950s, Davey’s persona

15 There are many other fictionalizations of Riel that focus on history or biography rather than genre, including more recent examples such as Chester Brown’s *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography* (1999) and Gregory Scofield’s *Louis: The Heretic Poems* (2011).

16 See also Ihab Hassan’s *The Postmodern Turn* (1987) for two chapters that use the “para” prefix (for “paracritical” and “parabiography”).

at first suggests that Riel is comparatively “real” because “[y]ou couldn’t play / cowboys & Riels, you couldn’t play / Riels & Indians” (49). The implications here are manifold: that “Indians” are fictional, not real; that “cowboys,” too, are fictional; that Riel was neither cowboy nor “Indian.” Although I discussed in chapter 2 Garry Gottfriedson’s observation that some Indigenous people have adopted the identity of the cowboy, I cannot imagine how anyone could refuse to accept Riel as “Indian” if that term means “Indigenous.” But, quite rightly, perhaps “Indian” is such a distortion that it is not a synonym; Indigenous people are real, and “Indians” are fictional. Davey implies that this problem is a result of the Western and its conventions of “cowboys and Indians,” and it is compounded by Riel’s notoriety in the mass media.

The Cree-Métis scholar and poet Emma LaRocque wonders whether we can “redefine Cowboys and Indians” (150) so that the terms are different from “the Wild West type” (150): less driven by mass media, less historically and generically dependent, less adversarial, less binary. Davey himself deconstructs the fact/fiction binary and soon thereafter raises the question of authenticity—a concept that postmodern theory defeathers into a very naked canard.¹⁷ How it does so, briefly put, is through the Nietzschean idea that our selves are now so relative that we have no foundation or perspective from which to define an objective reality (Cangiano 342). We could be authentic if we could know who we are and what our principles are, and if we could rely on that selfhood in a changing world. Postmodern thinkers do not generally believe this to be the case. When Davey’s speaker refers to “The Real Rebellion” (51), not the *Riel* Rebellion, as it is sometimes described, he remembers his mother saying that “[t]here was something fishy . . . / about Louis Real” (51). He was supposed to be historical, thus real (in mainstream logic), but he was “fishy” instead. Aligning with LaRocque’s criticism (which Chelsea Vowel echoes) of the flawed appreciation of Indigenous “authenticity” (147–9) in other texts, Davey implies a similarity between historical reinterpretations of Riel and the inauthenticity of the Western. I think he is skeptical of the

17 For an attempted validation of authenticity in the context of postmodernism, see Alessandro Ferrara’s *Reflective Authenticity: Rethinking the Project of Modernity* (1998). Highly conceptual, it comments on art in relation to intention, interpretation, and identity.

historical reinterpretations too, because they are a sign of what LaRocque calls a colonial “need for an authentic Indian” (149) that can even trigger an “identity crisis” (149) in some Indigenous people who worry that their contemporary Indigeneity is not authentic enough. To Davey’s credit, he does not appear to be seeking “an authentic Indian.” Rather, he is reflecting on where these ideas and images come from.

Although there are degrees, and we can think of Riel as “real” compared to the reel of the Western, Davey is still implying that “Louis Real” depends in some way on the alternating binary of “cowboys & Riels” and “Riels & Indians” that Canadians import from American popular culture. This hybrid status (not necessarily a racial hybridity but something more like that of genre) aligns with the American citizenship that the historical Riel gained while exiled in Montana before returning to Canada in 1884 as an ally to Dumont. Riel is thus transnational. Hybrids and transnationalism are of interest partly because Davey doesn’t appear to believe in homogeneity, uniformity, unity, or anything so potentially simple; in his book *Post-National Arguments* (1993) he emphasizes contestations (15, 18, 24) and disputation (8, 24) between the diverse parts of the complex whole, and I think that he believes this to be the reality of the situation, “real” life.¹⁸ Pragmatically, it means that Canadian cultures and Indigenous cultures have to deal with the power of American cultural exports.

For this reason, here I am aligning hybridity with not only transnationalism but also multiculturalism, even though it is common to think of hybridity on a much smaller scale than the other two.¹⁹ Davey’s Riel is a hybrid who symbolizes multiculturalism and its messy relationship with nationalism. As Kit Dobson writes in his book *Transnational Canadas* (2009), “Davey’s well-known discomfort with both the national and the global side of the free trade debate signals a dawning awareness of the interpenetration of the two terms. Davey opts to support the nation in

18 Finding the discourse of conflict and contest in the work of Gerald Graff in the 1980s, Daniel Heath Justice suggests that Indigenous literary studies, too, offers “a self-critical (and always contested) understanding of literature as both artistic expression and political instrument and an assertion of literature within a larger matrix of relationships, influences, and effects” (335–6).

19 For a related commentary in the context of Indigenous literatures and cultures, see chapter 5 of Dee Horne’s *Contemporary American Indian Writing* (1999), in which Horne explains Indigenous hybridity or multinationality as a defence against colonialism.

[*Post-National Arguments*], but one wonders if he would do so in the same terms today” (xvii). I would guess that his “support” would fluctuate, as mine does, depending on who the underdog is: the region versus the nation; the First Nations versus the nation-state; the nation-state versus the transnational corporation. I would disagree slightly with the suggestion that Davey is uncomfortable with the changing allegiances; Davey in fact once commented on the “anxiety” toward Canadian “incoherence” (“On Not Being Indigenous” 10) leading to the very first TransCanada conference, suggesting again his tolerance of contestations and disputations that are inevitable on the grand scale of multiculturalism and on the small scale of individual hybrids searching for identity.

