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# Democracy and Capitalism in the American Western

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Michelle C. Greenwald entitled "Democracy and Capitalism in the American Western." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Charles J. Maland, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Mary Papke, Christine Holmlund, Lisi Schoenbach

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Vice Chancellor and Dean  
of Graduate Studies

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DEMOCRACY AND CAPITALISM IN THE AMERICAN WESTERN

A Dissertation  
Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Michelle C. Greenwald  
December 2006

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## DEDICATION

*The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.*

~Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love*

This dissertation is dedicated to my father, Andrew. Though he did not survive his battle with cancer to see the completed project, he was my greatest source of inspiration for its inception, and indeed, for much of my life. He loved and encouraged me, challenged me to achieve my best, and set for me an example of unselfishness, honor, and courage in the face of suffering.

*Vous restez toujours dans mon coeur.*

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## Abstract

In “Democracy and Capitalism in the American Western,” I argue that the Western consistently dramatizes the tensions between democracy and capitalism while revealing the cultural structure of feeling at the time of its production. Since the first modern Western, Wister’s *The Virginian* (1902), the genre has expressed a concern that the balance between democracy and capitalism has been upset and that this imbalance has engendered or exacerbated other social problems. The genre generally worked to promote consensus about progress until the breakdown of the liberal consensus in the 1960s, when Americans’ belief in progress was shaken, resulting, in turn, in a shift in the Western to highlighting and critiquing the darker motivations and results of American progress.

In Chapter One, “‘The Code of the West’: Democracy, Capitalism, and the American Hero,” I argue that, though classic Westerns share a basic faith in America’s progress, they also reveal contemporary tensions between democracy and capitalism. As the Western evolved into a medium of cultural criticism, it openly recognized greed as a major motivating factor in the settlement of the West, which I argue in Chapter Two, “‘Riding off into the Sunrise’: The Revision of the Western.” In Chapter Three, “‘No Longer a Poor Man’s Country’: The Anti-incorporation Western in Post-consensus America,” I build on Alan Trachtenberg’s *The Incorporation of America* to argue that many Westerns produced since 1980 can be called Anti-incorporation Westerns because they reveal the settlement of the West as a Civil War of Incorporation rather than as the triumphal achievement of America’s manifest destiny. The West these works depict

belies the morally self-aggrandizing American narrative of the settlement of the West. Rather, the spirit informing the Anti-incorporation Western's west is an implacable mercenary spirit.

Westerns so effectively interrogate both the tensions between democracy and capitalism and the structure of feeling because the time and space displacement of the Western setting provides a vehicle for writers and filmmakers to ask their audiences to consider the complexities of our traditional myths, intimately intertwined with Western history, and our current national and international situations, perhaps provoking intelligent debate and discussion.

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## Introduction

In an essay entitled “Eastwood Noir” discussing the significance of the films of actor/director Clint Eastwood, David Kehr argues,

The continuing fascination of Eastwood's work comes in part from his refusal to make a clear-cut moral choice between social commitment and personal independence. Both options are viewed as equally valid and equally fulfilling [...] it is here that Eastwood approaches one of the fundamental contradictions of American life, the conflict between democratic collectivism and capitalist egoism. [...] The ambivalence runs deep in Eastwood's work, just as it does in American life.<sup>1</sup>

The tension Kehr discovers in Eastwood's work is, as he suggests, ubiquitous in American culture, and especially so in the quintessentially American cultural product, the Western. Clint Eastwood has asserted that the Western is the only original American art form, aside from jazz, no doubt because the relatively brief historical time period (generally, between the end of the Civil War and the turn of the century) and specific setting employed by the genre, whether in fiction or film, provide such suitable ground and materials to stage a drama enacting the tension in the American culture which Kehr notes. Corey Creekmur, in turn, argues in “Buffalo Bill (Himself): History and Memory

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<sup>1</sup> Kehr's essay was the featured essay for PBS's American Master's Series segment on Eastwood and can be accessed at [www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/eastwood\\_c.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/eastwood_c.html).

in the Western Biopic” that “[w]hile most film genres, including the most fantastic, often make some claims upon historical reality, the Western appears unique in its regular, perhaps even inherent, reference to a geographically and historically delimited time and space” (134).<sup>2</sup>

For André Bazin, the frontier experience provided a grammar for an American mythology to be expressed in film: "Those formal attributes by which one normally recognizes the western are simply signs or symbols of its profound reality, namely the myth. The western was born of an encounter between a mythology and a means of expression" (qtd. in Buscomb 142). Henry Nash Smith, in his *Virgin Land*, recognized that the history of westward expansion was employed, reshaped, and developed into the Western myth by the interaction between pulp fiction writers and their eager audience, but he also analyzed the ambivalence Americans feel toward the West in its symbolic expression as both "Garden" and "Desert." Jim Kitses, in *Horizons West*, takes his cue from Northrop Frye, creating a series of thematic/conceptual dichotomies in tension in the Western--for example, "Wilderness," associated with the individual and with freedom, versus "Civilization," associated with community and restriction. For Kitses, this series of competing opposites represents a "philosophical dialectic, an ambiguous cluster of meanings and attitudes that provide the traditional/thematic structure of the genre" (11).<sup>3</sup> Thomas Schatz also noted this tension in arguing that the development of the story of western expansion into mythology in literature and film depicts "a world of

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<sup>2</sup> Creekmur's essay is included in *Westerns: Films through History*, edited by Janet Walker (New York: Routledge, 2001), 131-150.

<sup>3</sup> One might also read Thomas Schatz's discussion of George Stevens' *Shane* (1953) in his *Hollywood Genres* in which he refers to the film as a "ballet of opposites" (55-58).

precarious balance in which the forces of civilization and savagery are locked in a struggle for supremacy" (*Hollywood Genres* 47). Tied up with this struggle for supremacy over the desert and the forces of savagery is another, more modern and internal, struggle: that of preservation of individual freedom in the face of the bonds offered by, and the limitations demanded by, community life and the progress it heralds. Schatz describes this conflict in his discussion of Ford's *Stagecoach*: "Perhaps the most significant conflict in the Western is the community's demand for order through cooperation and compromise versus the physical environment's demand for rugged individualism coupled with a survival-of-the-fittest mentality" (50).

As Kehr's comments on Eastwood have suggested, the concepts of individualism and community bear a complex relationship to the ideologies of capitalism and democracy, and this fact also contributes to the specifically American character of the Western. As McCloskey and Zaller have noted in *The American Ethos*, capitalism and democracy are the "two major traditions of belief" that "have dominated the life of the American nation from its inception" and have "strongly influenced the course and character of American development" (1). While McCloskey and Zaller note that capitalism and democracy, in their early forms, both "aimed to free the individual from the dead hand of traditional restraints and to limit the power of the rich and well-born to exploit the less privileged," there are distinct points of divergence between the two traditions which create a tension in American life (2). The authors describe those points of divergence thus:

Capitalism is primarily concerned with maximizing private profit, while democracy aims at maximizing freedom, equality, and the public good. From this difference, others follow. Capitalism tends to value each individual according to the scarcity of his talents and his contribution to production; democracy attributes roughly equivalent value to *all* people. Capitalism stresses the need for a reward system that encourages the most talented and industrious individuals to earn and amass as much wealth as possible; democracy tries to ensure that all people, even those who lack outstanding talents and initiative, can at least gain a decent livelihood. Capitalism holds that the free market is not only the most efficient but also the fairest mechanism for distributing goods and services; democracy upholds the rights of popular majorities to override market mechanisms when necessary to alleviate social and economic distress. (7)

McCloskey and Zaller's study of American attitudes toward these two traditions found that while the majority of Americans accept both to a significant degree, individuals tend to lean towards one of the traditions and are suspicious, to some degree, of the other, and the authors conclude that "the tension that exists between capitalist and democratic values is a definitive feature of American life that has helped to shape the ideological divisions of our nation's politics" (1). Particularly since the Reagan Era, party lines appear to be drawn specifically according to the divergences between capitalism, on the one side, and democracy, on the other.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Bellah et al.'s *Habits* (publication information in note below) 262-271 and Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation* 643-654.

This ambivalence toward capitalism and democracy, as I noted earlier, is connected to the ambivalence about individualism apparent in American culture and reflected in the West. Both the use of the term "individualism" to describe a significant aspect of the American character and an anxiety about that characteristic first appear in Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. In Part II of his work, Tocqueville reveals his own ambivalence as he attempts to distinguish individualism as a "mature and calm feeling," from selfishness, "a passionate and exaggerated love of self"; while selfishness could be immediately convicted because it "blights the germ of all virtue," Tocqueville worried that individualism, while "of democratic origin," might only initially appear admirable, but in the long run, have the most negative consequences: "individualism, at first, only saps the virtues of public life; but in the long run it attacks and destroys all others and is at length absorbed in downright selfishness" (104).

More recently, Robert Bellah and his colleagues have studied the manifestations of American individualism in *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*.<sup>5</sup> Bellah, a sociologist, and his colleagues, whose interdisciplinary work touches on philosophy, theology, and sociology, take their title from Tocqueville, and, like him, they are pessimistic about the ends of individualism. Their study found that individualism in America manifests itself in "both a 'hard' utilitarian shape and a 'soft' expressive form. One focused on the bottom line, the other on feelings, which often were viewed therapeutically" (viii). Individualism is connected in the American mind with

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<sup>5</sup> For my study, *Habits* refers to the second edition of *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1996), which includes an updated introduction; the first edition was published in 1985.

qualities such as self-reliance, initiative, energy, and determination; these are the qualities that, many would argue, have allowed Americans to succeed. However, individualism also encourages the view that each person is responsible for, and therefore deserves, his or her own success or failure, and because of this, it allows Americans to tolerate substantial inequities in income and concomitant inequities in such necessities as housing, education, and health care. Bellah's indictment against individualism is that it "adulates winners while showing contempt for losers, a contempt that can descend with crushing weight on those considered, either by others or by themselves, to be moral or social failures" (viii). The harshness of this side of individualism has been checked throughout American history, according to Bellah and his colleagues, by what they term "more generous understandings of life," namely, the biblical and civic republican strains of the American culture (ix). While individualism is also present in these two traditions, it is tempered by the sense of connectedness and responsibility to others that they convey.

*Habits* analyzes the ways in which individualism has contributed to the success of capitalism, especially the more recent version of it, which Bellah and his colleagues term "neocapitalism,"<sup>6</sup> in opposition to welfare liberalism: "The neocapitalist vision is viable only to the degree to which it can be seen as an expression—even a moral expression—of our dominant ideological individualism, with its compulsive stress on independence, its contempt for weakness, and its adulation of success" (xxvi). Neocapitalism supports the

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<sup>6</sup> The authors of *Habits* define neocapitalism in opposition to welfare liberalism, which began when Roosevelt's New Deal policies attempted to employ government resources to alleviate the ills caused by the Great Depression: "Neocapitalism, an effort to revive older free-market ideas in contemporary form, developed as the major critique of Welfare Liberalism, gaining plausibility and adherents as a consequence of the economic difficulties of the 1970s. Since 1970 Neocapitalism has entered into a serious contest for hegemony in the American political consciousness" (262).

idea of meritocracy (a concept that Wister wholeheartedly espouses in *The Virginian* and which will be discussed in Chapter One): the best and brightest succeed and deserve the rewards they gain, while the unsuccessful likewise deserve their position due to lack of talent or effort. Thus, the wealthy and the successful are freed from responsibility to the less successful members of their community. For the authors of *Habits*, the continued success of neocapitalism points to a "bleak" economic and social future: "under the aegis of neocapitalist ideology the American economy has chosen high rates of short-term gain, however speculative, over investment for long-term growth" (xxvii). The authors of *Habits* see the success of neocapitalism as tipping the ideological balance in favor of radical individualism, and as Americans become more invested in this radical individualism, the biblical and civic republican aspects of our culture, with their appeal to a sense of responsibility to others, appear less and less valid.

These strains in our culture are, of course, expressed in the products of our culture, including Western novels and films. Bellah and his colleagues note that ambivalence with regard to individualism and community

shows up particularly clearly at the level of myth in our literature and our popular culture. There we find the fear that society may overwhelm the individual and destroy any chance at autonomy unless he stands against it, but also recognition that it is only in relation to society that the individual can fulfill himself and that if the break with society is too radical, life has no meaning at all. (144)

The tension between the competing demands of individualism and community life is most intensely developed in the Western in the figure of the Western hero and the code

by which he lives. The fan of Westerns may immediately call to mind Owen Wister's Virginian risking the love of the Eastern schoolmarm Molly Wood in order to preserve his good name and protect his neighbors' cattle by challenging the villain Trampas to a shootout; or perhaps Will Kane, philosophically at odds with, and in danger of losing, his Quaker wife, Amy, as he determines to face Frank Miller and his gang in *High Noon*; or one recalls Shane riding off into the mountains having saved the farmers from the cattle baron's hired gun, but unable then to join the community; or, perhaps one envisions Ethan Edwards in the final image of *The Searchers*, approaching but unable to cross the threshold into the domestic world of the Jorgensen family after returning his niece to their home. The code by which these Western heroes live depends on an intense individualism but also upholds a sense of honor that recognizes the value of, and the need to protect, community life. Indeed, often times Western heroes, like Shane or Tom Doniphon in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, live out the code by sacrificing themselves and the possibility of their assimilation into the community for the sake of the community.

The Western, what André Bazin has called the "American film par excellence," has been traditionally branded as conservative, reinforcing dominant contemporary ideologies; that is, the expected resolution of the hero's inner conflict between pursuing his individualism and joining the community reinforces, in this view, the status quo. However, this view of ideology suggests that it is a stabilized or achieved state of meaning in a culture. Applied to the Western, then, the notion that this genre has been traditionally "ideological" suggests that the genre has inculcated and hopes to impose upon its audience a dominant ideology. The Western, then, becomes a genre that stages a

conflict between the individual and his/her community, normally pitting a cowboy or gunfighter against savages or bad gunfighters, in order to reinforce the workings and values of capitalism and individualism in American social and political life.<sup>7</sup>

However, Raymond Williams, in *Marxism and Literature*, offers a process oriented view of culture not as a stable or achieved state but, rather, as a field of interaction between what he terms "dominant," "residual," and "emergent" elements of culture. A residual element, as Williams defines it in *Marxism and Literature*,

has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present. Thus certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue—cultural as well as social—of some previous social and cultural institution of formation. (122)

A residual element can function in two ways: it may be incorporated into the dominant culture, or it may have an "alternative or oppositional" relationship to the dominant culture. Williams' example of a residual element resonates with Bellah and his colleagues' understanding of the biblical and civic republican traditions in American life, which can be considered residual elements of our culture, and Williams, in fact, offers organized religion as being "predominantly residual." Some aspects of it, like a shared "official

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<sup>7</sup> For criticism which views the Western as reinforcing dominant ideology, see, for example, Will Wright's *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (1975), an analysis of the cultural function of myth in the Western; Jane Tompkins' *West of Everything* (1992) which views the twentieth-century Western as reacting against the nineteenth-century's cult of domesticity in an effort to reinforce dominant masculine hegemony; and Richard Slotkin's trilogy, a historical study of the mythology of violence related to the

morality" have been incorporated into the dominant culture; other aspects, like "absolute brotherhood" and "service to others without reward," offer alternative or oppositional values in our capitalist, individualist dominant culture (122).

The dominant and residual elements of the culture are always interacting with the emergent, those "new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship" which are continually being formed (123). Williams admits that the emergent may be difficult to recognize, for two reasons: first, it can be difficult to determine if that which appears emergent is actually alternative or oppositional to the dominant, or merely some new phase of the dominant; second, the dominant culture is often eager to incorporate emergent cultural elements. This view of culture as an interaction between dominant, residual, and emergent elements indicates that in the experience of day-to-day life, the ways of thinking and being of individuals and societies is a mixture, or a "solution," as Williams calls it, of elements. This solution is what he calls the "structure of feeling." For Williams, art,<sup>8</sup> as opposed to ideology, is the proper place to locate structures of feeling; in "Film and the Dramatic Tradition," he argues:

We examine each element as a precipitate, but in the living experience of the time every element was in solution, an inseparable part of a complex whole. And it seems to be true, from the nature of art, that it is from such a totality that the artist

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frontier, that ultimately indicts the Western for the genre's inability to "envision the nation as polyglot, multicultural, and egalitarian" (*Gunfighter Nation* 658).

<sup>8</sup> Williams used the phrase "Culture is ordinary," the title of one of his essays originally published in *Conviction* in 1958, to break down the strict traditional distinction made between high and low art. Williams does not accept the "apparent division of our culture into, on the one hand, a remote and self-gracious sophistication, on the other hand, a doped mass" (24). He prefers to define culture as "a whole way of life;" it is both "traditional and creative," and it includes "both the most ordinary common meanings

draws; it is in art, primarily, that the effect of the totality, the dominant structure of feeling, is expressed and embodied. To relate a work of art to any part of that observed totality may, in varying degrees, be useful; but it is a common experience, in analysis, to realize that when one has measured the work against the separable parts, there yet remains some element for which there is no external counterpart. This element, I believe, is what I have named the structure of feeling of a period, and it is only realizable through experience of the work of art itself, as a whole. (33)<sup>9</sup>

Western films and novels, then, both express and embody the structure of feeling of the period in which they were produced.

The Western genre is particularly interesting for its interplay of dominant, residual, and emergent cultural elements. As I've already suggested, the genre dramatizes a tension between the dominant cultural emphasis on individualism and the residual cultural elements of our biblical and civic republican traditions which promote the common good. Also, the genre, set in a moment of our history in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century at the time of westward expansion, pits the dominant elements of industrial, urban life against the residual elements of our culture which look back longingly to the socially more simple, if in physical ways more challenging, pastoral existence of that time period. Williams explains, again in *Marxism in Literature*, the significance of the residual in a

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and the finest individual meanings" (11). As John Higgins notes in his introduction to *The Raymond Williams Reader*, Williams' position opened the way for serious scholarly study of film.

