

MARRIAGE, VIOLENCE, AND THE NATION IN THE AMERICAN LITERARY WEST

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Baskerville Monotype 11/12.5 pt *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Handley, William R.

Marriage, violence, and the nation in the American literary West / William R. Handley.
p. cm. (Cambridge studies in American literature and culture; 132)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 81667 x (hardback)

1. American literature – West (US) – History and criticism. 2. Domestic fiction, American – History and criticism. 3. National characteristics, American, in literature. 4. Western stories – History and criticism. 5. Frontier and pioneer life in literature. 6. Family violence in literature. 7. Women pioneers in literature. 8. West (US) – In literature. 9. Marriage in literature. 10. Violence in literature. I. Title. II. Series.

PS271.H29 2002

810.9'3278 – dc21 2002016593

ISBN 0 521 81667 x hardback

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
Introduction	i
1 Western unions	10
2 Turner's rhetorical frontier	43
3 Marrying for race and nation: Wister's omniscience and omissions	67
4 Polygamy and empire: Grey's distinctions	97
5 Unwedded West: Cather's divides	125
6 Accident and destiny: Fitzgerald's fantastic geography	159
7 Promises and betrayals: Joan Didion and Wallace Stegner	191
Afterword	224
<i>Notes</i>	234
<i>Index</i>	256

Illustrations

- | | | |
|---|---|---------|
| 1 | “American Progress,” by John Gast. Lithograph in <i>Croftt’s New Overland Tourist and Pacific Coast Guide</i> , 1879. | page 26 |
| 2 | “Utah’s Best Crop.” Frontispiece, <i>Croftt’s New Overland Tourist and Pacific Coast Guide</i> , 1879. | 30 |
| 3 | “The Mormon Coon” Songbook, 1905. Published by Sol Bloom. | 109 |
| 4 | “Mormon Elder-berry, Out with His Six-Year Olds, Who Take after Their Mothers.” <i>Life Magazine</i> , 28 April 1904. | 110 |
| 5 | “Situation of the Mormons in Utah.” <i>The Wasp</i> , 1 February 1879. | 114 |
| 6 | “Brigham Young’s Defence of Utah – The Result.” <i>Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper</i> , 19 December 1857. | 119 |

CHAPTER ONE

Western unions

The United States is unique in the extent to which the individual has been given an open field.

Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Problem of the West" (1896)

The nomadic, bachelor West is over; the housed, married West is established.

Owen Wister, preface to *Members of the Family* (1911)

Is the Marlboro Man lonely? Answering this question demonstrates the social truth behind this icon of the antisocial western individual. If we answer yes, we imply that his solitude is neither desirable nor sustainable. If we answer no, we have yet kept company with him by believing in his contentment and admiring him for it. Whether we answer yes or no, we have put ourselves in the picture, animated him. Of course, we can also refuse to pose the question and consider it meaningless, in which case we kill him off. Indeed, he cannot live without us. His continuing life, manifest in a dying advertising campaign, attests to a deep contradiction in American beliefs and experience. Many Americans celebrate an individual in the landscape of the American West who never settled the West by himself or even much lived there in his grand isolation. He does not refer to himself in his individuality so much as to some need in those who believe in him; he is a social creation who embodies a profoundly asocial ideal. To the extent that he ever existed, he always had a family, if only one he left behind; he probably had a best friend, some admirers and enemies, occasionally a wife and children – and a federal government that backed him up. He resembles his admirers more than they may want to believe, and perhaps for this reason he is left alone without having questions put to him about his feelings.

In her analysis of a more fleshed-out cousin of the Marlboro Man, Joan Didion argues that in making a hero of Howard Hughes, Americans exhibit their instinctive love of "absolute personal freedom, mobility,

privacy . . . the instinct which drove America to the Pacific, all through the nineteenth century.” Of course, she adds, “we do not admit that. The instinct is socially suicidal.” As a result, there is an apparently bottomless gulf between “what we officially admire and secretly desire, between, in the largest sense, the people we marry and the people we love.”¹ In the twentieth-century American literary West, Didion’s analogy is aptly played out in some of Americans’ most valued books, but with an important twist: the characters that readers love both marry and fight over marriage – and with fictive results that are often murderous and suicidal. Even if many Americans ward off social suicide, in Didion’s sense, by not marrying the Marlboro man and by loving him from a distance, threats of violence, if not murder and suicide themselves, surround representations of marriage in the literary West, including in the fiction of Joan Didion.

The Marlboro Man and Howard Hughes are figural descendants of the American Adam, that orphan who set out for the territory and encountered the Indian in the nineteenth century, in tales by James Fenimore Cooper and others after him. The American frontier has come to be imagined throughout the world predominantly through that unself-conscious emissary of empire after the fact of conquest, the “nomadic, bachelor” cowboy, a representative individual who had an open field for the exercise of his freedom in the American West. Yet western history tells a more complicated story, one of families shaping and being shaped by the frontier long before the ascendance of the cowboy and his collateral folklore. Even Frederick Jackson Turner, who argued in his famous hypothesis that “the frontier was productive of individualism,” nevertheless saw that this individualism arose when the wilderness transformed “complex society . . . into a kind of primitive organization based on the family.” Where Turner suggests a direct correlation between the family and individualism, with “anti-social” results, so many narratives of the West – including some renderings of Turner’s frontier thesis – have seen them as distinct, if not contradictory, as in Didion’s distinction between the people we love and the people we marry.² While often seen as incompatible with each other in respect to the exercise of freedom, the individual and familial versions of the western past reveal not only a contradiction about American beliefs, as Didion describes it, but a history of a different sequence and significance from the one often ascribed to Turner. Whereas Turner’s thesis about social evolution on the frontier made it seem that the family “culminated rather than coordinated settlement,” as Kathleen Neils Conzen describes it in her discussion of western families in the nineteenth century, families were there early on.

