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FROM STARVED ROCK TO CANCER ALLEY: SIMULATED VIOLENCE AND REPRESENTATIONAL COLLAPSE IN THE AMERICAN WEST

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ABSTRACT

At the start of the nineteenth century, the Louisiana Purchase created complex landscapes of cultures and ethnicities on the western peripheries of the Early Republic. While some feared that seemingly boundless expansion would threaten (white) American identity, others imagined the new frontiers as a clean slate on which the US could develop core values and engender its own unique cultural identity. Throughout the 1800s, axiomatic regeneration through (violent) experiences dominated peripheral-yet-central discourses of an ever-transforming American space. Shedding new light on the role of representation in the placemaking of the West, this article interweaves a reading of James Hall's short story "The Pioneer" (1835) and its serial killer protagonist with real-life experiences of violence recovered from travelogues and diaries, as well as their embodiments in material culture. I suggest that violence was not just a crucial driver of settler colonialism but also a narrative device that negotiated the discursive dynamics between reality and fiction, as well as spatial imaginations of center and margin in the nascent nation. The results are representational spectacles and excesses that rely on the conspicuous consumption of violence. As early examples of these discursive dynamics, under-researched texts such as Hall's become important pieces in the fictionalization of the West and its operationalization in the service of subsequent colonial projects. Today, western legacies of real-and-imagined violence remain present in cultural productions such as paintings, photography, and video games—all of which continue to threaten the representational collapse of the American West.

KEYWORDS

American West; representation; simulation; violence; settler colonialism

Introduction: America in Its Ideal Form

After 1803, incorporating the unmapped extent and ethnically diverse populations of the area covered by the Louisiana Purchase into the body of the Early Republic became a daunting task. Wondering which space would, in fact, be transforming which, American policymakers feared that political assimilation might jeopardize the fragile national identity of the newly independent United States. Federalist commentators cautioned against the cost of annexing Louisiana's 'great waste, a wilderness unpeopled with any being except wolves and wandering Indians'; others feared that an influx of Native American, French, Spanish, and Creole people from the West would irreversibly alter the Early Republic and strain relations between the northern states and their slave-holding compatriots in the South.¹ Among the highest tiers of government, strategies of ordering the unwieldy new territories had been envisaged before its legal acquisition from France. Unlike Hamilton and other skeptical Federalists, Jefferson saw the Louisiana Territory as a clean slate on which the seeds of republicanism would (literally) be sowed by planters and yeoman farmers at a democratic grassroots level. In this agrarian spatial imaginary, the nation would move on to replicate itself in a 'purer' form in the 'empty' spaces of the West.

The vocabularies of shape or gestalt reflect these dreams of an agrarian empire by signaling the geographic reformation of national identity. Especially the notion that 'the whole is something else than the sum of its parts' occupied the minds of Americans who understood the Louisiana Purchase not as a sure-fire road towards political fragmentation and ethnic commingling, but as a respatialization on a higher plane: the making-whole of America in its ideal form.² The reports of the Corps of Discovery were designed to lay the narrative groundwork of this psychosocial shapeshifting but did more to stir territorial desires and bloody conflicts alongside the developing ethnic frontiers. Focusing on the cultural work of violence as a lynchpin of placemaking in the American West, this article juxtaposes an analysis of James Hall's 1835 short story 'The Pioneer' with instances of nineteenth-century life writing, folklore, and contemporary material culture. It proposes that violence was not only a keystone of settler colonialism but also a narrative toolkit that bridges the gaps between idealized imaginations and dire realities of the American West to the present day. Bypassing the historical complexity and cultural diversity of what I call the unfamiliar West, storied violence amalgamates contradictory spatial imaginations into culturally coherent and politically sanctioned shapes of discourse. The results are representational excesses that mold the West into a seemingly familiar yet largely simulated space

¹ James MacGregor Burns, *The American Experiment: The Vineyard of Liberty, The Workshop of Democracy, and The Crosswinds of Freedom* (New York: Open Road Media, 2013), p. 518.

² Kurt Koffka, *Principles of Gestalt Psychology* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935), p. 176.

of highly consumable but increasingly dispensable spectacles of violence. Today, these spectacles are cast into new cultural forms, for instance in the video game industry's quest for ever-increasing realism. These logics of discursive placemaking threaten to dissolve the fabrics of historical truths, most notably the genocidal trajectories of settler colonialism. Importantly, they also create templates and vocabularies that can readily be transplanted to a global level to rationalize and justify present-day imperialist practices.

Simulated Fox Hunts and Narrative Massacres in “the Garden of Western America”

First published in 1835, James Hall's *Tales of the Border* is a collection of short stories set in the Louisiana Territory and, as suggested by the title, its bordering regions in the West. First indications of the author's approach in sketching the character of these regions already surface in the introductory remarks. Directly addressing readers and penned in a rather defensive tone, the preface reads almost like a disclaimer meant to deflect accountability from a writer at odds with his own position between the lines of historical reality and its dramaturgical fictionalization. 'Although the garb of fiction has been assumed,' Hall insists that:

the incidents which are related in these and other tales of the author are mostly such as have actually occurred; [...] In the descriptions of scenery he [i.e., Hall] has not, in any instance, intentionally departed from nature, or exercised his own fancy in the creation of a landscape, or in the exaggeration of the features which he has attempted to draw and if the fidelity of his pictures shall not be recognized by those who have traveled over the same ground, the deficiency will have resulted in the badness of the execution, and not in any intentional deviation from the originals.³

It seems unclear if by 'originals' Hall refers to natural features and topographical accuracy of the story's setting, or to some unspecified first-hand accounts of western travelers and settlers 'who have traveled over the same ground' and whose genuine experiences he fears to misrepresent. Considering the book's publication at a time when white emigration into the western territories began to reach a critical mass, Hall may even have added this disclaimer to exclude himself from personal liability as prospective settlers— in lieu of official guides and maps—could have used his descriptions as orientation aids during their journeys into uncharted spaces. Equally significant seems Hall's withdrawal into 'the garb of fiction' combined with the

³ James Hall, *Tales of the Border* (Philadelphia: Harrison Hall, 1835), pp. 9-10.

subsequent avowal of not having 'departed from nature, or exercised his own fancy in the creation of a landscape'. Apart from trying to create tension by positioning himself as an unreliable narrator, the author's narrative and personal discord with matters of authenticity that saturates the preface of *Tales* goes beyond merely stylistic considerations. Instead, tensions between fact and fiction deeply permeate the stories themselves, signaling a desire to depict accurate geographies and lifelike characters while at the same time assembling these 'cold facts' into meaningful human geographies at the country's peripheries.