<sup>9</sup> This essay is included in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, edited by John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 25-41. It was originally published in 1954 in *Preface to Film* (London: Film Drama Ltd.), 1-55.

way that suggests its function in the Western and one function of the genre itself in our culture:

In the subsequent default of a particular phase of a dominant culture there is then a reaching back to those meanings and values which were created in actual societies and actual situations in the past, and which still seem to have significance because they represent areas of human experience, aspiration, and achievement which the dominant culture neglects, undervalues, opposes, represses, or even cannot recognize. (124)

The emergent culture of the West before its assimilation into the United States becomes after that assimilation has taken place the residual cultural element of the Western. In reaching back to a specific time period in which the established nation dealt with and eventually incorporated the territory along its western border, and in staging the tensions between an established culture and an emerging one, the Western genre is inherently a drama about the interplay between dominant, residual, and emergent elements in a culture, its structure of feeling.

It seems to me that critics who argue that Westerns merely reinforce the status quo—the dominant elements of a culture in the terminology I've been using—are, as Williams would have it, analyzing separable parts of the totality of elements that constitute a culture's structure of feeling rather than observing these parts in solution. Williams' concept of culture as an interplay between dominant, residual, and emergent elements allows a reading of Westerns which can appreciate their complexity and the suppleness of the genre to engage the tensions in American life and to contribute to the

ongoing conversation of a living, changing culture. Westerns produced during the first half of the twentieth century tend to espouse an optimistic view of the nation's achievement of its Manifest Destiny, particularly those released during the period governed by the liberal consensus following World War II; and yet they still acknowledge and work out the tensions between democracy and capitalism. Furthermore, Westerns produced in the 1960s when the liberal consensus was breaking apart and after that period can hardly be assumed to espouse such an optimistic viewpoint and, more often, I would argue, serve as media for criticism of American culture and practice. In other words, they serve in the "alternative or oppositional" relationship to dominant culture Williams defined. I wish to analyze this totality, this "solution of elements," interacting in Westerns in an attempt to determine the structure of feeling that artists represent in their texts to contribute to contemporary conversations about capitalism and democracy and individualism and community life. My study will address Westerns produced in different time periods with very different structures of feeling.

The significance of the settlement of the western frontier as a mythology rests in its ability to provide Americans with a narrative and a grammar to express, and promote consensus with regard to, American history and cultural values; another way of viewing this narrative is as one that justifies the means to the end of fulfilling what politicians of the 1840's called "Manifest Destiny." Richard Slotkin, in *Gunfighter Nation*, hits on this when he describes the narrative based on the "Myth of the Frontier" as one in which "the conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation or displacement of the Native Americans who originally inhabited it have been the means to our achievement of a national identity,

a democratic polity, and a phenomenally dynamic and 'progressive' civilization" (10). Scholarly study of the Western in more recent decades has emphasized the racism, sexism, and imperialism evident in both the mythology of the frontier and the Western genre. According to Stanley Corkin in *Cowboys and Cold Warriors*, "Westerns of the intensely nationalist period from 1946-1962 respond to variations in national posture and behavior that allow them to attract and maintain their audience" (9). These Westerns readily lend themselves to criticism that they express the dominant ideology of the time, including elements of racism, sexism, and imperialism. However, what has been less often analyzed is the interplay, within these Westerns, of the dominant ideology with the contemporary residual and emergent cultural elements.

I will begin in Chapter One by complicating a view of the Western as an essentially conservative genre, one that employs our frontier mythology in service of reinforcing the dominant cultural ideologies. In Chapter Two, I will examine the ideological shift apparent in many Westerns of the turbulent period when the liberal consensus broke apart. And in Chapter Three, I will analyze Westerns which continue the work of cultural criticism in post-consensus America as citizens must negotiate the exponential increases in the power of global corporations that have drastic effects on the balance between capitalism and democracy.

Chapter One, "The Code of the West: American Individualism and the Western Hero," will establish how the Code of the West and frontier mythology have traditionally functioned and how these two concepts relate to the tension between individualism and more communal strains of American character, which Tocqueville noted and Bellah and

his colleagues wish to resurrect, as that tension relates to the tension between democracy and capitalism. I will take as my example to illustrate these concepts Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, which scholarly consensus names as the novel that heralds the modern Western. While Wister's novel preaches the moral superiority of individualism and the desirability of an aristocracy of the just, brave and successful, the interplay between this dominant ideology and the emergent concerns of immigrants and labor unions, as well as the residual elements of biblical and pastoral traditions, complicates Wister's overt philosophy. Hollywood Westerns produced from the release of John Ford's *Stagecoach* in 1939 until about 1962 have been largely read, and productively so, as representative of the dominant ideologies of their time. However, I will analyze two films of this period, George Stevens' *Shane* (1953) and John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), in which the dominant ideology is critiqued by a more overt interplay in the films of the dominant with the residual and emergent elements of the culture.

While Chapter One will complicate the idea of the "classical" Western as complicit in reinforcing dominant individualist, capitalist ideology, Chapter Two explores Westerns of the 1960's and 1970's, the era during which the liberal consensus of the post-war period broke down and criticism of the dominant ideology became most overt. "Riding Off into the Sunrise: The Revision of the Western" examines several "revisionist" Westerns, focusing on the way their treatment of the Western hero confronts the tension between individualism and community and critiques individualism and capitalism in the context of the social and political turbulence of the period in which they were produced. Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* (1964) in fiction and Sam Peckinpah's

*The Wild Bunch* (1969) and Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971) in film all develop the tensions I've noted as they revise the mythology of the western frontier and the cowboy hero. Thomas Berger's novel follows the life of Jack Crabbe and, in doing so, complicates the notion that the white man civilized the savage West by portraying the community and civility of the Native Americans and the brutality and corruption of the whites. Peckinpah's Western refashions Western heroes into a band of self-interested mercenaries whose gun battle against railroad men in the opening scenes of the film results in the violent deaths of many innocent townspeople and epitomizes the clash between democracy and capitalism. Altman's gloomy film portrays the death of the individual entrepreneur at the hands of corporate bullies. Each of these works is a product of the structure of feeling of its period of production, a period in which dominant and emergent cultural elements clashed with great force and lasting effects.

The remaining chapter of this work deals with Westerns produced, in fiction and film, in the 1980's and 1990's, a period marked by increasing corporate power and curtailment of democratic freedoms enabled by the rise, following the breakdown of the liberal consensus, of a new conservative movement that has supported neocapitalist (to use Bellah's term) administrations. Implicit in the Western's portrayal of and commentary on the tension between democracy and capitalism in American culture is the question of whether the American project, a project that hoped to balance these two traditions, has failed. Chapter Three, "'No Longer a Poor Man's Country': The Anti-incorporation Western in Post-consensus America," examines this question in an analysis of Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* (1980), Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992), and Cormac

McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* (1992). *Heaven's Gate*, conceived as an epic blockbuster, critiques corporate capitalism and bigotry as it narrates its version of the Johnson County Cattle War. *Unforgiven* tackles issues of economic and legal injustice, violence, and brutality of law enforcement; in the process, it deals overtly with the mythologizing of the history of the West, and particularly that of the Western hero, in popular fiction by including a dime novelist who greatly embellishes the deeds of a supposed gunfighter. *All the Pretty Horses* combines a romantic view of the Western hero with a criticism of his individualist code of ethics and behavior and ultimately offers a pessimistic view of our fate as Americans. The novel, the first in McCarthy's Border Trilogy, opens with a youthful protagonist who leaves the United States for Mexico in the hopes of finding a way to continue the cowboy lifestyle which is being eroded in America due to the advance of modern technology and urbanization. The novel has much to offer to our public dialogue about the direction in which America is heading. McCarthy asks his readers to consider the effects of the loss of our agrarian roots, not just on individual characters, but also on the environment and American culture itself. Each of the works I examine in this chapter invites a consideration of the effects of incorporation, both in the time the Western is set and in contemporary America, on the traditions of democracy and capitalism.

The Western, whether in fiction or in film, has always been a product of our popular culture that offered a formula, a specific narrative structure, for discussing the drive of individualism in American character and the tension between it and the demands of community life entailed in progress and nation building. The Western hero was most

often valorized in traditional Westerns. Even when this individualist hero was unable to assimilate into a community, his skills and code of honor have been presented as required by and essential to the establishment of the community in which he would not be able to live. Following the turbulence of the 1960's and 1970's, the formula of Westerns produced in the 1980's and beyond does not change so much as the significance of the elements of that formula; these elements are revised to deconstruct the white, male, triumphalist moral of the Frontier mythology and to highlight residual and emergent elements of our culture. This process offers opportunities to employ a familiar narrative in a different way as a starting point for a more inclusive and complex public conversation, one that unmask the fictions of our national mythology and allows us as individuals to reconsider our place in the larger communities of our nation and our world.

## Chapter One

### **“The Code of the West”: Democracy, Capitalism, and the Western Hero**

The Western dramatizes and mythologizes American expansion and nation building at the end of the nineteenth century. At the heart of the nineteenth-century progress the genre narrates is the tension between democracy and capitalism; in dramatizing this tension, the genre also conveys the structure of feeling regarding the two traditions at the times the works were produced. Herbert McCloskey and John Zaller, in their study of *The American Ethos*, have traced American attitudes towards these two traditions which have shaped American life, concluding that they originally worked harmoniously to help the fledgling nation "throw off the anachronistic restraints by which individuals were circumscribed and closely controlled" (163). While the two traditions converged in this effort to free fledgling America to forge a republic, distinct points of divergence between them have caused considerable tension in American life at various times in history. The authors argue that though the early nineteenth century saw its share of intense political and economic disputes concerning democracy and capitalism, the free enterprise system and private property ownership associated with capitalism were still widely seen as intimately associated with the equality promoted by democracy because "the people who took strong stands in favor of free competition and unfettered enterprise were, by and large, the same people who championed popular sovereignty, equality of rights, and individual freedom" (167). However, the inherent tensions between the two

traditions became pronounced in the late nineteenth century as the nation moved from an agrarian economy to an industrial one.

Industrialization allowed some to amass great fortunes, while long hours in low-paying industrial jobs limited the personal freedom of most workers and curtailed their access to democratic freedoms that had been more readily available to their agrarian and artisan forebears. McCloskey and Zaller describe the effects these changes had on American life:

The great inequities of wealth and opportunity that resulted from these changes had a deleterious effect on the conduct of democratic life. They tended, for example, to divide more sharply the wealthy from the poor, and to create barriers between social classes that led to resentment, hostility, and fear. The great personal fortunes of the new "captains of industry" set them apart socially from other Americans and fostered even sharper inequalities in political power and influence. It was in this period, for example, that the United States Senate came to be described as a "millionaire's club." (168)

Not only did many Americans "lack the financial resources to participate effectively in the election of candidates or the enactment of legislation," but also they "lacked the *social* resources, such as education, that are vital to political effectiveness" (168). The balance of power began to favor capitalistic values over democratic values and effectively muted the voice of a large number of working-class Americans. The tensions that became clear between democracy and capitalism during this period of massive economic and social change have motivated a continual swing of the pendulum between

democracy, on the one side, and capitalism on the other throughout twentieth-century America, a cycle which continues into the twenty-first.

Significantly, the Western is set in the time period when the tensions between democracy and capitalism became pronounced, for whatever other domestic and social issues the genre displaces into the late nineteenth-century western setting, it consistently dramatizes the tension between these two traditions in the process of nation building. The restriction of resources that was heralded by the closing of the western frontier brought to the fore the tensions between the two traditions.

In *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah and his colleagues find a correlation between the rise of the corporation and the popularity of the Western: “The cowboy and the detective began to appear as popular heroes when business corporations emerged as the focal institutions of American life. The fantasy of a lonely, but morally impeccable, hero corresponds to doubts about the integrity of the self in the context of the modern bureaucratic organization” (149). Bellah and his colleagues echo McCloskey and Zaller in tracing the beginnings of the corporatization of America to the time that provides the setting for Westerns in fiction and film, the period of vast expansion and transformation of the nation following the Civil War:

By the end of that century, new technologies, particularly in transport, communications, and manufacturing, pulled the many semi-autonomous local societies into a vast national market. [...] The new economically integrated society emerging at the turn of the century developed its own forms of social organization, political control, and culture, including new representative

[American] characters.<sup>1</sup> The new social form, capable of extending the control of a group of investors over vast resources, huge numbers of employees and, often, great distances, was the business corporation. (*Habits of the Heart* 42)

This development of the corporation allowed for the effective management of the various new technologies and developing industries, and for these concerns to grow into, and reach across, a developing national market. However, Bellah also points to the negative consequences of the efficiency and control that corporations allowed:

In those years, a new politics of interest developed, with the powerful national economic interests of the corporations, banks, and their investors, and, eventually, the labor movement, competing with the old regional, ethnic, and religious interests. [...] In the predatory capitalists the age dubbed robber barons, some of the worst fears of earlier republican moralists seemed confirmed: that by releasing the untrammelled pursuit of wealth without regard to the demands of social justice, industrial capitalism was destroying the fabric of a democratic society, threatening social chaos by pitting class against class. (*Habits of the Heart* 43)

In effect, the massive growth of the nation at the end of the nineteenth century allowed a number of entrepreneurs to amass wealth which then began to be consolidated into corporations; this consolidation of wealth, and the consolidation of power which it allowed, threatened the Jeffersonian ideal of democracy, which relies on the survival and effectiveness of the political voice of the individual.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bellah enumerates the new American character types that evolved as a result of the rise of corporate America as the Entrepreneur, the Manager, and the Therapist. See *Habits of the Heart*, pp. 27-51.

<sup>2</sup> Bellah calls this individual the “Independent Citizen”: “Jefferson’s ideal was the independent farmer who could at the same time make his living and participate in the common life” (30). *Habits* traces changes in

One specific historical struggle that exemplifies the tension between democracy and capitalism, the open-range cattle wars, reached a crisis point in Johnson County, Wyoming, in 1892. In this conflict, the restriction of resources necessary to support the free-range cattle industry pitted the interests of large cattle ranchers against those of smaller ranchers and farmers. Significantly, the historical moment in which large cattle interests and independent ranchers and farmers clashed has been dramatized in a number of fictional and film Westerns, perhaps most notably in Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902), George Stevens' *Shane* (1953), and John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962). These three Westerns, produced at very different time periods, illustrate the Western's ability not only to effectively dramatize the tension between capitalism and democracy inherent in this conflict but also to convey the structure of feeling regarding the two traditions at the time each of these works was produced.

Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) appeared at the tail end of the period of massive growth during which tensions between democracy and capitalism came to a head. The novel has been read by some as a non-partisan Western, but many critics interrogate the work to reveal Wister's intentional efforts to blur his essentially Anglo-Saxon and aristocratic political bias with his choice of hero, a southerner from a family

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this ideal to include (after Franklin) utilitarian individualism and (after Whitman) expressive individualism: "The self-sufficient farmer or artisan capable of participation in the common life was Whitman's ideal as well as Jefferson's and Franklin's. He would have shared their idea of justice" (35). It is the massive transformation of America into a nation of corporations and employees that has resurrected Tocqueville's fears that rapidly growing industry would instigate the "rise of a new form of aristocracy that would make

without name or fortune, who rises from low-wage laborer with little formal education to elite businessman in the course of the novel.<sup>3</sup> Despite the author's attempts to appear democratic, the tension between democracy and capitalism, expressed in the novel as a tension between the "equality" and the "quality," provides a fundamental thematic and ideological underpinning for *The Virginian*. Wister expresses his elitist, essentialist vision of the West as what Robert Schulman terms "an Anglo-Saxon preserve" more clearly in his 1885 essay, "The Evolution of the Cow-puncher."<sup>4</sup> Further analysis of the novel in light of this essay as well as historical issues contemporary to the period during which Wister was visiting the West and writing *The Virginian* allows the reader to identify more precisely Wister's vision, in spite of whatever attempts he made to obscure his ideology, as a refutation of the emergent populist and progressive voices in American society.

Wister's novel narrates the protagonist's resolution of two main conflicts: the battle with Eastern schoolmarm Molly Stark Wood for possession of her heart, and the antagonistic relationship with the cattle thief Trampas that escalates into a violent confrontation, the seminal western showdown, with the prize being the victor's good

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owners and managers into petty despots and reduce workers to mechanically organized, dependent operatives, a condition incompatible with full democratic citizenship" (42).

<sup>3</sup> For example, Gary Scharnhorst, in "Wister and the Great Railway Strike of 1894," unearths the novel's anti-labor treatment of the 1894 railway strikes and rebuts the thread of critical commentary which argues that "the novel gives offense to neither Democrat nor Republican, Jeffersonian nor Federalist, worker nor capitalist, immigrant nor native. The Virginian and Trampas are apparently divided by no issue more nuanced than the (im)morality of cattle rustling, or so goes the argument" [In *Reading The Virginian in the New West*. eds. Melody Graulich and Stephen Tatum (Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 2003), 113-125]. John Cawelti suggests in *Adventure, Mystery, Romance* that Wister blurs his political intention by combining in his protagonist "several conflicting images of American life" (229). Robert Schulman, in his introduction to the 1998 Oxford edition of *The Virginian*, argues, "Wister's strategy is to have the [Eastern establishment] narrator second ideas the Virginian advances, not the reverse, so that the patrician views and values appear to come from the grass roots" (xxiv).

<sup>4</sup> This essay appears in the 1998 Oxford edition of the novel. The quote can be found in Schulman's introduction (x).

name. Both conflicts fit into the rubric of tensions between capitalism and democracy, and their resolutions hinge on the Virginian's employment of the Code of the West; Miss Wood's standoff with the Virginian is based on her desire to avoid *mésalliance* and escalates over the issues of lynching and gunplay, while the conflict with Trampas, on which I will focus, is set within the farther-reaching conflict between large and small cattle ranchers in late nineteenth-century Wyoming. More specifically, Wister's depiction of the Johnson County Cattle War, which pitted the interests of the wealthy Eastern establishment businessmen who built large ranches in Wyoming against the interests of small ranchers, farmers, and low-wage laborers, indicates the dominant and residual cultural elements that informed his vision. The novel allows the reader to begin to clarify the structure of feeling out of which the novel was born, for Wister associates emergent cultural elements he finds threatening, particularly immigration and labor unions, with the antagonists, and at times directly addresses these issues, either as narrator's commentary or authorial intrusions. Throughout he employs the Code of the West in the service of a patrician view of the cowboy and the significance of the West in the continued development of the United States.

