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# The American Western in Canadian Literature

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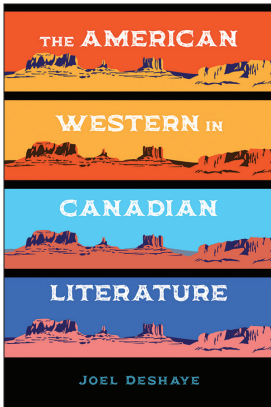
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## THE AMERICAN WESTERN IN CANADIAN LITERATURE

by Joel Deshayé

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## Conclusion

### *Mining the Western in the Twenty-First Century*

In the small market of Canadian literature, the genre of the Western and its post-Western spinoffs have recently been booming. The resurgence since the year 2000—and I would stretch this date back at least as far as Robert Kroetsch's 1998 novel *The Man from the Creeks*—includes Guy Vanderhaeghe's *The Last Crossing* (2002) and *A Good Man* (2011); Fred Stenson's trilogy *The Trade* (2000), *Lightning* (2003), and *The Great Karoo* (2008); Brad Smith's *All Hat* (2004, adapted to film by Leonard Farlinger in 2007) and *The Return of Kid Cooper* (2018); Gil Adamson's *The Outlander* (2007) and *Ridgerunner* (2020); Lee Henderson's *The Man Game* (2008); Patrick deWitt's *The Sisters Brothers* (2011, adapted to film by Jacques Audiard in 2018); Sean Johnston's poetry in *Listen All You Bullets* (2013); Natalee Caple's *In Calamity's Wake* (2013); Nadia Bozak's *El Niño* (2014); Dayle Furlong's *Saltwater Cowboys* (2015); Alix Hawley's *All True Not a Lie in It* (2015) and *My Name Is a Knife* (2018); Clifford Jackman's *The Winter Family* (2015); Bill Gallaher's *High Rider* (2015); Jordan Abel's poems in *Un/Inhabited* (2014) and *Injun* (2016); Emily Ursuliak's poems in *Throwing the Diamond Hitch* (2017); Tyler Enfield's *Like Rum-Drunk Angels* (2020); Gary Barwin's *Nothing the Same, Everything Haunted: The Ballad of Motl the Cowboy* (2021); and Bob Armstrong's *Prodigies* (2021). In Canadian film and theatre, we also have *Six Reasons Why* (Campagna and Campagna, 2008), *Gunless* (Phillips, 2010), *Forsaken* (Cassar, 2015),

*Maliglutit* (Kunuk and Ungalaaq, 2016), and *Gabriel Dumont's Wild West Show* (Dalpé et al., 2017).<sup>1</sup>

Having briefly illustrated the post-humanist and ecocritical movements in Adamson's *The Outlander* and deWitt's *The Sisters Brothers* at the end of the previous chapter, on "Degeneration through Violence," I want now to return to these books for another glance from a slightly different perspective, alongside Kroetsch's *The Man from the Creeks*, Furlong's *Saltwater Cowboys* (which also coincidentally brings me "home" to the East, where I live and where this book started), and Ursuliak's *Throwing the Diamond Hitch* (which brings me home to the West, where I was raised). Coming full circle is a sign of Planet Earth that is not a mere cliché; it is meaningful but also urgent, because if people in cultural studies such as literature and film want to contribute to slowing the devastating increase in global temperature, we have a moral imperative to (1) think critically about texts that might positively or negatively influence our imagination of our environments, and (2) think creatively about how to shift away from fossil fuels, plastics, and other petroleum products (e.g., in a circular economy). I am in part answering Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann, in *Gunfight at the Eco-Corral* (2012), who call for "historicized views of environmental degradation or sustainable development" (6, 10) in Westerns and related scholarship. I am leaving many other issues of twenty-first-century Westerns in Canada for future research in order to "mine the Western" here, to interpret these texts mainly from the ecocritical perspective that I have been working on.

Some of the new Canadian Westerns above return to familiar scenes of boom towns and gold rushes to comment on today's extractive industries and their political contexts.<sup>2</sup> Not coincidentally, the Canadian boom comes at a time when the Western is popular again in the United States (Worden, "Neo-Liberalism" 225) and the extractive industries are again (or on again, off again) the "engine" of the Canadian economy. Oil came relatively late, however, to the economy of the Canadian West, with nine-

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1 In Canadian television, the single-season CBC series *Strange Empire* (2014–15) imagined a nineteenth-century Canadian-American borderland in which most of the men had been killed and women survived in the roles typically assigned to men.

2 The most recent American example is C. Pam Zhang's 2020 novel *How Much of These Hills Is Gold*.

teenth-century mining towns built around coal,<sup>3</sup> as suggested by the title of Ralph Connor's *Black Rock*, the 1898 novel that might in fact be the first Canadian Western. Part of my own twenty-first-century interest in early industrial Westerns comes from Paul Thomas Anderson's film *There Will Be Blood* (2007)—with its brilliantly imaginative linking of blood, oil, and milkshakes—and this interest more generally arises in Canadian culture from the dramatic expansion of the oil sands in Alberta in the years of the Harper government (2006–15). Murray and Heumann describe such an expansion as a “rush for oil” (*Gunfight*, ch. 4) in relation to *There Will Be Blood*, describing the historical realities of conflict and competition that arise from “advancing” the industrial frontier. During the years of the Harper government, some Canadian writers implied a comparison between Alberta's oil sands and much earlier developments in capitalizing on the West and its natural environment as a natural resource—“natural resources” being a reframing of nature and Nature according to a neoliberal language of inescapably economic values, rationalized inequality, and uneven development. This span of years, 2006 to 2015, includes some of the novels that are my focus here: *The Outlander*, from 2007; *The Sisters Brothers*, from 2011; and *Saltwater Cowboys*, from 2015. Of these, only *Saltwater Cowboys* is set in contemporary times, specifically the 1980s, a decade coincident with Reaganomics and Thatcherism, which were economic and cultural phenomena that developed toward the Harper government in Canada just as they were later echoed by the Trump administration in the United States.

Unquestionably, Donald Trump posed and still poses problems for many otherwise cogent analyses of American culture, perhaps especially in relation to the Western. Personally and politically, Trump's indecency and valorization of extreme wealth are at odds with classic Western courtesy and frugality; however, his isolationism and contempt for non-Americans and supposedly un-American activity seems consistent with a mindset of the closing of the American frontier—the notion that there is nowhere else to go, hence the retrenchment, hoarding, and identity policing. Thus, the

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3 As an example of turning from coal to oil, in the pulp fictional short story “Valley of Vengeance” (1941) in the Smokey Carmain series in *Dynamic Western* magazine, natural gas is exploited as a poison by villains to intimidate and kill small-time ranchers.

Cowboys for Trump organization promotes border protections, and more germane to this conclusion, they claim to “want to stand up and support rural America thru [sic] greater access to public lands, natural resources, and rural industries. We advocate against the attacks of environmental and radical endangered species acts. The backbone of America is found in the logging, ranching, mining, farming and oil and gas industries” (“Cowboys for Trump”). Such a claim is possibly a distortion of the values of the Western—a conflation of the values of the Western with some of the values of the West (even though, admittedly, I often suggested earlier in this book that the Western scales up from genre to region to nation and “Western world”). Murray and Heumann show that Westerns often prefer one type of business over another, usually local business over big business, but I have seen and read few Westerns that truly support these industries on any scale. Most Westerns rue natural degradation by industry even if they also seem to posit that it is an inevitability of modernity that can only be heroically resisted. One risk of the continued influence of Trump and his brand of Reaganomics on world markets is further deregulation and a resulting environmental cost. However much the authors of Canadian Westerns in this conclusion would support or oppose extractive economics, their novels all address the problem of industrial damage to Nature and to humans who are inextricable—unextractable—from Nature.