In Hall's and many of his contemporaries' widely read works, this factional approach forms a narrative template; it becomes an archetypal pattern that engenders thematic spaces characterized by implied verisimilitude and facticity, oftentimes intensified by the inclusion of gruesome and morally liminal elements. To use a theater analogy, these spatio-narrative blueprints often work like moveable pieces of scenery. These set pieces are supplemented by the subjective and blunt interventions of an authorial narrator who attaches meaning to the events to counteract the unfamiliarity of readers with spaces such as the Louisiana Territory. 'The Pioneer' frames the western borderlands of Illinois as characterized by self-replicating patterns of violence and counter-violence between native inhabitants and encroaching settlers. The story is focalized through the eyes of an unnamed frontiersman who 'pushed forward in advance of the main body of emigrants, who were rapidly but quietly taking possession of the fertile plains'. His traversal beyond semi-peripheral spaces thus makes him special and vests him with heightened placemaking power, derived from his translating into geographic praxis the democratic-individualistic virtues of the American nation by moving 'in the full enjoyment of that independence, and freedom from all restraints'.⁴ Through his entering the liminal territories ahead of the swelling emigrant masses, the narrator encounters cultural geographies not only alien to himself but also wide open regarding empirical, 'objective' description and semantic mapping for readers in the East.

This twofold openness allows Hall to assume the role of a synthesizer between subjective and objective narrative dimensions. He can fold them into a factional narrative by constructing a personal tale without 'exercis[ing] his own fancy in the creation of a landscape' (Hall, p. 9). As Deleuze notes, this aesthetic stratagem 'posits form as folded, existing only as a 'mental landscape' in the soul or in the mind, in upper altitudes: hence it also includes immaterial folds'.⁵ To achieve this folding-together and establish his placemaking authority, the nameless pioneer

⁴ James Hall, 'The Pioneer', in *Tales of the Border* (Philadelphia: Harrison Hall, 1835), pp. 13-14.

⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (London: Athlone, 1993), p. 35.

enmeshes historical facts with yarns and legends as he travels the West alone on horseback, imbued by the sensation that he was 'going singly to sea' (Hall, p. 19). When he encounters a distinctive rock formation on the shores of the Illinois River called Starved Rock, for him it becomes tantamount to the character of the place's native peoples. When he relates the 'Legend of Starved Rock', he imagines them as different from their brethren in the East, where '[t]he spirit of the red man was broken by repeated defeat [...] He had become accustomed to encroachment, and had learned to submit to that which he could not prevent' (Hall, p. 14). In contrast, the native protagonists at Starved Rock are viewed through the lens of conventional 'Injun' stereotypes rooted in an 'insatiable and ever vigilant thirst for vengeance [and] unconquerable endurance of suffering' (Hall, p. 16).

Although Hall does not give specific names and dates, the legend most likely refers to the famous Ottawa chief (and later namesake of a General Motors automobile brand) Pontiac, who was treacherously murdered during a tribal council meeting in the 1760s.⁶ After the subsequent skirmishes, the surviving members of the Illinois sought shelter atop a prominent rock formation, which they believed to be inaccessible to their assailants. Leaving them without food and water, what would eventually become known as Starved Rock quickly turned into a death trap. Hall's I-narrator goes on to compare the refugees' tragedy—related by the sole survivor, 'a squaw, whom [the Ottawas] adopted into their own tribe, and who was yet living, at an advanced age, when the first white men penetrated into this region'—with the merits of 'scientific' and 'civilized' European traditions of warfare:

We admire the genius that plans, and the talent that executes, a successful stratagem, and pay the homage of our respect to any bright development of military science. Courage always wins applause; we cannot withhold our approbation from a daring act, even though the motive be wrong. But bravery on a fair field, and in a good cause, becomes heroism, and warms the heart into an enthusiastic admiration. How different from all this, and from all that constitutes the chivalry of warfare, and how like the cold-blooded sordidness of a deliberate murder, was that savage act of starving to death a whole tribe, – the warriors, the aged, the females, and the children!

⁶ John Gunnell, 'Pontiac is 75! From GM's Value Leader to wide-tracking High Performance, It's Been quite a Ride' *Popular Mechanics*, 178 (2001), p. 98.

(Hall, pp. 17-18)

In this solemn and moralizing depiction of a violent region and its cruel inhabitants, Hall mixes anecdotal factoids of Native American history with his opinions about the 'chivalry of warfare' and 'that savage act' at Starved Rock. In 1911, the setting of this grim folklore became part of an eponymous State Park in Illinois. According to the park's official website, 'true adventure awaits you [...]. How about a cabin to stay in?'.⁷ The figure of the cabin here provides a fitting example for the creation of simulated westernness and the 'dissimulation' of actual western histories of violence and colonialism. Today, not comfortable resorts but rustic log cabins, tents, and perhaps (motorized) trailers represent the most 'western' of dwellings that promise the most genuine experience. In the early days of western tourism, the selling points for these experiences were oftentimes not jingoistic frontier myths but transatlantic assemblages with the romantic sceneries of Europe: 'California was the Mediterranean, a transplanted Italy; Colorado was Switzerland, with replicas of the Alps. Western resort hotels had [...] to match European luxury; for this elite and well-financed type of tourist, European-like scenery had to be accompanied by European-like buildings and services'.⁸ This does not mean, however, that these experiences were less unreal and sometimes borderline absurd.

For instance, western historian Patricia Nelson Limerick reports that in Colorado Springs upper-class tourists aped the lifestyle of British aristocrats with lavish suppers, dances, and polo games. Somewhat breaking the illusion, a lack of foxes in the area meant that American elites had to content themselves with chasing after coyotes on horseback (Limerick, p. 20). In the twentieth century, similar performances peaked in places such as Las Vegas, showing how simulations can overtake personal experiences of 'the real thing'. What Baudrillard termed disneyfication 'is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation'.⁹ Limerick mentions a lesser-known (but arguably more amusing) example of western simulacra, which occurred in the town of Kellogg, Idaho. After the demise of its longstanding mining and logging industries, Kellogg received federal grants to help revamp its blue-collar image into the guise of a picturesque ski resort. This confronted the town council with the difficulty of

⁷ Illinois Department of Natural Resources, 'Starved Rock State Park', 2021

<<https://www.starvedrocklodge.com/starved-rock-state-park/>> [Accessed 18 January 2023].