But in Turner's time American reformers "had come to doubt the ability of the family to withstand the pressures of the new urban environment. What role, then, could such a feeble institution hope to play in the face of the even greater savagery of the wild?"³ Quite a large one, in fact. Entitlement to land – whether for whites to claim it or, later, for Indians to reclaim it – was primarily granted through heads of households. As an 1846 observer misleadingly put it by removing the paternal role, "All we had to do was to let our women and children go [to the Oregon region] and, without assistance from any one, they would take possession of the country."⁴ In his groundbreaking study of the American family in 1917, Arthur W. Calhoun recognized that "the family was the one substantial social institution" on the frontier and was profoundly influenced by it. Indeed, the most important influence on the American family in the decades after the Revolution, he argued in Turnerian fashion, was pioneering and the frontier.⁵ It was not until the 1960s that historians returned to the role of marriage and families in western settlement, because Turnerian approaches had up until then become "so thoroughly discredited that the question of a specific western or frontier influence on the American family was barely raised."⁶

Contemporary western historians have tackled this question. In her study of western marriages and families, Glenda Riley explores why the American West, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, had the highest divorce rate in the world. A major contributing factor was "western values and beliefs themselves," the very ideology of free individualism that Turner championed and that for a time in the nineteenth century, as Riley also demonstrates, encouraged flexibility and experimentation in marital and familial relationships.⁷ Those beliefs also had a damaging effect on western marriages in large part because of the high expectations for personal happiness that they raised. Hence Turner's figural individual, as unrelated as he has come to seem to the familial version of the western past and as comparatively less corporeal, is intimately tied up with western marriages and families, like the figure of Shane in Jack Shafer's 1949 novel of that name, who becomes for a time part of the family, but who is, in the end, loved from a distance. At the end of the 1953 film version of *Shane*, as he is about to ride off and leave the family forever after having disposed of his enemies who threatened the homestead, Shane asks the boy who longs to be him to tell his mother that, with his departure, "there aren't any more guns in the family." As if satisfying a Cold War need to externalize threats of violence away from the homeland, the film effectively demarcates violent masculine

individualism from family life. At once a threat to marriage and its protector, the lone gunman leaves the domestic scene. But in much twentieth-century western fiction, he does indeed, as the boy in *Shane* vainly calls out for him to do, “come back.” Violence comes home, but without the clearly defined enemies with whom Shane and others like him have so often battled: bad white men, savage Indians.

The literary works in this study consistently play out the consequences of frontier settlement through scenes of marital conflict in which “domestic aliens,” such as Indians and Mormon polygamists who threatened domestic virtues, are replaced with scenes of alienated domesticity that carry, as so many battles with Indians and others had seemed to carry for whites, the burden of civilization’s fate. This substitution, historically, is not an accident: the cult of domesticity as women’s “separate sphere” arose in the US in the 1840s and 1850s along with the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny, and it served American expansion by imagining the borders of home against the foreign.⁸ In the twentieth century, after the settling of the West, once conventional figures of foreignness, especially Indians, are often missing from even the most popular and nostalgic forms of western American literature. Scenes of domestic discord and violence represent, in effect, a white dominant culture turning inward, after its conquest of native peoples and cultures, against its most cherished myths about how American character was formed and about the individual’s and nation’s seemingly manifest destinies. The popularity of these texts suggests an historical and cultural shift in how majority white Americans imagine the meaning and consequences of western conquest and settlement. Where once the American fought racial others, often violent conflict occurs in much twentieth-century western fiction between familiars close at home. Without serviceable binaries of otherness provided by the “civilized” and the “savage,” markers of identity such as whiteness, masculinity, and “American character” find themselves in violent conflict with each other. Figuratively speaking, whereas domesticity and imperialism in the nineteenth century pretended to dance apart in their separate spheres while courting each other, in the twentieth century they have settled down together, have become estranged, and are often at each other’s throats, once “frontier democracy” – the supposed source of American character which they collectively gave birth to – and its attendant enemies are thought to be gone. Having conquered its domestic enemies, imperialism brings its guns home.

The popular idea about the nineteenth-century American West in Turner’s rendition is that it made Americans American: self-reliant,

idealistic, egalitarian. Especially as handed down to us through formula Westerns in literature and film, that American individualism is decidedly masculine and often violent. Although Turner de-emphasized violence in his notion of the frontier's significance, it is nonetheless conquest's most persistent legacy. Where Turner left an obvious gap, Westerns have rushed to fill it in: violence in the name of a man's or nation's honor is immediately apparent in just about all of them. Revision of the western hero in historiography as well as fiction and film has flourished in the last thirty years; studies by Christine Bold, Lee Clark Mitchell, and Richard Slotkin, to name a few critics, have enriched our understanding of this iconic figure.⁹ Krista Comer and Susan Rosowski have recently studied alternative, female-centered western traditions that constitute divergent regionalisms and nationalisms and that suggest new ways of reading the relationship between region and nation.¹⁰ Collectively, these studies present a dialogue between genders and genres in the West that ranges across literary history. Individually, and with justification, they take the boundaries between the genders and types of artistry seriously, given the cultural power of the male western myth and the critical desire to read against it or to read it against itself.

