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Abstract

Landscape portrayals—literary, visual, or otherwise—serve as recognizable features at the core of American Western iconography and aesthetics. Renderings of landscape point to an implicit gaze appraising the land—a gaze which often communicates its idealization, condemnation, or contemplation of the American West through physical and metaphorical description. Traditional western landscape portrayals may evoke images of breathtaking wildness, boundless freedom, and infinite potential—a sublime landscape that appeals to settler colonial gazes and fantasies. Through comparative analysis of three texts—*The Way West* by A. B. Guthrie, Jr. (1949), *All the Pretty Horses* by Cormac McCarthy (1992), and *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko (1977)—this essay examines textual treatment of the land to explore the legacy and future of the American West. Additional literary, historical, and theoretical concepts such as Frontier Theory, the Kantian Sublime, and feminist regionalist scholarship are introduced to explicate the shifting symbolic significance of the American West throughout history, the anthropocentrism underlying both American exceptionalism and settler coloniality, and the avenues of healing that may exist for Indigenous populations on a landscape marked by violence and destruction.

Literary Landscapes:

A Future for Post-Frontier Regionalism in Literature of the American West

Aesthetics lie at the heart of the American Western. Landscapes of the American West, in particular, may evoke specific images of sweeping plains, luminous skies, and textured deserts. Renderings of western landscapes point to an implicit gaze—a gaze which often communicates its idealization, condemnation, or contemplation of the American West through physical and metaphorical descriptions of the land. In A. B. Guthrie, Jr.'s novel *The Way West* (1949), gendered portrayals of landscapes along the Oregon Trail appeal to settler colonial fantasies. These overwhelmingly sensuous descriptions also evoke the Kantian sublime—an aesthetic experience that arises from the triumph of human capability over the boundlessness of nature. While *The Way West* celebrates the western landscape as a site of settler conquest, Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* (1992) depicts apocalyptic landscapes bathed in red, illuminating the uncaring nature of the world and the ambiguous future of a western regionalism deeply marked by loss and violence. Avenues of healing—namely storytelling, a tradition which enjoys a long Indigenous history—are explored in Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony* (1977). In each of these novels, the textual treatment of landscapes—their commodification, destruction, and restoration—does not only represent an interest or investment in western aesthetics. Understanding landscape also elucidates other understandings of the land, the nature of a textual world, and the enduring ways in which the American West continues to endear itself to the observer's imagination.

The version of landscape presented in A. B. Guthrie, Jr.'s novel *The Way West* (1949) represents a gaze of settler coloniality. *The Way West* recounts the journey of several settler families from Missouri to Oregon—a land which protagonist Lije Evans describes as the frontier of “a great, new nation” (13). Lije Evans' unexpected rise into leadership on the wagon train reflects the demand for a new code of virtue—a settler virtue—necessary for survival on the trail and frontier life. This settler virtue,

characterized by individualism, humility, and resilience, represents a democratic commitment to the “everyman”—the pioneer, embodied by Lije Evans.

The symbolic and discursive importance of the frontier to the progress of American democracy is also explored in historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s “Frontier Thesis.” The frontier of the American West represents a liminal space often evoked to further a narrative of American progress and exceptionalism. Manifest destiny and Indigenous erasure are two examples of such narratives. As Turner presents in “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893), the Western frontier drives American progress and democratic ideals. He summarizes this Frontier Thesis, stating: “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.” The “free-ness” of this land—its openness, vastness, and wildness—constitute the aesthetic core of classical landscapes of the American West.

In *The Way West*, the landscape of Oregon appeals to this classical aesthetic. One of the most sensuous and intimate passages in *The Way West* is a landscape description. When the wagon train arrives at the Platte, four men—Lije Evans among them—ride horseback in front of the rest of the train to appraise the land. Their effort is rewarded by the sublime beauty of the resulting landscape:

“Evans had heard about the Platte. He had pictured it in his mind. He thought he knew what he was going to see, but now that his horse stood on the summit, he couldn’t believe. He couldn’t believe that flat could be so flat or that distance ran so far or that the sky lifted so dizzy-deep or that the world stood so empty....He thought he never had seen the world before. He never had known distance until now. He had lived shut off by trees and hills and had thought the world was a doll’s world and distance just three hollers away and the sky no higher than a rifle shot.” (87)

Lije’s observation about the land’s “empty-ness” resonates with Turner’s commentary on the characteristic “free-ness” of the frontier land. The classic landscape of the American West trades in emptiness and freedom—two qualities which invite idealistic projection of the colonial gaze upon it. Lije is overwhelmed by the infinite potential of the land and its vastness. His experience of the landscape is characterized by disbelief—Lije “couldn’t believe” the perfect flatness of the land and the sheer distance

of the horizon and the absolute depth of the “dizzy-deep” sky. His worldview experiences a shift in scale, as Lije feels that he “never had known distance until now.” This presentation of landscape in *The Way West* resonates with classical representations of the aesthetic sublime.