⁸ Patricia Nelson Limerick, 'Seeing and Being Seen: Tourism in the American West', in *Over the Edge: Remapping the American West*, ed. by Blake Allmendinger and Valerie J. Matsumoto (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 20.

⁹ Jean Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and Simulations', in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Mark Poster (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 172.

selecting a proper theme for the newfangled resort. Because most of its competitors had opted for ‘western Americana’, Limerick notes that:

Kellogg settled on “Old Bavarian” as its image of choice. Not everyone was enthusiastic. “I have,” said one resident in a wonderful and memorable line, “some real reservations about going Bavarian.” [...] “So you have some reservations about going Bavarian,” one wants to say to the speaker from Kellogg. “Would you have any reservations about going back to mining? Isn’t a bit of Alpine bric-a-brac a small price to pay compared to those earlier prices of acid rain, pollution, deforestation, and cyclical economic collapse?” [...] [T]he residents of Kellogg, Idaho, may feel a little goofy in their pinafores and lederhosen, but wearing silly clothes is a small price to pay for the escape from environmental injury and economic instability represented in the town’s old smelter.

(Limerick, pp. 27-8)

In contrast to the excesses of German-American simulacra, PR statements on the Starved Rock State Park website fully embrace the dynamics of a more clearly bounded westernness, whose most fascinating and bone-chilling stories were canonized by authors like James Hall. These scripts of westerners, it seems, are sold as authentic because they are ingrained in the western landscape itself. At Starved Rock, they are set in stone to be relived, touched, and copied indefinitely. ‘Here is the same soil upon which the Indians trod,’ the website proclaims, ‘the same rocks and some of the same trees now standing, saw the stirring events of those earlier times [...] Here people have lived, prayed, fought and died more than two hundred years ago [...] Thousands of them resolved to dust upon this rock and within range of our vision’ (*Illinois Department of Natural Resources*). On the one hand, the notion that this imaginary dust as a spatial marker of tribal barbarism, violence, and genocide still exists atop a rock and can be felt under one’s hiking boots and breathed into one’s lungs may be disturbing and somewhat tasteless. On the other hand, this example of sensory placemaking is a consequence of the spatial format of the unfamiliar West, whose discursive boundedness escalates through repetition and can now only be pried open forcefully and accessed through ever more violent and shocking representations.

Exploring sites of simulated violence and suffering such as Starved Rock, one might find some actual historical artifacts: an arrowhead carved from stone or buried bone fragments exposed by erosion. These can be photographed or picked up and shown to one’s peers at the

nearby lodge, making the western experience even more valid and following the invitation of marketers to ‘let your imagination ponder [...] and see if you can sense what it was like ages ago, when they were here!’ (*Illinois Department of Natural Resources*). By couching together Native American pseudo-history and Euroamerican normative morality, Hall’s rendition of the events at Starved Rock engenders a mythical space whose senseless violence seems distressing and utterly unfamiliar. It represents a cautionary tale that not only cautioned prospective settlers against the danger of vicious Indians but also contained a moral lesson by allowing that ‘[t]here is nothing in it of the pomp, or pride, or circumstance, which often deceive us into an admiration of deeds of violence’ (Hall, p. 17). Conversely, today’s oftentimes touristic and experience-centered spatial discourses of the West frame public consciousness of sites like Starved Rock—and simultaneously their economic *raison d’être*—both in opposition to and based on this unfamiliarity: Violence and warfare no longer are experiences to be circumvented or at least mitigated by civilized moral principles, as Hall suggested. They are no longer connected to personal risks and excesses that accompanied the conquest of borderlands. Instead, they have turned into cognitive necessities that enable individual and collective participation in the West as the ideological kernel of American identity by ‘establishing connections between the individual and the archetypal, the singular and the universal’.¹⁰

In other words, the West is compiled reductively through factional amalgamations and therefore inherently violent. In turn, the West is itself violated through its reductive representations. To overcome this twofold violation and to remain subjectively knowable and recognizable, spectacles of violence, disaster, and atrocity are needed. These involve ‘public representation[s] of violated bodies, across a burgeoning range of official, academic, and media accounts, in fiction and in film [and have] come to function as a way of imagining and situating our notions of public, social, and collective identity’.¹¹ Without its hallmark viciousness, the American West loses much of its geographic identity. Places such as Starved Rock reveal how Hall and other writers prefigured dominant representation of violent spaces as a primary theme that regulates regional (western) and national/imperial (American) myth-making in the age of mass media. Imagining a popular western discourse that forgoes its ordering alongside the violence-as-spectacle of shootouts, vendettas, and the killing of ethnic Others then prompts unsettling questions regarding the transference of these logics to the stage of global politics as a space of imperial and hegemonic westernness. It moreover asks what happens if, like a word that is

¹⁰ Richard Slotkin, ‘Dreams and Genocide: The American Myth of Regeneration Through Violence’, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, V (1971), p. 38.

¹¹ Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America’s Wound Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1998), p. 21.

repeated until it loses all meaning, America's geopolitical dominance is gradually destabilized by the semantic deflation of violent westernness as one of its key signifiers.

While this question, at least for now, remains without a straightforward answer, some clues emerge in the plot of James Hall's 'The Pioneer'. Leaving Starved Rock, the story's protagonist enters the Great Plains. He allocates this space by describing its features and the natural splendor of the colorful flower carpets that cover the prairies during spring. Diana Quantic remarks that '[d]escriptions of the Great Plains landscape repeat familiar features that have become a kind of mythic shorthand readers recognize: the buffalo hunting grounds, the sea of grass, the great American desert, the Garden of the World'.¹² Exposed on these sublime but barren plains, the pioneer gets soaked by a torrential downpour that 'ran down [his] boots until they overflowed' (Hall, p. 22). Feeling like 'a drowned rat', he encounters another lone traveller who introduces himself as a Methodist priest. The strangers decide to join company and travel together westwards (Hall, p. 22). Proving their sturdiness to each other by negotiating swelling streams and steep ravines, the 'casual acquaintance ripened speedily into intimacy' as the narrator becomes intrigued by his companion's 'peaceful garb and holy calling [that] were entirely inconsistent with his military bearing, his keen jealous eye, his intimate acquaintance with the artifices of the hunter, and the wistful glances which I sometimes saw him throw at the rifles of the persons we occasionally met' (Hall, p. 31). Finally, the actual pioneer's tale begins in the form of the peculiar priest's life story, told in first person and inspired by the grandeur of the western landscape itself:

Sometimes a particular state of the atmosphere, the position of the clouds, and the distribution of light and shade, give a character to the landscape which transports me back in a moment to the days of childhood, and pictures, in living truth upon my imagination, an event which occurred under such circumstances, as to have connected it indissolubly with those natural appearances.