This study, however, originated from a desire to read across, rather than within, genders and genres – to read books in relation to other writers regardless of whether they are men or women or writers of middlebrow or highbrow Westerns. I want here to challenge our sense of the genealogy and generic context of Owen Wister's and Zane Grey's transitional and influential Westerns – books that often seem to bear only a passing family resemblance to their progeny – by placing them in a new context: not within the succeeding formula in fiction and film that they influenced, but, as I have begun to suggest in the Introduction, within the context of other, related works of fiction and historiography about the American West by women and men. In the early stages of this project, what I saw were writers who found competing allegories of national identity in the West's regional materials, who treated the West as a stage upon which they interpreted the meaning of democracy, especially in a "post-frontier" world, and the value of the nation's westering past. Writers in this study see quite different nations when they look West, and the Westerns of Owen Wister and Zane Grey, following the nationalist readings of the West by Turner and Theodore Roosevelt, serve more narrowly racialized and masculinist goals than the ethically ambiguous texts by the other writers in this study, Cather, Fitzgerald, Didion, and Stegner. If, for a time, these more highly literary and canonical writers

did seem to me to stand apart in their literary methods and ideological impulses from the writers of Westerns I examined alongside them, now I see them in another, more provocative, relation to their popularizing contemporaries.

Given that preoccupations about gender, violence, and the myth of the frontier exist in the work of Cather, albeit revisionistically, it is curious that she is nowhere mentioned, for instance, in Richard Slotkin's otherwise encyclopedic study of the twentieth-century frontier myth, *Gunfighter Nation*. Is that because, despite the number of gunshots in Cather's work, there is no shoot-out between hero and villain? Why, in other words, has the formula Western come to dominate critical discussions of western literature with regard to the relationship between gender and violence on the frontier, an issue that, as Cather's work illustrates, is hardly unique to it? One reason is of course the formula Western's international popularity and powerful cultural influence on film; as such, it merits scrutiny within and by virtue of its conventional generic boundaries. And the Western, to be sure, more explicitly forges a relationship between violence and masculinity than other western genres. Many Westerns, from James Fenimore Cooper's novels to Hollywood movies, are also concerned with white/Indian ethnic difference. Yet while Leslie A. Fiedler has argued that "tales set in the West seem to us not quite Westerns, unfulfilled occasions for myth rather than myth itself, when no Indian . . . appears in them," no Indians appear as represented characters in *The Virginian* or *Riders of the Purple Sage*, two of the most popular Westerns of all time.¹¹ The early twentieth-century Westerns included in this study, in fact, begin to look less and less like Westerns, as critics have conceived them, and more like the literature that Westerns, according to Jane Tompkins, react against: they are deeply concerned with marriage and domesticity – and in the case of Zane Grey, religious issues that are not just included for their own sake, but for their significance for the nation and its western myths.¹²

Odd family resemblances emerged between Westerns and other western texts as I followed an unconventional trail of literary history. Whereas formula Westerns often reject a religious frame of reference, religion frames questions of cultural identity and marital fate out West in fiction by progenitors of the formula Western, Wister and Grey, and by Cather, Stegner, and Didion. Where there were once always Indians in Westerns to occupy the place of the Other, according to Fiedler, in the twentieth-century literary West heterosexuality becomes the structure of difference, and often men are "other" to women who are imagining their

own destiny.¹³ In place of the ethnic differences against which the early nation constructed its identity and that the popular western myth promoted, the texts canvassed here reveal instead, to borrow René Girard's term, "crises of distinctions" between familiars that produce a form of violence resistant to easy assimilation by nationalist ideology.¹⁴ With the exception of Turner, whose notions about frontier individualism and American (masculine) character in the nineteenth century are located in that "nomadic, bachelor West" that Wister describes in the epigraph with which I began this chapter, other twentieth-century writers consistently and surprisingly see the West and its significance in relation to marriage and family, even when they are writing about the period before the supposed end of the frontier and its masculine individualism. Questions of masculinity and violence do not fade from view with these new considerations in mind; they simply do not stand alone. Yet the individual, of course, has never stood alone, except in the cultural and ideological imagination. While it may hold true that, as Tompkins argues, many subsequent formula Westerns reject everything domestic from their worldview, other important western texts, including the Westerns of Wister and Grey, find in marriage and family the very struggles and issues – concerning democracy and empire, promises kept and betrayed, greed and possession, optimism and pessimism, romance and violence – that are played out in the West with a sense of national stakes. It is as important to read, say, Wister with Cather or Fitzgerald as to read him with Zane Grey because such new pairings allow us to reconsider the nature and meaning of the early Western's violence, too often circumscribed by its resemblance to a later (and often filmic) formula, and also to recognize the literary canon's debt to popular western fiction. It was *Hopalong Cassidy*, after all, that James Gatz, before he became Jay Gatsby, loved to read.