Whether self-identifying Canadians are imagining a better future in multicultural folk traditions, or whether a hybrid is trying to find a home in the world, nostalgia is a problem. Davey suggests that he has acquired nostalgia from the United States in a cultural and economic exchange enabled by the mass media of film and television. Although Svetlana Boym traces nostalgia to seventeenth-century medicine, she adds that “[n]ostalgia as a historical emotion came of age at the time of Romanticism and is coeval with the birth of mass culture” (16). I would add *multi-culture*. To my fascination, the nostalgia for this hybridity is also what in 1989 Jameson called a “nostalgia for the present” (qtd. in Appadurai 30), because the decade of the 1980s was the first decade of official multiculturalism in Canada, and this multiculturalism resonated with postmodern writers who had committed themselves to categorical breakdown in the 1960s and ’70s. The etymology of nostalgia defines the term as a longing for home, and the longing to make Canada home to more cultures was a temporary win-win situation that *seemed* to redress colonial problems *and* assuage colonial guilt. Boym explains that “[l]onging for home became a central trope of romantic nationalism” (12). Many of my teachers, colleagues, and friends have since argued that multiculturalism was not and is not enough, and that anti-racism is more direct and to the point, and I usually agree, and I suspect that the contestation implied in “anti-racism” would be appealing to Davey. I definitely agree with Jameson that “nostalgia for the present” is a sign of “false consciousness” (*Postmodernism* 282) about what is actually happening in the present. Hutcheon affirms this view by writing that “the ideal that is *not* being lived now is projected into

the past” (“Irony”). Nostalgia can be “consciously denied but deeply felt” (“Irony”). In a phrase that crystallizes a problem and its critique, as Vowel also does (43), Michael Kammen calls it “history . . . without guilt” (qtd. in Boym xiv). In the present of the 1980s, when Davey was writing his *Louis Riel* and just before Jameson was writing his *Postmodernism* (1991), the nostalgia was vivid because the *theories* of multiculturalism and hybridity were current, and yet in Canada, *manifestations* as nationally powerful as Riel were perhaps only historical. In locating the ideal at a different historical moment, such as at Riel’s time of potential self-government, the political comparisons become obvious. Furthermore, as Hutcheon claims, exposing the obviousness creates irony (“Irony”). Davey seems to have exchanged an imported and thus false nostalgia for a nostalgia that is more *authentic* because it is based on a present ideal of multiculturalism and hybridity—but yet *ironic* because it was embodied in the historical but unreal Riel.

Irony can stymie readers who are looking for political orientations. In *The False Traitor: Louis Riel in Canadian Culture* (2003), Albert Braz arrives at a different conclusion from mine. Braz writes: “unexpected in light of [Davey’s] postmodernism is his apparent unreceptiveness to Riel’s hybridity, the latter’s proclivity to disregard boundaries” (66). Braz’s claim about Davey’s “unreceptiveness to Riel’s hybridity” may well be true if the “Riel” section of Davey’s book is read in isolation from the book’s four other parts. Braz interprets so many representations of Riel that some nuance has to be sacrificed. The parts of Davey’s book are entitled “Wacouster,” “Dump,” “Crockett,” “Riel,” and “The Thomas Organ and Piano Company,” but time and space do not permit me, either, to explain how the ironies multiply with each.

The juxtaposition of the parts entitled “Crockett” and “Riel” is most significant as a commentary on the Western and related nationally relevant attitudes. Why not set Riel side by side with an Indigenous figure from the same time period in America, such as Sitting Bull, who, like Dumont, was once a performer in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show? I do not have an entirely satisfying answer, but I speculate that Davey wanted a contrast between different degrees of celebrity and recognition in the mass media. And Davy Crockett was a historical figure who *was* in some ways parallel to Riel: a woodsy politician who stood up for Indigenous

land claims, died because of a rebellion, and is now often remembered as a national hero of the frontier. Partly because Riel was originally associated with rebellion rather than Confederation, and partly because of the racialization that Davey calls attention to with the trope of the “Indian,” Riel could never become as popular—even in the 1980s—as the fictionalized Crockett on TV and film. Davey seems to remark on the differences in popularity when he also compares himself to the fictionalized Crockett: “It was 1955 / Davey Davey Davey Davey / Crockett, they called me” (39). The repetition of “Davey” and “Davy” in this poem echoes the Crockett phenomenon partly inspired by Disney and the associated theme songs. Aware of his own nostalgia, Davey writes: “1950. We’re all ten years old. The Alamo ricochets / onto the screen of the Abbotsford Odeon. / Of course it’s myth,” and, “[a]n army (we’ll learn) / only Hollywood can dream” (40). In 1950, Davey himself *was* “ten years old,” and so there is a “real” nostalgia of his memories of childhood superimposed on the false nostalgia of 1950s versions of Davy Crockett that recall the 1836 Texas Revolution. The Texas Revolution and the North-West Resistance are also in juxtaposition, implying different awarenesses of regional histories in American and Canadian cultures—a difference likely related to the fact that the North-West Resistance involved Indigenous peoples so centrally, people who were assumed to be vanishing in the national culture of the time.

Another implication of juxtaposing the Texas Revolution and the North-West Resistance is that war is conceptually parallel with hybridity or the trespassing of racial borders, and this raises questions about positive views of war or negative views of hybridity. Considering Davey’s commitment to postmodern complexity, I do not think that he has such clear-cut views. Davey writes about Riel’s actual border crossings: “Louis kept crossing the border. Down / to Minnesota up to Toronto,” “[d]own to Minnesota / up to Assiniboia,” “[d]own to Minnesota / up to Ottawa,” “[d]own to Montana. Up to Duck Lake, Batoche” (56). These politically motivated exiles and negotiations can symbolize war, because “[t]he bullets / went back and forth” (56) too. The implication of violence associated with the United States in other books by Davey leads Aritha van Herk to offer the following commentary:

Murders and murderers, [Davey] maintains, are read as partaking of an American sensibility rather than any ordinary Canadian experience. . . . Only Louis Riel and Marc Lépine, “Davey” says, proclaim the infamous brand of murderer. . . . The general opinion that murder is “un-Canadian” is one of our social myths. (“Frank Davey”)

Here, Riel is one of the “un-Canadian” exceptions, aligned with American infamy. “Maybe he wears a six-gun” (54), Davey speculates. If we imagine Louis Riel as a cowboy in parallel with Davy Crockett, as suggested by the juxtaposition of their sections in Davey’s book, we might wonder how American this Riel is, or is meant to be.

This view of Riel as a cowboy and thus an American is provocative, but we also have to think about the final section of *The Louis Riel Organ & Piano Company*, a section entitled “The Thomas Organ & Piano Company” (emphasis added). Davey probably intends the Riel-Crockett juxtaposition and its associated Canadian-American comparisons, but the book’s title and the section’s title differ only in the name of the brand of organ or piano—the brand being another sign of corporate identification and alignment with popular culture—and so Davey probably also intends a Riel-Thomas juxtaposition and comparison. In the centre of the book, Davey suggests that the idea for the comparison was in the memory of sheet music for the piano. He writes: “above each piece of music in my practice book / was a small picture of a black-bearded unsmiling man” (51) who reminded him of Timothy Eaton, Mackenzie King, and evidently Riel. How does “Thomas” stand in for “Riel”? What characteristics—what national signifiers—of the Thomas Company transfer metaphorically to the Riel Company and to the collective and individual meanings of “Riel”?