(Hall, p. 32)

The priest's autobiographical narrative relates his transitory movement alongside the peripheries of Kentucky, Illinois, and the Louisiana Territory, which results in his own perpetual brutalization. The farther he moves west to escape the traumas of his childhood, the more he becomes entangled in a self-enhancing cycle of violence committed either by or against natives.

¹² Diana D. Quantic, 'The Great Plains', in *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America*, ed. by Charles L. Crow (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), p. 213.

Having spent his childhood in an isolated Kentucky cabin, he describes his family's isolated but picturesque subsistence in what he believed 'should be the garden of Western America' (Hall, p. 34). The family's agrarian serenity, however, is constantly tarnished by rumors of atrocities happening in the region. Amplified by the family's spatial seclusion, fears begin to haunt them and take the form of ever-darker visions and dreams, reminiscent of the collective delusions and moral panic of the Puritan witch crazes. '[T]here was the continual terror of the savage,' the priest tells his travel companion, 'pressing like the hideous monster of an unquiet dream, upon [my mother's] bosom [...], dreading the moment when the stealthy footstep of the Indian might invade the sanctity of her dwelling' (Hall, pp. 37-38). Over time, the household and their far-away neighbors work themselves into a frenzy over an impending assault, which they constantly simulate in their imagination. They spin a web of gossip and rumors that casts Indians as monsters and eternal enemies:

The word *Indian* conveyed to our minds all that was fierce, and dangerous, and hateful. We knew what we had ourselves suffered from this ferocious race, and we saw that others lived in continual fear of them. We heard the men talk of "hunting Indians," as they would speak of tracking the beast of prey to his lair—and the women never met without speaking of the abduction of children, or the murder of females.

(Hall, p. 44; italics in original)

As these fictional outrages accumulate, they begin to encroach upon the family's sense of reality and produce a mindset of unfamiliarity. This constant dread taints their formerly pastoral existence through their 'repeating tale after tale, each exceeding the former in horror, until the whole circle became agitated with fear, the candles seemed to burn blue, and the slightest sound was considered as a prognostic of instant massacre' (Hall, p. 44). At the same time, the priest contradicts this lopsided picture of white victimhood by casually mentioning that he 'had been taught to consider the slaying of an Indian as an act of praiseworthy public spirit' (Hall, p. 44). This mental construction of violent westernness shares similarities with the instances of touristic hyperreality discussed above, resulting in a psycho-spatial limbo where cognitive mapping and physical environments slowly drift apart and lose their direct correlation. For Baudrillard, the result is a hyperreal condition that culminates in the absurdity of the 'mad project of an ideal coextensivity [sic] between the map and the territory' (Baudrillard, p. 166). The events of Hall's story become archetypal examples of Baudrillardian simulacra that realize said 'ideal

coextensivity': One by one, the family members fall prey to violent acts that are hauntingly similar to those they had previously fantasized about. First, the priest's father is ambushed and killed while working the fields. Later, his little sister is abducted, and finally, his mother and uncle are mutilated before his very eyes, which he recalls in a gratuitously graphic crescendo of cruelty:

We came near enough to see the bodies [...] stretched lifeless on the ground, or struggling in the agonies of death surrounded by the monsters, who were still beating them with clubs, and gratifying their demoniac thirst for blood in gashing with their knives the already mutilated corpses. Never did I behold a scene of such horror—language has no power to describe it, nor the mind capacity to obliterate its impressions. Men, women, and children, were alike the victims of an indiscriminating carnage. The hell-hounds were literally tearing them in pieces,—exulting, shouting, smearing themselves with blood, and trampling on the remains of their wretched victims.

(Hall, pp. 69-70)

Deeply traumatized by these horrifying events, the orphaned adolescent leaves the wilderness and moves to Kaskaskia, Illinois, a small settlement just west of the Mississippi River. He spends his days erratically ranging the woods, honing his trapping and shooting skills and vowing revenge for the loss of his family. Roaming the ethnic borderlands of Illinois, he fosters paramilitary tactics and finally puts into action his personal vendetta against a band of outlawed natives whom he believes to be the killers of his family. After tracking them down and exacting bloody retribution according to the *lex talionis*, however, he still cannot find peace. Instead, the self-styled vigilante begins to 'feel an insatiable thirst for the blood of the savage'. Indiscriminately, he murders every nonwhite person he encounters at the frontier as he 'strolled off to the woods to kill an Indian, as another man would seek recreation in hunting a deer or a panther' (Hall, pp. 80-82).

Pointing to the origins of simulated and repeated patterns of western violence, Hall's descriptions are hauntingly similar to events that occurred some twenty years later on October 28, 1855, during the so-called White River Massacre near Auburn, Washington. This region close to Seattle has been described as a 'traumatized landscape' and 'SlaughterTown' and houses the first historical record of a serial killer in US history. Joseph Brannan was homesteading in the White River Valley during the mid-1800s when his brother William, his sister-in-law, and their infant child

were murdered.¹³ Although reliable sources are scarce, some claim that ‘Mr. [William] Brannan’s body was found in the house and his body was cut to pieces [...] Mrs. Brannan’s dead body was found in the well with her baby in her arms [...] She had been stabbed in the heart and in the back of the head’.¹⁴ Following the gruesome discoveries, historian Knute Berger relates that—much like Hall’s protagonist— ‘Brannan took it upon himself to seek revenge [and] For years he murdered Indian men he thought responsible for his brother’s family’s death [...] He became a serial killer and only stopped when his fiancé begged him to end his reprisals’.¹⁵ The random murders committed by Hall’s protagonist in ‘The Pioneer’, however, are not only portrayed as the pathological acts of a traumatized individual; they also become a morally ambiguous yet highly effective nation-building practice, for instance when the priest states ‘I believed that in killing a savage I performed my duty as a man, and served my country as a citizen’ (Hall, p. 86).