Violence between familiars is perhaps the most unexpected thing we find at home in the West, since the formula Western's violence is most often portrayed between whites and Indians or between good and bad white men. But even in the case of Wister and Grey, such categorical descriptions of the individuals or groups at odds with each other become difficult to defend: though the Virginian is attacked by Indians, for example, the scene is never represented, and though he kills two "bad" white men, one of them is his best friend Steve, who left a note for the Virginian explaining that he would not say goodbye before being hanged because he did not want to cry like a baby. In the case of Zane Grey, the ethnic and religious differences that seem to structure his novels increasingly blur,

to the point that enemies and families, strangers and lovers become difficult to distinguish meaningfully according to group identity. In the work of Willa Cather, violence is always around the corner, often unaccountable in its causes and effects, committed by types almost unprecedented in western literary history: the suicide by gunshot of a heroine's father, the fatal shooting of a young wife and her lover by a jealous husband, a marital murder-suicide driven by greed and jealousy, and a suicide of a tramp in a threshing machine are among other disturbing moments that involve only whites. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, which is a response to western motifs and Turnerian ideals, is famous as much for its chain of murder and suicide as for its romance. Myrtle Wilson is killed by a car, her husband kills the man he thinks was at the wheel, and then he kills himself. With Wallace Stegner and Joan Didion, the scope of violence and betrayal in marriage widens as the nation's western myths loom larger with passing time and fall under the scrutiny of skeptical, revisionist eyes. Murder and suicide in the context of marriage – to mark only the most violent moments in Stegner and Didion – serve explicitly to call into question the hope of the West itself.

Why should the setting of the West, with its "open field" for the individual – one that, according to Turner, made America exceptional in the nineteenth century – be so occupied by marital and familial conflict in the twentieth, even when novels are retrospectively set in the nineteenth? How and why does a culture shift from romanticizing the Turnerian individual with his great western opportunities and dreams to representing almost obsessively domestic discord and failure? The very ideals of individualism that Turner claimed the frontier produced not only created expectations that could not be met in western contexts, but could not sustain social life in the West where kinship was key to communal survival. The idea of the masculine individual who thrives out West has had a longer cultural life than his actual, brief history. Romanticizations of this figure in the last third of the nineteenth century, including the more misogynistic ones in the context of mining towns, are often conjoined with a bemused longing for women and children. Mark Twain sang praises to the ephemeral culture of young men mining in California in *Roughing It* (1871): "It was a splendid population . . . a wild, free, disorderly, grotesque society! *Men* – washed their own shirts! . . . only swarming hosts of stalwart *men* – nothing juvenile, nothing feminine visible anywhere!" But when a woman appears, the men demand to "FETCH HER OUT!" to see her; on another occasion, a miner offers a hundred and fifty dollars in gold dust to kiss a child.¹⁵ In Bret Harte's most famous

story, “The Luck of Roaring Camp” (1868), the orphaned baby of the camp prostitute brings out domestic virtues of clean living in the men of the camp who try to raise him. Owen Wister, following the lead of historian Theodor Mommsen, thought the cowboys a “queer episode” in the nation’s history, a cycle through which all nations passed: “Purely nomadic, and leaving no posterity, for they [the cowboys] don’t marry.”¹⁶ But the romantic nostalgia for this episode collapses with the arrival of civilization and the bride. In his story “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky” (1898), Stephen Crane parodies this abrupt transition: once the former gunslinger brings a bride to the western town, his gun-toting foe is defanged and flummoxed by this transformed, civilized apparition, who calls up the ghosts of a life that “civilization” has transformed. In Wister’s *The Virginian* (1902), marriage again marks the end of the hero’s (necessary) violence – most dramatically, his lynching of his best friend Steve, who has taken individual freedom too far by stealing cattle – and the beginning of his domestication, happily ever after. But that is the last we see, among the influential texts in this study, of a happy marriage marking the end of an historical era. From this point on, marriage only betokens trouble. For Wister, who would go on to write one of the most famous happy endings in Westerns, the trouble begins with the West’s loosening of marital norms through interracial marriage in settings where men and even women have few choices of mate. In his first western story, “Hank’s Woman” (1892), the new Austrian bride, recently fired as a lady’s maid and thus desperate to marry, smashes in her black husband’s skull with an axe and, in an attempt to throw his body into a bottomless ravine, falls to her own death.

If in the nineteenth century, as Amy Kaplan argues, “domesticity not only monitors the borders between the civilized and the savage but also regulates traces of the savage within itself,” in the twentieth century “civilized” violence comes home in all senses of the word – among family members, best friends, and members of the same race.¹⁷ The Westerns of Zane Grey and Owen Wister continue, in part, to align domesticity with the imperial project of civilizing, but even these Westerns represent conflicts between familiars as well. In this regard, western literature carries the traces of historical violence on a local, identifiable scale – yet not always for discernibly political ends. Whereas the sentimental novel, especially *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, sought to achieve a sympathetic identification by its white readers with fictional black slaves in a domestic space, the novels in this study were probably unnerving for white readers in that the social or national cause which their sympathetic identification

was meant to serve is unclear. Hence the violence in the text has no unambiguously compensatory value. When Wister's Virginian hangs his best friend; when Cather's Frank Shabata murders his wife and her lover Emil and Emil's sister forgives him; when Cather's Bohemian immigrant Mr. Shimerda commits suicide; or when Grey's heroine gains her freedom at the price of her land and her people: what is lost usually exceeds whatever might be gained. Are such instances allegories of the difficulty of justifying American conquest and the process of "Americanization," in contrast to the ease of justifying the Civil War and the abolition of slavery? Turner's frontier thesis attempts to treat slavery as a "mere incident" in American history, a suppression which can be read as an allegory of *not* reading the national significance of slavery's domestic and civil violence. In this regard, it is worth noting that so many early twentieth-century Westerns are set retrospectively in the decades after the Civil War and before the "end" of the frontier, in border regions of transition in which antagonistic religious, territorial, ethnic, and legal interests have yet, historically, to be resolved in favor of American federal control and "Americanization." Their suspense-value was a form of nostalgia, since at the time of the novels' publications, the resolution of conflict in favor of American national interests had already been determined.