Reflecting the potted history of political contexts of the Western from the introduction to this book, *The Man from the Creeks*, *Saltwater Cowboys*, *The Outlander*, and *The Sisters Brothers* are revisionist Westerns or post-Westerns that are themselves “mining the Western” to comment on neoliberalism, concentrating on plots that feature coal and gold mining. Similar to Westerns such as HBO’s *Deadwood* series (2004–6) in interrogating “how neo-liberal reasoning produces social effects” (Worden, “Neo-Liberalism” 231), each of these novels rejects the myth of the West as what Richard White calls “the He-Man Land” (qtd. in Quam-Wickham 135) of capable masculinity. They also impugn the related myth, which Northrop Frye conceptualized, of the “no-man’s-land” (Frye, “Conclusion” 220) of the Canadian landscape. Frye’s theory applies to the West in general because, if there are no men working that land, then it is open to the “He-Man,” the man who can come and “dominate a feminine nature” (White, qtd. in Quam-Wickham 135), as we saw in the previous chapter

with the Gaian mountain that eventually destroyed the historical and yet aptly named town of Frank. The plots of these novels culminate in disaster, disfigurement, and shame associated with men's failure to become rich through mining. Nancy Quam-Wickham writes that "[t]he West was a profoundly gendered region: a place where men conquered Mother Nature" (135), and she explains that "it was men who exploited these [natural] resources, men who laboured in the forests and mines, men who built a distinctive regional economy," men who were "masculine heroes" (136). When the heroine of Adamson's *The Outlander* arrives at the coal mine, she asks her "Indian guide," Henry, where all the people are. "People?" he answers. "The *men* are underground. In the mine" (147, original emphasis). Her assumption that there would be women in the West is crucial, partly because obviously there *are* and *were* women such as herself and Henry's wife, Helen, and partly because the myth of the West is that it was empty except for the white men who went there to make their fortunes. The phrase "make your fortune" suggests that riches are built and worked at. These gender roles involve managing "the distribution of power under capitalism" (Quam-Wickham 139) and coping with the risks of extraordinarily dangerous industrial work (140), but the "heroes" are not to be found in these novels. Their reversal of the rags-to-riches narrative (with the partial exception of *The Man from the Creeks*) is clearly skeptical of neoliberalism; less clear is how these novels align with the politically complex ecocriticism identified in the mining plots of American Westerns by Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann ("Mining" 58–9), who attended to Clint Eastwood's *Pale Rider* (1985), as seen in my chapter on postmodern Westerns. How much of the conservatism of early conservatism remains in today's neoliberalism?

This question fascinates me, because I find an earlier American Republicanism equally problematic and appealing—the Republicanism that Canadians got through popular culture once upon a time, that of Spencer Tracy, Jimmy Stewart, and even Clint Eastwood. Eastwood's *Pale Rider* is one of the films that compares different economic models without calling into question all of the Western and American (and Canadian) ideals of the landscape. This comparison is itself a questioning of neoliberalism—a capitalism that accepts no alternative—even if the family-run, community-oriented mining operation protected by Eastwood's Preacher

is different from the boss-and-son's operation mainly by virtue of that very community orientation (and its scale, of course). Each of the novels in this conclusion presents a slightly different economy of scale, from the singular inventor and his secret experiments in *The Sisters Brothers* to the mass popularity of rushing and mining for resources in *The Man from the Creeks*, *The Outlander*, and *Saltwater Cowboys*. With the possible exception of the Ridgerunner's views of Nature in *The Outlander*, none of these novels comments directly on a conservationism related to early conservatism. Each of them proposes, however, that capitalism has costs—human costs and costs to Nature—that might be borne with the usual Western stoicism but that could be avoided by minimizing greed.

Allow me to sketch a now familiar picture: the open country of the Western, the untouched landscape, the promised land, a proving ground for the mobile and self-reliant masculinity embodied in the heroes of the genre. Now imagine graffiti on the idyllic picture I have just drawn to mind. By graffiti I mean the mark of the revisionist Western whose purpose is to uncover the often hidden grit of the clean-shaven heroes of movies such as *High Noon* (Zinnemann, 1952), *Shane* (Stevens, 1953), and of course *True Grit* (Hathaway, 1969; Coen and Coen, 2010). Usually the revisionist Western tries to correct the classic Western for historical reasons, often to call attention to historical atrocities perpetrated by colonists and soldiers in the West—or, quite the opposite, to enlarge the stature and status of the Western hero by suggesting that, historically, the West was much rougher, tougher, and more violent than the classic Western had ever shown. Although I am not a historian, I think that the revisionist Western has over-corrected toward atrocity, much like the mass media over-correct by revealing true crime to such an extent that we believe it's much more common than it is. For example, Eric Hobsbawm claims that “the total number of deaths caused by gun wounds in the major cattle towns in the 15-year period between 1870 and 1885 amounted only to 45” (qtd. in Polić, “Sisters” 132). Kevin Grant states that violence in Westerns “cried ‘authenticity’ at the same time as being blatantly absurd” (34–5). Life in the Old West would probably have been boredom and plenty of hard work. Much of this hard work would have been in the early industries of the West, such as mining. The novels I am studying here suggest that the risk to men in the Western, which we usually assume to be other men, is actually industrial.



## “Pitched on His Head, and Pumped Full of Lead”

On the surface, Kroetsch’s *The Man from the Creeks* could easily be read as a restoratively nostalgic novel about mining gold in the Klondike if it were not for the fact that all of its heroes, except the narrator, die by gunshot at the end. *The Man from the Creeks* borrows its title and conclusion from Robert Service’s epic poem “The Shooting of Dan McGrew,” from *Songs of a Sourdough* (1907), also published as *The Spell of the Yukon* in the United States in the same year. The poem is arguably one of the Northerners or Northwesterners that first turned attention to the North as a new frontier. My own father has entirely memorized the poem, with consequences for my own recollection:

A bunch of the boys were whooping it up in the Malamute  
Saloon;  
The kid that handles the music-box was hitting a jag-time  
tune;  
Back of the bar, in a solo game, sat Dangerous Dan McGrew;  
And watching his luck was his light o’ love, the lady that’s  
known as Lou. (45)

The poem implies a love triangle between Lou, McGrew, and the stranger who later appears at the bar one fateful night, but it also implies that money is at stake—not only here in the “solo game” but also in the pinching of pokes (from the poem’s final line) that Kroetsch transforms into his narrator’s obsession with money throughout *The Man from the Creeks*. Kroetsch refers to and quotes the poem most often in the final section, entitled “1899” (a centennial date that gives me licence to think of Kroetsch as writing a turn-of-the-millennium Western here), when the plot of the novel coincides with that of the poem:

When out of the night, which was fifty below, and into the  
din and the glare,  
There stumbled a miner fresh from the creeks, dog-dirty  
and loaded for bear. (qtd. in Kroetsch 277)

The poem is mum on the identity of this stranger “from the creeks,” but the responding novel is not. Kroetsch creates the character of Ben Redd, a cooper by trade, who falls in love with Lou on their journey with the other stampedeers to the Klondike. Rather than stock up on the necessary goods that will equip him for the journey, Ben fills several barrels with whisky and labels them “salt herring” as, well, a red herring. He then trades the whisky as needed along the way, paying for things with whisky that others would pay for with gold. The whisky’s function as currency (a fool’s gold) and its placement in barrels lead me to think of it as symbolic oil, oil being a product that is often measured in barrels.<sup>4</sup> *The Man from the Creeks* might appear to romanticize the extractive industries of the West by expanding on Service’s poem with the novel’s own affections, and I was surprised by this possibility given Kroetsch’s career of writing subversively postmodern novels such as *The Studhorse Man* (1969) and *Badlands* (1975); however, it can also be read as a parable about our culture’s addiction to oil rather than alcohol, one that culminates in violent death.