“Blowing His Head into Atoms”: Native Genocide, Contaminated Cattle, and Representational Collapse

With the emergence of US geopolitical power in the twentieth century, the moral reframing of indiscriminate killings as patriotic performances pervaded discourses about so-called collateral damage, for instance during the Vietnam War and more recently in connection to remote drone strikes in the Middle East. The discursive origins of these debates can be traced back to the western frontiers, for instance the Wounded Knee massacre as witnessed by journalist and ethnographer James Mooney during his investigations of the pan-tribal Ghost Dance movement. On December 28, 1890, around 350 starving Lakota refugees, many of them women and children, were traveling to the Pine Ridge Reservation to surrender themselves to American troops. When they encountered them, they were surrounded and mowed down with machine guns, allegedly because of a ‘misunderstanding’.¹⁶ A famous photograph recorded the aftermath and shows the frozen corpse of Lakota leader Unphán Glešká (Spotted Elk aka Big Foot) on the ground. A handwritten inscription on the picture’s negative bears the official version of the events: ‘Big Foot

¹³ White River Valley Museum, ‘Person Record: Brannan, Joseph’, <<http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=blackman-farmer&id=I390888>> [Accessed 18 January 2023].

¹⁴ Kathy Weiser, ‘White River Massacre, Washington’, *Legends of America*, December 2020 <<http://www.legendsofamerica.com/white-river-massacre-washington/>> [Accessed 18 January 2023].

¹⁵ Knute Berger, ‘“SlaughterTown”: Ghosts of a traumatized NW landscape’, *Crosscut*, 13 April 2017 <<https://crosscut.com/2017/04/slaughtertown-ghosts-of-a-traumatized-nw-landscape>> [Accessed 18 January 2023].

¹⁶ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), pp. 154-155.

chief of the Lakota Sioux who defying the US tried to escape their reservation confinement lies dead in the snow at Wounded Knee'.¹⁷

At the close of the nineteenth century, photography and other technical advances for the first time allowed observers to capture the violation of Native Americans and other nonwhite inhabitants of the West. Introducing photography and other visual media, however, did not mean that literary accounts lost their impact. Even with today's virtually unlimited access to a plethora of audiovisual sources, written accounts continue to effectively convey the power of (violent) spatialization processes. Written accounts such as George Catlin's reflections concerning the fate of many native inhabitants of the Louisiana Territory retain their significance, for example when Catlin notes that 'twelve million of whose bodies have fattened the soil in the mean time; who have fallen victims to whisky, the small-pox, and the bayonet'.¹⁸ Still, many American 'citizens were first introduced to the wilderness by images', often by the epic paintings of Albert Bierstadt and other Hudson River School painters who channeled the western *genius loci* through ethereal panes of light-flooded grandeur. 'Late in the century,' Vicki Goldberg explains, 'virtually every home had a viewer for 3-D stereographs of a West that looked like a fable'.¹⁹ While new technologies produced more lifelike representations of western places and peoples, the discursive bandwidth of an emerging mass cultural vocabulary concurrently became more reductive as it integrated itself into the nations' ideological axioms of frontier culture and manifest destiny.

Before scholarly movements like New Western History decried the ever-narrowing imaginative scope of the West, artists and photographers worked at subverting the representational idealization of the western sublime. Groups like the New Topographics, the Rephotographic Survey Project, and the Atomic Photographers Guild insisted the West be depicted as a social space and a twofold 'dumping ground'. First physically, as even in the "last wild place", the remote ranges and lost box canyons, the Pentagon's jets are always overhead'.²⁰ And second metaphorically, as the West became the graveyard of dead and dying spatial imaginations such as Jefferson's agrarian empire, whose last remnants were buried for good by

¹⁷ US Department of Defense, "Big Foot, leader of the Sioux, captured at the battle of Wounded Knee, S.D.' Here he lies frozen on the snow-covered battlefield where he died, 1890', 1890 <<https://catalog.archives.gov/id/530805>> [Accessed 18 January 2023].

¹⁸ George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1857), p. 22.

¹⁹ Vicki Goldberg, 'Ansel Adams in a New Light', *The New York Times*, 17 January 2019 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/17/arts/design/national-parks-ansel-adams-photography.html>> [Accessed 18 January 2023].

²⁰ Mike Davis, 'Dead West: Ecocide in Marlboro Country', in *Over the Edge: Remapping the American West*, ed. by Blake Allmendinger and Valerie J. Matsumoto (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 347.

the Great Depression and Dust Bowl of the 1930s. In that same decade, Ansel Adams' so-called straight photography 'with its sharp focus, vivid contrast and compositions that amounted to studies in form and light' transposed the majesty of western National Parks into the aesthetic language of modernity (Goldberg). During the 1970s, the above-mentioned groups:

mounted a frontal attack on the hegemony of Ansel Adams, the dead pope of the "Sierra Club school" of Nature-as-God photography. Adams, if necessary, doctored his negative to remove any evidence of human presence from his apotheosized wilderness vistas. The new generation has rudely deconstructed this myth of a virginal, if imperiled nature. They have rejected Adams's Manichean division between "sacred" and "profane" landscapes, which leaves the already altered and inhabited parts of our environment dangerously open to uncontrolled exploitation. Their West, by contrast, is an irrevocably social landscape, transformed by militarism, urbanization, the interstate highway, epidemic vandalism, mass tourism, and the extractive industries' boom-and-bust cycles.

(Davis, pp. 346-347)

Intriguingly similar to Ansel's carefully modeled cutouts of the West, Hall's narrator also attempts to become what Truman Capote in an interview about his nonfiction novel *In Cold Blood* (1965) described as a 'literary photographer' as he arrogates to adopt a 'narrative form that employed all the techniques of fictional art but was nevertheless immaculately factual'.²¹ In contrast, Misrach's unfiltered depictions of desert fires, flooded gas stations, and dead animals document the western landscape's discursive and material brutalization. Again, these depictions underline the West's unidirectional representational scope that demands an ever more vicious imagery to preserve its impact on consumers. 'The Pioneer' is among the texts that fleshed out fundamental western tropes and narrative placemaking practices that eventually culminated in the fierce aftershocks which Misrach captured in abandoned trailer parks, stone swastikas laid out on desert highways, and—perhaps most powerfully—in the 'Dead Animals' series taken in the so-called 'Pit'. In oversized forty by fifty-inch color prints, the latter shows half-submerged animal cadavers, preserved by the desert climate and evocative of the apocalyptic imagery in Picasso's *Guernica*. The accompanying description explains:

²¹ Qtd. in George Plimpton, 'The Story Behind a Nonfiction Novel', *The New York Times*, 16 January 1966 <<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/97/12/28/home/capote-interview.html>> [Accessed 18 January 2023].