Wister presents the Virginian as an ideal, the epitome of what is possible in democratic, capitalist America.<sup>5</sup> The Virginian's self-control in tense situations and self-

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<sup>5</sup> In many ways, Wister's protagonist is his alter ego, a man of unprivileged upbringing who embodies qualities the author must have wished to possess. The son of a prominent Philadelphia physician and an artistically talented mother, Owen Wister was educated in American and European boarding schools and at Harvard. Though Wister was also musically talented and considered pursuing a career in the arts, his father desired him to pursue a career in the world of business. Wister seems to have both yielded and not yielded to his father's wishes: he completed law school and occupied an office in a Philadelphia law firm, but he apparently did not actually practice law and instead used the office as a base for his writing. The pressures of his personal and professional life contributed to nervous depression which led the famous Dr. S. Weir

sufficiency in dangerous ones contrast sharply with the nervous bumbling of the Eastern tenderfoot narrator, who, like Wister, travels to the West as a treatment for neurasthenia.<sup>6</sup> His impressive personal skills and strict adherence to his ethical system reflect the Code of the West that the Virginian embodies and that Wister employs to justify his protagonist's actions in the course of the novel.

Wister establishes the basic template for the modern cowboy hero in his Virginian: he is a man skilled with horses and guns and strict in his adherence to the "Code of the West." In *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel*, Cawelti notes that Westerns are set at a moment in history when "institutional law and government have not yet fully developed in the West, [and] the community has had to create its own methods of insuring order and achieving justice" (70). Some semblance of law and order does exist in the setting Wister offers, but the author presents the budding legal system as corrupted by cattle rustlers and their sympathizers. Several characters make reference, albeit dismissively, to the court system and juries which have been established and the sheriff who has been elected. This negative criticism allows Wister to present the Code in reverential terms, valuing it above the law, and adherence to it justifies the Virginian's

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Mitchell to prescribe a "West cure," effectively sending Wister into both Wyoming and a career as a writer of things Western. For a biographical account of Wister, see Darwin Payne's *Owen Wister: Chronicler of the West, Gentleman of the East* (Dallas: Southern Methodist UP, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Will's "The Nervous Origins of the American West" (*American Literature* 70:2 [Jun 1998]: 293-316) offers an analysis of S. Weir's Mitchell's "West Cure" for male neurasthenic patients (in contrast to the "rest cure" he prescribed for female patients infamously recorded by Charlotte Perkins Gilman) and its significance to both Wister's writing career and *The Virginian* in particular. Will casts neurasthenia as a uniquely capitalist malady, noting that Mitchell and his colleagues saw nervous conditions among urban businessmen as a sign of their "'modernity' and exceptional 'brain power'" and felt that this nervousness might be balanced by "the healthful benefits" of Western hunting expeditions but not cured (297). In fact, Will concludes that complete cure was not to be desired by Mitchell and his like-minded colleagues because "the strain of modern life was not only productive of a generation of exhausted neurasthenics but was equally [...] 'proof that America was the highest civilization that had ever existed'" (298).

participation in lynchings mandated by the cattle barons as well as the showdown with Trampas.

A cowboy's ability to live up to the Code was essential to his survival in the rough-and-tumble West, and, in Wister's view, one's ability to live up to the Code was determined by one's race and ethnicity. In "Evolution of the Cow-Puncher," Wister traces a direct connection between the Anglo-Saxon knight, the English nobleman, and the American cowboy.<sup>7</sup> He praises this race of men while he denigrates the immigrants from other nations entering the U.S. in great numbers during Wister's lifetime. In the essay, Wister blusters,

No rood of modern ground is more debased and mongrel with its hoards of encroaching alien vermin, that turn our cities to Babels and our citizenship to a hybrid farce, who degrade our commonwealth from a nation into something half pawn-shop [sic], half broker's office. But to survive in the clean cattle country requires spirit of adventure, courage, and self-sufficiency; you will not find many Poles or Huns or Russian Jews in that district; it stands as yet untainted by the benevolence of Baron Hirsch.<sup>8</sup> (331)

Wister's vision of the West was of a wild and promising land in which men, even those of humble beginnings, could test themselves, improve themselves, work out their neuroses, and produce great achievements. *Anglo-Saxon* men, that is. Though he

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<sup>7</sup> For a psychoanalytical study tracing the history of the warrior/knight archetype, see Chris Blazina's *The Cultural Myth of Masculinity* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003). Blazina devotes a chapter to "The Cowboy Myth."

<sup>8</sup> Baron Maurice de Hirsch (1831-1896) was a Jewish philanthropist who contributed large sums of money to aid Jewish emigration and education.

expresses these views overtly in the essay, Wister obscures them in *The Virginian* by recasting his opposition between “Anglo-Saxons” and “vermin” as an opposition between the “quality” and the “equality.” The “quality” include those who can live up to the Code of the West, surviving and even thriving in the West no matter what their social or economic class at birth, like the Virginian. The “equality,” in contrast, possess neither the physical skills, the strength of character, nor the mental acuity to succeed in the West. In addition to limiting his extension of democratic opportunity effectively to Anglo-Saxons, Wister further limits it to include only those Anglo-Saxons of the lower classes who defer to the upper classes and earn wealth, power, and social position through their hard work for, and loyalty to, those above them on the social and economic ladder. Though Wister’s choice of the Virginian as the exemplary Westerner may appear to embrace the possibilities of American democracy to encourage and ensure economic success for the many, it becomes clear that by distinguishing him from other cowboys in the novel, whom the author associates negatively with the small ranchers of Wyoming and the labor unions who were pitted against the large business magnates, the novel actually indicates Wister’s suspicion of democracy in an age when the security of Wister’s class seemed threatened by immigration, the organization of labor, and the “New Rich” on Wall Street.<sup>9</sup>

The second chapter of *The Virginian*, “When You Call Me That, *Smile*,” establishes several elements of the Code of the West: skill, reputation, self-control, and

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<sup>9</sup> Wister, in his rededication of the novel in 1911, laments that “[o]ur democracy has many enemies, both in Wall Street and in the Labor Unions; but as those in Wall Street have by their excesses created those in the Unions, they are the worst; if the pillars of our house fall, it is they who will have been the cause thereof” (6). In *The Virginian*. New York: Oxford UP, 1998.

self-preservation. Interestingly enough, given the typical Western hero's reputation as a man of few words, these skills are established in situations that specifically turn on dialogue.<sup>10</sup> Judge Henry has dispatched the Virginian to retrieve his guest, the Eastern, tenderfoot narrator, from the town of Medicine Bow, and circumstances conspire to force the two men to stay in the town overnight before they can begin their long journey to the judge's ranch. This extended time with the Virginian gives the narrator the opportunity to admire the Judge's "trustworthy man," who first earns the narrator's respect by deflecting his attempts at familiarity. The Easterner tells us that this "ungrammatical son of the soil" bests him with verbal and social skill: he "had set between us the bar of his cold and perfect civility" by providing the most limited and pointedly sarcastic responses to the narrator's patronizing attempts to be chummy, and in doing so, "he had come off the better gentleman of the two" (17). His deportment at a dinner table peopled by loquacious traveling salesmen reinforces the Virginian's prudence in limiting his conversation and skill in choosing *le mot just* to keep his interlocutors in line.<sup>11</sup> When the Virginian sits at a card table in the saloon, an antagonistic Trampas seems bent on goading him into a fight by suggesting that he's an "amature." The taunting escalates until Trampas finally snarls, "Your bet, you son-of-a \_\_\_\_\_" (28). The Virginian uses his

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<sup>10</sup> Lee Clark Mitchell's "'When You Call Me That...': Tall Talk and Male Hegemony in the Virginian" discusses significant deviations in stage and film versions of the novel. Mitchell notes that, in a genre which is assumed to privilege action over dialogue, in *The Virginian*, we "are not actually shown [...] the scenes that became stock features of the genre: the Indian attack, cattle roundup, and lynching each forms instead a narrative lacuna [...]" (66). Mitchell notes the importance of language in the novel and pursues the question of why "a novel so enjoyable for its rhetorical engagement [should] have been read for its scenes of action and then in turn have inspired a formula notable for its exhibition of physical violence" (67).

<sup>11</sup> This chapter (as well as the first and third chapters, to a somewhat lesser degree) is also significant for its derogatory depictions of the German and Jewish "drummers," though, it could be argued, Wister muddies

verbal skill and self control to protect his reputation without provoking violence: placing his pistol on the table “unaimed,” he “issued his orders to the man Trampas:—‘When you call me that, *smile!*’” (28). Trampas backs down, and the narrator, impressed with the cowboy’s expertise in the “cool art of self-preservation,” has had his first introduction to the Code of the West in practice (29). Although the Virginian chooses to avoid violence in the Medicine Bow saloon, violence and the threat of violence are necessary aspects of the Code he lives by.

Several years have passed and the friendship between the narrator and the Virginian has grown when the narrator first personally experiences the moral violence mandated by the Code. Expecting to meet up with his cowboy friend for a hunting expedition, the narrator arrives early and instead stumbles upon a lynching party that includes the Virginian. The prisoners are suspected cattle thieves, one of them a former close friend of the Virginian’s named Steve. Though squeamish and upset by the lynchings, the narrator does not contest his friend’s argument that he “would do it all again” because Steve “knewed the customs of the country, and he played the game. [...] You leave other folks’ cattle alone, or you take the consequences” (268). The phrase “customs of the country” is misleading, at best, as the Virginian employs it here to refer to practices regarding cattle in Wyoming during this period. Wister erases any doubts about the immorality of Steve’s actions and the morality of the Virginian’s actions by depicting Steve as a cattle thief, plain and simple, and the protagonist’s actions as the just punishment for the crime. However, a review of history makes clear that the “customs of

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the issue of his bigotry somewhat by designating the “American” salesman as the butt of the Virginian’s

the country” regarding cattle at this time were riddled with ambiguity, a situation that contributed to the Johnson County Cattle Wars of the 1880's and 1890's.

As Victoria Lamont argues in "History, Gender, and the Origins of the 'Classic' Western,"<sup>12</sup> Wister's unambiguous definition of "rustlers" as cattle thieves is suspect because such a

distinction was by no means easily achieved in Johnson County, where cattle rustling was an ambiguously defined practice and where any cowboy who owned cattle was vulnerable to rustling charges no matter how his herd had been acquired. Wister's fictionalized version of the rustler wars thus achieves a degree of moral clarity lacking in the historical record, where the ambiguous state of the maverick calf made cattle theft an ideological problem rather than a moral one.

(151)

As Lamont describes the situation, open-range grazing meant the promiscuous co-mingling of cattle from various ranches until roundup when the cattle could be separated according to their brands. However, calves that had not yet been branded and became separated from their mothers could not be definitely identified as the property of any particular rancher. These "maverick" calves were rustled, either by cowboys starting their own small ranches or by employees of the large ranch owners. As competition between large and small ranchers for grazing lands and accessibility to water increased, the maverick issue became highly contested ground in the war between these two classes of

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pranks.

<sup>12</sup> Lamont's essay was included in *Reading The Virginian in the New West*, edited by Melody Graulich and Stephen Tatum, eds. (Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 2003), which acknowledges the centenary of the publication of Wister's novel.

cattlemen. The state government of Wyoming attempted to resolve the issue by passing the Maverick Law in 1884, which required all maverick calves to be turned over to the Wyoming Stock Growers Association (WSGA) so they could be sold at public auction. The law favored the interests of the large ranchers represented by the WSGA, many of whom were business magnates from the East and from Europe, and it increased tensions between them and the cowboys and small ranchers. Lamont points out that the law "deliberately made no provisions for how the auctions were to be carried out, enabling the WSGA to exclude cowboys by demanding expensive bonds and by auctioning the animals in large lots that no cowboy could afford" (158). The WSGA's powerful members had influence with the state legislature, so the smaller ranchers and farmers fought back by becoming involved in local politics to enact laws that favored their interests. Local juries, who were sympathetic to the small ranchers, tended to rule in their favor in cases of cattle rustling. Lamont argues that, while the WSGA saw this as evidence that the juries were under the control of the "rustlers," in fact "property disputes were grounded in the difficulty of distinguishing between theft and purchase on the open range" (157). The Virginian tells Molly that Trampas "helped elect the sheriff in that county" as an explanation for why the alleged cattle thief and murderer has not been arrested and, also, as justification for the extralegal methods—lynching and the final showdown—the Virginian and his compatriots employ to deal with Trampas and his cronies (291). This logic reflects what certainly must have been the thinking behind the decision of certain members of the WSGA to hire professional guns from Texas and to send a small army into Johnson County in April 1892 to assassinate or evict the most

influential among the small ranchers. Though this army killed two of the "rustlers," the Johnson County contingent was able to organize quickly enough to stop the invasion at that point. Though they were taken into custody, none of the members of the cattlemen's vigilante army was convicted. Lamont argues that "every single case was dismissed because of legal technicalities—an outcome facilitated, no doubt, by the invaders' many influential supporters" (159). Obviously, Lamont's account of the Johnson County War disagrees sharply with the version Wister offers in the novel, and his depiction reveals sympathy for the WSGA, a group that included men he counted amongst his friends.

Wister's version of the Johnson County Cattle War and, in fact, the novel as a whole suggest his suspicion of democracy, though he overtly touts his acceptance of it. In fact, Wister tinkers with the definition of democracy to make it fit with his own world view, one which privileges the interests of old capital over those of more emergent classes vying for a piece of the economic and political pie. In the significant chapter "The Game and the Nation—Act First," Wister's Eastern narrator opines on democracy:

All America is divided into two classes,—the quality and the equality. [...] It was through the Declaration of Independence that we Americans acknowledged the *eternal inequality* of man. For by it we abolished a cut-and-dried aristocracy. We had seen little men artificially held up in high places, and great men artificially held down in low places, and our justice-loving hearts abhorred this violence to human nature. Therefore, we decreed that every man should thenceforth have equal liberty to find his own level. [...] Let the best man win! That is America's

word. That is true democracy. And true democracy and true aristocracy are one and the same thing. (101 [Wister's italics])

As I've suggested, Wister avoids a direct alignment of old capital with the "quality" and the working classes with the "equality" by his depiction of the Virginian's humble background. However, textual hints prod the reader in that direction. For example, the narrator finds the inspiration for his musings about democracy after he patronizes Colonel Cyrus Jones' "eating palace," where he notes the "rainbow of men" peopling the eatery: "Chinese, Indian chiefs, Africans, General Miles, younger sons, Austrian nobility, wide females in pink" (102). Wister's redefinition of democracy here coupled with his depiction of the cattle barons, like Judge Henry, in the episodes of the novel that approximate the Johnson County War comprises the author's argument for the validity of a privileged class of Anglo-Saxon men. Richard Slotkin, in his *Gunfighter Nation*, interprets Wister's view this way:

Democracy is not a value in itself but the means through which a naturally qualified ruling class can make its way to the top. And once in place, the neo-aristocracy is entitled to maintain itself by force. It may be implicit in Wister's argument [...] that the newly empowered classes would [...] prove themselves equal. But it is clear from the rest of the novel that the terms would never be easy, that government had no business correcting the disadvantages (or "bad luck") under which the "equality" labored, and that indeed the ability to overcome actual

disadvantage was a test of admission to the "quality." Wister's "democracy" thus provides a biosocial rationale for class privilege.<sup>13</sup> (178)

Judge Henry couches the lynchings of rustlers in terms of "ordinary citizens" taking the law into their own hands, but this begs the question of what constitutes an "ordinary citizen"; in fact, the WSGA ranchers were not residents of Johnson County, and many were not even full-time citizens of Wyoming but, rather, Eastern businessmen who enjoyed "strenuous" vacations from their responsibilities back East on their Western ranches.<sup>14</sup>

The threat that small ranchers and others of the working classes posed to Wister and his class was exacerbated by the significant, if not completely successful, workings of the labor unions against big capital that the writer had occasion to observe and even experience first-hand. In his cogent essay, Gary Scharnhorst reveals that Wister "re-created, reenacted, or dramatized the Great Railway Strike of 1894, led by Eugene V. Debs, which virtually closed all rail travel and transport in the West" in "The Game and the Nation" chapters of the novel (116). Scharnhorst notes that Wister initially saw the strikers as victims of corporate greed, but after his own travel plans were disrupted by the

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<sup>13</sup> See Slotkin's account of the Johnson County War in *Gunfighter Nation*, pp.169-183. Slotkin reads this conflict as a manifestation of a new definition of vigilantism which was a "means of justifying new forms of social violence directed against the 'dangerous classes' of the post-Frontier, urban, and industrial order. As a result, the vigilante ideology itself was transformed from an assertion of a natural and democratic right-to-violence to an assertion of class and racial privilege" (173-74).

<sup>14</sup> Judge Henry justifies lynching of rustlers to Molly Wood as follows: "'Call them your ordinary citizens,' said the Judge. 'I like your term. They are where the law comes from, you see. For they chose the delegates who made the Constitution that provided for the courts. There's your machinery. These are the hands into which ordinary citizens have put the law. So you see, at best, when they lynch they only take back what they once gave'" (284). The "strenuous life" is the term Teddy Roosevelt employed to indicate "the life of toil and effort, labor and strife" which he preached to the men of his, and Wister's, class (qtd. in Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 51). Slotkin argues, "For them, the problem of a closed Frontier is not the lack of

strike, he released his poison against those who had inconvenienced him, calling them "rats" in a piece published in *Harper's* entitled "The National Guard in Pennsylvania." Scharnhorst argues, "In the western hero's defeat of the labor leader, typified by Trampas, that is, Wister decisively sided with capital and against strike organizers such as Debs" (116). In these chapters, the Virginian prevents the troop of cowboys under his management from defecting from Judge Henry's employ in favor of "striking" out for the gold mines by defeating Trampas, their apparent leader/organizer, in a tall-tale telling contest. Significantly, this battle of wits begins as the men ride the rails back from Chicago to the judge's ranch, and it climaxes during an enforced layover when the train's forward progress is stopped by a washed-out bridge. Scharnhorst lays out a convincing case showing these chapters to be a "veiled attack on labor unions," associating the stoppage of the train with the railroad strike and connecting Trampas with the strike organizer Debs. I would like to extend Scharnhorst's argument by examining Wister's depiction of a secondary character in the novel, a depiction that connects the writer's attack on labor unions with his views of the "equality."