Probably my interpretation of *The Man from the Creeks* as an ecocritical novel about the deadly consequences of oil will be questionable to some readers, especially in the West, where oil is almost sacred, and especially because the novel lacks most of the trappings of postmodernism that we might expect from Kroetsch, such as temporal play (e.g., in 1977’s fragmented *Seed Catalogue*),<sup>5</sup> farcical mythopoeia (e.g., the uproarious sex in a tornado in *Badlands*),<sup>6</sup> and satirically neoclassical allusions (e.g., the allegorical Demeter in *The Studhorse Man*).<sup>7</sup> But Kroetsch’s transformation of the poem’s mysterious minor character—“the lady that’s known as Lou”—into the novel’s most important character also has potential as a

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4 Granted, oil was a probably a commodity that was less brought into the West than extracted there.

5 The millennial coincidence of the late 1890s and the late 1990s, and the narrator’s unlikely age of 114 (305), are possible exceptions.

6 Kroetsch might be referring to one of his own most famous scenes when Peek says of his lover Gussie Meadows that “[t]rying not to look at her was like trying not to look at a tornado” (156). Curiously, her status as his “true love” is implied by her lack of gold, despite the wealth she earned at her hardware store: “The one thing she wasn’t wearing was gold” (125).

7 *The Man from the Creeks* is arguably historiographic metafiction, however, which becomes more obvious when Peek disputes Service: “the poet wasn’t there. He, not the miner, was the stranger of whom he goes on to speak. Why are poets such bluffers and prevaricators, such dotards in the face of the bald truth? Why do poets fail, ever, to look at the facts themselves?” (278).

revision that is critical of gold rush capitalism and its afterlife as petroculture. Aritha van Herk explains that Lou

refuses to take up Dangerous Dan McGrew's offer of a share in the Malamute, turning down a partnership because she knows that [he] does not treat his investors well. . . . [S]he challenges the economy of the gold rush story so that it climaxes in neither wealth nor romance, but in the peripheral happiness of an anonymous woman who uses the occasion to evade her own category and name herself into existence. ("Turning" 136)

I am not certain that Lou would have been happy to die in the arms of her lover, which is what happens at the climax, but she does indeed become known as Lou because she tells men to call her that (5), and she "challenges the economy" and the capitalist imperative of upward mobility by choosing wages over property. And the novel imitates this production of alternatives for interpretation too. The sort of bait and switch implied by the red herring of the "salt herring" is also implied elsewhere. The novel's epigraph from "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" is one such place, and it frames the entire book:

Then I ducked my head, and the lights went out, and two  
guns blazed in the dark,  
And a woman screamed, and the lights went up, and two  
men lay stiff and stark.  
Pitched on his head, and pumped full of lead, was Dangerous  
Dan McGrew,  
While the man from the creeks lay clutched to the breast of  
the lady that's known as Lou. (Service 49)

If the teller of the tall tale admits to having "ducked [his] head" as the story played out "in the dark," then we can assume that the readers face a similar difficulty. Perhaps even Service was unconsciously thinking of oil when he chose the words "pitched" and "pumped" (pitch being a distillate of tar, and pumping being a method of extracting oil), though oil was much later

to replace gold and coal as the primary commodity of the Canadian West. Kroetsch himself certainly allows for barrels to be full of curiosities: he invents a subplot in which Ben meets Dangerous Dan McGrew (before the latter became known as “Dangerous”) when McGrew hides for his life in one of Ben’s barrels. Peek naively remarks that “Lou had a way of believing that people harboured secrets” (133), and in fact they obviously do. Lou becomes a heuristic that exposes problems of the economy and its violent enablers. Such interpretations extend the ecocritical and feminist work in the previous chapter and chapters 3 and 4, which criticized the Muscular Christianity and devilish masculinity of early Westerns. God, devil, or firewater, men are part of the problem.

But these replacement operations—McGrew standing in for whisky or oil in the barrel—are evident in other similes, metaphors, and metonyms of *The Man from the Creeks*. After all, money as a currency is a replacement for commodities, especially gold, and commodities are partly interchangeable; we saw in the introduction to this book that a milkshake replaces oil in the famous scene from *There Will Be Blood*. Early in *The Man from the Creeks*, the narrator—Peek, Lou’s son, a teenager of 14 going on 15 who is not in the original poem and tells the story retrospectively from the age of 114 (305)—compares “silver dollars” to “snowflakes” in “a dream of money” (54). In fact, Peek is obsessed with money, mainly because he is anxious about the inflating cost of goods on the way to the Klondike—inflation eventually meaning that their barrelled whisky was “worth its weight in gold” (173). While the stampedeers have a penchant for literality, as when they give the name of Dead Horse Pass to the way past a gulch full of dead horses (68–9), they also choose metaphors that transform ordinary things into their own “dream[s],” such as the climb through the mountains that becomes “The Golden Stairs” (90). Relatedly, Peek imagines that Lou and Ben have “turned their small space on the floor in their room in The Nugget [the Ole Nugget Saloon] into a cozy den of sorts” (70)—gold becoming a metaphor of home. Gold is later associated with whisky quite directly: “They could taste the faraway promise of gold, along with the whiskey” (157). The metonym here can easily be extended to oil, partly because Kroetsch sometimes figures gold as a liquid, as if oil were liquid gold: “I guess she’d expected a golden colour, given that the Klondike was fed by more gold creeks that [*sic*] anyone had bothered

to count” (182). So Ben’s barrels of whisky in the 1890s are easy enough to interpret as oil for Kroetsch in the 1990s.

All the more fascinating, then, that Kroetsch has Peek involve himself in the final scene by shooting the last barrel of whisky when Ben appears “out of the night” and unexpectedly co-opts the piano for his haunting, threatening solo performance. Ben’s otherworldly command of the ivories renders the patrons and staff at the saloon “squirmly and riveted and sweating and cold at the same time” (289). Taking one of McGrew’s classic Western six-guns—a Colt .45 Peacemaker (293)—from a drawer behind the bar, Peek aims and then takes the shot: “I hit the keg that was sitting on the grand piano” (296). He claims to have wanted to “keep the peace” (296), but the shot catalyzes the violence: Ben shoots and kills McGrew, McGrew shoots and kills Ben. And yet Peek’s purpose in the story is to correct Service’s version: “What the poet and his poem do not tell you is that Ben and Lou had in fact been struck by one and the same bullet” (300). How ironic, this “2 for 1” (a standard capitalist promotion but with a double death that symbolizes worse-than-expected externalities). The fateful “bullet” is fired by the man whom Ben once found in a barrel, the man who embodies some of the addictive substances of the West: whisky, gold, and oil. Peek’s shooting of the barrel can be interpreted as the boldest action that a shy young man could take; had he been bolder or meaner, perhaps he would have thought to shoot McGrew himself, rather than McGrew’s representation in the barrel. (Nevertheless, his draining of the barrel again evokes *There Will Be Blood* and Daniel Day-Lewis’s braggadocio about “drain[ing]” the oil out of his neighbour’s land.) Peek also could have had in mind, as a teenager barely out of his boyhood, that the barrel was a sort of pinata—on the one hand, a festive container to surprise everyone with a treat and thereby please the thirsty crowd; on the other, a game to relieve the unbearable uncanniness of Ben’s song. Surely relief from tension was part of his plan. The shooting of the symbolic Dangerous Dan McGrew was probably not intended as a macho performance of gender, a waste in the colloquial sense of “wasting somebody,” but it might have been unconsciously meant in the sense of wasting a valuable commodity. In the latter sense, Peek was enacting the same challenge to the economy that van Herk identifies in his mother Lou’s refusal to be a partner with McGrew in the ownership of the Malamute Saloon. If he

was following a role model in a performance of gender, it was his mother. His intuition was to achieve “peace” by reorienting the crowd away from their evening commerce of gambling and drinking—in other words, away from activities that might degenerate into the degenerative violence that I considered in chapter 6, and away from the extractive industry of gold mining that supported those activities. Whether gold, whisky, symbolic oil, or all of them, the commodities of *The Man from the Creeks* lead to violence even against the best intentions of the storyteller.