Described by Immanuel Kant in *The Critique of Judgement* (1790), “the Sublime” represents an aesthetic experience similar yet distinct from “the Beautiful.” According to Kant, the Sublime does not arise as an emergent property of an object, as it does for the Beautiful. Instead, the experience of the Sublime emerges from human cognition—specifically from the interplay between two paradoxical faculties of the human mind, “Imagination” and “Reason.” Kant writes: “there is in our Imagination a striving towards infinite progress, and in our Reason a claim for absolute totality, regarded as a real Idea, therefore this very inadequateness for that Idea in our faculty for estimating the magnitude of things of sense, excites in us the feeling of a supersensible faculty.” Paradoxically, the mind understands its own “inadequateness” to process the superb “magnitude of things.” This self-awareness lends cognitive coherence to otherwise-incomprehensible experiences, leading to a “feeling of a supersensible faculty.” Gazing upon the object that evokes this feeling, experiencing the Sublime represents an exercise and celebration of human faculty. From it, the observer derives gratification because at its essence, the Sublime is an aesthetic of human capability and pleasure.

Reading landscape in *The Way West* through a lens of the Kantian sublime allows the settlers’ sublime landscape experience become an allegory for settler colonialism. Looking upon the Platte, Lije experiences a sudden realization of the land’s vastness—a realization of what is described in *The Critique of Judgement* as the “magnitude of things.” However, this knowledge does not lead to humility and appreciation of the land beyond anthropocentric gain. Instead, similar to how the Sublime arises from a triumph of human cognition over the seemingly-infinite, the sublime landscape elicits pleasure because it evokes this Kantian narrative of human capability (settler coloniality) over transcendence (the vastness and wildness of nature). In *The Way West*, this claim is evidenced by a passage near the end of the novel. Looking over Oregon, the settlers’ new home, Lije recounts their journey: “Once, long ago, he had come to the Platte and felt greatness....Yonder it was, yonder was home, yonder the rich soil waiting for the

plow, waiting for the work of hands, for the happy cries of children” (340). Evoking Lije’s experience of the Platte, this passage privileges his personal feeling of “greatness” as the distinguishing characteristic of viewing the Platte’s landscape. Subsequent descriptions of the land—the “rich soil waiting for the plow, waiting for the work of hands, for the happy cries of children”—fill the “empty” landscape with idyllic visions of settler coloniality. The land, once overwhelming in its magnitude, becomes tamed by a self-satisfied settler imagination.

The settler gaze embodied in *The Way West* is also deeply gendered. The four individuals who first survey the Platte are all men, and the gaze they adopt is subsequently hegemonically masculine. As Dr. Krista Comer states in *Landscapes of the New West* (1999), the enduring discourse of the American West evokes a “dominant geocultural imaginary” that characterizes western spaces as “open” and “free.” As previously noted, these terms echo the language employed by Turner and Lije in *The Way West*. However, paradoxically, Comer observes that this “open-ness” and “free-ness” operates within western frontier space that remains enduringly “gendered male and racialized white.” Femininity in *The Way West* landscapes emerges in the form of female/landscape objectification, as feminization turns the land into an object of the male gaze. When the wagon train travels across the crest of the Blue Mountains, the description of landscape is gendered female: “Pulling up a slope, head raised to see what lay beyond, Evans whoaed his team, for yonder, yonder, blue and white and dizzy in the distance, rose the Cascade range and, like the queen of heights, Mount Hood, like the nipples queen, like a snowy cloud, like proof and promise” (318). Here, feminization of landscape transforms terrain into the topography of the female body. The sensual and maternal qualities of the land, evoked by imagery of the “nipples queen,” also reinforce the fertility, ripeness, and virginal purity—recognizable elements of a tradition of colonial landscape aesthetics. Understanding the land as gendered feminine offers new valence on the “empty-ness” and “free-ness” of the land—landscape is not only a site upon which the white male gaze projects ideals—it also becomes a vessel of impregnation for settler colonial fantasies.