In the second chapter of "The Game and the Nation" section of the novel, the narrator stumbles upon two fellow travelers who miss the same train he is trying to catch, which results in the three men joining the Virginian's outfit on their train back to Wyoming.<sup>15</sup> One of the travelers, Scipio Le Moyne, seems to occasion a bit of jealousy

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economic opportunity but the loss of those conditions that allowed their class to acquire the virile character that entitles and enables them to rule giant corporations or a modern nation-state" (51).

<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to note that, when the narrator meets up with the Virginian at this point in the novel, the cowhand is returning from transporting and selling Judge Henry's cattle in Chicago, a task for which he has been assigned the role of foreman. The judge has also assigned his foreman the task of meeting with directors of the Northern Pacific railroad to "explain to them persuasively how good a thing it would be for

on the part of the narrator when he becomes fast friends with the Virginian, certainly because it is immediately apparent that Scipio can handle himself in the West but perhaps also because he and his family "have been white for a hundred years" in spite of their foreign-sounding name (108). The other traveler, Shorty, will be my focus here. The narrator describes him as "light-haired and mild. Think of a yellow dog that is lost, and fancies each newcomer in sight is going to turn out his master, and you will have Shorty" (108). The depiction of Shorty as a "yellow dog," which Wister repeats throughout the novel, epitomizes Wister's view of the "equality." The term "yellow dog" has had the most negative connotations since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century; it would come to name the type of contracts used by employers to force employees to give up their right to organize as a condition of employment.<sup>16</sup> Both Scipio and Shorty become employees of the judge, but Shorty closely aligns himself with Trampas, with whom he eventually leaves the judge's

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them to allow especially cheap rates to the Sunk Creek outfit henceforth" (105). As Schulman's textual note indicates, this practice of providing discounted transport rates to those who shipped cattle in large quantities was outlawed by the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887 because it gave the large cattle ranchers an unfair advantage over smaller ranchers. Though the practice may not have been illegal in the narrative time of the novel, it had been illegal for more than a decade at the time of the novel's publication. This seems to suggest further Wister's sympathy with big capital, and adds insight into the applications of the logic of the authorial intrusion (concerning lynching) in which Wister asserts that "to call any act evil, instantly begs the question [...]. Gentlemen reformers, beware of this common practice of yours! beware [sic] of calling an act evil on Tuesday because the same act was evil on Monday!" (281).

<sup>16</sup> Joel I. Seidman, in his *The Yellow Dog Contract* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1932), traces the history of this type of contract in which employers require employees to sign a document swearing that they are not and will not become members of a labor union. In tracing the history of the term itself, Seidman offers the following: "As early as 1902 this general term of contempt had been applied by labor to the obnoxious house lease used in the coal fields of [West Virginia], which provided for eviction on short notice and often in addition gave the lessor—the employing coal company—the right to enter upon the premises at any time and remove persons objectionable to it.[...] By 1921 the term was generally applied to the contract alone, and by the following year it had come into general use throughout all industries" (31). Robert Hendrickson's *Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins* (New York: MacMillan, 1987) offers the following origin of the term: "The yellow dog, generally considered to be a cowardly common cur or mongrel, has long been a symbol of utter worthlessness in America. The term *yellow dog* has been used in expressions of contempt since at least 1833, when it is first so recorded, and toward the late 19<sup>th</sup> century it began to be heard in the term *yellow-dog contract*, a contract in which company employees do not or

ranch only to become a "rustler" who is murdered by one of his own gang. Shorty's disastrous fate, the result of Trampas' urgings, indicates that Wister drew Shorty as exemplar of the "equality" who attempt to rise above their station; it also suggests that Wister believed strike organizers like Debs were doing a disservice to weak souls like Shorty when they encouraged them to do so. Wister seems to employ the term "yellow dog" here in the service of his dramatization of the likely fate of the "equality" who are lured away from the protection of benevolent management by the promises of labor unions.

Shorty first reveals his shortcomings upon realizing that he, along with Scipio and the narrator, has missed the train. His frustrated outburst as he runs after the train indicates that he does not possess the Virginian's verbal skill or self-control, for "Shorty yielded himself up aloud. All his humble secrets came out of him" (109). Scipio, on the other hand, does not run after the train but "arrive[s] with extreme leisure" at the tracks, and he rhetorically establishes himself as having the upper hand over the "spangle-roofed hobo" by slinging a riff of disparaging wordplay at the train, ending his diatribe "with expressions of sympathy for it because it could never have known a mother" (109). The Virginian, watching this spectacle, quickly evaluates each of their characters: he immediately offers Scipio a job but is reluctant to give Shorty one. The Virginian invites all three men to board the train, and Shorty comes "like a lost dog when you whistle to him" (111). Though the narrator has shown a lack of discipline similar to Shorty's by kicking his valise and swearing at the train and has repeatedly proven himself unable to

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cannot join the union. Though outlawed by the Wagner Act in 1935, yellow-dog contracts still persist"

survive without supervision in the West, he is not described in the derogatory terms reserved for Shorty by both the narrator and the author. One might assume that the reason for this significant difference between the depictions of the two foolish men is the narrator's honorary membership in the “quality,” based on his socioeconomic class.

Shorty does find his way into the Judge's employ upon reaching Sunk Creek, but during his tenure there, his association with Trampas, who is still harboring ill will toward the Virginian, intensifies. Trampas convinces Shorty that he is worthy of a pay increase, and armed with this conviction, Shorty takes the opportunity to ask the Virginian, who has been permanently promoted to foreman, for a raise. The Virginian denies the request, instead attempting to convince Shorty that lower-paying “stable work” is “the right kind of a job” for him given his skill with horses (180). That is, the Virginian believes that Shorty has not developed himself or his skills enough to merit higher pay. He tells Shorty, “The money I made easy that I *wasn't* worth, it went like it came. I strained myself none gettin' or spendin' it. But the money I made hard that I *was* worth, why, I began to feel right careful about that. And now I have got savings stowed away” (180). Shorty counters this argument with the assertion that he could also be financially secure if he had had the Virginian's “luck”: “Well, if I had took up land along a creek that never goes dry and proved upon it like you have, and if I had saw that land raise its value on me with me lifting no finger—” (180). The Virginian's response— “Who stopped yu' taking up land?”—should give readers pause, given the tense and, at times, violent competition between large and small ranchers over both land and cattle at the time

and the probability that the wage Shorty earns would be unlikely to allow him to purchase land (180). Shorty feels that the Virginian has had the advantage of good luck, and the Virginian has no sympathy for those who experience the disadvantages of bad luck. He explains his views to Scipio: “It may be [...] that them whose pleasure brings yu’ into this world owes yu’ a living. But that don’t make the world responsible. The world did not beget you. I reckon man helps them that help themselves” (179). The Virginian views Shorty’s desire for a raise, then, as a request for charity. His disdain for Trampas, in turn, is increased by his belief that Trampas is corrupting a simple man who is easily led astray. That Shorty is not an exceptional case but rather the poster child of the “equality” becomes clear in the Virginian’s assessment of Shorty when the foreman talks to his employee about the pay raise: “There was not a line of badness in the face; yet also there was not a line of strength; no promise in eye, or nose, or chin; the whole thing melted to a stubbly, featureless mediocrity. It was a countenance like thousands; and hopelessness filled the Virginian as he looked at the lost dog, and his dull, wistful eyes” (179). Might the Virginian have been feeling “hopelessness” for the future of America? Clearly, neither the Virginian nor Wister sees much possibility for the lower classes to improve themselves, making charity useless, and Wister’s digs at “reformers” throughout the novel bear up this argument. The “equality” are, as a whole, like Shorty: “It was too late for him to get wise when he was born” (178).

Wister’s first disparaging comments concerning charity and reformers appear in the chapter entitled “Em’ly,” which concerns a hen the narrator claims “has no judgment,” so he names her after “an old maid at home who’s charitable, and belongs to

the Cruelty to Animals, and she never knows whether she had better cross in front of a street car or wait” (55). Em’ly’s problem is that she will sit on anything—potato, onion, soap—in an attempt to hatch it since she “can’t make out to lay anything” (57). The hen’s attempts to raise the offspring of a turkey and that of a dog create chaos in the barnyard, which prompts the Virginian to perform his own act of charity: he takes an egg from another hen for Em’ly to sit on, but the egg hatches in only ten hours, causing Em’ly to die of shock because of the violation of the “established period of incubation”; the narrator attributes this tragic outcome to “chance and the best intentions” and suggests that this type of interference in the process of natural selection amounts to the “overturning of a natural law,” ill-advised because it can do no good (61). The efforts of the two religious figures in the novel connected with moral reform are similarly dismissed, but each for different reasons. Dr. MacBride, a Calvinist minister who comes to Judge Henry’s ranch to preach to the cowhands, delivers a fire and brimstone sermon that opens with “They are altogether become filthy; There is none of them that doeth good, no, not one” (159). The narrator concludes that “if a missionary is to be tactless, he might as well be bad,” for his sermon has the effect of turning some of the cowboys off from religion altogether (160). The second religious figure, the bishop of Wyoming, though respected by the Virginian, finds his hands tied by his religious beliefs. The Virginian encounters the bishop just before his showdown with Trampas, and the bishop attempts to use scripture to dissuade the cowboy from facing his enemy. Though sincere in his Christian faith, the bishop finds himself torn because of the logic of the Virginian’s rebuttals and the appeal of his cause: “Of all kicking against the pricks none is so hard as

this kick of a professing Christian against the whole instinct of human man” (306). The bishop’s Christianity is clearly at odds with the Code of the West. Despite Wister’s unfavorable depiction of Dr. MacBride, his religious determinism actually seems to resonate with Wister’s socially deterministic view of the “equality.”

Unsurprisingly, given Wister’s acceptance of social determinism, Shorty’s experiences after quitting the judge’s ranch bear out the Virginian’s hopelessness. In the chapter entitled “Progress of the Lost Dog,” Shorty, desperate for money, sells his beloved pony, Pedro, to Balaam, a notorious abuser of horses, for much less than the well-trained pony is worth. The Virginian knows that Shorty “had been turned off [the roundup] for going to sleep while night-herding,” certainly more proof for the Virginian that Shorty will never get “wise” (189). Shorty seems to redeem himself somewhat, though: because of his love for the pony, “[one] way or another, the lost dog had been able to gather some ready money” to buy back Pedro (209). However, his bad luck again intervenes; he returns to Balaam only to find that the pony has been killed while in the abusive man’s service.

The final act in Shorty’s drama occurs after he follows Trampas into a gang of cattle thieves. Shorty’s foolishness in lighting a fire when the thieves are on the run from the Virginian’s lynch mob causes two members of the gang, including the Virginian’s friend Steve, to be captured. Shorty escapes with Trampas only to have the latter murder him because Shorty hinders his escape efforts. The narrator and the Virginian discover Shorty’s body, “his wistful, lost-dog face upward, and his thick yellow hair unparted as it had always been”; and again, the Virginian blames Shorty’s own ineptitude for his

demise: “‘There was no natural harm in him,’ said the Virginian. ‘But you have to do a thing well in this country’” (274). Shorty’s relationship with Trampas and Wister’s repeated use of the term “yellow dog” to describe him encapsulate the author’s sentiments toward the equality and his vision of what happens to simple laborers who are misled by unions and their organizers from the benevolence of Wister’s version of the “true aristocracy.”

The philosophical dialectic that Wister provides, the opposition between the “quality” and the “equality,” concerns the position of an established, dominant class being threatened by the demands of emergent classes. The anxiety the author feels over the tension between democracy and capitalism is apparent in his narrator’s redefinition of democracy from what McCloskey and Zaller explained as a tradition that “attributes roughly equivalent value to *all* people” and that “tries to ensure that all people, even those that lack outstanding talents and initiative, can at least gain a decent livelihood” to one that merely allows for a social Darwinist struggle that will end with the establishment of a new, if more natural, in Wister’s eyes, aristocracy (7). Wister’s espousal of a deterministic capitalism and a version of democracy that would not interfere with it lends credence to the fears of thinkers like Bellah and his colleagues that, when the ideological balance is tipped too far in favor of capitalism, negative consequences ensue. According to this redefinition, democracy condones adulation of winners and contempt for losers; and the depiction of Shorty makes this utterly clear.

While Wister’s sympathy with big capital and antipathy toward immigrants, labor unions, and Wall Street are evident in the novel, what Janet Walker in *Westerns: Films*

*through History* has referred to as the “lost stories” may also be unearthed, at least partially, from it.<sup>17</sup> Walker urges a study of Westerns which recognizes that they, like written history, are narratives interpreted through ideological stance. This type of analysis, applied to *The Virginian*, reveals that Wister may be closely associated with social Darwinists, but the narrative threads which involve Shorty and Trampas also imply the civic republicanism of local government in action and the Populist vision which inspired the labor movement; that is, the narrator’s comments and author’s intrusions suggest and respond critically to the vision of reformers associated with the Progressives and various religious movements. All of these visions contributed to the structure of feeling of Wister’s time; all of them attempted to put forth a vision for American life in light of the vast changes brought about by massive immigration, industrialization, urbanization, and the closing of the frontier.

Fifty years after Wister published his fictional version of the Johnson County Cattle War, another take on this historic conflict appeared in George Stevens' 1952 film adaptation of Jack Schaefer's 1947 novel, *Shane*. However, unlike Wister's *The Virginian*, both Schaefer’s novel and A. B. Guthrie, Jr.’s screenplay version of that conflict cast the

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<sup>17</sup> In discussing the elision of Native American perspectives in Westerns, Walker admits, “It’s just that the stories are told from the colonists’ perspective—from the perspective of celebration rather than boundless grief at the ‘taming of the frontier’ wilderness.’ My point is that history and myth are related and textual. If this weren’t so, then the western corpus could include a narrative turn in which Europeans are repulsed, pushed back across the sea, or in which they decide to withdraw once they see how their diseases are killing Native Americans. But these possibilities seem ludicrous because *that’s not the way it actually happened*” (10). She argues, though, that “[k]nowledge of this history can aid film analysis in identifying

cattle baron as oppressor of the hardworking homesteaders. Guthrie's screenplay and Stevens' direction align the heroic individualism of the gunfighter Shane with the cause of democratic community interests as represented by Joe Starrett and the other homesteaders rather than with cattle baron Ryker and his hired gun, Wilson.

Scholarly analysis of *Shane* has, for the most part, concluded that the film reinforces dominant American individualism either by diffusing or by appearing to resolve the contradictions between the individual and the community. Shane's skill as a gunfighter is necessary for him to save the Starrett's community, but it also makes him too violent a figure to live in that community, so he leaves it at the end of the film. In effect, the strength of Shane's gun is the necessary complement to the strength of Starrett's voice and values; the two forces unite to ensure the survival of a weak, fledgling community. Though Shane's departure from the community at the film's end seems to reinforce the value of the community over that of the individual, Robert Ray argues that, "[b]y avoiding the outlaw hero's final assimilation into the community (always the greatest threat to his independence), *Shane's* ending [...] not only postponed indefinitely that hero's demise, but also preserved the sense of his centrality to American culture" (73). Scholarly consensus finds that the film ultimately upholds the value of individualism over the common good and promotes the necessity of a powerful individual who can unilaterally employ violence to protect a peaceful community.<sup>18</sup>

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the nature of 'lost stories,' in finding what is there residually, and in comprehending a new form of western being made in the late 1980s and '90s, a form that includes stories of Native American heritage[...]" (10).

<sup>18</sup> For example, Thomas Schatz, in *Hollywood Genres*, argues that Shane exemplifies the ambiguity with which Western heroes were increasingly depicted after World War II; he describes the gunfighter as "an isolated, psychologically static man of personal integrity who acts because society is too weak to do so. And it is these actions that finally enforce social order but necessitate his departure from the community he

These critical approaches to the film have provided productive readings, particularly as considerations of the U.S. Cold War foreign policy with *Shane* approximating the international role of the U.S. in the containment of the spread of Communism. However, the film's very positive treatment of cooperation between *Shane* and the homesteaders allows for another reading of the film that focuses on its consideration of the domestic structure of feeling at the time of the film's production. Both the tension between the competing values of individualism and communal good and the cooperation between the two forces are significant, I would argue, to an understanding of the structure of feeling concerning the preservation of both individualism and democracy in the face of increasing corporate power which informs the film. Though the film's mise-en-scène and cinematography convey *Shane*'s heroic difference from the homesteaders, Stevens' direction also emphasizes the cooperation between *Shane* and Starrett in ending Ryker's reign of terror over the homesteaders. As Ray has argued, this allows the viewer to avoid having to choose between one set of values and the other. Another way of viewing the positive depiction of both

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has saved" (57). In *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*, Robert Ray contends that "the western's importance derived from the national ideology's eagerness to assert an American exceptionalism as the basis for avoiding difficult choices" (74). Ray sees *Shane*'s audience as positioned with Starrett's wife, Marion: "To *Shane*'s life of solitude, self-determination, and freedom, Starrett opposed the value of family, society, and responsibility. With her affections wavering between the two men, Mrs. Starrett represented the audience's own dilemma, Ray suggests, about which man and which set of values was to be preferred" (72). The film resolves this dilemma by presenting the two men's values as actually "reconcilable, mutually fertile complements" (73). Richard Slotkin, in *Gunfighter Nation*, argues that the "ideological structure" underlying gunfighter films like *Shane* "devalues 'democracy' as an instrument of progress and declares that the only effective instrument for constructive historical action is a gun in the hands of the right man" (396). In *Cowboys as Cold Warriors*, Stanley Corkin reads *Shane* as an example of Cold War Westerns that, "despite their appreciation of the idea of the common good, ultimately suggest that such a social state can be catalyzed only by the acts of an extraordinary individual. That individual is marked by his capacity or willingness to exercise violence—however lamentable the necessity for such action may be" (153).

individualism and communal good in *Shane*, though, is to see the alignment of individualism *with* the communal good as a reflection of the interplay of cultural attitudes towards individualism and democracy in post-war America.