## Gold over Guns

Kroetsch’s concern about men’s greed in *The Man from the Creeks* reappears in deWitt’s *The Sisters Brothers*, with similar ramifications for gender—and, again, violence between men seems to stand in for industrial-occupational hazards. In *The Sisters Brothers*, where we might expect a showdown and a killing, the climax of the plot involves a toxic spill, a failed get-rich-quick scheme, and a maiming. In brief, what happens in *The Sisters Brothers* is that two notorious assassins, Charlie and Eli Sisters—“the fabled Sisters brothers” (236)—are hired to kill a man and take a scientific formula from him in California during the 1851 gold rush. (I offered a similar plot summary in the previous chapter, with a different emphasis.) Instead, they cross their own employer to join the scientist and participate in his experiment. The scientist is really a hybrid of pre-modern alchemist and modern technician; his formula is “a *diviner*” (191), and he plans “to dam a river” (223) and then flood the resulting pond with the formula to make the gold glow, thereby enabling rapid and effective panning for gold. Unfortunately, the chemical is toxic and quickly burns the men wading in the river. The scientist’s name is Hermann Kermit Warm, and his warmth becomes an ironic, symbolic fire (perhaps also a symbolic whisky or firewater again) as he and his assistant are “immolated” (286) by the toxic spill. Eli and Charlie were not fully submerged and were exposed only once, so they survive—but Charlie loses his hand and his ability to work as usual: as a gun for hire alongside his brother Eli.

That the hand is a phallic symbol linked metonymically with the handgun was manifested to me in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (Leone, 1966), when the close-up of the hand of Angel Eyes by his holster and groin reveals that one of his fingers is missing a fingernail—implying a

vulnerability that proves true when Blondie kills him. In that film, Blondie gets the gold. In *The Sisters Brothers*, some Indigenous passersby steal the gold from the chemically injured white men (299–300).<sup>8</sup> The brothers cut their losses, choosing not to risk their lives by chasing the Indigenous people to recover the gold. In a related essay on the meaning of gold in HBO's *Deadwood*, Kyle Wiggins and David Holmberg argue that,

[i]n the Western, autonomy is commonly signified by a proficiency with firearms, which in turn gets morphed into the phallic worship that [Jane] Tompkins and [David] Lusted identify. Death and reproduction conflate, and the key instrument in the Western's crude symbolic order is something wielded by individual agents. However, this ideology is supremely dehistoricized, even within the genre's own timeless logic, and effaces the economic or material circumstances that dictate who can access power in the frontier. (293)

Instead, Wiggins and Holmberg claim, access to gold, not guns, is the more historically accurate opportunity to act. Although *The Sisters Brothers* is self-conscious about myths of the West, through its themes of pseudo-science, superstition, and cinematic mythopoeia (e.g., in the novel's "intermission"), it is not historical fiction; it is not that kind of revisionism. But it does adjust focus from guns to gold, and to the economic subtext of trading with "Indians" and taking "Indian" land. The implication is that the Western's idea of masculinity is premised on taking the land in order to gain agency through mineral rights. Similarly, *Deadwood* "reconfigures phallic power, one of the dominant signifiers in the traditional Western, as a guarantor of financial independence rather than its axiomatic meaning of sexual longevity or destructive authority" (Wiggins and Holmberg 284). In *The Sisters Brothers*, "phallic power" fails sexually *and* financially,

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8 For a transnational historicization of colonial resource extraction as a form of theft, and the re-appropriations that might ensue, see Fenn Elan Stewart's "Hiawatha / Hereafter: Re-appropriating Longfellow's Epic in Northern Ontario" (2013).

though Eli does succeed in murdering his boss,<sup>9</sup> what might be called an ironic gesture of “authority and independence from the boss” (Quam-Wickham 142). Then he and his emasculated brother Charlie give up their careers and go live with their mother in a matriarchal, fatherless home that codifies their symbolic relationship as sisters rather than brothers.<sup>10</sup>

The refusal to run down the “Indians” in *The Sisters Brothers* has a remarkable echo in Dayle Furlong’s *Saltwater Cowboys*. The latter novel’s plot has many of the Western’s conventions with the exception of a nemesis and a singular act of violence at the climax. The initial tension arises from the familiar tale of westward expansion for settlement and resource extraction, but instead of a nineteenth-century setting we have a late twentieth-century family from Newfoundland—as far to the East as you can go in North America—who move west to Alberta to work in the gold mining industry when the mines in Newfoundland lay off workers. So, when Jack McCarthy and his family move west with their best friends, another family in mining, he is soon involved in stealing gold from their mine alongside other men described only as “cowboys.” When they are eventually arrested, the novel implies that the police fail to recover all the stolen property, which Jack’s wife, Angela, gives to its one Indigenous character (246–7), Olive St. James. Furlong gives her an individual identity, unlike deWitt’s anonymous band of “Indians,” but her identity does not appear to be an entirely original creation. Olive St. James is a Cree musician seemingly styled after the Cree musician Buffy Sainte-Marie’s early costumes and performances, with a “feather at the back of her head, tucked into a buckskin headpiece, [that] was covered in red beads” (154)—a gesture to tradition but also potentially a stereotype of the “Indian” unable to modernize, a stereotype countered by Indigenous writers such as Jordan Abel and Thomas King, as seen in the second chapter of this book.

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9 Notably, in Jacques Audiard’s film adaptation of *The Sisters Brothers*, Eli does not have to kill his boss, who is already dead when they arrive to kill him. In the novel, Eli drowns the Commodore in his bathtub, echoing a theme of ironic cleanliness and purity from other Westerns (Gaines and Herzog 180). In the film, they find the Commodore in his open casket at the wake, and Eli punches the body, whether to be sure that he is dead or in anger at having missed his chance.

10 In contrast, in the Kiefer and Donald Sutherland vehicle *Forsaken* (Cassar, 2015), the gunslinger—John Henry Clayton (Kiefer Sutherland) returns to the home of his father, his mother having died years ago. In this case, however, it is the beginning of the story.



Here the plot implies the post-colonial guilt of wanting to give back, or surrender, to Indigenous people what was stolen by the whites, or it implies that the ultimate emasculation is to lose to the “Indians.” In *The Sisters Brothers*, Eli and Charlie effectively give their gold to the Indigenous interlopers by deciding not to pursue them. Rearmed, they could have tracked and killed them, who had only one rifle and numbered “a half-dozen” (299): odds that the brothers had easily defeated in the past thanks to their expertise as hired killers. If indeed it’s a gift, then, in *Saltwater Cowboys*, Angela’s gift to Olive is a similar, dramatically insufficient restitution: an afterthought and a gift unlikely to remain in Indigenous hands. Because the gift is golden in these novels, it is a symbolic attempt to pay penance and maybe even to recover phallic power. In *Saltwater Cowboys*, Angela has to wait many years to recover this power in the form of her husband, whose jail term makes him a shadow of the man he was. His release and their reunion hardly make for an optimistic ending. Like Charlie, he has been symbolically castrated, and, like the Sisters, the whole family has been emasculated. If the family represents some sort of union, as do the gold bands of marriage, then by synecdochal extension these families might represent a reconfiguration of national, federal power. I should say that *Saltwater Cowboys* was published in 2015, the same year in which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada published its final report (and in which Justin Trudeau and the Liberals gained power at the expense of Stephen Harper’s Conservatives). Widely discussed, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was and is Canada’s biggest anti-colonial project, one focused on addressing the harms caused by a policy of moving Indigenous children from their homes to residential schools to be forcibly assimilated into colonial culture. I wonder whether the novel was intended as a subtle commentary on the very late and questionably effective restitution offered by the Canadian government for its colonial project in the West. Regardless of the intention, *Saltwater Cowboys* implies a new Western mentality, one that *The Sisters Brothers* imagines as a sort of mature *Bildungsroman* about the development of sensitivity and conscience—the transformation, as Vanja Polić writes, of “a villain with a heart” (“Sisters” 139).