There are at least three important ways in which we can understand the shift in the literature of the American West from the alternately romanticized and violent encounter with Indians-as-Other to the romanticized but often violent encounter with familiar-as-Other. From an anthropological standpoint, to borrow René Girard's model of pure and impure violence, nineteenth-century western American culture lacked any of the rites of "sacrificial" violence of so-called "primitive" societies, the "purifying" sort that serves to put an end to cycles of revenge by selecting a victim who is not an explicit enemy. With the loss of these traditional sacrificial rites, a culture loses the difference between impure and purifying violence. "When this difference has been effaced," Girard writes in terms that might describe the cycles of violence in the work of Cormac McCarthy or in unredemptive Westerns like Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992), "purification is no longer possible and impure, contagious, reciprocal violence spreads throughout the community."¹⁸ Western conquest has all the hallmarks of a kind of frenzied insanity. The destruction of native peoples served not nearly so much to bind whites as a community, since there was nothing purifying or sacrificial in the violence committed against Native Americans, as it served to spread aggression throughout the nation in the name not just of insatiable greed but of

bloodlust. How else do we understand, for example, the slaughter of sixty million buffalo, especially passengers shooting buffalo from speeding trains for amusement? For native peoples, in contrast, hunting buffalo often bore the characteristics of ritual sacrifice. If, as Girard argues, once the sacrificial distinction is obliterated in categories of violence, all other distinctions upon which a culture is based are obliterated as well, we might hypothesize that violence against Indians and against nature proves uncontainable: it spreads into the nation's homes and across the nation's borders.¹⁹ Terms such as "white," "American," and "masculine" undergo a resulting crisis that produces struggles within these categories for distinction and supremacy.

A second way in which we can understand this shift from inter-ethnic to intra-ethnic scenes of western violence is through the question of consent, which is key to the American analogy between marital and national union. One man's or woman's consent was often another's captivity, often depending not so much on ethnicity as on which side of the nation one stood. Mutual consent was intrinsic to the American model of marriage derived from the Christian religion and English common law, a model that political and legal authorities "endorsed and aimed to perpetuate nationally," as Nancy Cott argues. Because of the intrinsic matter of consent, "this form of marriage was especially congruent with American political ideals: consent of the parties was also the hallmark of representative government. Consent was basic to both marriage and government, the question of its authenticity not meant to be reopened nor its depth plumbed once consent was given."²⁰ The federal government's conquest of others, including marital nonconformists within whose practices the monogamous Christian majority presumed there could be no consent on the part of women, did not depend upon or presume the consent of the conquered. Neither is a woman's consent always assumed in marriages in this study – consent is forced, if only by a woman's limited options. Marital choice and romantic conflict often share the logic of the forced choice of American domination in western territories, as we see in the dilemma of Zane Grey's heroine Jane Withersteen, torn between the claims of Mormon empire and American imperial imperatives: give up your Mormon father's land and keep your virtue and freedom to marry, or keep your land and lose both your virtue and your consent to Mormon polygamy. Either way, her choice is forced.

Related to consent is a third question of legitimacy and law. Today most would agree that conquest is illegitimate according to a higher ethical standard than that of a racist sense of "natural right" or of physical force.

The establishment of federal law and control in western settlements retroactively gave legitimacy-by-law to that which “civilization” and “right” had claimed. Likewise, marriage, seen as the very “cornerstone of civilization,” is the legitimating contract *par excellence* that justifies the romantic conquest. As Tony Tanner describes it, “For bourgeois society marriage is the all-subsuming, all-organizing, all-containing contract. It is the structure that maintains the Structure.”²¹ At least in theory: long before the revisionism and sexual revolution of the 1960s, marital contract and legitimacy are challenged in the literary West. In Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!*, for example, Alexandra Bergson’s heroism in stewarding the land is purchased without the benefit of a marital contract. When she finally does marry, it feels anti-climactic by the standards of the conventional marriage plot. In contrast, in Cather’s *My Ántonia*, Jim Burden, as a lawyer for one of the railway companies that consolidated the West, gains his expedient marriage to a woman with her own fortune at the expense of feeling love or romance. Meanwhile, Ántonia, whom he romanticizes in his memory and who “seemed to mean the country” of his youth, bears a child outside of marriage at the age of twenty-four and suffers many hardships. Cather’s Niel Herbert in *A Lost Lady* alternately invests in Marian Forrester his vision of western romance and his disillusionment with a changing West – explicitly *as* her marital status changes – while Marian Forrester’s experience is one of endurance, survival, and ultimate happiness regardless of marriage and the allegorical burden she bears.