Local Heroes

Provenance is the main signifier. According to Davey, the Thomas organs were built in a factory in Woodstock, Ontario. Testifying to its globalization, however, some of its materials were imported. The rubber of the bellows, for example, came from “tarps that had covered fieldguns / on their way from Liverpool / to Fish Creek” (62), one of the sites of the North-West Resistance. So, yes, the signs of war and the signs of trade appear

together, along with colonial signifiers. Although he doesn't specify, the rubber might have come from Liverpool too, but rubber is not produced from Canadian or English materials, as far as I know; it is usually associated with Asia and various countries in Africa. On the next page, Davey's concern with provenance is revealed to be a concern with buying locally; the speaker's mother would bring him on shopping trips from Abbotsford to Vancouver or across the border to Washington State, where anything they bought had to remain a secret from his girlfriend's father, who managed a local store (63). Showing his penchant for the comic, Davey then contrasts regional loyalties toward beer with the region-effacing cosmopolitanism of modernist writers:

T. S. Eliot
was from Missouri. "I'm from Missouri"—
T. S. Eliot said that only once,
much too late, & A. J. M. Smith
was already world-famous across Canada
for urging cosmopolitan standards. (66)

Borrowing Mordecai Richler's line, from *The Incomparable Atuk* (1963), about being "world-famous . . . all over Canada" (40), here Davey seems to resent "cosmopolitan standards" for effacing or erasing the small things in a big world. As Métis, like a Thomas organ, Riel is branded "Canadian" despite his component parts not fitting together comfortably under that brand: not all French Canadians identify as Canadian, just as many Inuit and First Nations do not identify as Canadian. As a big country in a much bigger world, Canada is made up of parts, the mosaic, and Davey seems to be urging us to remember the parts, the provenance, the Indigenous, when the globe beckons—even if the parts were put together as a result of war and colonization. They can serve different purposes now.

The poem about cosmopolitanism that I just quoted has what Arjun Appadurai calls a "scalar dynamic" (32): a telescoping size from "small-town" (66) to state ("Missouri") to country ("Canada") to "world." This telescoping is a feature of Appadurai's conception of modernity "at large" in the world, which has serious implications. In contrast, Richler

and Davey's joke is that Canada on the world stage is a joke. Davey's speaker muses,

I always thought
that if there were more bricks, poems
& novels made in the small towns of Canada,
somewhere in Canada
there'd be a really good brick
& poem, & novel. (72)

I suspect that the speaker's wish for something "really good" is partly a wish for a hero, a local hero, a figure of Eliot's status but Mazo de la Roche's popularity (72), and he comes up with Riel. He is not looking for a war hero, but an ironic hero, a multicultural hero. Although there is a moral to be affirmed in this view of Riel, it might still be what Emma LaRocque describes as a "White Man's heroic point of view" (143) that implicitly downgrades the moral claim of Indigenous people to their traditional lands and widens the surveying scope of imperialism by associating heroism with its modern derivative, celebrity, which is a mechanism of cultural colonization. The logic here is a logic of expansion, even if Davey suggests (with the irony of a doubling) that nothing better than "really good" could ever come of it.

It is an example of Davey's tendency, as editor and author, to publish what Smaro Kamboureli calls "writing that questions literariness" ("Frank Davey" 208) through its postmodern blending of literary and popular cultures, the mash-up of high and low. In a way, it asks why Crockett should be the televised hero of the 1950s for Canadians when Riel could have been that figure, in theory. In another way, and more controversially perhaps, the related question is why self-identifying Canadians could not entertain or be entertained by a hero coded as "Indian," at least until 1985; today, it is a little different, given that King and others are both canonized and entertaining, but LaRocque's concern about the pejorative connotations of "Indian" (as Savage or Noble Savage) still stands.

So, where does this leave us with *The Louis Riel Organ and Piano Co.*? First, Davey compares Riel's historicity to the inauthenticity of Hollywood's Western and seems to think that they are similarly created.

Second, Davey is playing with nostalgia by suggesting a paradox of real or authentic nostalgia for the present of the multicultural 1980s, while also providing evidence for Hutcheon's suggestion that we should understand this nostalgia as ironic. Third and final, another irony is that to accept Riel as a cowboy or "Indian" and thus as a convention of the Western, we have to ignore that Riel, as Métis, can be branded "Canadian" despite—or precisely *because of*—his component parts not integrating as Canadian. Davey explains that a literature or an identity is the sum of "the specific contentions and nexuses of the sites of its production" (*Post-National* 23). Ultimately, this is an irony of multiculturalism, especially when Canadians see multiculturalism as a cultural difference from American society.

A Western Heroine in Quebec

If the skeleton key of this project is the transnationalism of the Western and the resulting challenge to the nationalisms of the United States and Canada, then no one should be surprised that the key and our attention would eventually turn to Quebec. In fact, the two biggest and most lavish books on the Western in Canada come from Montreal: *Québec Western* (2013) from Éditions les Malins (printed in China) and *Once Upon a Time . . . The Western* (2017) from the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (printed in Italy). Neither book has anything to say about the Western in Canadian literature in English. Although there are French-language Westerns from France, such as Céline Minard's *Faillir Être Flingué* (2013), and from Quebec, such as Marie Hélène Poitras's *Griffintown* (2012), Dominique Scali's *In Search of New Babylon* (2015), and Olivier Dufault's *Benediction* (2019), here I am concentrating on George Bowering's *Caprice*, one of English Canada's postmodern Westerns—a category found mainly in the 1970s, '80s, and arguably the early '90s that includes those already considered in this chapter: Nichol's *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid*, Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Jiles's *The Jesse James Poems*, and Davey's *The Louis Riel Organ and Piano Co.* Davey's and Bowering's books are the only ones in which Indigenous characters are prominent; Bowering's is the only one with a woman as a main character (with the possible exception of Zerelda James as a central, framing figure in Jiles's book). It is also distinct from the others as the only one with an

emphasis on the other “official” founding nation in Canada, the French of what is now Quebec.