Giving the gold back to the Indigenous people happens more symbolically in Adamson’s *The Outlander*, when the historic landslide at Frank,

Alberta, in 1903 effectively buries the “black gold,” the coal, and keeps it in the earth to which Indigenous people have such an elemental connection in the Western. (The avalanche in *The Man from the Creeks* has less significance but conveys the dangers of the North and West just as well.) Prior to the landslide in her novel, Adamson describes an arrival at the mine as a movement “from wilderness to wasteland” (148). When the avalanche happens, Adamson describes it like so, in a quotation worth repeating from chapter 6: “This was no mere avalanche; the entire cap of the mountain was coming down toward the town of Frank. . . . For a full minute, the mountain seemed to billow, then slowly collapse, floating downward, lit palely from within. It luminesced from pure friction” (294). The coincidence of the historical town’s masculine name, Frank, with the landslide’s symbolic destruction of industrial masculinity must have seemed just right to Adamson. Murray and Heumann remind me that, in the Humphrey Bogart vehicle *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (Huston, 1947), one of the gold miners wants to decommission the mine because “[i]t’s the least we can do to show all our gratitude for all the wealth she’s given us.” In response, the miner played by Bogart says, “You talk about that mountain as if she were a real woman” (qtd. in Murray and Heumann, “Mining” 62). In *The Outlander*, after the dust settles there is a “terrible new landscape” (294), “terrible” partly because it reminds us of awe, of the awful, of the sublime nature that industry exploits and attempts to control. This nature is feminized in *The Outlander* as it is in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. As I concluded previously, the Frank Slide is, in effect, Mother Nature’s revenge against industry and the feminized landscapes of so many other Westerns, including *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and *Pale Rider*.

Furthermore, the consequences of nation making are not as expected; the nation making is supposed to be engendered by the self-made manhood that ensures that the nation’s citizens are both self-reliant and co-operative. In *The Sisters Brothers*, when Eli tells his brother, “This is the last job for me, Charlie” (216), he intends to live off his profits while ending his partnership with Charlie—which doesn’t happen, because Charlie’s emasculating injury reconfigures their brotherhood toward non-profit. In other words, their brotherhood is no longer in business; similarly, in *The Man from the Creeks*, Peek’s family business—that of prospecting and mining for gold—is abruptly terminated in the saloon by the murder of his

mother, Lou, and his symbolic father, Ben, by Dangerous Dan McGrew, leaving him at work as a tour guide who sells an oversimplified version of his own story to uncritical fans.<sup>11</sup> In *Saltwater Cowboys*, Jack and Peter could have remained friends if Peter had not insisted on continuing to steal more and more gold from their mine. In *The Outlander*, the collapse of the mountain above the town of Frank precedes the widow's fight with the twin brothers, which results in her being jailed for killing her husband. When she escapes, the twins are disheartened and cannot agree to pursue her again, because they associate her with "[t]he trackless eternity of trees" (379). Her integration into the "trees" is a symbolic power of connecting with nature that the men could not muster. Although we have seen this disappearance into the trees before, as a problematic mark of the Vanishing "Indian" in films such as *Dances with Wolves* (Costner, 1990), in these twenty-first-century Canadian Westerns, traditional masculinity is more likely to go the way of the dinosaurs. Such masculinity is the fossil fuel of culture: a force that has been powerful until now but must be minimized in favour of new masculinities oriented to the future.<sup>12</sup>

These themes of a futuristic masculinity associated with fuel appear with a twist in the 2008 film *Six Reasons Why*, directed by (and starring) Matthew and Jeff Campagna. *Six Reasons Why* is set in a near future in which oil wells have run dry and one of the most sought-after fuels is the battery. Thus, electric power has become the "gold." The men in the story (there are virtually no women) are variously driven by revenge, greed, and a desire to escape the desert, either back to their homes or across to the presumably still verdant (but never pictured) paradise in the West. In a revealing scene that establishes the environmental context, some of the men—who have monikers such as the Criminal, the Sherpa, the Nomad, and the Entrepreneur, no personal names—are thirsty from wandering in the Badlands. They are about to drink from a shallow river, which runs

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11 This outcome in *The Man from the Creeks* is echoed in Gil Adamson's *Ridgerunner*, which ends in Banff National Park. According to Bob Armstrong, "[p]arks are, after all, rife with our frontier fantasies. . . . They are where we seek an authentic experience in an area that has been artificially delineated as a wild place—supposedly stripped of human influence, except for that of commerce. They even provide tourism entrepreneurs with dreams of gold—yet another chapter in the ongoing quest for El Dorado" ("Writing").

12 An example of such new masculinities is *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), Ang Lee's adaptation of the Annie Proulx short story.

below a bluff where an abandoned oil well stands, but their guide warns them, “That ain’t no water. At least, not any more.” The implication is that the river was poisoned by the oil well. Later, they are sitting around a campfire at night. Until this point, the setting might almost have been confused for the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, but they had already exchanged a battery instead of gold. One of them opens the newly re-energized “tune box” and plays a country song—“drinking music, not talking music”—while they all drink too much sarsaparilla (itself possibly a symbolic gold, in light of *The Man from the Creeks*). The silliness and defamiliarization of the scene reframe the film as a parody of the Western, even if the remainder of the film is often serious and indeed portentous.

### Like Oil and Water: Horses, Trains, Car Culture

But the portentousness of *Six Reasons Why* is rationalized by the ecocritical theme of the end of oil and the transition to greener electric power. A subplot of the film involves the extension of an existing monorail out of the remaining communities, across the desolate Badlands and westward into an almost mythic utopian land. To me, the ambition of the plan can be discouraged as another colonial venture that will help the post-apocalyptic dystopia “travel” into the utopia by virtue of the train, whatever its power supply. The monorail seemingly wants to point—rather literally—to an Edenic gardenscape, but it also reproduces the imagery of colonial expansion that the train conventionally delivers in the Western, thereby calling into question the necessary alignment of ecocritical and anti-colonial ideals. In other words, *Six Reasons Why* is surprisingly complex and pragmatic: progressive ideals are not always compatible with each other.

Although there is no train in the 2010 Paul Gross vehicle *Gunless*, there is a North-West Mounted Police barracks that implies that the train has already reached the film’s setting in late nineteenth-century Alberta. Instead of the train, the only sign of industry akin to a mining operation is Jane’s (Sienna Guillory) windmill-powered well, which she is trying to complete to bring more water (not oil) to her farm. Having left her abusive husband in a backstory that echoes that of *The Outlander*, Jane is developing her self-reliance on the range, and the introduction of the Montana Kid shows him to be comparatively emasculated at every turn: hanging like a flaccid penis beneath his horse, handling a broken pistol, forced to

wear Chinese clothing that he seems to think of as feminine or at least too decorative for his manliness, ultimately begging for a showdown so that he can die in a secretly assisted suicide. But his agreement to help Jane finish the well is one step toward his integration into Jane's society, including that of her neighbours and the local NWMP. The well is a subtle suggestion that water (or wind), not gold or oil or electric power, will be the treasured resource of the future. (Hydro power plays out somewhat differently in Eastwood's *Pale Rider*, where the miners pressurize water to blast through the landscape in their search for gold, and where Preacher uses dynamite to destroy the hydro-power operation. *Pale Rider* continues to associate heroism with explosive power.) For the Montana Kid—later rather funnily unmasked as “Sean”—masculinity has to be adjusted away from the power of gunpowder and other earlier industrial technologies and fuels. More natural sources of energy are required, and *Gunless* proposes that they will be less dangerous and less deadly than the fiery fuels on which we still rely. To grow up from the Kid to Sean, he has to avoid certain kinds of power.