Through analysis of sublime and gendered landscapes in *The Way West*, the text furthers a worldview in which the world is not only comprehensible, but also claimable as a faculty of human

capability. The version of landscape presented in Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* (1992) offers a drastically different view on the nature of the world. A post-frontier Western, *All the Pretty Horses* follows the story of John Grady Cole, a sixteen-year-old who possesses great skill with horses. Cole's love for horses maps itself onto his moral philosophy. Early in the text, Cole reflects on his love of horses and humanity: "All his reverence and all his fondness and all the leanings of his life were for the ardenthearted and they would always be so and never be otherwise" (6). Throughout the ethical quandaries and suffering he encounters in *All the Pretty Horses*, one of John Grady Cole's most distinguishing traits is his strict adherence to his internal moral code. This code values skill, stoicism, and solitude above all else. It represents an ethics of the "ardenthearted" that captures the romantic core of Cole's imagined American West.

Accompanied by his best friend Lacey Rawlins, John Grady Cole leaves the Texan ranch that raised him to search for a romantic vision of the American West. This quest leads John Grady Cole and Lacey Rawlins to Mexico where, for a while, they satisfy their dream to live as cowboys and ranch hands. However, Cole soon encounters a brutality in Mexico that returns him to America, physically wounded and deeply distraught. Multiple events—the horror he and Rawlins experience in prison, the absurdity and apparent inconsequence of another young boy's death, the heartbreak he receives from the *hacendado's* daughter—all of these challenge the feasibility of living solely according to an unquestioning love for the ardenthearted. Cole's code, the idyllic core of his western fantasy, is shaken. Without this romantic view to sustain him, Cole experiences disillusionment and a profound sense of placelessness.

Landscape descriptions in *All the Pretty Horses* heighten this sense of disillusionment, revealing the West as a region inseparable from its history of loss and violence. This unromanticized characterization is especially apparent in the first landscape and the last landscape described in the text. During a solitary horseback ride after his grandfather's funeral, Cole encounters the first landscape described in *All the Pretty Horses*:

“The wind was much abated and it was very cold and the sun sat blood red and elliptic under the reefs of bloodred cloud before him....At the hour he’d always choose when the shadows were long and the ancient road was shaped before him in the rose and canted light like a dream of the past where the painted ponies and the riders of that lost nation came down out of the north with their faces chalked and their long hair plaited and each armed for war which was their life and the women and children and women with children at their breasts all of them pledged in blood and redeemable in blood only.” (5)

This landscape description serves as an illusory invocation of a lost legend. The twilight hour marks this moment as a period of transition—a liminal time when Cole’s imagined vision of the past West becomes illuminated and fleetingly visible. His romantic image appears “like a dream of the past” as Indigenous warriors emerge on painted horses, preparing to fight for “the war which was their life”—that is, their survival. However, the passage resonates with loss. The warriors and women and children are later reported to pass into a “darkness bearing lost to all history and all remembrance” (5). The land appears unconcerned with the “secular and transitory and violent lives” of its inhabitants. However, these lives remain fixed to the landscape as redness—redness from the sunset and from the blood that symbolizes the violence that saturates this western landscape.

The final landscape John Grady Cole confronts echoes a similar soberness concerning the legacy of the west and the nature of the world. *All the Pretty Horses* ends with a funeral—that of Abuela, a worker on the Grady ranch. Abuela represents Cole’s last meaningful connection to his childhood home—her death signals his ultimate untethering to place. After the funeral, Cole again departs on horseback, becoming a transient part of the final landscape in *All the Pretty Horses*:

“The indians stood watching him....They stood and watched him pass and watched him vanish upon that landscape solely because he was passing. Solely because he would vanish.

The desert he rode was red and red the dust he raised....The bloodred dust blew down out of the sun. He touched the horse with his heels and rode on....Passed and paled into the darkening land, the world to come.” (301-302)

While the first landscape of *All the Pretty Horses* witnesses the ghosts of past Indigenous warriors pass by, this final landscape reorients the roles of spectator and observed subject. Here, the “indians” represent the stable parties—the spectators who watch John Grady Cole pass by like a ghost from the past and “vanish upon the landscape.” The spectators seem unconcerned and unaffected by his presence. The land is similarly unmoved. The enduring redness of the landscape—the desert, the dust, the blood, the sun—cast an ominous uneasiness over the novel’s closing. Redness here still represents violence saturating the west, as it did in the first landscape John Grady Cole faces after his grandfather’s funeral. However, the significance of redness heightens by the end of the novel, as Cole has become intimately acquainted with this violence. His experiences in Mexico deromanticize his illusions of the west as an idyllic place where an ethics of the ardenthearted prevails. As Cole admits to a judge after returning to Texas, he may appear to be ““somethin special,”” but in actuality, he is painfully ordinary (293). Instead of riding into the sunset like the proverbial hero of a classic Western, John Grady Cole “passed and paled” into an ambivalent landscape, as transient as the dreamlike warriors who rode their painted horses into battle in previous landscapes. While *The Way West* presents a view of western landscape that emphasizes exceptionalism and the faculty of humanity, then *All the Pretty Horses* renders humanity as a passing feature on an indifferent terrain. According to the perspective offered by John Grady Cole’s story, the past and present of western regionalism remains stained by irrevocable loss and violence. Its future is marked by literal “darkness” Cole nevertheless travels towards. At best, the future *All the Pretty Horses* is terribly ambiguous.