Quebec’s situation in Canada is itself distinct, of course. The independent spirit of Quebec has caused Canadian national crises of identity and unity in the twentieth century, and earlier French explorers such as Jacques Cartier shared with English and American nationalists an imperial drive to obtain lands and resources. French-Canadian traditions of trapping, fur trading, and exploration by canoe are motifs in a minority of early Westerns in print and film. Pierre Berton surveys some of them in *Hollywood’s Canada* (1975), as does Dominique Brégent-Heald in *Borderland Films* (2015). Brégent-Heald focuses more narrowly on the 1910s but thereby offers insight into the historical period very close to the turn-of-the-century setting of George Bowering’s *Caprice* (1987). *Caprice* takes place in the British Columbian interior, involving a villainous international border-crossing American and a heroic interprovincial border-crossing French Canadian. Regardless of their distance from actual borders, they interact in the imagined American-Canadian borderlands, “a wider and more inclusive zone of transnational and cultural interactions” (Brégent-Heald, *Borderland* 10). Farther east, Quebecers assert that they share a common ground with Americans and “their” genre of the Western: “Après tout, l’Amérique, c’est aussi nous, et l’Américain fait même bien souvent partie de la famille. . . . À cette familiarité s’ajoute nos racines communes: anglo-saxonne, nord-américaine, et notre âme de pionnier” (“After all, America, that’s us too, and the American is often enough part of the family. . . . Added to this familiarity are the roots we share: Anglo-Saxon, North American, and our pioneer spirit”; Blondin et al. 13).²⁰ Evidently, the genre of the Western is an expression of culture that aligns with some points of view in Quebec, and seemingly for many Quebecers the Western has most of the same meanings that it has for self-described Canadians outside of Quebec. Simply, it means independence, authenticity, and nostalgia, perhaps also a highly problematic colonial fantasy. These meanings are precisely what Bowering is playing with in *Caprice*, which is about a young woman from Quebec in the 1890s who journeys to the interior of British Columbia to avenge her murdered

20 Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the French are my own.

brother. Bowering himself is from British Columbia, and, in his looking to the East, *Caprice* becomes a thought experiment. What would happen to the genre if the hero of the Western was not a man from the West but a woman from the relative East, specifically Quebec? Obviously, Quebec is still “West” relative to Europe, but it’s “East” relative to the setting of *Caprice* in the interior of British Columbia, just as New England and the Eastern Seaboard are easternized in the genre of the American Western. My purpose here is to try to explain, first, how these relativities can be described as postmodern; and, second, how they relate to other seemingly postmodern dimensions of *Caprice*, such as its border crossings, its self-reflexivity, its gender-bending, and ultimately its *genre*-bending.

These relativities are a dimension of what Alexander MacLeod calls “postmodern-regionalism.” MacLeod hyphenates the term because he believed that, when he was completing his research in 2003, postmodernism and regionalism were so opposed that they had to be “grafted” (10) together. MacLeod explains that “[b]ecause most scholars continue to interpret regionalist texts according to a resolutely empirical reading of geography, literary regionalism has fallen out of touch with the new kinds of ‘unrealistic,’ generic landscapes that now dominate North American culture in the postindustrial era” (ii). He is thinking partly of the surreal suburban malls and parking lots of American postmodernism. He does not include the Western as a sometimes postmodern example of an “‘unrealistic,’ generic landscape,” but I would add it. In terms of “unrealistic” and “generic,” think of the false fronts of architecture in so many Westerns, and the constructed mesas and cacti implied in Margaret Atwood’s “Backdrop Addresses Cowboy,” which I considered briefly above. (Such elements are taken to new heights in John Landis’s 1986 comic Western, *The Three Amigos*, perhaps especially in the nighttime campfire singalong scene.) MacLeod’s research demonstrates that we cannot sufficiently understand Canadian postmodernism unless we understand it as a regional response to the suburban landscapes that most Canadians live in. Robert Kroetsch figures centrally in MacLeod’s research, and both of them explain that writers from the West led the development of postmodernism, at least in the West if not throughout the country. MacLeod might prefer that we “read postmodernism regionally” (ii), and I agree that doing so is crucial; but now that he has done so, here I read regionalism postmodernistically.

The consequence of this thinking for a novel such as *Caprice* is that we cannot accept its borderland between the BC interior, Alberta, and the United States as a place that will be inevitably or essentially or fundamentally different from the heroine's origin in Quebec. As a result, my own interest in the regionalism of this novel has little connection to actual places (with one exception), and rather I find the regionalism in *characters* and in *metaphors* that interact with the postmodern dimensions that I have already listed: border crossings, self-reflexivity, gender-bending, and *genre*-bending.

Partly because we are thinking of region, and because the interpretation at work here is related to postmodernism, I want to acknowledge that an early version of this part of this chapter was presented at Congress 2018 in Regina, Saskatchewan, more historically at *oskana k̄a-asastēki*, or the place where the bones are piled up. The areas around Regina are the traditional lands of the Nēhiyawak (or Cree), the Anihšīnāpēk (or *Saulteaux*), the Dakota, Lakota, and Nakoda, and the Métis. Although it is not entirely compatible with Indigenous views to read a region postmodernistically, because of the risk of uprooting the knowledge that we find there, Bowering at least acknowledges Indigenous people and imagines how they might view the genre of the Western. As I have shown in my research on Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* and Garry Gottfriedson's *Whiskey Bullets*, Indigenous views of the genre tend to be ambivalent but ultimately negative—which is understandable, given that the Western is usually a narrative that glorifies colonialism and the vanishing of the “Indian.” But a postmodern reading of regionalism aligns with Indigeneity in at least one respect—namely, that the postmodern reading blurs borders, borders which colonists and settlers affirm very strictly, to the detriment of First Nations and Métis, who asserted and still assert a transnational fluidity to the land and their own movements.