On March 24, 1953, the Bulloch brothers were trailing 2000 head of sheep across the Sand Springs Valley when they were exposed to extensive fallout from a dirty atomic test. Within a week first ewes began dropping their lambs prematurely – stunted, woolless, legless, potbellied. Soon full-grown sheep started dying in large numbers with the same symptoms – running sores with large pustules, and hardened hooves. Horses and cattle were found dead with beta burns. At final count, 4,390 animals were killed. Initial investigation by government experts indicated that radiation was the cause. However, when the Atomic Energy Commission recognized the potential economic and political liability, all reports and findings were immediately classified. The AEC did not provide a public explanation – a dry year and malnutrition were blamed.²²

Misrach's visceral images capture the aftermath of nuclear testing in supposedly empty southwestern 'national sacrifice zones' that have been permanently injured in the service of their country and its struggle against communism during the Cold War era. Corporate practices also produce what might be called environmental sacrificial zones, for instance the toxic concentration of petrochemical industries between New Orleans and Baton Rouge dubbed "Cancer Alley".²³ The historical trajectories of these logics of western violation, it becomes clear, subordinate and sacrifice human and nonhuman lives in the service of economic and national interests. These trajectories can be traced back to the letters, journals, and diary entries of nineteenth-century emigrants. James Cardwell, a forty-niner on his way to the Californian gold mines, relates in his journals that a Native American man:

remarked to me [...] that it never had been his nor the intention of any of the Indians to give up the country, but that they ment to let a few whites settle in here, and git as much property around them as they could, and there go to work and wipe them all out. [...] but now said he, we have waited and put our designs off too long, the whites have overpowered us, and he allmost went into fits with rage, his eyes were green. [...] I then and

²² Lawrence Rinder, 'Richard Misrach / MATRIX 126', *Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive*, 2022 [1989] <<https://bampfa.org/program/richard-misrach-matrix-126>> [Accessed 18 January 2023].

²³ Jeanne Willette, 'Richard Misrach: Photographing Horrible Things Beautifully, Part Two', *Art History Unstuffed*, 15 June 2018 <<https://arthistoryunstuffed.com/richard-misrach-photographing-horrible-things-beautifully-part-two/>> [Accessed 18 January 2023].

there swore [...] that if an opportunity ever presented to me I would kill that indian. I afterwards had the pleasure of shooting him, but it did not kill him.²⁴

Upon his arrival in California, Cardwell mentions the killing of a native prisoner called Sear Face who was 'looking for a chance to escape, and he made step as if he intended to run [when] one of the men shot him in the back of [his] head with [a] large size colts revolver blowing his head into atoms, instantly killing him' (Cardwell, p. 25). In Utah, a Mormon settler named James Godson Bleak records the lethal collision of native and Euroamerican spatial imaginations:

About this time [i.e., July 1864] an Indian chief died and the demand was made of the settlers for a white man to be killed to accompany their chief to the happy hunting grounds. This demand was, of course, refused and the indians prepared to enforce their demand. A collision occurred and five of the indians were taken prisoners. The white settlers used their best efforts to pacify the natives, but without avail. The indians were still detained as prisoners but two of them escaped and were followed and refusing to surrender, were killed. Afterwards the other three were killed. No whites were killed.²⁵

Indiscriminately killing natives in a similar manner, James Hall's vigilante in 'The Pioneer' has made a rule for himself to spare women and children. One day, he lies in wait and watches an indigenous family who made camp on the banks of a river. Watching the peaceful scene from a safe distance, he 'felt a malignant delight in the idea of invading this family as mine had been invaded, and blasting their peace by crushing their protector, *there*, on that very spot, in the presence of his innocent and helpless dependents' (Hall, p. 88; italics in original). Edging closer and slowly taking aim, he recognizes the European features of the woman and her uncanny resemblance to his mother. Shocked, he realizes that she is, in fact, his long-lost sister who was kidnapped by Indians as a child and is now:

the mother of a spurious offspring of that degraded race! [...] I looked at her children, and recoiled at the idea of the unnatural union which had

²⁴ James A. Cardwell, *Emigrant Company* (Berkeley: Bancroft Library Western Americana Collection, 1878), pp. 15-16; Misspellings in this and subsequent diary entries have been preserved from the originals.

²⁵ James Godson Bleak, *Annals of the Southern Utah Mission* (Berkeley: Bancroft Library Western Americana Collection, 1847), p. 189.

brought them into existence [...]. Instead of the lovely woman, endued with the appropriate graces of her sex, I found her in the garb of the wilderness, the voluntary companion of a savage, the mother of squalid imps, who were destined to a life of rapine; instead of a gentle and rational being, I saw her coarse, sunburned, and ignorant without sensibility, without feminine pride, and with scarcely a perception of the moral distinctions between right and wrong.

(Hall, pp. 88-95)

After overcoming his initial disgust, he decides to emerge from his hiding spot and confront the interracial couple. However, after confirming that the woman is indeed his sister, he fails to convince her to leave her husband and return to 'civilization' with him. Unsurprisingly, his flawed concept of morality is utterly foreign to the young family. Frustrated about the ultimate futility of his gruesome vendetta, he walks away and finally sees himself confronted by his conscience when he hears:

[t]hat small still voice, which cannot be suppressed, [and] again and again repeated the appalling question: "If they are murderers, what are you?" The difference, I replied, is that between the aggressor and the injured party. They burned the home of my childhood, and murdered all my kindred. I have revenged the wrong. They made war upon my country, ravaged its borders, and slew its people. I have struck them in retaliation. But had *they* suffered no injury? Was it true that they were the first aggressors? I had never examined this question. [...] for the first time in my life, I began to think it possible, that mutual aggressions had placed both parties in the wrong, and that either might justly complain about the aggressions of the other

(Hall, pp. 99-100; italics in original)

In his diary, the French-Canadian refugee Francis Matthieu describes similar dynamics of reciprocal violence and the responsibility of both sides. Matthieu mentions how 'a white man complained that there was an Indian who had stolen his wife from him [...] The old Dr. tied the Indian to a cannon and whipped him [...] Only two or three months afterwards a white man took an Indian's wife, and he did the same thing for the white man, he tied him to the gun and whipped

him'.²⁶ Western emigrant Esther Belle Hanna conveys the logics of violence and retribution that took place among a wagon train of white settlers: 'Saw 3 graves one was [...] of a man who was murdered yesterday, his name was Miller, the name of his murderer is Tate, who killed him in cold blood'.²⁷ Her entry on the following day states: 'Saw 3 graves one was th[e] grave of Tate the murderer of Miller, he was taken the next day after he committed the awful deed, tried by his company and some others, then hung' (Hanna, p. 11). During her journey across the Great Plains, Hanna counts graves, creating stark and existential between natural grandeur and the ephemerality of human existence: 'We saw some fine species of cactus today [...] we got one in bloom, very beautiful indeed. Saw a fresh grave today' (Hanna, p. 8). Her entry on yet another day of traveling the plains simply notes: 'Saw 4 graves today all children' (Hanna, p. 12). Unlike the sober objectivism exuded by Hanna's diary, more complex narrative patterns have congealed into the static landscapes that continue to inform popular imaginations of the American West as a stage for masculinity and psychosocial regeneration through violent encounters with Otherness.