The romance of the West and the romance of marriage share the same bed and hearth and meet similar fates in much of the literary West. Civilization’s “cornerstone” does not so much secure civilization as question its very meaning and future. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s depiction of Myrtle Wilson’s torn breast along the side of the road – a murder and mutilation born of marital misery, betrayal, and the carelessness of the wealthy – is an unmistakable figure for and revision of the “fresh green breast of the new world” that the Dutch mercantilists saw before the founding of the American nation. Fitzgerald’s alignment of domestic misery and national destiny is only the most famous of fictional moments in this study in which marriage and nation intersect. The literary West imagines American pasts and futures not simply through the masculine individual but through the nexus of ethical relations and responsibilities – the hopes, promises, dreams, and betrayals – that presume there are always at least two people testing the romance of the West against its often brutal reality. In these imagined relationships, women figure often, unsurprisingly, as both the repository of ideals and the sacrificial victims.

That this romance is persistently heterosexualized is in part because of the long history of feminizing the land that the masculine conqueror possesses; divine, feminized nature both legitimates American conquest and falls as corruptible victim to it.²² Self-conscious about gendered rhetorical figures, the historically persistent need to locate (or dislocate) the nation in familial relationships, and particularly the fate of romantic heroines, Cather and Didion revise that heterosexual logic, in which women and land are subjugated by male desire in acts of courtship (in Wister's case) or conquest (in Turner's gendered metaphors), or in which romance sanctions that subjugation and violence.

I have been speaking thus far, necessarily but somewhat misleadingly, about violence "in" fiction, as plot device and theme. Not only is there of course no literal violence in verbal art, but scenes of violence in much western fiction of the first half of the twentieth century either occur, as it were, "off-stage" or are represented obliquely. Lee Mitchell has observed that the crucial, plot-turning "acts" of violence in Owen Wister's *The Virginian* are undescribed. As a result, Mitchell argues, this and other early Westerns influence the genre when its readers "fill in" what they expect is already there.²³ While the thematic effect of violence in fiction is undeniably important to readers, it is nevertheless critical not to dissociate it from the verbal occasion in which it exists. As Michael Kowalewski cautions, violence in fiction needs to be approached not as a represented fact, but as a fact of representation.²⁴ Violence is never just ideologically or thematically functional; it also stands as a limit and expressive challenge to the force of verbal representation. Whether it is occasioned in realist or romantic prose, whether it is rendered directly or obliquely, violence "in" fiction is of a piece with its verbal means of expression.

When violence is "there" in a text without being represented – when Jay Gatsby is shot, when the Virginian hangs his best friend – we have an altogether different kind of verbal occasion than the sort Willa Cather mercilessly presents to the reader, for example, in *A Lost Lady*, when Ivy Peters catches a woodpecker.

He held the woodpecker's head in a vise made of his thumb and forefinger, enclosing its panting body with his palm. Quick as a flash, as if it were a practised trick, with one of those tiny blades he slit both the eyes that glared in the bird's stupid little head, and instantly released it.

The woodpecker rose in the air with a whirling, corkscrew motion, darted to the right, struck a tree-trunk, – to the left, and struck another. Up and down, backward and forward among the tangle of branches it flew, raking its feathers, falling and recovering itself.

The assonance of “quick . . . trick . . . slit” is as excruciating as any graphic image could be. The bird’s corkscrew flight is a horrifying miniature of mutilated nature, both sensate and helpless – and a chilling hint of Ivy’s approach to it as an adult. The Blum boys, who can only watch and “who lived by killing things . . . wouldn’t have believed they could be so upset by a hurt woodpecker.”²⁵ And neither might a reader, habituated to graphic and repeated violence in contemporary cinema and television, believe how upsetting such a moment can be – or how disturbing the hanging of the Virginian’s friend is in Wister’s novel precisely *because* the narrator cannot bear to look.

The means of representing violence are inseparable from the implications of such scenes, especially if we consider more generally the relationship between pervasive western nostalgia and actual historical violence. In fiction, violence so often seems to *have* happened, to be the unviewable moment toward which, or away from which, retrospective narratives move; it both threatens and organizes narrative coherence. To an important extent this is true of historiography, which has either blocked violence from view, in the case of Turner’s optimistic view of frontier history, or brought it to the fore, in the case of the tragic view of New Western historians. Debates among western historians about the significance of the western past hinge not only upon the causes and importance of violence, but as a result, on the narrative means by which it is made to matter. One can read some histories of war without feeling the kind of visceral recoiling that Cather’s image of the blind woodpecker provokes. The turn to literary models among some western historians is a means of bringing questions of subjectivity more fully to bear on “objective” analysis, as a way of making once subordinated histories communicate with a human voice and feeling. Yet in doing so we also risk making the past seem more familiar than it really is, as it was lived; this is often the trade-off in imagining history from our unavoidably subjective standpoints.

There is no consensus about the United States’ western past, nor has there ever been. Historians of the American West have debated, especially over the last forty years, whether the West is best understood, following Turner, within a single paradigm – as a succession of frontiers or a legacy of conquest, for example – or as multiple stories, and whether the western past predominantly records the best or the worst about the American nation, as if the nation is either redeemed or put on trial in its western past. Revisionism about the West has been a constant: the West is a setting upon which American ideology gets figured and refigured,

upon which debates of national consequence are allegorized in competing ways, for different ethnic groups, business interests, religious beliefs, and political agendas. Most pervasively, the West – as setting and even as a word – has served as both a point of national consolidation and a place from which to question empire and American faith in individual freedom and providential destiny. Against expectation, the popularly embraced fiction examined in this study is filled not with examples of free individualism but with forced choices and constraints, tragic marriages, environmental hardships, group conflict and identity confusion, murder, failure, and accidents. These examples resemble the New Western History but they are an old story, the story of a retrospective American romance at odds with, and complicit in, ongoing American reality.