Although the two Indigenous characters in *Caprice* are only observing the action from a frame story and are known to us only as “the first Indian” and “the second Indian,” their sardonic remarks introduce the novel's questioning of the Western and its colonial and patriarchal implications. I will return to the post-colonial and anti-colonial themes, and I will begin with the imperfect feminist theme that the character *Caprice* and her novel imply, simply because the cover of the novel and

the two Indigenous characters who get the first word all focus on her. The two Indigenous characters set up a central question about the nature and gender of the cowboy, here illustrated (literally, on the book's cover) by Caprice. Possibly the first heroine and female main character of a Canadian Western, Caprice also stands out as a francophone—and a poet—from Quebec. In a single sentence, the plot of *Caprice* involves her travelling alone (except for her horse) from Quebec to British Columbia (via Mexico) to avenge her brother, who was killed by an American near Kamloops. Her language and place of origin do not change what it means to go west. Her gender does—not because women stayed home while the men went west, but because she adopts the role of outlaw-lawman, someone out of her own jurisdiction taking the law into her own hands (mostly). Her age matters too, because the novel plays with differences between boys and men, and between girls and women. Age and gender are mapped onto regions to suggest that regions are symbolic constructs as much as real places. The other twist in the plot is that she eventually goes home, at least symbolically to a domestic space (which we don't see before the novel ends), invoking the nostalgia so characteristic of the Western and redoubling some of the ethical problems of the Western even as her eponymous novel tries to break out of them.

Gender-bending and genre-bending go hand in hand in *Caprice*, starting with the crossover genre implied on the cover of the novel. The cover displays Caprice and her horse in the semi-realistic, semi-pulp style of lurid illustrative painting recognizable especially on Harlequin romances and in middlebrow magazines of the 1940s such as *The Saturday Evening Post*. Bowering indirectly explains the painting as an alternative to “a picture of [Caprice] with [her] whip” (102) that a photographer in the novel proposes to her. In her critical study of the novel, Isabel Carrera observes that inside the book “Caprice’s physical appearance is certainly suggestive of depictions of women in certain types of male fantasy literature [such as the Western, though she does not mention it here]. This figure, out of yet another sub-genre, male popular romance/comic magazine/pornography, is mostly silent” (435). Helene Staveley therefore calls Caprice an “enigma” and “a fetish for the male reader’s gaze” (247, 248n). As “a French-Canadian Cinderella” (254), Caprice bends the Western toward the romantic novel, not so much for teenage girls and women as for teenage boys and men.

Extending Staveley's and Carrera's more sinister implications, we could also associate Caprice and her whip with a genre of S&M (sadism and masochism), but it could also be an allusion to a popular hero from earlier in the 1980s: Steven Spielberg's Indiana Jones, whose first film was *Raiders of the Lost Ark* in 1981. The Indiana Jones series became self-consciously a Western and an epic in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989, two years after *Caprice*), where, in the backstory, we see a landscape of mesas, a horse chase, and a fight atop a steam-powered locomotive. That it is in the backstory suggests that Indiana Jones was always a Western. (They also ride off into the sunset at the end of the film, but they are in the Middle East, near Petra.) Inasmuch as the cover of *Caprice* suggests that it, too, was always a Western, it signals other genres with an obviousness and insistence that imply it is self-consciously postmodern in the sense of strategically multi-categorical. Caprice's work as a poet, "a creator of wor(l)ds" (Carrera 435), helps to imply the authorial self-reflexivity. So does the novel's motif of eyes: "'ordinary English eyes,' . . . American eyes, Indian eyes, male and female eyes" (Carrera 437). The motif of eyes draws the reader's attention to the fact that Caprice is a representation, not a reality, and her mythic quality is one excuse—however poor—for her objectification. Although she is described without her shirt in a brief love scene (75–6), it is no more explicit than "one high little breast followed by a second, sweet soft firm muscles, the freckles above them" (75). The Indiana Jones comparison is instructive: with his frequently half-unbuttoned shirts, he shows more skin than Caprice does on the cover of the novel, where her long-sleeved denim shirt is buttoned to the collar, her chest could almost be that of a strong male, and her blue jeans are thick and baggy. Even her hat is pulled low over her eyes. Her braids (more about them later) are the telltale sign of her femininity, and—though their girlishness becomes doubly problematic in light of the implications of pornography and S&M—they are part of a visual first impression that gender-bends away from Caprice as a woman toward both girlishness and mannishness.²¹

21 Caprice's masculinity is also potentially part of the tradition, in dime-novel Westerns, of women who pose as men and cowboys. Daniel Worden explains it (an explanation that Collin Campbell pointed out to me) as a sometimes critical response to "late nineteenth-century genteel norms and institutions, particularly through a proliferation of masculinities that are not essentially connected to a legibly male body" (*Masculine* 36).

Caprice also bends the genre by association with the regional and linguistic relativities of its heroine's home. *Caprice* is Québécoise; the novel thereby invites responses to Frank Davey's assertion that the sort of "transnational mapping" (*Post-National* 8) that I see in the Western tends to diminish the Canadianness of Quebec. I would argue that Bowering recognizes the westering nationalism of both solitudes. The strong similarity of the westering nationalisms in Quebec and the rest of Canada was attested to in 2013 by Jacques Blondin et al.'s *Québec Western: Ville Après Ville* and the Télé-Québec program of that name. Neither is an academic study, though a few books from academic presses can be found in its bibliography; *Québec Western* is a popular history and contemporary survey—a French catalogue of the country musicians, yodellers, fans, dancers, campers, truckers, writers, actors, filmmakers, fashionistas, and other Quebecers who adopt or have adopted a cowboy persona and the trappings of the genre to express their independence, their desire for self-governance, their authenticity, their love of the countryside, and the historical and commodified nostalgias also self-evident in places called Vieux Québec and Old Montreal. Throughout, the book asserts that this Eastern province is Western "ville après ville," wherever you go. It reads the Western into the folksy *chansonnier* genre, into false-front architecture, and into "rodeos" of motorcyclists. I do this sort of work too—thinking that the Western is a synecdoche for the Western world—so I can't complain. In the context of literary history, it admits that "[l]e Québec n'a évidemment pas pareille tradition littéraire [compared to the Western in the United States]—il faudra attendre les années 1960 pour voir plusieurs auteurs québécois s'intéresser à notre passé d'un point de vue nord-américain. Il a cependant lui aussi son digne pionnier" ("Quebec obviously does not have the same literary tradition; not until the 1960s would several Quebec authors become interested in their past from a North American point of view. Quebec, too, however, has its own pioneer"; Blondin et al. 174). Here *Québec Western* reveals some of its less apparent ideology. Tracing this dignity of the pioneer back to an exception to the rule, the authors find Quebecer Ernest Dufault, who wrote *Lone Cowboy: My Life Story* (1930) under the pseudonym Will James. Dufault/James remarks that French-Canadian trappers were "ceux qui sont arrivés les premiers partout" ("those who were the first to arrive everywhere"; qtd. in Blondin