The 1950s were a time of general postwar prosperity when Americans on the whole saw economic improvement in their lives.<sup>19</sup> However, the decade also saw a crisis of individuality that was connected with the postwar growth of corporations and the uncertainties of the Cold War. In *Gunfighter Nation*, Slotkin highlights the connection in the public mind between postwar prosperity and big business:

The wealth of this new frontier was to be enjoyed by all. But it was not to be achieved in “populist” (or in [Motion Picture Association President Eric] Johnson’s term “collectivist”) means, which would require government regulation of big business to support the claims of small entrepreneurs, farmers, and organized labor. The wartime expansion that opened this new frontier was the work of big business—one-third of all war orders had gone to ten large corporations—and its success had given corporate capitalism a higher ideological standing than it had enjoyed since the days of Calvin Coolidge. (331)

This high “ideological standing” of corporate capitalism encouraged a voluntary sublimation of individual will to the corporation in exchange for financial and personal security.

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<sup>19</sup> Slotkin describes how WWII effectively ended the Depression; during the War, “American income, aggregate wealth, and production more than doubled over pre-war levels,” and that, despite concerns about the possibility of a postwar recession, “[i]nstead, the most ‘utopian’ predictions of postwar prosperity seemed to be near realization. The marvels of wartime productivity suggested that a new frontier of potentially limitless wealth had been discovered in a Keynesian partnership between government, consumers, and big business” (*Gunfighter Nation* 330).

Books like David Reisman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), C. Wright Mills's *White Collar* (1951), and William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956), as well as Sloan Wilson's novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955), express concern that individual volition in the 1950s was largely being determined by forces beyond individual control. Erica Arthur notes that "Collectively, the depiction of white-collar masculinity in these texts helped create the context for the stereotypical perception of 1950s business enterprise as a breeding ground for conformity and troubled male identity" (24).<sup>20</sup> Kim Phillips Fein argues that Reisman's book "reflected the sad withdrawal of the McCarthy years from a sense of the possibilities of political action. Instead of seeing society as a space of struggle, of flux and motion, Reisman and social critics of the 1950s (like Louis Hartz, Richard Hofstadter, and C. Wright Mills) believed it to be the product of nearly inhuman processes" ("Reconsiderations: *The Lonely Crowd*" 89). Mills tackles the deleterious effect on creative, meaningful labor as corporations broke labor down into discreet work processes, or "rationalized" them, effectively making individual employees cogs in the production wheel whose survival and mobility depended on their ability to conform to corporate mission statements and formulas for achievement. Whyte saw corporate employees, and society as a whole, casting about for an ideology to reconcile

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<sup>20</sup> Arthur's essay, "The Organisation Strikes Back: Rhetorical Empowerment Strategies in 1950s Business Representations of White-Collar Manhood," analyzes various corporate publications of the 1950s which responded to social criticism that corporations inspired conformity and emasculated workers by "[characterizing] the inactive work of the white-collar employee through a language of heroic physicality" (24). Often, these publications "indicted sociologists, cultural producers such as *Fortune* magazine, and even the government for cultivating a climate in which conformity was permissible," and presented corporations as "one of the last bastions desirous of individualism, powerless to change the status quo" (39). Arthur concludes, though, that "the overwrought and exaggerated emphasis on strength, heroism, independence and physicality in both metaphoric figurations and literal job descriptions, ultimately drew attention to the practical conditions of white-collar work—conditions that were not conducive to the expression and development of such qualities" (40).

American individualism with the pressure, and even desire, to conform. Labeling this new dominant ideology the “Social Ethic,” Whyte wrote that “with reason it could be called an organization ethic, or a bureaucratic ethic; more than anything else it rationalizes the organization’s demands for fealty and gives those who offer it wholeheartedly a sense of dedication in doing so—in extremis, you might say, it converts what at other times would seem a bill of no rights into a restatement of individualism” (*The Organization Man 2*). Whyte saw the Social Ethic as a breed of short-term thinking and abdication of citizens’ democratic duties:

Like the utopian communities, [the Social Ethic] interprets society in a fairly narrow, immediate sense. One can believe man has a social obligation and that the individual must ultimately contribute to the community without believing that group harmony is the test of it. In the Social Ethic I am describing, however, man’s obligation is to the here and now; his duty is not so much to the community in a broad sense but to the actual, physical one about him, and the idea that in isolation from it—or active rebellion against it—he might eventually discharge the greater service is little considered. In practice, those who most eagerly subscribe to the Social Ethic worry very little over the long-range problems of society. It is not that they don’t care but rather they tend to assume that the ends of organization and morality coincide, and on such matters as social welfare they give their proxy to the organization. (4)

Whyte effectively describes here the logic which justifies individuals’ handing over their volition and democratic rights and responsibilities to a corporate body and accepting in

their place the corporation's mission statement and profit goals in order to achieve a sense of belonging and the possibility of moving up the corporate ladder. He also highlights how this ideology discourages a faith in the effectiveness of individual voices to instigate and effect social and political changes which may benefit society as a whole but run counter to the corporation's interests.<sup>21</sup>

Whyte's analysis of society anticipates several points in President Dwight David Eisenhower's farewell speech to the union, in which he articulated the dangers of sacrificing too much in the way of individual rights and duties in the hopes that the larger entities that had acquired power would act in the best interests of society as well as those of the global community. In his "Military-Industrial Complex Speech," Eisenhower reflected on the eight-year period of 1953-1961, which circumscribed his term as President of the United States, and he cogently identified the dominant, residual, and emergent cultural influences of that period, the structure of feeling of the time, and the concerns he wished all Americans to consider. Eisenhower acknowledged that the U.S. had emerged from that century's wars as "the strongest, the most influential and most productive nation in the world," one that had achieved great economic, scientific, and technological advances, but he also cautioned that "America's leadership and prestige depend, not merely upon our unmatched material progress, riches and military strength, but on how we use our power in the interests of world peace and human betterment." He argued that failure to achieve these goals "traceable to arrogance, or our lack of

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<sup>21</sup> In "Youthful Vision, Youthful Promise, Through Midlife Bifocals: C. Wright Mills' White Collar Turns 50," Steven Rytina concedes that, though Whyte's methodology as a sociologist is no longer considered valid, "[t]he angst of the frontier-bred free spirit pounded into the corporate cage made a timely theme" (563).

comprehension or readiness to sacrifice would inflict upon us grievous hurt both at home and abroad.” Eisenhower also acknowledged the dangers posed by the Soviet Union, but argued that proposals to handle this enemy

must be weighed in light of a broader consideration: the need to maintain balance in and among national programs.[...] Good judgment seeks balance and progress; lack of it eventually finds imbalance and frustration.[...] The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.

Eisenhower’s reference to “an alert and knowledgeable citizenry” acting to ensure the efficacy of democratic processes calls to mind Jefferson’s vision, while his description of the military-industrial complex highlights the vast power and influence corporations can bring to bear against individuals who attempt to “compel” these entities to maintain a balance between their political and economic interests and the common good.

Significantly *Shane*, released in 1952 and set at the time of the cattle wars, exemplifies the popularity of the cowboy (or, in this case, gunfighter) hero that, as Bellah noted, responds to doubts about the value and volition of the individual brought on by the restrictions corporations and the Social Ethic place not only upon employees but also upon the political voice of the average citizen who lacks the wealth and power to compete with these large entities in the politics of interest. The monopolistic drive of

Ryker's clan threatens the homesteaders' ability to form a viable farming community and Shane's ability to reinvent himself. That is, Ryker's threat to the community Shane adopts makes him unable to pursue a new role as farmer and community member.

The narrative and stylistic devices employed by George Stevens in *Shane* work together to convey the nobility of the homesteaders and their democratic ideals. The film's opening shots establish the Starretts' homestead; its sod-roofed, log buildings are shot straight on with the Grand Teton Mountains rising up behind them. This framing makes the buildings appear almost level with the ground, so they seem to grow organically out of the land along with the trees and other plants amongst which they are nestled, suggesting to the viewer the "grassroots" nature of the homesteaders' enterprise, one that appears to be in harmony with nature. The mise-en-scène and cinematography also emphasize the homesteaders' willingness to work hard to earn the life they desire; a number of the scenes involving Joe Starrett (Van Heflin) show him laboring on his farm. Viewers are first introduced to Starrett as he chops a tree stump with an ax when his son, Joey (Brandon DeWilde), informs him that a rider who will introduce himself as Shane (Alan Ladd) approaches their property. The images of farm labor outside of the home are complemented by a shot of the open window of the house, through which viewers catch a glimpse of Joe's wife, Marion (Jean Arthur), passing by as she works in the kitchen, and out of which gently flows the sound of Marion's singing.

*Shane's* stylistic system works in turn to depict Ryker (Emile Meyer) and his clan as monopolistic, tyrannical, and violent. The Rykers first appear in the background riding toward Starrett's homestead while Starrett talks with Shane; when they reach the water

that designates the property line, the camera frames the six riders on horseback in a low-angle long shot which captures the cloud of red dust rising from the ground beneath them. They are ominous figures, a pack of riders whose faces are shadowed, and tense non-diegetic music increases the sense of threat associated with these characters. The camera then cuts into a closer shot of the horses' hooves trampling Starrett's garden as they cross onto the homesteader's property. The threat that the Rykers present is made clear in that they are shot throughout the scene from low angle, always on horseback; as Starrett responds, he remains on the ground, shot straight on as he stands against the house. The camera angle and framing suggest his narrative position: backed against the wall by the force of the Rykers' onslaught. When Rufe Ryker first speaks, the camera frames him in a low-angle long shot, in the center of the pack of horsemen; when he becomes angry, the camera cuts to a medium close-up in which his head exceeds the limits of the frame, much as his demands exceed reasonable limits, at least from Starrett's perspective.

The film's narrative system also emphasizes the homesteaders' nobility and the domestic civility of their life, while at the same time it establishes the opposition the Ryker clan poses to their enterprise. The dialogue of the first confrontation between the Rykers and Starrett establishes the terms of their debate. Rufe Ryker's first words, "I don't want no trouble, Starrett," belie his willingness to use whatever means necessary to reclaim what he refers to as "my range" in order to fatten up his cattle to meet the terms of a government contract to supply beef to a reservation. Starrett responds by asking Ryker and his men, "would you mind getting' off *my* place?" Both of the men feel a sense of rightful ownership of the land. In the tense exchange of words, Ryker

continually refers to Starrett and his neighbors as “squatters,” while Joe counters with “homesteaders, you mean, don’t you?” Starrett’s refusal to acquiesce to the cattle baron’s demand that he and the other homesteaders move on foments Ryker’s frustration and causes him to make his threat overt: “I could blast you out of here right now, you and the others.” While Ryker relies on his sense of entitlement and his potential to bring violent power to bear on the homesteaders, Starrett supports his claim to the land with federal law and the ideal of civilization’s progress, responding, “Now you listen to me. The time for gun-blastin’ a man off of his own place is past. They’re building a penitentiary right now to take care of [...]” Joe is cut off at this point by Marion, who interrupts to prevent the argument from escalating. Ryker and his men then notice Shane, who tells them that he is a friend of Starrett’s, while displaying the gun at his waist; this seems to deflate the cattlemen somewhat, as they surely expected to find Starrett, with only the support of his wife and child, an easy target for intimidation. Ryker and his posse leave, again trampling the vegetable garden.

Shane, like the Rykers, is frequently shot from a low angle in these opening scenes, and during his first conversation with Joey and Starrett, he talks down to them from horseback. Though this may seem to associate him as a powerful figure like the Rykers, the narrative quickly aligns him with the Starretts. After quietly defending Starrett by standing behind him during the Rykers' visit, he joins the family for dinner and then expresses his gratitude by taking the ax to the tree stump Starrett had been working on when Shane first arrived. Starrett joins Shane, and the scene which depicts the two men working to remove the stump that Joe had been "fighting on and off for two

years" is the first of several which emphasize the power and effectiveness of the two when they join forces to work as a team. Stevens alternates medium shots of Shane, then of Starrett, and then of their respective axes hitting the stump, followed by alternating medium close-ups of each of the men and the axes hitting the stump. This series of shots culminates in a medium shot of Shane stopping to smile at Joe, followed by a medium close-up of Joe, the triumphant homesteader, returning the smile. The scene ends with the two men struggling to force the stump out of its root bed and finally succeeding as the daylight diminishes into evening dusk.

Another scene which emphasizes the power of cooperation between Shane and Joe Starrett occurs in the saloon, when the homesteaders have decided to go into town as a group to ensure their safety against the cattlemen. On an earlier errand into town, Shane was "buffaloed" by Chris Calloway, in the eyes of the homesteaders, when he went into the saloon to get a bottle of soda pop for Joey. On that occasion, Calloway called Shane a "pig farmer" and told him not to return to the saloon; Shane, trying to leave his violent past behind, left without putting up a fight. On the occasion when the homesteaders caravan into town, Shane returns the soda bottle to the bar, and this time he does not back down from a fistfight with Calloway. Though Shane beats Calloway handily, his refusal to accept Ryker's offer of employment if he switches loyalties starts a second fight, one in which Shane finds himself hopelessly outnumbered. Shane puts up a strong fight, but eventually three of Ryker's men pin him while Ryker repeatedly hits the now defenseless man. Starrett then joins the fight, which he and Shane together, though still outnumbered, are able to win. This scene parallels the opening scenes of the film at two points: as

Ryker beats a restrained Shane, the camera cuts to a medium close-up of Ryker in which his head again exceeds the borders of the frame; secondly, when Joe and Shane begin to win the fight, they stop and take a moment to smile at each other. This scene reinforces the power of the joined forces of the two men in the face of Ryker's excessive and unjust power. Joey recognizes this, and tells the tired warriors, "I bet you two could lick anyone!"

The tension between democracy and capitalism that the film dramatizes centers on the issue of progress, conceived in terms of the film as the passing of the free-ranging cattle industry and the rise of the independent homesteader. Ryker believes that the part he played in the initial settlement of the region entitles him to the land; he tells Starrett that the cattlemen "made this country. Found it and we made it, with blood and empty bellies. The cattle we brought in were hazed off by Indians and rustlers. They don't bother you much anymore because we handled 'em. We made a safe range out of this." He complains that the farmers "fence off my range and fence me off from water. Some of 'em like you plow ditches, take out irrigation water," which he needs for his cattle. Starrett's response suggests the tyranny of Ryker's approach: "You talk about rights. You think you've got the right to say that nobody else has got any. Well, that ain't the way the government looks at it." The homesteader proposes a Turnerian concept of progress to counter Ryker's claim and to justify his own claim and the continued settlement of the land that the homesteaders promise. Turner saw the settlement of the West occurring in stages, whereby one phase of settlement was replaced by the next in the continuing

process of civilization. This view seems to inform Starrett as he explains to Shane both his claim to the land and the efficiency of his industry in comparison to Ryker's:

These old-timers, they just can't see it yet, but runnin' cattle on an open range just can't go on forever. It takes too much space for too little results.[...] Now, cattle that is bred for meat and fenced in and fed right—that's the thing. You gotta pick your spot, get your land, your own land. Now a homesteader, he can't run but a few beef. But he can sure grow grain and cut hay. And then what with his garden and the hogs and milk, well, he'll make out all right.

Starrett argues that the open-range cattle industry wastefully uses resources in comparison with farming; his philosophy also highlights the importance of owning one's own property, an emphasis which calls to mind Jefferson's ideal of the small, independent farmer. This property, and his pride in the work he has done on it, inspires Joe to fight to retain his farm and invests him with a sense of responsibility, not only to his own family, but to the other homesteaders as well. Starrett expresses this ideal most clearly at Torrey's (Elisha Cook Jr.) funeral in an attempt to encourage the other homesteaders to stay on the range and fight for their right to exist there:

We can have a regular settlement here. We can have a town and churches and a school.[...] We can't give up this valley and we ain't gonna do it. This is farmin' country, a place where people can come and bring up their families. Who is Rufe Ryker or anyone else to run us away from our own homes? He only wants to grow his beef and what we want to grow up is families, to grow 'em good and grow

‘em up strong, the way they was meant to be grown. God didn’t make all this country just for one man like Ryker.

Starrett employs the pride of ownership as well as the promise of the future to embolden the frightened homesteaders and to inspire in them the courage to fight for their land and the lives they wish to pursue.

*Shane*’s mise-en-scène associates the cattle baron and the town with laissez-faire capitalism, unregulated by any higher authority. Ryker and his gang gather in the town, specifically in the saloon. The town does not seem to be comprised of much in the way of housing; it appears, instead, as a kind of commercial hub, consisting of the saloon, a general store, a hotel, and the blacksmith’s shop. The cattlemen seem to have a great deal of time to expend in drinking in the saloon, which is, interestingly enough, owned by a man named *Grafton*. Grafton (Paul McVey) not only owns the one general store and saloon that supply the farmers and the cattlemen, but he also seems to be the one person Ryker feels he must appease. The official representative of the law, the marshal, lives several days’ ride from the town, so Ryker does not need to worry about his interference in his bid to oust the homesteaders. However, when he hires the gunfighter Wilson (Jack Palance) to aid him in escalating his intimidation of the farmers, he feels under pressure to “make things look right” to Grafton, suggesting that the saloon’s owner may hold some authority, most likely as the major commercial interest in the town. Grafton voices his objection to the fistfight that occurs in his saloon and even declares Shane and Joe to be the “winners,” but he does not intervene and seems willing to look the other way if appearances at all allow him to do so. In the scene in which Wilson guns down the hot-

headed Torrey, Ryker appeals to the Code of the West as justification, claiming that Torrey had drawn his gun and Wilson had only shot the homesteader in self-defense, though Torrey realizes, even as he reaches for his weapon, that he cannot match Wilson's skill and never actually aims his gun at the professional gunfighter. Clearly, some type of alliance exists between Grafton and Ryker; and the homesteaders realize that they have no advocate in town and feel at risk there.