In the three sections of this chapter that follow, I will explore the West as a literary allegory in order to understand how and why it gets narrated in relation to the American nation, both as historiography, in the case of Turner, and in the novel. It is in part with the legacy of that nationalism that New Western historians have had to do battle, who have a hard enough time just defining the West in its reality. The cultural legacy of western violence has endured through the life of that allegory. It is also because of the West's function as national allegory and because marriage has served culturally and historically as an analogue to national union, that this study is justified in reading the troubled particulars of romance and marriage in relation to American nationalism. The writers of fiction in this study enact those allegories with varying degrees of self-consciousness about their fictionality and about the limits and distortions of retrospection. In the last section of this chapter, I will show why the thematic and formal considerations in this book, and indeed in any consideration of the literary West, need to be thought about together.

ALLEGORIZING NATION

Writing in 1921 for Yale University Press's series the *Chronicles of America*, the sometime western novelist Emerson Hough began *The Passing of the Frontier: A Chronicle of the Old West* with a claim as large as his subject's national significance: "The frontier! There is no word in the English language more stirring, more intimate, or more beloved . . . It means all that America ever meant . . . To a genuine American it is the dearest word in all of the world." Since the frontier in history has had "many a local habitation and many a name," he argued, "it lies somewhat indefinite under the blue haze of the years, all the more alluring for its lack

of definition.”²⁶ With its confident sense of an affective consensus among undefined and nominally “genuine” Americans about a word that is yet indefinite and hazy, Hough’s rhetoric dates itself, at least in the context of current academic writing about the West. Yet today, what many western historians consider the ethnocentric “f-word” is nevertheless alive and well in American culture, shared by most Americans as a kind of “cultural glue” that holds them together, as Patricia Limerick has argued.²⁷ It is by virtue of their elusiveness that the words “frontier” and “West” have not only come to frustrate historians but have come to be saturated with American nationalist meanings, to signify “America” in the cultural imagination. Hough describes, as Ronald Reagan later would, some of those commonly held, retrospectively imagined reasons that made the word so dear to those who loved the American nation: “There lies our comfort and our pride. There we never have failed . . . The frontier was the place and the time of the strong man, of the self-sufficient but restless individual . . . There, for a time at least, we were Americans.”²⁸ The cultural work of a single word is clear: preserved beyond its history yet embedded in the past, the frontier made Americans American and that American was the strong white man, the restless individual, both self-reliant and unsatisfied. Born of no family and producing no progeny, the American was “made” out West, both satisfying a nation’s sense of its exceptionalist difference from the inherited history of the Old World and simultaneously generating anxiety about how this exceptionalism might be perpetuated through a continuing national genealogy.

If we substitute “the West” for “the frontier,” Hough’s description and set of connotations accurately represent an imaginary site that Americans can still automatically visualize, even if the connection or distinction between “frontier” and “West” largely goes unarticulated in popular culture and both are imagined more as past places frozen in time than as historical processes connected with present sites and regions. The word “frontier” and the phrase “Manifest Destiny” are both freighted with what happened to any people who obstructed America’s sanctified mission to spread natural freedom, those people Jefferson alluded to, looking ahead to the settlement of the continent, as a “blot or mixture on [the] surface” of empire.²⁹ But today the word “frontier” has a clearer relation to the concept of Manifest Destiny than it did before Frederick Jackson Turner first delivered his address “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” in 1893. Turner did not make the relationship between frontier and the ideology of Manifest Destiny explicit in his thesis, though he used the latter phrase. As Theodore Roosevelt said, he



Figure 1 "American Progress," by John Gast. Lithograph in *Croft's New Overland Tourist and Pacific Coast Guide*, 1879.

“put into definite shape a great deal of thought that had been floating around rather loosely.”³⁰ In arguing that the process of settlement along frontier lines of continuous recession *explains* the development of the *entire* nation up to his time, Turner provided a historiographical way of affirming retrospectively the presumptions of proponents of Manifest Destiny, who, seeing the vastness of the continent, believed in equally large measure in the rightness of taking it. In other words, whatever descriptive, particular reference the term “frontier” might have had before Turner’s hypothesis it had no more. It became imbued retrospectively with the greatest national significance, just as prospectors and presidents surveying the continent had imbued the landscape with the American mission. As Anders Stephanson describes it, “[Manifest Destiny] was more than an expression: it was a whole *matrix*, a manner of interpreting the time and space of ‘America.’”³¹ Manifest Destiny conflated the sacred and the secular and turned time into space and gave world-historical importance to the idea of moving west, an idea that was already a commonplace in the eighteenth century and extending back to the ancients as *translatio imperii* – the “heliotropic” idea that, as the mediaeval abbot and mystic Hugh of St. Victor wrote in *De vanitate mundi* (*On the Vanity of the World*), “everything that happened in the beginning of time took place in the East when the world began, while in the progress of the ages toward the end of time, which is the end of the world, all things come to an end in the West.”³² In western American terms, all things in civilization had come to their zenith. The Reverend Thomas Brockaway preached in 1784, “Empire, learning and religion have in past ages, been traveling from east to west, and this continent is their last western state . . . Here then is God erecting a stage on which to exhibit the great things of his kingdom.”³³