et al. 174), perpetuating the myth of *terra nullius*, nobody's land, the open range that is free for the taking. *Québec Western* does not speak back to Dufault/James; it does not significantly acknowledge Indigenous peoples in Quebec or elsewhere, nor does it appear to imply the so-called victim narrative or any related equation of the French minority in Canada with the Indigenous minority. There is recent scholarship in French on the figure of the "Indian" in the Western (e.g., Mathieu Lacoue-Labarthe's *Les Indiens dans le western américain* [2013]), but I chose *Québec Western* partly because it seeks a popular audience in a way similar to the Harlequin-like cover of *Caprice*. (Indeed, the covers of both books are similar in the pose of the cowboy on the landscape with an impression of movement from the horse on *Caprice* and the highway on *Québec Western*.) Furthermore, like so many popular Westerns even after the 1960s, it idealizes the Western as a search for Eden or utopia (Blondin et al. 174). Sue Sorensen juxtaposes *West as Eden* and *West of Eden* (6) in her edited collection, *West of Eden* (2008), which is about the West in general. "Being in Eden," she writes, quoting Dick Harrison, "also requires the writer or reader to think in terms of 'moral simplicity and optimism'" (4). I think this happens in *Québec Western* and many Westerns: it's easy to be optimistic if you omit ethical dilemmas caused by colonialism. This idealization has been a hallmark of regional literature in general, and *Caprice* herself wants no part in it.

Bowering's *Caprice* involves Quebec in the West and the Western quite differently, partly because the novel is framed by, and often interrupted by, the observations of two Indigenous men who remark ironically upon "the white people who have been thoughtful enough to come and pursue their living among us" (2), and partly because *Caprice* herself is not the typical cowboy. In fact, the two "Indians" begin the story by debating whether she may be called a "cowboy" when she is a girl or, more accurately, a woman (2–5). Bowering shows his self-consciousness about language in the same scene when the second "Indian" (the younger and the protégé) says, "I am not sure I can find the words" (2) to describe *Caprice*. Although we are probably reading an imagined translation from their Indigenous language, the second "Indian's" "words" imply not only that *Caprice* is difficult to describe but also that colonization—*Caprice's* "[c]oming from the east" (1)—has damaged his language. When the second "Indian"

parodies Latin by calling the distant past the “etcet-era” later in the novel, the first “Indian” remonstrates: “No you dont [*sic*]. That is not an Indian pun” (128). Later still, an Indigenous boy in a residential school says of a pencil, “This thing. It does not understand my words” (175). Poignantly, his exclamation suggests that he has other “thing[s]” to say but that colonial technologies of writing have interrupted and supplanted his effective speech.

This damage, too, is implied by the context of the Western that Bowering introduces in his very first paragraph: “If you just had ordinary English eyes, you would have seen late-morning sunlight. . . . But if you had those famous Indian eyes you could . . . see something moving” (1). These “eyes” are “famous” because of the popularity of the Western, of course, and they reinforce stereotypes of the eagle-eyed—no, *hawk-eyed*—and stoic, laconic “Indian.” The status of observer that the two Indigenous men share does not mean, however, that they cannot speak, because they are probably the most talkative characters in the book; their actual language is the question. According to Davey, the two observers “parody those discourses [of the Western] and speak themselves, rather, in the analytical language of anthropology, to which their role as spectators to another culture suits them” (*Post-National* 84). Whether this appropriation of language is assimilation or counter-appropriation is uncertain, but Bowering also refuses to insist that “English” is the only possible language of power: his character Everyday Luigi is an Italian working for a Chinese boss, Soo Woo, and he is perplexed by the Chinese language. I interpret Bowering’s writing about the babel of language and his use of “Indian” framing devices, which evoke anthropological epistemology, as significantly post-colonial and postmodern.

By starting with “words” and their nationalities and related languages, Bowering’s *Caprice* evokes the linguistic determinism of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis—the idea that how we see the world depends on how our language sees it—but it also calls upon us to examine “our interpretive schemata” (Garrett-Petts 567), such as genre. Bowering imagines the space of the West as an “alphabet” (76), and its eponymous heroine as “living in a different [one]” (76). She might be “living” elsewhere, but she is a poet visiting the West, bringing with her a poet’s perspective and a discomfort with the gun violence reputed to be endemic to the West. *Caprice*’s

different approach to the role of outlaw-lawman probably has more to do with her vocation as poet and her gender than with her French language or her provenance in Quebec, which at least according to *Québec Western* is a place of significant affirmation of the Western. Still, in *Caprice*, the heroine has gone west only to pursue two criminals, including the murderer of her brother; she will then return home. One of the criminals, Loop Groulx, is also French Canadian, suggesting that at least part of her search is for her old home in Quebec—a twist on the genre of the Western in which almost everyone wants a *new* home and not the one they left.

Regionalism in *Caprice* is therefore not only Western Canadian, and it is understood partly in relation to other cardinal directions, not only eastward but also northward. Eventually shot in the arm by *Caprice* in her quest to kill Frank Spencer, Loop Groulx tires of Spencer's lecture about the "freedom and opportunity" in the West; he "just wanted a white bed. He didnt [*sic*] care what direction it was in" (245). Loop's moniker, which appears to be a reference to the Loop Garoo Kid, the African-American cowboy in Ishmael Reed's parodic 1969 novel *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, has geographical dimensions: "Loop" is a nickname, and his real name is Lionel Groulx (74, 105), which is also the name of an early twentieth-century figure, a Roman Catholic priest and religious nationalist in Quebec. The historical Groulx soon had a college and metro station named after him in Montreal; the Lionel Groulx station is a hub that has lines going in four directions—in other words, a cross, roughly the cardinal (not the priestly) directions. The fictional Loop Groulx/Lionel Groulx has a nickname that replaces the lion of "Lionel" and means "wolf" in French (but is pronounced "Lou," as in "the lady that's known as," as explained in this book's conclusion). Funnily, the nickname aligns the character with an animal known for its errant sense of direction, as in the phrase "as the wolf runs," meaning "not straight," or not "as the crow flies." The multiple ironies can be unpacked only briefly here, but for Montreal to name a metro station after Lionel Groulx is simultaneously to honour the recent past (Groulx having died in 1967) and to project Groulx's then dated religious nationalism into the future, the subway system being an infrastructural symbol of the modernization of Montreal and Quebec.