The traditional masculinity that Sean learns to moderate and complicate is specifically the industrial and nation-making masculinity that underlies so much of the anxiety about modernity in the Western more generally. In today's context, when a climate crisis is happening and Canadian and American federal leaders show little concern—or at least commit distantly to so few practical transformations of our power systems—these texts are a political critique. To me, the critique questions a style of conservatism that produces illusions of empowerment while subordinating individual men and their brotherhoods to corporate and national interests that do serious harm—to their individuality, their bodily coherence, their relationships, and their environment. Envisioning an ecocritical interrelationship between humans and the landscape, and all other animals with whom we should begin a rapprochement—is the way forward.

Emily Ursuliak's narrative poem and surrogate memoir, *Throwing the Diamond Hitch* (2017), puts a hitch in this plan, if only to tie it up differently later. Whereas the extractive industries in the previously considered texts are often linked with men's violence, vehicles powered by fossil fuels in *Throwing the Diamond Hitch* initially seem to be an attractive symbol

of empowerment—this time for women. (Indeed, it raises the question of how oil is gendered, if landscapes are usually gendered feminine and extraction masculine.) Ursuliak's book draws on her grandmother's diary of a 1951 road trip from Victoria, British Columbia, to Red Deer, Alberta, in a "beloved 1927 MG Roadster that Phyllis [her grandmother] and Anne saved up for and bought together for \$150" (1). They name the car Jason and learn how not only to push "his" buttons but also how to "dissect / his iffy engine" (11). Their ability to "dissect" implies that they are scientists of the roadster, and, billed as a Western, the book suddenly reminds me of the scientist Doc Brown (Christopher Lloyd) in the *Back to the Future* trilogy (Zemeckis, 1985, 1989, 1990), which features the iconic gull-winged DMC DeLorean coupe that the Doc has modified into a time machine and which culminates in a Western. In some ways, Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* (1992) is a better American comparison, because of its often rose-coloured look back to the same era of a regrettably emerging car culture when the halcyon days of necessary horses were still with us. In Canada, Brad Smith's *The Return of Kid Cooper* (2018) is similar. Set in 1911, Smith's novel memorably describes the advent of the automobile as "hard on the ears" (69): as a "loud cacophony of bleating and barking, as if a mutant strain of sheep had invaded the range" (17).<sup>13</sup> But Ursuliak's manipulation of symbols of time is a little more like that of *Back to the Future*. At the end of *Back to the Future II* (1989), Doc is in the now flying DeLorean when it is struck by lightning—a power surge that sends him back in time to the Old West in 1885. In the third and final film, Doc is unable to time travel from the Old West because a 1980s sports car cannot be repaired with the existing nineteenth-century technologies. There is no gasoline, for example, to enable the car to reach the requisite eighty-eight miles per hour and catalyze the "flux capacitor" of the time machine. Doc and his sidekick Marty (Michael J. Fox) try to use a team of horses to pull the DeLorean, but they fall short of eighty-eight miles per hour. (Doc then decides to push it with a dynamite-powered train, obviously.) The horse-car dynamic in *Back to the Future III* strongly relates to *Throwing the Diamond Hitch*, because Phyl (as she is known) and Anne have planned

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13 A subplot of *The Return of Kid Cooper* involves a crooked senator's role in an "interstate highway project" (97): roads are dirty.

not to drive the MG back to Victoria. Rather, they will go by horse, looking for alternatives to the car as in *Back to the Future III*.<sup>14</sup>

It is not explicit, but the MG and the horses in *Throwing the Diamond Hitch* enable a symbolic time travel: forward from a place marked by nineteenth-century empire (that of Queen Victoria) to a place marked as a future frontier—a once “open country” in the West. Red Deer also figures as a *past* frontier, because to Ursuliak and her readers Red Deer is a city with the heritage of ranchland and oil country all around it. Their travel also offers a freedom from men: weeks of independence and companionship on the road together. Whereas many formula Westerns, even by some women, “invoked values associated with the rural past, including a lost frontier, and looked backward in time to the female image that had pervaded the domestic novel for an earlier readership” (Yates 3), Ursuliak is recovering a more progressive “female image.” Although her image of “the rural past” seems fairly conventional, the sense of a “lost frontier” is less troublesome, partly because her travelling women do a circuit from Victoria to Red Deer to Victoria, leaving nothing behind—unlike the abandoned train from Don McKay’s *Deactivated West 100* (2005) that I mentioned in chapter 1, and unlike the destroyed train that Doc Brown leaves in the gully in *Back to the Future III*. They don’t stay. Vancouver Island and Victoria were and are colonized, but symbolically Phyl and Anne decolonize the landscape by leaving; they arrange to have their car driven home as they ride, refusing a modern technology while also not treating it as obsolete garbage in the process of experimenting with an alternative. In this symbolic decolonization, they reflect Caprice’s movement back home (but to the East—namely, Quebec) in George Bowering’s 1987 novel with her name as title, as explained in chapter 5, which also presents the most detailed account of Svetlana Boym’s typology of nostalgia in this book. By looping not only through space but also through time in her book, Ursuliak indulges in the restorative nostalgia of trying to piece together her grandmother’s road trip, but she also uses nostalgia

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14 The Western written by Sam Shepard in collaboration with director Wim Wenders, *Don’t Come Knocking* (2005), is another example: partly a road movie (through Utah, Nevada, and Montana), but one in which the movement is prominently on horseback. The main character, an actor in Westerns, unhappily leaves the set of a film and goes by horse instead of car.

as an occasion for reflection on, and critique of, women in the car (and truck) culture of the West.

The most obvious reflection on gender and fuel appears early in *Throwing the Diamond Hitch*. In spite of their affection for Jason, the MG, Ursuliak's speaker admits that

Jason's legacy [is]  
twenty years  
of breath  
by combustion. (9)

By naming "Jason" here, Ursuliak implies that "combustion" is men's "legacy" or responsibility, as with the historical Frank and the associated coal mine in Adamson's *The Outlander*—the mining and burning a cause of lung disease. Such an assignation would not be especially critical except that it is in the context of "breath." People and other animals need fresh air to breathe safely, and the West was once vaunted for its fresh air and other benefits of unpolluted nature.<sup>15</sup> In the context of combustion, of burning things, Ursuliak also calls a map "a route / scorched / against the land's will" (29).

Although there is not time or space to consider the implications of the potentially Gaian "will" here, Ursuliak elsewhere makes clear that we can respect the best interests of other animals and the land even if they cannot express these interests in human language. Ursuliak's speaker also admits that Jason and his ilk are at odds with their other favoured mode of transportation: the horse, an animal whose breath is true breath and far safer than that of a sports car. *Throwing the Diamond Hitch* has three notable horses: Monty, Peaches, and Pedro, the latter becoming one of the main characters. After seeing exactly the respect alluded to above, Anne says to Phyl,

in the West  
a man

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15 The West in North America in recent years has been beset by long droughts (especially in the American Southwest) and uncontrollable wildfires whose severity and frequency are associated with climate crisis, one result being air pollution.



gives a bigger house  
to his horses  
than himself. (19)

Later, when Anne and Phyl discover that Bun Bolton doesn't know how to tie the near-mythical diamond hitch, Bun gives them "dubious" (28) directions to another source, saving his better help for the horses:

His last act of kindness:  
some added padding  
to Pedro's cinch,  
his best sock  
cut up for the job. (28)

The alluring combination of sparingly resourceful pragmatism and simple generosity here seems to be an unheralded response to a statement from earlier in the book, in a poem about the celebrity sighting of one of the actors who played Clarence E. Mulford's turn-of-the-century cowboy, Hopalong Cassidy. Phyl claims that "Hopalong's too soft" (13). Rather, "a cowboy" is defined as being "lean . . . hard . . . well-weathered . . . preferably scarred. That's cowboy" (13). Only later does Bun's "act of kindness" toward Pedro demonstrate an arguably nobler cowboyishness, one strongly associated with the cowboy's sense of affection and care for the horse.