The most widely disseminated image of the West in the nineteenth century is also one of the most fantastic: John Gast’s 1872 lithograph “American Progress” (see figure 1), which as a painting is elsewhere variously titled “The Spirit of Progress,” “Manifest Destiny,” and “The Spirit of Manifest Destiny,” a fact which demonstrates that an allegory may have many aliases but much the same spirit. It was especially reproduced in George Crofutt’s many editions of his tourist guide of the West in the 1870s, which sold over half a million copies; the painted version has also been reproduced on the cover of recent studies of Manifest Destiny, American exceptionalism, and the myth of the West, and given attention by Alan Trachtenberg.³⁴ This image visually depicts the kind of grand stage the Mr. Brockaway described a century before, in

some ways more secularized but just as theatrically allegorical. In it, images of empire, learning, and technology – borne only by men – move from east to west across the entire continent, banishing the buffalo and the Indians in the Far West into a receding darkness. Above these Turnerian “stages of civilization” floats a giant white Lady – the Spirit herself – with schoolbook in one arm and telegraph cable in the other. Woman-as-allegory weds, in this image, the particulars of western settlement to national destiny. Crofutt’s *Guide* claimed that the star on her forehead is the “‘Star of empire,’” as it guided its readers through an interpretation of the image by pointing out that the Indians “turn their despairing faces toward the setting sun, as they flee from the presence of the wondrous vision. The ‘Star’ is *too much for them*. What American man, woman or child, does not feel a heart-throb of exultation as they think of the glorious achievements of PROGRESS since the landing of the Pilgrim Fathers, on staunch old Plymouth Rock!”³⁵

Like the enduring, optimistic myth of the West, the picture figures history as geography, or turns time into space, by means of the governing allegorical Spirit – one the whole family can enjoy. The allegorical structure is immediately apparent: as if along vertical and horizontal axes, the tall, metaphorical spirit of progress dominates and gives meaning to the ground beneath her, in which a metonymic chain of historical events, men, and objects are typologically represented across the continent, any of them as iconic as the other of the West. The particulars of the painting become allegorical because of the governing spirit of “Manifest Destiny,” which is also the spirit of allegory-as-nation-building. The painting enacts, for the viewers, what Manifest Destiny assumed, that the continent was given to them. By subsuming the vast continent and its history of progress within its frames, the painting “gives” the viewer the continent and its rationalization for doing so. Significantly, the Indians and buffalo, though dim in the darkness in their fast retreat, are nevertheless present. These are not vacant lands, as much American rhetoric would have it, but lands in need of the spirit of progress. The vanishing Indians give structural significance to that need; they are an essential part of the allegory, an allegory more of transcendence than history. Indeed, the image suggests transcendence over history, individual experience, and particularity, all for the sake of a nation’s image of itself. As if the viewer needed more instruction, Crofutt’s guide stresses that the picture is “of purely national design.”

While the lithograph lacks images of marriage and family, five decades earlier, in 1820, the Reverend Jedidiah Morse headed a governmental

investigation among American Indian groups in part to gain information on their “moral condition.” Morse concluded that “‘the marriage institution, in its purity,’ would serve as a vehicle of civilization among the natives,” arguing that polygamy, like the individual Indians in Gast’s painting fifty years later, “ever yields and vanishes before the light of civilization and christianity.” Offering property and citizenship to Native Americans who were heads of families would remain conditional upon the renunciation of tribal affiliation. Marriage to a white American became evidence that an Indian had joined “civilized life.”³⁶ After decades of Indian removal and their perceived recalcitrance in joining that life, Gast’s picture simplifies and distorts the ways in which a younger nation imagined the civilizing effects of monogamous and even interracial marriage. In this image, citizenship and property rights are given solely to individual white men, regardless of whether they are heads of households. Gone is the family, replaced by the emerging frontiersman of the popular imagination, who stands for the progress of the nation. And while all the men in Gast’s image are racially distinguished as either white or Indian, the white woman-as-allegory marries white-Indian difference to the transcendent star of empire. In contrast, Crofutt’s guide begins, opposite its title page, with a drawing of “Utah’s Best Crop,” dozens of babies (see figure 2). These two introductory images in this popular travel guide imply that families were to follow in the march of progress (and substitute a better crop for Utah’s). But the whole impulse to civilize and conquer in the early nineteenth century was predicated upon monogamous Christian marriage and the family. In the twentieth century, many writers who reimagined the consequences of settlement would return the focus to marriage and family, away from the masculine individual, but without the structurally important role of the Indian in defining civilization.

The nationalist intent of Gast’s painting is not surprising in the context of nineteenth-century culture, but in the context of contemporary American culture, what is surprising is that so much *narrative* is given to an image of the West, and that the narrative sweep should have to be so large and explicit to guide people into the West. Contemporary Americans are apparently drawn toward images of the West that are mute as nature is mute, or that at least do not make their meaning explicit, as in numerous car commercials set in rugged western landscapes, and in a recent magazine advertisement by the Wyoming Division of Tourism that depicts the old “nomadic bachelor” West of the past, by means of a lone man on a horse near a mesa. The advertisement says, “The West is not a myth.