So, the cardinal directions are curiously related to time: past and future. In *Caprice*, Bowering's narrator reflects on regions in the late

nineteenth century from an admittedly anachronistic post-*Shane* (1949 in print, 1953 on screen) perspective (110):

By the 1890s the west had started to shrink. It had started noticeably to shrink by the time the first locomotives made the turnaround at Port Moody. Now or rather then it shrank with every word that was sent back from the dry country across the mountains and over the Atlantic Ocean. Some of the west spilled northward for a while and seemed to be expanding to its original size, but there too it would shrink, until the west became small enough to fit into eastern plans, to become a region in the eastern scheme of things. Out in the west the west was also, by the 1890s, becoming the past. The more one looked around in the west the more it seemed obvious that it was the past hanging on for a while. It became more clear all the time that the future was getting ready to move in, and the future of the west was going to be the east. (108)

The postmodern reversals and diversions in space-time here, the symbolic shrinking and expansion of West and North, help to provide evidence for the relativistic explanations of “the idea of West” in the introduction and first chapter of this book.²² Here, Bowering’s metaphor of the shrinking/expanding region is an explanation from physics: a fluid, something that “spilled,” corresponding with images of gravity wells and, if you can imagine it as a container, a light cone. Later, the fluid metaphor wicks over to characters when Roy Smith, the schoolteacher and Caprice’s lover, “remembered that Horace Greeley said the ‘Indians’ would have to disappear while the white people filled up the west” (176).

In fact, the two “Indians” have the cleverest view of how characterization and region align:

22 At the same time, however, Bowering lets a generality about Canadian/American difference stand, when Everyday Luigi is shot in one of the hold-ups perpetrated by Loop: “You did not often see shooting like that from the back of a quick-moving horse, at least not on this side of the medicine line” (123)—a practice that helped some Indigenous peoples to differentiate the empires.

“The white man in what he calls the west and we call the middle prizes action above all else. He thinks of himself as a man of action, and does not trust other men who are not. This includes most people from what he calls the east, and it includes people who read books, or engage in abstract conversation, or do not get dirty when they work.”

“I do not like getting dirty when I work,” said the second Indian.

“I have never had an opportunity to observe whether that is true,” said the first Indian. . . . “The western man of action believes that his actions are saving his country, as he calls it, from the decay of its early promise that set in when life became easy enough back east for people to make their living without getting dirty. He therefore resents people in the west who survive on the practice of quiet. He thinks that his ideal might be undermined by lawyers, bankers, teachers, writers, and the like.”

“Are bankers like writers?”

“Only in the sense that they do not get dirty—I am speaking literally—when they work.” (191)

The comic timing and co-operation here are perfect, and the first man’s attention to naming and his reference to “speaking literally” demonstrate Bowering’s willingness to “authorize” the men and give them a say in what the regions mean. He is speaking literally but he is implying figuratively; his opinion is that bankers are untrustworthy and morally stained. The regions are not defined by actual geography, here, but by figurative and relative points of view held by characters with different beliefs. Similarly, a little later, Caprice is offered an American pistol to replace the German Luger that she had never fired, and she considers “the western man of action” already mentioned: “The trouble was thinking. The remedy was action. She was not sure that she believed it” (194). It was too simple, even if a thought followed by, or transformed into, an action is a sentient being’s most basic temporal performance.

She is also unsure about other gendered characterizations that could link her to geography. On one occasion, she meets a homesteading wife

and assumes that her interlocutor wants to hear about women's toughness in the West: " 'Women-folks,' she said in a language she was borrowing, 'have to be just as fierce as the weather around here' " (214). Of course, the "language" here is the English that supplants her French while she is on the trail of her brother's killer, but it can also be a language of signs pointing from gender ("women-folks") to place ("here"). The "here" is a place defined by "the weather," which is "fierce," though she is still learning how to shift from poet to avenger. In a previous chapter, I digressed by considering snow in the West; here, *Caprice* shows that character, weather, and geography combine, and this might be as close to a real, material region as we come in my interpretation here: the acknowledgement that, in Canada, we are close enough to the North that weather and geography are often issues of life and death.

The metaphoricality of region therefore maps onto characterizations that symbolize regions. The reversal of time—that "the future of the west was going to be the east"—is involved in *Caprice's* venture in the West. If she symbolizes East, then she also embodies a feminist vision of the future, in which the future is multilingual, feminine, and more creative than violent. As a "cowboy" and thus theoretically a "girl" despite her obvious womanhood in the eyes of the Indigenous characters and anyone who has read the first few pages, *Caprice* blurs not only gender but also age in ways that here have regional significance. The narrator of the novel states:

Children do not belong in myths. They are used in fairy stories, but myths are the domain of immortals. Children are reminders of change, or potential, of what is called in some places "becoming." Children make sense in a town that is looking forward to greatness in the twentieth century. But cowboys and lone riders and dangerous misunderstood gunfighters do not. (144)

So, insofar as *Caprice* is a "child," she "makes sense" in the future but is out of place in the Old West. In fact, her childishness relates to her regionality on the intertextual level too. Partly coded as regionally Eastern by her red braided hair's resemblance to that of Anne of Green Gables, and partly coded as "cosmopolitan" and "worldly" (Staveley 247) by her Spanish

horse and French-Canadian heritage, Caprice is “from a different order of reality” (251). She crosses the regional/global divide, which is another sign of coming from the future, another of the temporal facilities that we see in Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*—its reruns and rewinds.

But in another sense, Caprice’s coming from the future means that she is less a child than a ghost. In the future, we will all be dead; Carrera argues that Caprice is “murdered . . . by the ending of her story” (438), partly because she gives up on adventure. If Caprice is not only from elsewhere but also “from a different order of reality,” I would add that she is also from “a different order” of genre, one in which “an instrument of death” (Staveley 252) need not kill her target at the end of the story. This “order” is romance, widely understood in Canada since Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) as a narrative that circles back to the point of origin after death (187). Although Bowering writes that “[f]amily revenge belonged to Jacobean tragedies” (41), not romances, he also calls her journey from Quebec a “bitter quest” (60) on which “[s]he had spent more than a year meditating on death” (61). Furthermore, when Caprice is eventually photographed, the photographer thinks of the image that “[i]t was as if a ghost had stepped past without really being seen” (149). (Notably, she here aligns with my paranormal reading of Ondaatje’s Billy the Kid and his blank photograph at the beginning of the book.) Death is central, as Frye explains:

The complete form of the romance is clearly the successful quest, and such a complete form has three main stages: the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die; and the exaltation of the hero. (*Anatomy* 187)

The deaths in *Caprice*, however, are symbolic. Both Frank Spencer and Caprice literally survive. Caprice’s riding off into the sunrise is not merely a parodic reversal but also an inversion of the trope. In the Western, riding

off into the sunset means both into death and into the frontier.²³ Caprice's parting words to her lover are, in French, "je vais voir l'ombre que tu devins" ("I will see the shadow that you became"; 266). As Staveley suggests, these words are "funereal" (256), but they also refer to "the shadow" in *his* imagination, not hers. C'est l'ombre qu'il devint—le passé simple de *devenir*. He was becoming a shadow. True, Caprice has a dark side too; she is a poet. In a poem in the novel that is not attributed to anyone but that is likely hers, the speaker seems to identify with "les êtres destinés / A partager les ombres désolées" ("the beings destined / To share the desolate shadows"; 83). But she does not identify strongly enough to stay.

Caprice does not dwell on how the English language affects her view of the West, but she does not dwell long *in* the West either. When her brother's murderers are safely behind bars, quite differently from the stereotypical Western, Caprice rides off into the sunrise. In *Caprice*, riding off into the sunrise is to return home, giving up on new frontiers—hardly a feminist message—and fulfilling a rebirth that has been called a "restorative nostalgia" (Boym xviii). Despite her success, and perhaps because of her anti-feminist return to the presumably domestic space (in that it is home), the novel concludes with a sense of defeat, a phantom feeling of the "nostalgic regret" (109). In *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), Svetlana Boym describes two not altogether separable nostalgias, both of which can apply to *Caprice*:

Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* [the return home] and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives in *algia*, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately. Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while

23 One exception is *Dodge City* (Curtiz, 1939), where the newlyweds (Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland) ride off into the sunset to start their new life together—and to continue their adventures in crime-fighting in the American West.

reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt. Restorative nostalgia is at the core of recent national and religious revivals; it knows two main plots—the return to origins and the conspiracy. Reflective nostalgia does not follow a single plot but explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones; it loves details, not symbols. At best, reflective nostalgia can present an ethical and creative challenge, not merely a pretext for midnight melancholias. (xviii)

In the simplified language of the Western, restorative nostalgia wears the black hat, and reflective the white. In this sense, *Caprice's* restorative return home is problematic; however, the novel as a whole seems reflective in that it “dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity.” Bowering’s remarks about the regions and their “time zones” of past and future are evidence of these “contradictions.” Certainly, the “ethical and creative challenge” in *Caprice* is not only from its reflective nostalgia but also from its combination of the two nostalgias and its reversals of direction and regional directives. (The same could be said of Davey in *The Louis Riel Organ and Piano Co.*, where nostalgia is restorative because the past is usually another country and, thus, our nostalgia can be imported along with so many other components of our lives. It is also where nostalgia becomes self-deprecatingly *self*-reflective through Davey’s recollection of his unheroic youth and its refrain: “Davey / Crockett.”) The Western orders *Caprice* to kill Frank Spencer, but she spares him with help from the Mountie; it orders her to ride into the sunset and die at least symbolically, but she rides east and may well thrive, however problematically at home, domestically even, in Quebec. On the one hand, *Caprice* leans toward restorative nostalgia, despite the reflective aspects of its postmodernism, and it is not as subversive as it could be in its representations of women, even heroic women. In the same vein, Nichol’s and Ondaatje’s Billies subvert heroic masculinity but are still phallogentric—their ghostmodernism implying the death of only one kind of masculinity. On the other, remember the question that I asked in the beginning: What would happen to the genre if the hero of the Western was not a man from the West but a woman

from the relative East, specifically Quebec? The hero does go home to the East, to Quebec, which is not quite as decolonial as going back to France, but it is in the right direction.

The gesture of returning home to Quebec has a conclusive theoretical implication too. I notice that Caprice leaves as easily as she came, without any story of the journey from place to place to place. Whether she returns to poetry is unknown, but these details affirm Hoberek's assertion that we should "read postmodernism dialectically, as the worldview not only of middle-class privilege but of the hollowness of this privilege: of the bitter discovery of one's lack of agency and inability to navigate the world" (341). Although Caprice presumably finds her way home, and showed agency in apprehending her brother's killer, she seems unsatisfied, even "bitter." The narrator states that she travelled and will travel again, but we do not see her "navigate the world," because she is simply there and then gone. She seems like a lost soul, and lostness is implicated in the refusal to show her travelling, her orienting herself on a trail through the landscape. Referring to Wayne Johnston's novel *Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (1998) and Guy Vanderhaeghe's *The Englishman's Boy* (1996), Alexander MacLeod argues that in other postmodern regionalist novels, "[b]ecause they cannot orient themselves in an ontologically unstable American cultural geography [such as the suburbs of American postmodernism], Johnston[s]' and Vanderhaeghe's characters flee from the United States to re-establish themselves in a Canadian landscape that at least seems more stable and more metaphysically secure" (26). Caprice seems to be fleeing to a "more stable and more metaphysically secure" place too. Here and now, the Canadian West is like America—with the transience of its malls, parking lots, and knock-downs—and Quebec is like Canada (or Europe). Nothing could be a more ironically postmodern comparison.

Dick Harrison once predicted that, by the late 1970s, "you will probably get the impression that the two literatures [of Canada and the United States] are converging," because "writers on both sides of the border feel themselves cut off from a living past" ("Across" 54). Certainly this has not happened much between Quebec and the rest of Canada, except insofar as they share the genre of the Western. Harrison traces the interest in historical authenticity to this transnationally shared dilemma, but he also suggests that the problem for Canadians is less "discontinuity" than "lack of

roots" (55). Caprice, unable to find roots (her brother being dead) or make roots (her lover being a bore), goes back from the West to Quebec, which is supposed to mean the "stable" and "secure" space of home, but it is never described. It is a mirage. Nostalgia as a drive to return home makes sense in a postmodern novel, because nostalgia is not necessarily rooted in a real place either; it is almost ahistorical. And perhaps what *Caprice* ultimately demonstrates is that Canadian postmodernism questions the idea of a "stable" and "secure" place but still dreams of it.

In the next chapter, we will see that this stability begins to break down even at the level of the gene.