Ryker's monopolistic tendencies are first pointed out by Joe Starrett when he shows Shane his small piece of property and, pointing beyond it, notes, "That's Ryker's spread...all that over there. He thinks the world belongs to him." I've already suggested a number of ways in which the film's formal system works to convey the power and force of intimidation the Rykers bring to bear upon the homesteaders; the violence of the scene in which Ryker's massive herd breaks through Ernie Wright's (Leonard Strong) fences and tramples his ploughed field as Torrey struggles to maintain control of his horse and the Wright family stands helplessly by conveys Ryker's capital literally running over the homesteaders. Ryker does not recognize the federal law that granted the homesteaders their tracts of land, and he feels justified in circumventing any civil law against murder in the service of his cause. He also possesses the financial resources to hire Wilson, a gunfighter from Cheyenne whose professionalism is captured in his eschewing of alcohol in favor of coffee and his ability to smile as he performs the tasks he's been hired to do.<sup>22</sup>

The film offers the homesteaders' wilderness as the contrast to the town and

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<sup>22</sup> See Richard Slotkin's discussion of Wilson's professionalism, as well as Shane's, in *Gunfighter Nation*, pp. 396-400.

connects it with a democracy that is supported by and protects the independent farmers. Joe Starrett's farm provides the location for the meeting between the homesteaders who are attempting to present a united front against Ryker to prevent him from driving them out. The Independence Day celebrations in the two locations emphasize the different values associated with each. In the streets of the town, apparently drunken revelers fire pistol shots into the air and hoot and holler as they watch a rider try to stay on a bucking bronco. Inside the saloon, Ryker and his men plot against Joe Starrett. The town's mayhem contrasts with the homesteaders' family-friendly 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration. Their scene opens with a close-up of the American flag, and the food, music, dancing, and fireworks celebrate both the nation's independence and the Starretts' wedding anniversary, connecting American democracy with family life.

The film's sympathies clearly rest, then, with the homesteaders, as do Shane's, but the relationship between Shane and the homesteaders develops both harmonies and disharmonies between individualism and the common good. Though apparently a loner and an outsider, Shane aligns himself with Starrett against Ryker in the opening scene of the film, decides to stay on to work for Joe, and refuses to accept Ryker's offer of employment at double what Starrett can pay him. Finally, Shane sacrifices his hopes of leaving behind his violent past and joining the community by employing his skill with his gun to kill Wilson, Ryker, and Ryker's brother to eliminate the threat they pose to the homesteaders. To do this, though, he must prevent Joe from fulfilling his desire to be the one who faces Ryker by knocking Joe out with his gun. After his gun battle at the saloon, Shane tells Joey to go home and tell his mother that "there aren't any more guns in the

valley,” but that can only be true if he also leaves the valley. Arguably, he also sacrifices Marion, given the obvious attraction that exists between the two. The film offers Shane as the hero: his act of violence, not the unity amongst the homesteaders that Joe encourages, ultimately defeats Ryker, which seems to value individualism over community. However, Shane’s individualism protects democracy from the excesses of entrenched big capital, and, in effect, it also protects capitalism from its own excesses by leveling the playing field so that fair competition can begin again. In that way, the film seems to pit an earlier nineteenth-century view of the harmonious democracy/capitalism relationship, what Tocqueville would have called “self-interest rightly understood,”<sup>23</sup> against the more antagonistic twentieth-century view that McCloskey and Zaller elucidate. That is, Shane, Starrett, and the other homesteaders reflect capitalism and individualism working together to enable and protect democracy and community. Ryker’s antagonistic relationship with the homesteaders reflects a more twentieth-century view of entrenched corporate capitalism attempting to circumvent democracy and stifle individual voices, even if this requires violence and murder. In that sense, *Shane* emphasizes that, as Whyte argued, the organization’s interests may run counter to those of the community; the film provides a vision of the effectiveness of individual voices and action to enact political and social change to benefit the common good that responds to Whyte’s criticism of the Social Ethic. The fact that the conflict must be resolved by violent action indicates just

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<sup>23</sup> As Tocqueville explains in the second book of the second volume of *Democracy in America*, “The Americans, on the contrary, are fond of explaining almost all the actions of their lives by the principle of self-interest rightly understood; they show with complacency how an enlightened regard for themselves constantly prompts them to assist each other, and inclines them willingly to sacrifice a portion of their time and property to the welfare of the state” (130).

how diametrically opposed the goals of capitalism and democracy can become, a situation Eisenhower warned against in his farewell speech.

John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, based on a 1953 novella by Dorothy Johnson, and released in the spring of 1962,<sup>24</sup> dramatizes a clash between the cattle barons' hired gun and "sodbusters" that appears to be approximately concurrent with the clashes in *The Virginian* and *Shane*, though the film never names the specific Western territory or specific time in which its conflict takes place.<sup>25</sup> The resolution of the tensions between democracy and capitalism engender a transformation of Western society from one regulated by the Code of the West to one regulated by what might be called the "Code of the East," or institutionalized law. *Liberty Valance* concerns itself equally, however, with exploring the creation of Western mythology. Ford encourages the audience to consider both the positive and negative effects of progress by having the

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<sup>24</sup> Walter Metz's "Have You Written a Ford Lately?: Gender, Genre and the Film Adaptations of Dorothy Johnson's Western Literature" [*Literature and Film Quarterly* 31 (2003): 209-220] notes that Johnson's literature focused on the plight of women and Native Americans in the West, and Metz argues that "the artistry of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* that has been attributed to Ford is deeply rooted in Johnson's short story. For this project, to revisit the auteur is also to theorize the female authorial voice within the Hollywood cinema, a voice that has been systematically silenced within most discussion of these films" (213). Scholars view the film as the culmination of Ford's career as a director of Westerns which, as Tag Gallagher argues, both revises and summarizes both his themes and formal style. Tag asserts that "Frank Baker stated to the author that the scenarios of [*Liberty Valance* and *Donovan's Reef*] were substantially improvised by Ford from day to day during production—*Liberty Valance* more so" (384n).

<sup>25</sup> In his notes to "*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance: Truth or Justice in the Old West*," Steven Lubet argues that the film "seems to take place in the 1870's" because the railroad hasn't yet reached Shinbone, and the topography suggests Arizona but "that would make the statehood issue anachronism—Arizona having been admitted to the union in 1912." The film was based on a novella by Dorothy Johnson, who was from Montana, a location that might seem reasonable given that "Montana became a state in 1889, which almost fits into the time frame of stage coaches and gunslingers," but "the topography does not match the scenery in the film." Lubet settles on Colorado as the most likely choice, given that it was "admitted to the Union in 1876, with enough desert landscape to satisfy John Ford." (373).

body of the film, which narrates the battle for statehood against the cattle barons' interests, told in flashback, while the frame story, the film's "narrative present," set around the turn of the century, allows the audience to see the effects of that conflict's resolution. The frame story shows a peaceful and prosperous Shinbone, presumably so because grassroots democracy freed the town from oligarchic capitalists. However, the town in the film's "present" is also tinged with a sadness that reflects nostalgia for an idealized past in the face of the realization that progress has opened the door to new entities which constrict individual freedom. The film explores the progress that has grown out of the tensions between democracy and capitalism and also considers the role of mythology in both contributing to and explaining that progress.

In comparing two Westerns released in 1960 to several released in 1962 (including *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*), Stanley Corkin has noted that the films he analyzed reflect a marked change in the national mood.<sup>26</sup> Corkin finds that in the films of 1962, "the moment of modernization is treated as one that has already taken place and has resulted in recognizable changes associated with modernity"; these films, "rather than reveling in the achievement of progress," actually "treat modernity as inevitable but flawed. The difference between these two sets of films released only two or so years apart suggests a substantial cultural shift in views of 'progress.'" Corkin summarizes that difference this way:

Where these popular cultural expressions of 1960 affirmed confidence in the

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<sup>26</sup> Corkin compares *The Magnificent Seven* and *The Alamo*, both released in 1960, with *Lonely Are the Brave*, *Ride the High Country*, and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, all released in 1962.

power of the United States and its affiliated ideologies to assist and elevate those who had not yet benefited from the blessings of technology and U.S. models of liberalism, both political and economic, the later films look back to a moment when modernity recognizably takes hold and lament the passing of an era that ushered in that moment. (*Cowboys as Cold Warriors* 207)

Corkin indicts the complexities of Cold War politics, the murky outcomes of conflicts like the Korean War and the Bay of Pigs incident, and a weakening economy in contributing to “a general sense that the glorious days of moral clarity and uninterrupted growth had passed” (211). The sense that individuals’ lives were determined by huge, inhuman corporations and bureaucratic government that had been expressed in the writings of social critics in the 1950's was becoming, by the 1960's, a more pervasive attitude toward the Cold War and also, as Corkin suggests, toward democracy and capitalism on the domestic front. The 1962 films “critique the material terms of modernity, terms that in the United States have resulted from a lack of regulation of the economic activities both of individuals and corporations” (223). The conditions of modernity increased uncertainty about America’s present and future, which resulted in a desire for a return to real or imagined conditions of the past, and these factors contributed to the structure of feeling of the early 1960’s embedded in the film.

The body of the film, narrated in flashback as the memories of an aging Senator Ransom “Ranse” Stoddard (James Stewart), tells the story of Shinbone's struggle against Liberty Valance (Lee Marvin), the hired gun of the cattle barons who live north of the Picketwire River and who are fighting statehood to keep the territory an open range.

Liberty Valance, literally the "scourge" of the cattle barons, intimidates the ranchers and townspeople with a silver-handled whip and his gun to maintain his employers' control over the territory and thus to avoid any federal regulation that statehood would entail. Because their cowardly and corpulent marshal Link Appleyard (Andy Devine) cannot control Valance, the ranchers and townspeople look for protection to Tom Doniphon (John Wayne), an independent rancher skilled in gunplay and the self-proclaimed toughest man south of the Picketwire. Doniphon and Valance both represent freedom from the fences ("picket wire" and otherwise) that suggest the necessary setting of boundaries that comes with progress, though they occupy opposing moral poles; they also share the same set of rules: the Code of the West.

Ransom Stoddard, a young lawyer from the East, arrives in the town bearing his law books and his faith in the American legal system and its democratic ideals, and after being brutally beaten by Liberty Valance and his gang during a stagecoach robbery, he determines to make Valance his first case. However, he finds that Shinbone's natives accept Western law as the norm and that no legal system to speak of exists in the town: Appleyard sleeps in the town's only jail cell, which has no lock, and he exploits whatever power his position gives him to get free meals at Pete's Place rather than to regulate Valance's violence. Ransome determines to bring Liberty to justice without a gun; he finds, though, that his crusade to civilize Shinbone will involve not only empowering the townspeople to exercise their democratic rights through education but also compromising his integrity and values. Stoddard gives in to Western law's acceptance of violence as a means of achieving progress, and he builds his political career on the myth that names

him as the man who shot Liberty Valance when, in fact, viewers discover near the end of the film, that the title rightly belongs to Tom Doniphon, who dies in obscurity and poverty.

The film immediately establishes a sense of both progress and constriction in its opening scenes. A train pulls into the apparently prosperous town of Shinbone, precisely on schedule, for which promptness Stoddard compliments the conductor. The sun shines on Shinbone's peaceful streets, handsome buildings, and electrical wires. However, the main characters seem somewhat stilted and quiet. Certainly, this is due both to the fact that Ransom Stoddard, his wife Hallie (Vera Miles), and Link Appleyard are getting on in years and that they have gathered for the funeral of their old friend, Tom Doniphon. But Ford's direction offers several clues that suggest another explanation. Several of these concern the locomotive: as the train pulls toward Shinbone, it spews thick black smoke into the air; as it pulls into the station, it blocks out the sunlight and casts the waiting Link Appleyard into shadow; as the former marshal attempts to talk with Hallie, he is drowned out by the train's whistle. Hallie remarks on the town, "The place sure has changed—churches, high school, shops." Link replies, "Well, the railroad done that." And certainly, the railroad has allowed growth. However, the visual and aural images Ford offers point to the darker side of progress; even the train's being on time suggests both efficiency and regimentation of human movement. The opening scenes in Shinbone's "present" provide a comparison point with Shinbone's past, which will be retrieved from Ransie Stoddard's memory in the flashback body of the film.

A second significant point of comparison that the frame story offers concerns the journalists who badger Senator Stoddard for an explanation of his return to Shinbone for the funeral of an unknown man who, as it turns out, was once quite well-known, though now forgotten. These reporters, who rudely demand their story even as the Senator is paying his respects at Tom Doniphon's coffin, compare unfavorably to Dutton Peabody (Edmond O'Brien), the founder and editor of the *Shinbone Star* who, though drunk more often than not, courageously lambastes Liberty Valance's violent acts even though it earns him a near fatal beating. The *Star's* subtitle, "The People's Voice," reflects what Peabody sees as the duty of "the fourth estate," to serve as society's "watchdog" and "conscience." Peabody may be a sot, but he is also a student of history, government, and culture. Though one might criticize his idealism, it is difficult to question his sincerity about the duty of the press to present the facts the people need to make good civic decisions when one considers the scene, both humorous and tense, in which Peabody prepares a headline disparaging to Valance (not the first he's printed): the editor, both determined and very much afraid, consumes a great deal of "liquid courage" to shore up his nerve.<sup>27</sup> Peabody describes his role with regard to politicians by saying, "I build 'em up, I tear 'em down," but his participation in this making or breaking of public figures seems ennobled by the fact that his work has immediate effects and requires him literally

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<sup>27</sup> Tag Gallagher argues with regard to this scene that "[w]e are intended to infer that words are untrustworthy: Peabody is as intoxicated by words as by liquor and it may justly be asked who is the master, Peabody or liquor, Peabody or words" (401). Gallagher finds that, after having consumed his liquid courage at the tavern, the Peabody that returns to his office and must face the angry Liberty Valance and his crew responds with puns: "Rather than fearful, Peabody derives joy from his pun, as though he were a martyr and the puns a cherished crucifix" (*John Ford: The Man and His Films* 402). It is precisely this idealistic zeal for words and their effect as employed in the service of a free press that would, I believe, force Peabody to print the true identity of Liberty Valance's killer if he had been privy to that information.

to risk his life to perform it. The film offers no evidence to suggest that Peabody learns who really shot Liberty Valance; if he had, he may well have felt obligated to print that fact. The work of his counterparts in their electrically cooled office in Shinbone decades later pales in comparison. Their work centers not on revelation but on preserving the status quo.

The narrative of Shinbone's past thus establishes the tension between democracy and capitalism and the Code of the West's role in maintaining the cattle baron's ability to suppress democracy. When Valance and his gang hold up the stagecoach bringing Ranse out West, Stoddard asks Valance, "What kind of men are you?" The question rebukes the men for roughly handling and robbing an elderly widow. Valance's response indicates that, out West, the measure of a man is his physical power and not his civility: he growls, "This kind, dude" as he strikes the lawyer, knocking him to the ground. In the kitchen of Pete (John Qualen) and Nora's (Jeanette Nolan) restaurant, Tom Doniphon reinforces the acceptance of Western law by scoffing at Stoddard's desire to have Liberty Valance put in jail. Doniphon suggests that the lawyer get himself a gun: "I know those law books mean a lot to you, but not out here. Out here a man settles his own problems." Stoddard, horrified that brute physical force or skill with guns determines the outcomes of conflicts rather than higher ideals of justice, responds,

Do you know what you're saying to me? You know, you're...you're saying exactly what Liberty Valance said. What kind of a community have I come to? You all seem to know about this fellow Liberty Valance...; he's a no-good, gun-

packing, murdering thief. But the only advice you can give me is to carry a gun.

Well, I'm a lawyer! Ransom Stoddard, attorney at law!

The composition of this shot is most revealing. Ransie, alone on the right side of the screen, sits on a bed; standing on the left, facing him, are Tom, who is smoking thoughtfully; Nora, whose facial expression and body language indicate that she has taken offense at Ransie's assessment of her community; and Hallie, who stands behind Nora listening intently. In the community Ransie has come to, the Code of the West ensures that the people who have rights are those who have the power to impose their will on others, and the lawyer's ideas are clearly alien here. Hallie breaks this composition by crossing the screen to sit at Ransie's right, saying, "A little law and order around Shinbone wouldn't hurt anyone." That is not, in fact, the case. The ascendancy of law and order over the Code of the West will cause the demise of Liberty Valance and the control of the territory by the cattle barons, as well as the decline of Tom Doniphon.

The establishment of law and order and the rise of democracy occur simultaneously in Shinbone. Ransie's attempts to find, in his law books, a precedent that gives Link Appleyard jurisdiction over Valance's crimes outside of the town (though this help is certainly unsought for by the marshal) leads to his realization that Hallie and Nora are illiterate and prompts him to start a school where he teaches the townsfolk the fundamentals of reading and of U.S. government. The class he establishes meets in an annex to Dutton Peabody's printing office, and the *Shinbone Star* provides a text for the class. Further, Ransie teaches the Constitution in a desegregated classroom: Tom's black servant Pompey (Woody Strode) and Link Appleyard's Mexican-American children share

the classroom with white men, women, and children, and a portrait of Abraham Lincoln hangs over Pompey's head as he attempts to recall the Declaration of Independence's assertion that all men are created equal. The teacher's desk provides Stoddard with a pulpit from which to preach his Eastern democratic ideals; the newspaper headline he uses as his text reads, "Cattlemen Fight Statehood: Small Homesteaders in Danger." Furthermore, the lesson does not end with civics. Tag Gallagher, in *John Ford: The Man and His Films*, has noted that "the class as an important theme—the young being educated—only becomes obsessive in [Ford's] last movies: [*Liberty Valance*], *Cheyenne Autumn*, *7 Women*, and humorously, *Donovan's Reef*. In each case, education is seen as indoctrination and as a method of imposing repressive order" (297). Ranse rules the classroom, telling Link to remove his hat, ordering that there will be no smoking in the classroom, and determining which students will be allowed to speak. The classroom regulations and its lessons may be repressive, but education does prove to be both threatening to the old order and empowering to the emerging order. For example, education obviously threatens the system that gives Tom his position in this society, a fact that becomes clear in his treatment of Pompey in this scene. Tom initially enters the classroom looking for Pompey because the work he left for him to do has not been completed. He angrily scolds him: "What're ya wastin' your time around here for? Get on back to work! Your schoolin's over." He dismisses Ranse's assertion that Pompey has a right to education. Furthermore, Hallie's dress and hair reflect her rising status as Ranse's teaching assistant, but her behavior towards Tom reflects even more emphatically a new found sense of confidence and self-respect. In the earlier scene in which Ranse was

nursed in Pete and Nora's kitchen, Tom belittled Hallie's concerns by saying, "You sure look pretty when you're mad." Hallie accepts the patronizing comment as a compliment. In the classroom scene, Tom arrives with the warning that Liberty Valance has killed two homesteaders and is gathering hired guns to intimidate the townspeople and so influence the upcoming elections, and he orders Hallie to leave the classroom and go home. Hallie's response is defiant: "Now you listen to me, Tom Doniphon. What I do and where I go is none of your business. You don't own me." Tom repeats his patronizing comment about how pretty she looks when she gets mad, but this time, she does not take it as a compliment. As Tom walks out the door, Hallie picks up some schoolbooks from the floor and slams them angrily onto a desk. Education thus threatens the status quo and specifically interferes with Tom's authority over the "boy" who works for him and the "girl" he considers his property.