Thus, several scenes in *Throwing the Diamond Hitch* demonstrate a clash between cowboy culture and car culture (68, 86, 88, 99). In the poem "Barbed Wire," a speeding car almost hits Anne and Phyl on their horses: "The horses jolt" and as the dust settles we see that "[t]he car has cut / a black scar / through the grass" (68), almost hitting a barbed wire fence. The blackness of the "scar" evokes burning rubber, even though the surface is grass and not something harder; the point is that the environmental damage to the "grass" is linked so closely to the barbed wire, which is another form of "scar" on the prairie topography. (It is not that different from the symbolic "black scar" of the river in *Six Reasons Why* that is polluted or blackened by the oil well above.) In much of the West (and elsewhere), fences demarcate roads and thereby indicate directions, and Ursuliak comically reflects on this fact in "Getting Directions." With the

horses causing a traffic jam of “[b]unched cars,” the narrative perspective zooms in to the centre, where we find the horse Pedro staring at “the road sign / he reads / for directions” (86). As we saw in the previous chapter, Westerns often personalize horses, and so we later sympathize with the already lame Pedro when a blue Ford attempts to pass him and “his hind-quarters / grind / against the bumper“ (88). Luckily, the incident leaves only a “residue” (89) upon Pedro, and the car swerves into the ditch. (In *Back to the Future III*, the DeLorean is irreparably destroyed by a train: an Iron Horse—a related poetic justice for the automobile.) In one of the final poems, “The Home Stretch,” Ursuliak writes that “[t]he horses endure / trolley buses / and traffic lights” (99), but I like to think that they at least “endure” and could perhaps thrive again.

For Ursuliak, the horse is obviously more integral to the fabric of the Western than the car, but both resonate for the West today. I have already mentioned that Phyl and Anne’s route to Alberta is reversed by the return trip on horseback. Their circular route is almost metafictional, because Ursuliak frames the book with self-conscious metaphors of narrative—that is, the “strand[s] of story” (3)—hence the “fabric” metaphor. She states in the end: “Every hitch thrown / makes a fleeting story / from a line of rope” (102). The rope here is crucial, and so is the adjective “fleeting.” The title of *Throwing the Diamond Hitch* refers to “the packer’s knot” (25) used to secure a load to a moving horse. The Platonic form of the knot is one that will not come undone until the moment when it needs to be untied. In its resemblance to the symbol of infinity (the figure eight on its side, or even an hourglass), the diamond hitch is also a symbol of time, and time is tied to rare wisdom:

The search for this knowledge  
resulted in a string of names,  
...  
and so far none of them  
able to demonstrate the knot. (25)

Eventually, Phyl and Anne find a teacher and learn the knot, and the knot and its lesson are a microcosm of the larger story. Having learned the

knot, and thereby having completed the journey home on horseback, the speaker of *Throwing the Diamond Hitch* and the author of the book assert the centrality of horses in the genre. They have completed a circle, a return to a life less dependent on fossil-fuelled vehicles—a life of sustained, sustainable animal companionship.

When Phyl and Anne sell their horses in the epilogue, we learn that their shared experience was a “last hurrah” (103) before their respective marriages. As with the nineteenth-century Westerns by women that Norris Yates studies in *Gender and Genre* (1995), *Throwing the Diamond Hitch* “mute[s] the messages about competence and self-reliance conveyed through active heroines . . . by propelling these heroines into domesticity at closure” (5). One difference is that Ursuliak’s book is partly her grandmother’s memoir, so it simply conveys a truth about a time and place where women had fewer options: the 1950s were remarkably like the late 1800s. Another difference is that it does not quite have a happy ending for Phyl and Anne. Symbolically, their husbands replace their horses when they tie the knot of marriage, and the sense of loss (compounded when we read of Phyl’s funeral and Anne’s eulogy many years later) is of the close relationship between women and animals who are not men, despite masculine names such as Pedro. The sense of loss is that the women of the West lost something as we allowed car culture to overcome Western traditions of ranching, riding, and even storytelling. In response, the “search” is a Proustian and deliberate search for (a) lost time, a trip through time to one’s youth—but not our own youth. It is someone else’s youth, and it is filtered through “a fleeting story” “in a string” that could well describe the nostalgic transference or vicariousness of the horse opera itself.

## The Lasso

We will probably not see this way back from car culture and its associated freedom of mobility in the West or elsewhere. As I circle a rope around this book—more a performative gesture than a real attempt to tie something up—I reflect on Svetlana Boym’s sense of critical thinking about the emotional appeal of the genre of the Western. It remains a nostalgic genre that typically hopes to restore or regenerate unprogressive notions of human relationships based on gender, nation, and other constructs, while maintaining emotional distance from almost every other animal except

the horse. When we pair Boym's work with Richard Slotkin's career-long theorization of regeneration through violence, we readers of Westerns can see that the genre's emotional appeal is not only that of longing but also that of cathartic violence and, as an ironic result (because of the longing), closure. We want the story to end but not end. We crave the moral clarity of an ending, but we also yearn to keep a simpler life alive. The ambivalence can be especially bitter if we realize that we will not get what we want, because the past is not easy to retrieve in reality, and a neat resolution to our current problems is unlikely.

Progress is difficult because there is no consensus about what it would look like or how we would achieve it. But one of the insights of this study, and one of the areas of potential ethical growth in the Western, is in the fusion of horse and human in the centaur-like figures of the horsemen and horsewomen that appeared in the previous chapter, chapter 6, especially through the works of Guy Vanderhaeghe and Gil Adamson. I wanted the horseman/woman to call into question ideas of progress and regression related to the role of violence in human society, primarily to dispute (unfortunately not refute) the view that violence is still a necessary and evolutionary step. Slotkin's explanation of regeneration through violence exposes a myth that revisionist Westerns in the United States and Canada have questioned too, partly by imagining the social, economic, and environmental externalities or unacknowledged costs of this violence. For Canadian Westerns at least, the myth of regeneration through violence is revised through figures of degeneration rather than regeneration: violence unmakes men and their power, rather than remaking them and their society. Patrick deWitt's brothers, the aptly named Sisters, lose or give up their power (a little of both) and an associated style of violent masculinity. Their return home to their mother might well be a sign of a better society to come, but we do not see it in deWitt's book. In partial contrast, Emily Ursuliak's Anne and Phyl return to car culture and the heteronormative nuclear family, after their good life together on the road, and the ending is a calculated disappointment. For both writers, the real story is not in how it ends but what led to the end; however, deWitt shows us what we need to leave behind (a greedy world in which the lives of humans and horses are undervalued and prevented from going on together), while Ursuliak shows us what we needed to keep (a friendlier world in which

the lives of humans and horses can come together without judgment). As this book has demonstrated, the revisionism of the Western is informed partly by post-humanism and concepts of the post-human, which can also be found outside the Western in science fiction and other genres, concepts that shift the focus from humans to other animals and that question very seriously whether the reason and openness of humanism have much hope in the future. And as the Campagna brothers imply, we must also wonder whether environmentalism will be effective against the short-sighted visions of growth and commercial or colonial expansion that are sometimes believed to be unlimited.

Strongly associated with these post-human ideas is the ghostmodern trend in most of the postmodern Canadian Westerns that I considered in chapter 5, such as those by bpNichol, Michael Ondaatje, and Paulette Jiles. The ghostmodernism of these books situates the postmodernism of postmodern Westerns or post-Westerns as a way of thinking that is not merely an intellectual revision of an anti-intellectual genre; it is also an emotionally intelligent literalization of the feeling of being haunted by the past, a feeling similar to the reflective nostalgia that Boym explains. It is not as hopeful as bringing something back to life. Instead, it evokes fear and the uncanny. If you recall the signs of a Western ghost town in St. John's, Newfoundland, that I described in the opening paragraphs of this book, you might also be interested in a crooked headstone in the Belvedere Roman Catholic Cemetery in St. John's, where you can find the final resting place of William J. Carroll, sheriff of Newfoundland (1861–1940), and his wife, Mary Ryan Carroll (1867–1950). The epitaph reads "*Gloria in excelsis Deo.*" Although Newfoundland still has an Office of the High Sheriff for administrative purposes in the court system—and not because of any influence of a genre from the United States—I cannot help but see the headstone obliquely, through the lens of the Western, resulting in the displacement of the Western to the East and to the very years around the island's entrance into Confederation in 1949. Similarly, in Canadian literature, the weirdness of ghostmodernism helps us to reflect on the temporal distortion of the Western, its own haunting by the past and, just maybe, the prospects of certain futures—personal, familial, or socio-economic—as imagined more recently by Ursuliak in *Throwing the Diamond Hitch*. And in the same way that it helps to reverse timelines, it helps in George

Bowering's *Caprice* to reverse narratives of westering, back to the East, creating the thought experiment of what decolonization might theoretically or symbolically entail—say, honest valedictions, actual leave-takings from colonized lands and back to other homelands elsewhere.