Clyde Milner accordingly suggests that the 'West has been oversold and oversimplified as a vast vista of mountain, plain, and desert occupied by heroic, often male, archetypes noted for their violent actions'.²⁸ Over time and through endless repetitions of its symbolic patterns, the West has thus become inverted, resulting in the opposite. Creaking under their own semiotic weight, places like the Grand Canyon look familiar and evoke emotions and (false) memories even for those who have never actually visited them. Western representations collapse onto themselves 'as reality decamps into the image [and] the image ironically absorbs the space of the real'.²⁹ What could be called the unfamiliar West is a precursor of this collapse. Based in Puritan views of a diabolical wilderness, it channels the peripheries as realms of fantastical Otherness 'where wolves are white and bears grizzly—where pheasants are hens of the prairie, and frogs have horns!—where the rivers are yellow, and white men are turned savages in looks [...] Through the whole of this strange land the dogs are all wolves—women all slaves—men all lords' (Caitlin, pp. 105-6). Like the Old or Wild West and other symbolic spaces, the ideograph of the unfamiliar West has largely detached itself from experiential references and assumed an arbitrary, static, and canonical form. According to Limerick, the democratization of writing accelerated these processes as

²⁶ François Xavier Matthieu, *Refugee, Trapper & Settler* (Berkeley: Bancroft Library Western Americana Collection, 1878), p. 16.

²⁷ Esther Belle Hanna, *Diary of a Journey from Pittsburgh to Oregon City* (Berkeley: Bancroft Library Western Americana Collection, 1852), p. 11.

²⁸ Clyde A. Milner, 'America Only More So', in *Major Problems in the History of the American West: Documents and Essays*, ed. by Clyde A. Milner, Anne M. Butler and David Rich Lewis (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), p. 39.

²⁹ Richard G. Smith, *Baudrillard Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 96.

journal-keepers, diarists, impression-recorders, and word-mongers [...] could not look out a train window at a wide open western horizon without reaching for their pens. The result of their compulsive literacy was, by 1900, a western landscape blanketed by words, covered two or three inches deep with the littered vocabulary of romantic scenery appreciation.

(Limerick, p. 20)

Consequently, today's West can no longer—as Hall already felt the need to reassure his readers in 1835—be contained by the authorial curating of authentic experiences. Instead, it can only stay unfamiliar and wild in its own simulations. Next to literary renditions and Hollywood Westerns, these simulations nowadays also take material shape in historical re-enactments of famous battles and shootouts, as well as online marketplaces that sell 'original' western attire and faux sheriff's badges. The Mojave Muleskinners are an enthusiast group whose emulation of authentic westernness goes as far as composing semi-fictional eulogies for deceased members who are depicted on yellowed wanted posters under pseudonyms like "Buffalo Kid," "Sugar Britches" or "Misfire Mel".³⁰

James Hall's own 'authentic' western biography and experience as a circuit-riding frontier judge in Illinois made his stories more credible for an audience that read not only for pleasure but also to gather imaginative blueprints about their future homes in the West. At first glance, 'The Pioneer' seems far removed from twentieth-century nonfiction western reportages such as Hunter S. Thompson's drug-fueled fever dream of Las Vegas and Los Angeles. However, much like the Gonzo journalist's eccentric reflections, Hall's also overtake the generic conventions of the factual, objective reportage, thus highlighting similar issues regarding the (imagined) boundaries between author, text, and reader. Hall's narrative voice, in fact, regularly approximates the tone of a newspaper reporter, which cannot solely be attributed to his editing of several journals and gazettes. This journalistic knack becomes crucial for the story's placemaking strategy and is used to amend fictional elements with (allegedly) genuine histories and experiences. Historicizing fiction by placing characters in real-life and often morally ambiguous settings was an important stylistic technique of early American novels, influenced by Charles Brockden Brown's essays 'Walstein's School of History' (1799) and 'The Difference Between History and Romance' (1800). Reliance on anecdotal knowledge in fictional texts and their developments into narrative factoids is, of course, not unique to the American peripheries but 'can be traced from the sexual antics of

³⁰ Mojave Muleskinners, 'Memorial Page', *Mojave Muleskinners*, 2023
<<https://www.mojavemuleskinners.com/memorial-page>> [Accessed 18 January 2023].

persons in Boccaccio's Decameron in the 14th century, through the exotic fictionalised confessions of 18th-century French literature, to the amalgam of lived experience and fiction present in Henry Miller and Hunter S Thompson'.³¹ In the era of Scottish Enlightenment and Lockean philosophy, acknowledging clear boundaries between fact and fiction appeared pivotal as to not distort the newfound republican virtues of objectivism and reason. At the same time, these same republican virtues needed to be disseminated and made palatable to more than those interested in longwinded, fact-based historiographies of (western) biographies and political treaties. Attaching affect and excitement while interlacing historical facts into a spatially 'orderly' narrative—and thus creating historical fiction—became the task of:

[t]he fictitious historian, not the chronicler, not the political economist or moral philosopher, stands best equipped to render the new nation coherent and legitimate by providing a diverse people with a shared past that they do not yet have. [...] [H]istoriographical novels [...] at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, allow[ed] some to iterate a more unified, more complete U.S. entity based on a history that emerges from the imagination as much as the recalled experiences of men and women.³²

In contrast to Brown's romantic approach, Hall relies on depictions of settler-native violence and rugged western neologisms to vest his characters with rough-and-ready frontier attitudes. Appropriately, he concludes the preface to *Tales of the Border* hopeful that '[t]heir brevity will probably secure them a perusal, in common with the similar productions of the press' (Hall, pp. 11-12).³³ Robert Siegle notes that this balancing act between objectivity and subjectivity 'makes us uneasy by its apparently oxymoronic nature—its mixing of reality and fiction', which would become a stylistic feature of western literature from the journals of the Corps of Discovery to Cormac McCarthy's austere prose.³⁴ At the fin de siècle, this narrative synthesis already threatened to undermine the boundaries between real experience and their literary refractions. Later, it was the film medium, and now increasingly the video game industry, that produce a

³¹ Ewan Morrison, 'Factual fiction: writing in an information age', *The Guardian*, 2 March 2012 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/mar/02/fact-fiction-writing-information-age>> [Accessed 18 January 2023].