From his desk, Ransome teaches that democracy will guarantee the kind of progress that the Code of the West has not brought forth, and he is framed so that visible on the blackboard above him is the statement "Education is the basis of law and order." Ironically, Ransome decides to compromise his own ideals in this same classroom. Hallie sees Ransome erase the statement from the blackboard and assumes he's planning on closing the school in the face of Liberty Valance's threat. In fact, Hallie learns from Peabody that Ransome has been practicing with a handgun for several weeks. Ransome's response to her, "Tom's right. When force threatens, talk's no good anymore," actually signals his resignation to Tom's assertion that votes will not be enough to end this conflict and violence will be necessary. As he speaks these words to Hallie, the two are framed so that

Ranse occupies the left side of the screen, and Hallie and a portrait of George Washington occupy the right. Though the audience might be tempted to find Ransom Stoddard hypocritical at this point in the narrative, the reference to the Revolutionary War general and first president seems to suggest a resonance between the colonist's conflict and Shinbone's conflict. Ranse compromises his values in another way in this scene. He encourages Hallie to go after Tom and "make it up to" him because Tom is trying to protect her, effectively encouraging her to accept the status quo, an unequal position as a protected object.

Preserving the status quo would preserve Tom's importance and position in the territory as well as his relationship with Hallie, and yet he proves both his heroism and his incompatibility with democracy in the actions he takes that end up facilitating it. Doniphon employs his reputation and physical strength to enforce the rules at the election meeting, and he limits Liberty Valance's attempts at voter fraud and verbal intimidation: the cattlemen's hired gun tries to have himself elected as the delegate from south of the Picketwire though he does not actually live there and though the residents unanimously prefer Ransom Stoddard and Dutton Peabody as their delegates. However, Tom is not so enamored with statehood and democracy that he will accept Ranse's nomination of him for delegate. Tom refuses because he has "plans...; personal plans." Tag Gallagher argues that "[t]his is Doniphon's curious nature; he provides the muscle to get things done and yet stubbornly declines responsibility. While this suggests democracy's tragedy, that those who are strong and good are often reluctant to assume duty, it is Doniphon's adhesion to his concept of personal freedom that makes him act as he does" (*John Ford*

400). For Gallagher, mere selfishness does not motivate this adherence to personal freedom; rather, a different ethical system compels Tom to uphold personal loyalties and, in so doing, to help dismantle the status quo that gives his life purpose. Gallagher argues,

His world and Stoddard's are mutually exclusive and belong to different ages.

Stoddard is from the East, Doniphon probably from Texas. The triumph of one will entail the eclipse of the other, just as only one of them will get Hallie.

Doniphon's glory, and that of his order, is that he will continually bring about destruction of himself and his order by remaining true to his notions of chivalry: for he must defend those who are against force, those who are loved by those he loves. (400)

While the election highlights Tom's incompatibility with democracy, it also suggests democracy's shortcomings, for Pompey sits outside the saloon where the meeting takes place, silent and excluded from the proceedings, until Liberty Valance's appearance requires him to stand, just inside the swinging doors, with his rifle cocked to support Tom's enforcement of the rules.

The event that will bring about Tom's decline is directly set in motion at the election meeting and stems from his adherence to the Code of the West. Valance, angered by what he views as Stoddard's interference with his attempt to have himself elected as delegate to the statehood convention, challenges the lawyer to a personal showdown, and he convinces Doniphon to back off as Stoddard's protector saying, "He's been hiding behind your gun long enough." This appeal convinces Doniphon precisely because of his belief that a man should "settle his own problems"; not to do so would be cowardly on

Stoddard's part, and interference would be dishonorable on Doniphon's part. Doniphon assumes that Stoddard will accurately assess his likelihood of surviving a showdown with Valance and leave town, which will effect the resolution of the conflict between the two men without interference from outside parties.

Doniphon does not, however, take into account several factors that will compel him to participate in the conflict. First, he does not anticipate that Stoddard's sense of justice will be so offended by Valance's beating of Dutton Peabody that the lawyer will decide to face the gunslinger despite the fact that he has almost no chance of surviving that encounter. Secondly, though Tom recognizes Hallie's affection for the lawyer, he does not correctly assess the degree of her attachment to Ransom Stoddard. So, when Hallie sends Pompey to retrieve Tom as Stoddard heads out to face Liberty Valance, Tom shoots Liberty to please Hallie by preventing Ransie from being killed without realizing that this action will result in Hallie's finally choosing Ransie over him. When he enters Pete and Nora's kitchen to find Hallie affectionately administering to Ransie's wounds, Tom finally realizes that Hallie is now Ransie's girl. But, again, his code of ethics compels him to act with loyalty to Hallie. He leaves without revealing that he, and not Ransie, has ended Liberty Valance's reign of terror.

Liberty Valance's death completes a transformation of Shinbone. The solidarity of the election, which gave the people the courage to stand up to Valance's intimidation, and Valance's attack on Peabody embolden first the doctor and then the notoriously craven Link Appleyard to rebuke Valance in the saloon for his violence against the newspaper editor. If that is not enough to foreshadow the imminent demise of Liberty Valance, the

gunslinger draws the dead man's hand at cards, aces and eights. After the doctor pronounces Valance dead, the music and singing at the Mexican cantina spill out onto the street, Pompey enters the saloon, breaking segregation laws (as he is reminded by the bartender, who is then rebuked by Tom), and then defies Tom's order to pour himself a drink, and Link Appleyard takes credit for running Valance's henchmen out of town. It appears that the town of Shinbone has been liberated, but the remainder of the film will highlight the positive and negative implications of the phrase "Liberty is dead."

The convention scenes illustrate both confidence and doubts about democracy. The hand-painted signs and dirtied suits of the statehood supporters contrast with the professionally lettered signs raised by the impeccably dressed cattlemen, and the inequality of the financial resources and power that each party brings to the convention make it all the more amazing that Stoddard is successful in his crusade for statehood and democracy that will "protect the rights of every man and woman, no matter how humble," as Peabody proclaims. The film suggests, however, the dishonesty also inherent in this political system. The convention offers a fairly bleak assessment of the operations of politics and presents politicians as image without substance. The Honorable Major Cassius Starbuckle throws away his "carefully prepared speech" so he can speak "from the heart," but his carefully prepared speech turns out to be an empty sheet of paper. The cattlemen's candidate is introduced with the ridiculous spectacle of a horse and rider galloping onto the stage and encircling Buck Langhorne with a lasso. Even Peabody compromises his ideals about the press's role as government's "watchdog" and "conscience" by accepting the conflict of interest inherent in his serving as delegate. Most

significantly, Ranse, after Tom reveals to him that he did not, in fact, shoot Liberty Valance, builds his political career by capitalizing on his reputation as “the man who shot Liberty Valance,” and Tom walks out of the convention and into the oblivion that he helped to bring about for himself. Ironically, then, the citizens seeking transformation from the Code of the West to the law and order promised by statehood elect a man based on his alleged employment of the Code of the West.

“You know the rest of it,” Senator Stoddard tells the journalists as the narrative returns to Shinbone’s present, and the editor rattles off Stoddard’s resume: governor, senator, ambassador, and, possibly, vice president. Though Stoddard wishes to unburden himself of the lie that has formed the basis of his illustrious political career, the editor of the *Shinbone Star* elects not to print the story. “This is the West, sir,” he tells the Senator; “When the legend becomes the fact, print the legend.” In effect, the editor decides that the senator’s personal desire to be absolved of the lie must be subsumed to the common good, which apparently requires the preservation of the myth.

Ford’s film does not overtly criticize the fact that public figures are often fabricated personalities as much as it exposes that fact. Certainly, the senator’s career has been illustrious, and Shinbone has experienced progress despite the lie. Gallagher argues, “Every student of history (and Ford was one) must continually marvel at the disparity between historical fact and tradition. People prefer fantasy and, often, they need it” (409). Ford may have accepted this as an inescapable truth about humanity, one that is ultimately acceptable because “the ideals that form society are more important than the functionaries of society” (Gallagher 409). However, this notion is problematic. A

democratic republic places a responsibility on its individual citizens to educate themselves about whom and what they are voting for. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* suggests that people are susceptible to accepting fabricated political personas, cults of personality, at face value rather than interrogating character and platforms to discover truths about their public leaders and the likely ends of their political designs, particularly when these public figures appeal to our national mythology of the Western frontier. Thomas Schatz has pointed out that, in *Liberty Valance*, Ford "concentrates on the very process whereby our present demands for a favorable vision distort and manipulate the past" (*Hollywood Genres* 77). The film also suggests the ways in which the mythology influences the democratic process by distorting the present.

As Richard Slotkin has warned, "A people unaware of its myths is likely to continue living by them, though the world around that people may change and demand changes in their psychology, their worldview, their ethics, and their institutions" (*Regeneration through Violence* 4-5). The Western genre and the frontier mythology as a whole have been critiqued for presenting a triumphalist narrative of the settlement of the Western frontier as the charge of democracy and capitalism that brought with it progress without interrogating the tension between the two traditions and the ways in which capitalism, at times, hinders the democratic process to preserve wealth and power for the few. This mythological narrative usually elides the narratives of women, Mexican Americans, African Americans, and Chinese Americans that would serve to discredit the positive, heroic view of United States history that the narrative offers. Furthermore, the narrative often presents Native Americans as savages who needed to be converted to

Western European culture or destroyed as a hindrance to progress. Corkin analyzes the Kennedy administration's employment of the frontier myth in both its presentation of Kennedy's personal image and its rhetoric and policies to respond to the structure of feeling at the time through its vision of the "New Frontier":

Kennedy in effect defines his Wyatt Earp style to minimize the complexities of his policies, a complexity that resulted from his combining the nation-building tendencies of Cold War liberalism and liberal internationalism with the hard militarism and preemptive interventionism of the right. He asserts the need for an extension of U.S. influence as a matter of the legacy of the frontier that defines the U.S. role as the guarantor of "freedom" throughout the globe. [...] By referencing a certain type of film-Western hero, Kennedy could pose as a figure that was both militarily able *and* altruistic. (*Cowboys as Cold Warriors* 209-210)

The problem with this employment of the myth to present a more palpable view of U.S. foreign and domestic policy to Americans weary of and uncertain about the complexities of the modern world is that the triumphant narrative it provides does not mesh with the complexities of reality. The myth of a powerful cowboy or gunfighter employing his physical prowess and skill to impose order ignores the fact that the West was actually the site of conflict and compromise between individuals of many nations and cultures struggling to establish a democratic society, and it does not take into account the lessons the United States learned, or should have learned, about the process it narrates. Corkin argues, "In many ways the disaster of Vietnam serves as an index of the multiple flaws of [Kennedy's] assumptions and strategies, in that the president oversaw a policy that, by

attempting both to control that nation by force *and* to bring it the assumed blessings of Western civilization did neither” (210). Richard Slotkin, in his assessment of the Kennedy administration, puts it this way:

But the mythology of war prevalent in American culture also sanctifies a hierarchical and highly “command-centered” version of democratic or republican ideology. When the war metaphor is invoked for a national project (containment of Communism, the war on poverty), the people as a whole become the platoon and the President becomes the commander in whom (at least for the duration of the crisis) we must repose *implicit* confidence. The paradox of the New Frontier was that it aimed at achieving democratic goals through structures and methods that were elite-dominated and command-oriented. (*Gunfighter Nation* 500)

Slotkin suggests the dangers of the myth to both the democratic process and the preservation of its ideals:

Just as Wister’s appealing fable of the “progressive cowboy” obscures the essentially anti-democratic implications of the novel’s ideology, so the powerful appeal of the “New Frontier” and the Kennedy style obscures the elitist and anti-democratic implications of “Camelot,” with respect to both the treatment of “weaker” peoples and nations abroad and to the management and control of public opinion and Congressional consent at home (*Gunfighter Nation* 504).

The emotional appeal of myths like that of the Frontier discourages the kind of interrogation that might reveal less palatable truths; in effect, the legend becomes preferable to the facts.

The Frontier myth tends to obscure the tension between democracy and capitalism in order to promote a national consensus regarding American cultural values. It offers a narrative in which the hero's conflicts, both with his community and with savages or other forces of evil, reinforce a positive valuation of capitalism and individualism in American social and political life. However, in the three works I analyzed in this chapter, the tensions between democracy and capitalism cannot be avoided in the narratives of nation building they offer. In fact, these tensions prove central to the conflicts that drive each narrative as the works present the conflict between large and small cattlemen during the cattle wars: the Virginian's success results from his support of big capital's suppression of small ranchers and farmers; Shane's struggle with a choice between individual fulfillment and service to his adopted community stems from that small farming community's struggle to survive Ryker's monopolistic attempts to destroy it and Shinbone's grassroots battle for statehood against large cattle interests occasions the conflict between Shinbone and Liberty Valance as well as that between Ransom Stoddard and Tom Doniphon over how to deal with the threat posed by Valance. These Westerns are conventional in offering an admirable white male hero who struggles with his individualism and his obligation to community but still resolves the crises in his community to ensure and allow progress. They also, however, reveal the cracks and fissures in the relationship between democracy and capitalism in the promotion of modern civilization.

*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*'s ambivalence towards progress contributes to its richness and makes it a transitional film, one that opened the way for the revisionist

works that would follow it. The works that I will discuss in Chapter Two will further interrogate the Frontier myth by investigating the narratives of morally ambiguous heroes and by questioning the assumptions on which the Frontier myth is based to offer an examination of the darker side of nation building.

## Chapter Two

### Riding off into the Sunrise: The Revision of the Western

As I argued in the previous chapter, even classic Westerns that present admirable white, male heroes who resolve the crises experienced by their community to make safe the way for progress reveal the tensions between capitalism and democracy that existed both during the period of nation building and during the period in which these Westerns were produced. The Westerns I will examine in this chapter were produced between 1964 and 1971, a period when dominant, residual, and emergent aspects of the culture clashed in the United States with great force and lasting effects. By revising Western mythology to offer morally ambiguous heroes in narratives critical of the motives and the means employed to settle the Western Frontier and fulfill the United States' "Manifest Destiny," these Westerns reflect both the tumultuous events and the roiling currents of the period's structure of feeling concerning the United States' traditions of democracy and capitalism.

Godfrey Hodgson, in *America in Our Time*, describes the "age of Kennedy and Nixon" as a "time of lost hopes" (3). The tumult of the period resulted, according to Hodgson, from a breakdown of the "liberal consensus" that had grown during the post-war years. This consensus rested on the assumptions that capitalism and democracy were working together to promote economic growth, social equality, peace, and social justice; that the one real threat to this progress was Communism, which must be fought diligently; and that America had a moral duty to export its system to the rest of the

world.<sup>1</sup> David W. Noble examines the writings of "conservative liberal" intellectuals from the 1950s and 1960s, such as Daniel Bell (*The End of Ideology*), Daniel Boorstin (*The Genius of American Politics*), and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (*The Vital Centre*), and finds that the "consensus" among them "was that they had as their major responsibility the defence [sic] of a good institutional status quo against the resurgence of right-wing or left-wing ideologies of perfectionism which might tempt the American people into abandoning their safe and sane society to pursue false promises which could only result in disorder, chaos, and then totalitarianism"(641).<sup>2</sup> Franklin Kalinowski frames the consensus as a response to the threat of scarcity and argues that in

the early 1960s, the response took the form of declaring an "end of ideology." It was assumed that our domestic problems were technical rather than political and, therefore, that a shift toward more centralized, rational decision making, more "human engineering," and the continued pursuit of the "gospel of efficiency"

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<sup>1</sup> Hodgson offers six assumptions on which the consensus was based:

"1) The American free-enterprise system is different from the old capitalism. It is democratic. It creates abundance. It has a revolutionary potential for social justice.

2) The key to this potential is production: specifically, increased production, or economic growth. This makes it possible to meet the people's needs out of incremental resources. Social conflict over resources between classes (which Marx called 'the locomotive of history') therefore becomes obsolete and unnecessary.

3) There is a natural harmony of interests in society. American society is getting more equal. It is in the process of abolishing, may even have abolished, social class. Capitalists are being superseded by managers. The workers are becoming members of the middle class.

4) Social problems can be solved like industrial problems: The problem is first identified; programs are designed to solve it, by government enlightened by social science; money and other resources—such as trained people—are then applied to the problem as 'inputs'; the outputs are predictable: the problems will be solved.

5) The main threat to this beneficent system comes from the deluded adherents of Marxism. The United States and its allies, the Free World, must therefore expect a long struggle against communism.

6) Quite apart from the threat of communism, it is the duty and destiny of the United States to bring the good tidings of the free-enterprise system to the rest of the world" (*America in Our Time* 76).