But, in practice, postmodern Westerns in Canada have been more transnational than decolonial, as suggested by the complex positions of border-crossing authors such as Ondaatje and Jiles (and of course Kroetsch, and later examples such as Thomas King and Patrick deWitt). The transnational dimension of Canadian postmodernism aligns with one of the central tenets of this book, that the Western has had well over a century of being not only American. It is also not tantalizingly, totalizingly Canadian. (This book has not dwelled on the regional differences of Canadian Westerns, notwithstanding the significant space in chapter 1 that was devoted to regionalism in theory.) Bowering and Jiles in British Columbia, and Dayle Furlong from Newfoundland—and many in between—have written Westerns and post-Westerns with different regional preoccupations and movements toward or away from colonial centres. The scalar dimension of modernity (*pace* Arjun Appadurai) spatializes the Western by telescoping it from nation to region and back again, ultimately gaining the momentum to swing a pendulum across oceans. Sometimes it grows a region into a global mould; sometimes the mould breaks as the region grows too big. We are basically seeing an interplay—and a proposed, provocative interchangeability—of globe/nation/region, one that illustrates contemporary anxieties about identity, belonging, race, and tribe.

In another example of resisting conventional wisdom in this book, the theoretical discovery of chapter 4, on the 1940s pulps, was that postmodern Canadian literature might have originated earlier than we thought, partly because we define its period so often in terms of canonical literature that represents the so-called high culture. But it makes sense to have it begin with the archival rediscovery of the pulp fiction of Luke Price in *Dynamic Western*, with the antinomy of popular and literary cultures, as a transition from what in retrospect seem to be the pretentiously didactic novels of Ralph Connor and H. A. Cody. Connor and Cody, as novelists of the early Canadian Westerns (or, relatedly, Northerns or Northwesterns), were working through the regionalism of the Western and expanding it into national visions of white civility on a Western model. They were

aspirationally literary, but they are barely canonical even by today's more open standards. In chapter 3, I suggested that their status is in part a negotiation between genres (i.e., as crossover genres) that connote different values depending on whether adults or children are the primary readership. But in fact all genre has a crossover dimension, with the Venn diagram being a better model than the hierarchy. Crossover itself also enables us to conceptualize the border-crossing, transnational movements of the Western that are so central to this book. Nevertheless, hierarchy and categorical separation had ramifications on early Canadian Westerns; I read Connor's and Cody's novels for their Muscular Christianity but also for the devious pressures of the formulaic distillation of the Western genre—a deviousness perfectly embodied by Price's later hero, Smokey Carmain—on the upstanding moralism of their adventure stories.

But for my own attempt at ethical criticism, I began reading the literature of this book, in chapter 2, with Indigenous perspectives on the Western genre. Many studies of Indigeneity by and for Indigenous peoples exist, but there are very few on Indigenous views of the Western, and it makes sense that Indigenous writers and allies would echo and mock popular culture as a contested site of resistance to cultural imperialism and the colonial doctrine of the Western. In looking for an Indigenous alternative to the Western's John Wayne, I considered Thomas King himself as an author with some of the requisite star power; I also looked back to Gabriel Dumont as a "Canadian" alternative to Wayne as a hero and performer; but, ultimately, I turned to Zacharias Kunuk and Natar Ungalaaq's approximate remake and revision of John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), *Maliglutit* (2016), where a woman finally saves the man who was trying to save the women, and where land is not obviously divided along racial, cultural, or national lines.

Coincidentally, I see genre itself as a site of non-obvious demarcations, of relationality more than category. I would never insist that the relationship between Northwesterns and Westerns means that they are identical, but I do insist that they be read for continuity. Hybridity and crossover are the terms for the relationality of genre that I tried to explain throughout this book, especially in chapters 1 and 3. If categories can be neat and tidy, hybridity and crossover can mess them up. The continuity between classic Westerns and revisionist Westerns is in their shared settings and other

icons or conventions, but it is also in the gradual change of how much generic and moral messiness readers and viewers could tolerate. I have suggested throughout this book that the Western has tended to become less conservative and more liberal over time, especially in the genre's development in Canada, and such a change is epistemological. The makers of Westerns and their audiences have learned to tolerate and even enjoy uncertainty (of who the bad guy is, or what genre this really is). The post-modern condition has required us to accept uncertainties and multiplicities (and, yes, it tempts us or frustrates us with fusions and illusions of sameness). As a result, we cannot "think in silos" anymore, as the saying goes in academia. Interdisciplinarity, connection—the fragments of modernity are later reframed as pieces of a puzzle.

The conclusion of this book, with its emphasis on the relationality of living things (and even inanimate things) on Planet Earth, is a lesson from settler-colonial writers such as deWitt and Adamson—especially those with an affinity for companion species such as the horse, and especially those with a critical eye on late capitalism or perhaps more accurately late industrialism. This lesson precedes them in Indigenous traditions that are continued today by writers and directors such as King, Kunuk, and Garry Gottfriedson—and even from substantially post-humanistic writers such as Jordan Abel, who sees through the nostalgic guises of the Western to a deconstructed future in which decolonial dreams are conjured from a post-Western world. When I think of where we as a species are going, I think that people like me have much to learn from Indigenous traditions of knowing while not subjugating the land—or other species, given that it is increasingly practical for humans to survive in the Western world without killing them for food. Related non-Indigenous epistemologies with similar ethics are equally crucial. In spite of the isolationist, anti-globalist, adversarial dynamics that are emerging around the world, we must realize that many of our problems are global in nature and cannot be solved without extensive co-operation between countries and the existing blocs.

Why have there recently been so many new Westerns and Western-like books in Canada, as in the list at the beginning of this conclusion? To ignore this question is to risk marginalizing creative interventions by Indigenous writers in the "cowboys and Indians" narrative. It risks decontextualizing the historical popularity of genres that can reveal



ideological trends: the myths that we want to believe and reify. It might also perpetuate a false, often elitist, dichotomy between popular and literary cultures. The early twenty-first-century resurgence of the Western in Canada has major political implications, partly because the Western is so strongly associated with the United States, and partly because the Canadian appropriation of the genre entails a symbolic realignment of the geographic axis of western expansion in North America. One of the more interesting theories, as I explained in chapters 1 and 3, is that Canadian writers turn the idea of West northward so that Canada becomes the new frontier (or at least Western and Northern Canada do, sometimes for inhabitants of both Canada and the United States). Understanding this realignment will help us to understand colonization in general, whether territorial or cultural, from 1492 to the present; colonization is a process driven in part by an idea of the frontier that the Western illustrates more than any other genre besides science fiction, which derives its idea of a “final frontier” (i.e., outer space as described in examples from *Star Trek*) from the Western. And we must understand that regional concerns, which can echo Indigenous concerns, are becoming increasingly relevant as resistance to the homogenizing effects of globalization. Realignments of cardinal directions are, on the one hand, a destabilization resulting from globalization; on the other, they can be reassertions of regionalism and its potential to expand into larger conceptions of nation and world, a manifestation of the telescoping effects of modernity—and the Western—that can help as a cypher for where we are today.