As a counter to hegemonic sources of knowledge, a redemptive vision of the future may be found in Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony* (1977). *Ceremony* follows the story of Tayo, a veteran of World War II suffering from “battle fatigue” (understood as some form of post-traumatic stress disorder). Haunted by memories of violence—his brother’s death deep in the Japanese jungle, his experience as a POW in a Japanese camp, the stress and despair of serving as a soldier—Tayo returns home to the Laguna Reservation physically, mentally, and spiritually broken. Similarly broken, fellow veterans from the pueblo fall into self-destructive cycles of alcoholism and violence. In an attempt to save Tayo, his family

summons the medicine man, Betonie, who serves as a spiritual guide throughout the remainder of *Ceremony*. Performing ceremonies that marry Laguna tradition with contemporary elements, Betonie presents a dynamic and adaptive version of restoration that ultimately facilitates Tayo's recovery.

Storytelling—an oral tradition in Pueblo culture—serves as a powerful medium for place- and meaning-making. In *Ceremony*, storytelling works in tandem with Betonie's ceremonies to offer Tayo a path towards understanding and healing. Throughout the novel, multiple narrative strands are operating, layered and interwoven and non-chronological, differing in subject matter and form. The most prominent narrative follows Tayo, telling his story through prose. Other narratives record the myths of spiritual entities—Thought Woman, Corn Woman, and Reed Woman—among others. In certain moments, multiple narratives intersect, generating powerful new places of connection and meaning. A moment of meaningful narrative intersection occurs for Tayo soon after meeting Betonie. A poem recounts the story of a lost son-in-law who has been transformed into a coyote, symbolic of Tayo's transformation and illness after returning from war (131). A ceremony is prepared to restore the coyote son by building "Pollen Boy"—this ceremony mirrors Tayo's restoration as well.

Narrative intersections such as this one powerfully locate individuals within a larger storytelling cosmology. In the moment of grand catharsis near the end of the novel, Tayo finally sees "the pattern of the ceremony" completed in the mine shaft. He considers a piece of ore streaked with uranium—beautiful like yellow pollen, yet destructive in its use in atomic weaponry—and finally realizes the power in the convergence of stories:

"He cried the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told. He was not crazy; he had never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time." (329)

Stories point to a transcendental interrelatedness—a "fitting together"—that lends coherence and clarity to an otherwise chaotic and cruel world. Tayo's model of storytelling as a dynamic and ever-evolving process echoes Betonie's philosophy about the nature of change: "things which don't shift and grow are

dead things....That's what the witchery is counting on: that we will cling to the ceremonies the way they were, and then their power will triumph, and the people will be no more” (116). Witchery—emblematic of all evil in the world—thrives from stagnation. Returning to the Laguna reservation a healed man, Tayo becomes a storyteller, embodying a resilience informed by modernity as well as an honor of tradition that may allow the rest of his community to survive and heal as well.

In renderings of the American West, landscapes may represent sites of conquest and reward, as in Turner’s Frontier Thesis and the vision of settler colonialism in *The Way West*. In contrast, the desolation of landscape in *All the Pretty Horses* evokes a sense of placelessness accompanying the loss of western regionalism. However, through old and new Indigenous ceremonies, *Ceremony* offers a redemptive model for the future of the American West. If John Grady Cole’s relationship to the land in *All the Pretty Horses* is characterized by profound placelessness, then storytelling allows Tayo to heal himself physically and spiritually, restoring his sense of place and locating himself in reference to the rest of the world. This vision of the future, deeply concerned with Indigenous survival, may not map neatly onto John Grady Cole—however, it does restore Tayo. Ceremonies and storytelling act as avenues that radically reorient and reimagine the relationship of the self with the land. In response to critical destabilization of the American West and its landscapes, storytelling may offer a dynamic and ever-evolving form of knowledge, understanding, and healing.