³² Amanda Emerson, 'The Early American Novel: Charles Brockden Brown's Fictitious Historiography' *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 40 (2006), p. 127.

³³ Hall, 'The Pioneer', pp. 11-12.

³⁴ Robert Siegle, 'Capote's 'Handcarved Coffins' and the Nonfiction Novel', *Contemporary Literature*, 25 (1984), p. 437.

‘scripted space’ of the West that ‘makes the replica more seductive than the original’ and ‘shatters historical distinctions between the real and the unreal by producing faux replicas of experience independent of the activity from which they derive’.³⁵ Video games now represent the largest category of the entertainment sector by far, raking in a global revenue of around 200 billion dollars at the time of this publication—more than the book, music, and film industries combined.³⁶ Scholars must keep up with these changing patterns of media consumption and engage with interactive media that shape the imaginations of future generations. While becoming more inclusive recently, video games work on expanding the scripted space of the West through obsessive pursuits to simulate historical realism. For example, players of *Red Dead Redemption 2* can not only indiscriminately slaughter non-player characters (NPCs) but also hunt, skin, eat, and sell the furs of around 200 different species of animals. In its open yet scripted world, the hyperreality of the West borders on the absurd as players can observe the testicles of their horses shrink in cold weather.³⁷ As Misrach and others recognized long ago, spectacles of representation and violence like these are the lifeblood that keeps the simulacral non-place of the West from collapsing into itself. Exploring how different styles and media negotiate western (un)familiarity then leads back to the discursive kernels of today’s US-dominated global order and the realization that, like the West as its most potent nexus of identity, ‘America, too, has entered this era of undecidability: is it still really powerful or merely simulating power?’³⁸

Conclusion: Western Legacies, Violent Futures?

Hall’s serial killer at last grasps the fatal logics of cyclical violence and revenge that shaped the West as he decides to repent from ‘the bloody path which [he] had trod through life’ by attaining priesthood and preaching forgiveness. This affords reliefs to his own conscience but ultimately adds further substance to the myopic axiom of the unfamiliar West, its spatialization through violence, and (post)modern excesses in simulated spectacles of westernness (Hall, p. 101). At the peripheries of the Louisiana Territory and elsewhere, violence became a prerequisite for placemaking processes connected to the continental imperialism of the Early Republic in what is

³⁵ Hal Rothman, *Devil’s Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), p. 13.

³⁶ Yiğithan Demirçin, ‘Global Video Games Revenue is Expected to Grow Strong and Reach Over \$320bn’, *Mobidictum*, 17 August 2022 <<https://mobidictum.biz/pwc-says-social-and-casual-gaming-is-fuelling-a-boom-in-the-industry/>> [Accessed 22 January 2023].

³⁷ John Wills, ‘Red Dead Redemption 2: can a video game be too realistic?’, *The Conversation*, 12 November 2018 <<https://theconversation.com/red-dead-redemption-2-can-a-video-game-be-too-realistic-106404>> [Accessed 18 January 2023].

³⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *America* (Brooklyn: Verso, 1989), p. 115.

commonly subsumed as settler colonialism. In doing so, as this article has shown, violence also turned into the narrative lynchpin of aesthetic strategies that aimed to couch diverse spatial imaginations and ethnic identities into coherent stories. With its desire to tell a veracious and morally substantial story, 'The Pioneer' reveals these dynamics by utilizing violence as a tool to bridge the gap between reality and fiction. Hall in this manner sowed the discursive seeds of an unfamiliar West as a space that was multi-layered and uneven, but must—either based on the psychosocial needs of frontier societies or the ideological demands of nation-building—be flattened through storytelling that violently cuts through the Gordian knot of the West's actual diversity. These findings emphasize the role of literary placemaking processes, yet also accentuate their limitations, arbitrariness, and hypotaxis in relation to cultural productions outside traditional literature, such as personal diaries or photography. The recent resurgence and global success of superhero movies have again underscored the hegemonic power of globalized US culture. *Avengers*, *Black Panther*, as well as other franchises, spinoffs, and crossovers from the Marvel and DC universes trace the frontiers between increasingly dire social realities and juvenile power fantasies. Like Hall's western borderlands of the nineteenth century, they construct simulated spaces in which idealized performances of heightened mobility, superhuman power, and regenerated masculinity become possible—energized, of course, by conflict, violence, and constant threats of total annihilation.

Simulations both in and of the American West finally demonstrate that placemaking processes are not merely unidirectional accumulations of power that culminate in one dominant imagination of a place, country, or region. Conversely, they can also become overburdened by their own accumulated symbolic weight. This penchant for collapse becomes more pronounced in the need to homogenize difference. Hall's attempt to level out complex human and cultural geographies to produce a more controllable narrative then points to a larger cultural matrix of 'Americanness' that draws its discursive power from tropes of storied westernness. This power, however, by no means depends on regressive nostalgia for the supposedly straightforward social and racial hierarchies of the so-called Old West. Conversely, it continues to inform contemporary discourses that rely on its signifiers of rugged masculinity, limitless mobility, and freely available resources. One of the most pertinent 'western' fictions now revolves around the digital colonization of an analogue past through artificial intelligence and machine learning that hails Silicon Valley 'as the future, the region in which Americans push forward the contemporary frontiers of technology'. Here, the unfamiliar and violent West again becomes a compelling metaphor for 'a highly competitive society ruled by information-age cowboys and gunfighters,

[where] there is little room or tolerance for the weak, for the losers in this battleground of postindustrial capitalism'.³⁹ The seeming dependence on such anachronistic cultural vocabularies then ultimately calls into question the future viability of unilateral projections of US-centric metanarratives—especially in a globalized world that is either oversaturated by or unwilling to take cues from triumphalist simulations of the American West.

³⁹ Jesús Martínez-Saldaña, 'La Frontera Del Norte', in *Over the Edge: Remapping the American West*, ed. by Blake Allmendinger and Valerie J. Matsumoto (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 374-375.

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