<sup>2</sup> Davis W. Noble's "Conservatism in the USA" appeared in the *Journal of Contemporary History* 13 (Oct. 1978): 635-652.

would correct the internal problems of an “undermanaged” society. The New Frontier and the Great Society corporate liberals would resolve our difficulties if only the American people would defer to the expertise of the social managers and not ask for such “romantic fictions” as participation, self-identity, or control over their lives. (68)<sup>3</sup>

American citizens, according to Hodgson, largely accepted these assumptions as they approached the polls to choose either Nixon or Kennedy in 1960, and the political differences that determined their choices were not significant enough to undermine the consensus they shared that the American system was working at home to guarantee a promising future and should be exported abroad. That consensus would be dashed apart during the ensuing decade.

The peaceful resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis in April 1962 may have offered Americans some reason to feel optimistic about their president and their country, but even during this period of apparent confidence, the cracks and fissures in the consensus were showing. As I argued in the previous chapter, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, released in 1962, presents an ambivalent view of progress and the future of America. In June of 1962, the Students for a Democratic Society held their first national convention; in what became known as the “Port Huron Statement,” these students identified themselves as “people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit.” The document identified the primary sources of that discomfort as the “Southern struggle

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<sup>3</sup> Franklin A. Kalinowski’s “Marxism, Fascism, and the New Left” appeared in *The Western Political*

against racial bigotry” and the Cold War. It went on to list other “disturbing paradoxes” in American society: advances in technology had not eliminated meaningless labor or unemployment; glaring gaps existed between the wealthy and the impoverished; exploitation of natural resources abounded despite rapid population growth; America’s “democratic” system was being manipulated in undemocratic ways; and apathy and complacency obtained when revolutionary thinking was most needed. The SDS members found themselves to be representatives of a minority opinion in 1962. However, the next few years would witness events that would shock America out of its consensus: assassinations, first of John F. Kennedy, and then of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy; a growing awareness of massive poverty, brought to public attention by such works as Michael Harrington's *The Other America*, which was published in 1962; the climax of the Civil Rights Movement; the growth of a radical peace movement in protest of the Vietnam War; urban rioting; and the rise of what Theodore Roszak coined the "counter culture." Hodgson argues that these events discredited both American domestic and foreign policy and even brought under suspicion the moral character of the nation and its people:

Americans had gone into the age of Kennedy and Nixon convinced that their government's actions—*their* action, that is, multiplied by the immense collective power of the federal government—could make over the world, at home and abroad. Now they had been burned. It was not just that they had learned how much harder it is to change the world than the elite they had listened to had told

them. The lesson was more painful than that. They had learned there was moral ambiguity where they had once thought the issues of right and wrong were clearest; that their own motives were not above suspicion; and that there seemed little that political action could achieve, however idealistic in its intentions, without invoking unforeseen and unwanted reaction. (494)

This breakdown of the liberal consensus and the concomitant uncertainty it revealed in the nation's self-image were reflected in the genre that dramatized the central myth of American culture.

Westerns produced during this period reflect a reevaluation of the meaning and the moral of Frontier mythology. They reconsider the means of progress and do not necessarily exult at the ends of it; they reconsider the moral character of the savages and outlaws, as well as that of the cowboys, entrepreneurs, and communities who effected that progress. These Westerns reveal that American history as the genre had often, at least on the surface, depicted it before 1963 no longer rang true. Hodgson argues that

there was a new awareness of the predatory side of the frontier tradition. The new sympathy for the American Indian [...] helped to make people realize how the West was won: by fraud and genocide as well as by courage and determination. [...] The result was a new popular understanding of what was implied by the New Frontier dream. Unlimited growth of American consumption in a world of poor people and scarce resources: that had always been a glutton's dream. Now it seemed a fantasy into the bargain. (471)

The three Westerns I will examine in this chapter, Thomas Berger's novel *Little Big Man* (1964), Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), and Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), all critique frontier mythology by presenting the fraud, genocide, greed, and violence as well as the courage and determination that resulted in the settlement of the West. This questioning of the national mythology during the turbulent 1960s and early 1970s reveals a structure of feeling in which a dominant faith in American exceptionalism and the consensus it had engendered had been shaken by emergent political and social events which highlighted the ways in which democracy could be impeded by capitalism and democratic ideals stifled by capitalist enterprises. The Westerns produced during this period evoke these paradoxes of American society and foreign policy, as well as the paradoxes of the mythology itself.

Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* (1964) juxtaposes white society, with its emphasis on lateral movement westward fueled by the values of progress and capitalism, with the Cheyenne, whose culture, conceived in terms of circular movement and wholeness, was disrupted by white westward progress. Though Berger published this novel generations after its events took place, the violent conflicts between Whites and Native Americans were significant to Berger and his contemporary Americans because the underlying beliefs regarding "progress" held by elite policymakers as they determined U.S. goals and practices in the "underdeveloped" world, particularly in Asia, seemed to reflect those that inspired the treatment of Native Americans during the period of the

settlement of the West. Richard Slotkin argues, for instance, that exceptionalist views of American modernization from the frontier theory of Frederick Jackson Turner through the theories of modernization presented in the early 1960's are similar in "their concentration on economic matters and in their neglect or evasion of the dark side of the Frontier Myth: the close connection between the development of American resources and the violent destruction of those who opposed the dominant forms of economic and national organization" (492). He also argues that, despite the other socialist, labor, and populist movements which suffered violent suppression, "the Indian wars provided the only historical case in which the progress and violence could be acknowledged" so that "the Indian-war metaphor acquired new significance after 1960" as American intervention increased in Asia and Latin America in the Cold War effort to contain Communism. The liberal consensus, as I've noted, held that America was bound by a moral imperative to encourage progress and maintain a balance of powers by exporting democracy and capitalism to underdeveloped nations, a goal that often resulted in conflicts with the citizens of these nations who were not necessarily open to American intervention or unfriendly to communism. The Indian-war metaphor provided a particularly apt comparison in this situation and "became increasingly prominent in the rhetoric of counterinsurgency after 1961," as Slotkin explains,

in part because of the parallels between these two kinds of fighting—both of which took place in a "wilderness" setting against a racially and culturally alien enemy. But the real power and relevance of the Indian-war metaphor are rooted in its appropriateness as an expression of the New Frontier's basic assumptions

about the relation between “primitive” and “advanced” peoples: that the natives (“savages”) of “fledgling” or “less developed” nations lacked anything like the equivalent of the political culture of a Western nation state. (493)

This assumption allowed the American administrations and policymakers to view these conflicts between “advanced” and “primitive” peoples as inevitable in the march of progress and to assume that they would result in the success of the advanced culture.

Though policymakers employed the Indian-war metaphor to express the morality of progress through the spread of democracy and capitalism and the inevitability of violent conflict between the forces of progress and the “savage” or “primitive” forces that would hinder it, Slotkin sees contradictions in the liberal consensus view which pervaded both foreign and domestic policy, as the wars on restrictive governments and debilitating social problems became wars on the individuals who suffered under these entities:

The “liberal” strain in their thinking made them genuinely desirous of improving the living conditions of “the poor” by engaging them in the dynamics of “progress” and by extending the benefits of political democracy to those who had been prevented from enjoying them by tyranny, discrimination, and their own ignorance. But their way of defining progress incorporated the very structure of thought which justified the subjection of “non-progressive” races and peoples “for their own good.” (497)

This inherent contradiction resulted in increasingly undemocratic means used, both in America and abroad, to justify and continue the war and other programs designed to spread democracy and capitalism; a similarly contradictory view resulted in worsening

treatment and eventual near-extirmination of the Native Americans in the nineteenth-century United States. The authors/directors of the works examined in this chapter thus use America's previous experience to critique their own era.

Thomas Berger highlights this contradiction in *Little Big Man*, and he also calls into question its basic assumption: that white society and its ideal of progress is superior to the "primitive" culture of Native Americans.<sup>4</sup> The liberal consensus moral imperative to encourage progress and peace by exporting capitalism and democracy to underdeveloped nations becomes, in the novel, the white tendency to see the world "as it should be," and the desire to impose this vision on the Native Americans contrasts with the Cheyenne tendency to see the world "as it is" and to accept others as they are.<sup>5</sup> However, the vision of the world as it should be is too often corrupted by greed. Berger presents the progress achieved in the settlement of the West as conceived almost

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<sup>4</sup> Though Westerns sympathetic to Native Americans had been produced in other time periods, Berger's novel is unique in its honest, and often brutally humorous, depiction of *both* natives and whites. Frederick W. Turner III argues that "for the first time really in American letters, both cultures are seen from the inside out" in "The Second Decade of *Little Big Man*" (*Nation* 20 [August 1977]: 150-151). Though *Little Big Man* has been read for its romantic, picaresque, tragic, mythic, parodic, and historic value, Michael Cleary finds its deepest significance in its value as satire: "On one level it is a condemnation of the weaknesses of human nature; on another level, it is a serious indictment of American institutions, culture, values, and even history itself" (61). Cleary's essay, "Finding the Center of the Earth: Satire, History, and Myth in *Little Big Man*," was included in *Critical Essays on Thomas Berger*, ed. David W. Madden (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1995), 61-75.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche influenced Berger's thinking, as a number of commentators have noted. For one analysis of the influence of Nietzsche's philosophy on the author, see Brooks Landon's *Thomas Berger* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989). Landon argues that the two start from similar assumptions, but, "for all the correspondences between Berger's fiction and Nietzsche's philosophy and for all the respect Berger holds for Nietzsche, significant differences appear in the ways in which they proceed from shared assumptions" (126). Several times in the novel, Jack makes reference to whites seeing the world "how things *should be*" and the Cheyenne seeing things "how they *was*" (361). This phrasing echoes Friedrich Nietzsche's in "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983): "[History] preserves the memory of the great fighters *against history*, that is to say, against the blind power of the actual, and puts itself in the pillory by exalting precisely those men as the real historical natures who bothered little with the 'thus it is' so as to follow the 'thus it shall be' with a more cheerful pride. Not to bear their race to the grave, but to found a new generation of this race—that is what impels them ceaselessly forward [...]" (106-107).

exclusively in terms of capitalist and materialistic values, with concerns of democracy and justice often becoming collateral damage in the frenzy of “making a pile” (341).

Jack Crabb, the protagonist of *Little Big Man*, notably diverges from the conventional Western hero in physical stature as well as moral character. At a lean five-foot-four inches, Jack manages to survive in the violent West of late nineteenth-century America to reach the astonishing age of 111 not so much through physical strength and skill with a gun as through what he proudly refers to as his “shiftiness.” For example, when Wild Bill Hickock discovers that Jack has been cheating him at poker (in fact, Jack has been earning a good living and supporting his adopted niece by cheating at poker), the notorious gunfighter invokes the Code of the West to provoke a showdown between the two men. Wild Bill calls Jack a cheat and a liar, which Jack recognizes as “shootable insults in the West at that time.[...] If you was called any of them names in public, you was expected to do something about it” (309). However, he also recognizes the false sense of honor driving Hickock’s actions, for Wild Bill refers to himself in the third person “like he was an institution: personally, he didn’t care so much about these supposed outrages of mine, but he could not let the noble firm of Wild Bill Hickock, Inc., be loosely dealt with” (308). Since Wild Bill often employed questionable ethics at poker himself, he “didn’t stand on no firmer moral ground” than Jack, but he is determined to get Jack to draw on him (309). Using the mirror ring that has been his means of cheating at cards, Jack blinds Wild Bill with the sun, causing the gunfighter to miss his target, but Jack pretends he has been hit so that when Wild Bill approaches what he assumes is a corpse, he finds the muzzle of Jack’s gun in his face and must concede defeat. Jack

survives both the massacre at the Washita and Battle of the Little Big Horn, as well as scrapes with Wyatt Earp, various Native tribes, the U.S. Army, bandits, and murderers with a similar combination of luck and shrewdness.

Jack's narrative opens with an assertion that reveals the competing values that lay claim to him: "I am a white man and never forgot it, but I was brought up by the Cheyenne Indians from the age of ten" (1). He finds himself living amongst the Cheyenne as the result of a series of misunderstandings that occur between the Natives and the white members of a wagon train, which includes Jack's family, along the California trail. The Cheyenne, acting on their social expectations regarding hospitality, are seeking coffee from the whites, and the whites, with the friendliest of intentions, ply the Natives with whiskey. In the mayhem that ensues, all the adult male whites are killed and the women raped. The Cheyenne later return with a peace offering of several horses, which Jack's sister, Caroline, misinterprets as a bid to trade the horses for *her*. Caroline's misinterpretation is influenced by her disappointment over *not* being raped by any of the Natives, but this does not prevent her from insisting that the Cheyenne want Jack, too. When Jack reflects on the misunderstandings that continued the cycle of tension and violence between Natives and Whites, he opines that "it would have been ridiculous except that it was mortal" (87). Caroline quits the camp soon after her arrival and leaves Jack to be raised by the tribe.

Jack spends about five years with the Cheyenne, who name him Little Big Man, during which time he learns how their customs reveal their communal values. After an encounter with a Crow Indian who tries to scalp him, Jack spends several days in the tent

of the medicine man who heals him. When he finally emerges from the tent, Jack finds the whole camp gathered outside: “They was all by their presence working for my cure. No Cheyenne suffers alone” (71). In a similar spirit, the Cheyenne chief who holds a celebration feast does not receive gifts but, rather, gives them, like Old Lodge Skins who “for celebration give most of his horses away to certain poor Cheyenne who didn’t have any, and after the eats he made presents to everybody who come: blankets, jewelry, and so on—he ended up almost naked” (71). Neither will the medicine man accept payment for treatment. The desire for material profit does not override the Cheyenne’s democratic view that all individuals have dignity, and the view of life that regards everyone in the community as connected ensures that the tribe members work together to create a society which does not countenance its members becoming alienated or destitute.

While Jack recognizes the Cheyenne love of war, initially feels revulsion at their gruesome mutilation of the corpses of their enemies, and repeatedly derides the Indians for never having invented the wheel, he comes to learn things about their culture that he admires, and these things also make it difficult for him to accept the white notion of progress uncritically. The Cheyenne may not be an advanced society with regard to technological developments or material abundance, but in many ways they are better exemplars of democracy than the whites Jack will encounter. Cheyenne values regarding the dignity of individuals are based on their view of life as

a mystical circle in which Cheyenne believed they were continuously joined, which is the round of the earth and the sun, and life and death too, for the disjunction between them is a matter of appearance and not the true substance, so

that every Cheyenne who has ever lived and those now living make one people:  
the invulnerable, invincible Human Beings, of all nature the supreme product.

(94)

This view of life as a circle contrasts with the white view of life, which Jack describes as a “world of sharp corners” (99). The Cheyenne view, instead, allows the Native Americans to see life as it is rather than as it should be, as the whites see it, and does not encourage progress, the amassing of material possessions, or the desire for complete dominion over the enemy, body and soul. Old Lodge Skins, the chief who adopts Jack as his son, compares the Cheyenne philosophy with that of the whites:

There is no permanent winning or losing when things move, as they should, in a circle. For is not life continuous? And though I die, shall I not also continue to live in everything that *is*? [...] But white men, who live in straight lines and squares, do not believe as I do. With them it is rather everything or nothing:

Washita or Greasy Grass [Little Big Horn]. (433)

The Cheyenne enjoy war as a part of life, just as they also accept death as a part of life. Fighting allows the Cheyenne braves to display their racial pride and courage, and “as to the enemy, they hate him for what he is but don’t want to change him into anything else” (79). Because the white man sees life as it should be and is driven by a desire for lateral progress, he “gets no pleasure out of war itself; he won’t fight at all if he can *get his way*. He is after your spirit, not the body” (81). The tension these competing values create in Jack’s life reflects in striking ways the tensions between democracy and capitalism in American life, both at the time the narrative is set and in the time the novel is published.

Jack makes a point of noting that the Cheyenne refer to themselves, exclusively, as “Human Beings” and do not refer to other Native peoples or individuals of other races with this phrase. Despite the sense of racial superiority Jack perceives, however, the Cheyenne are basically tolerant of other races, including whites; Jack points out, “for all his wildness, maybe because of it, a redskin is a patient cuss and always tolerant at first of anything unusual,” an attitude they apply to the whites until it becomes clear that their tolerance will not be reciprocated (153). Within their own society, the Cheyenne respect the individuality and the dignity of all members of the tribe. Jack also notes that the Cheyenne are “inclined to let anybody do what they want,” (63) and this attitude reflected itself in how their leaders rule, how the tribesmen and women interact with each other, and how they conduct their affairs. They do not employ corporal punishment when raising their children, for example; children who misbehave are simply told that their behavior “is not the way of the Human Beings,” which is enough to shame them into behaving properly (45). The chiefs do not impose their will on their tribesmen; they simply head in a certain direction or offer their pronouncement on a subject, and those who want to follow them do so. They are also tolerant of “contrary” individuals, who rebel against the habits of human behavior by doing everything backwards, and they are similarly tolerant of homosexuals. The Cheyenne call these men “*heemaneh*, which is to say half-man, half-woman. There are uses for these fellows and everybody likes them. They are sometimes chemists, specializing in love potions, and generally good entertainers. They wear women’s clothes and can get married to another man, if such be his taste” (77). The only unforgivable offense in Cheyenne society is the murder of a

fellow Cheyenne. Their tolerance and acceptance of the dignity of every individual thus contributes to a strong sense of community and cooperation.

Jack returns to white society when he is fifteen, and the remainder of his narrative indicates that he alternated, during the next twenty years, between periods spent in white society and periods spent in Cheyenne society, giving him many opportunities to compare the two communities. He quickly learns that whites conceive of progress almost exclusively in terms of capitalist competition and materialist values, which engenders a fierce competition within communities and, at times, within families. In the thrall of competition and the obsession with progress, whites often lose sight of the ideals of democracy which assert the dignity and equality of each human being. The result is a society that achieves much in the way of progress but often countenances hypocrisy, corruption, racism, and violence in order to achieve its goals.

Jack finds himself, upon reentry into white society, adopted by a Reverend Pendrake and his attractive young wife in Missouri, who offer him his first experience of the hypocrisy of this society. Pendrake's religious beliefs cause him to free a slave who works for him and to adopt the white boy raised by Indians, but his beliefs also leave him so obsessed with sexual sin that he does not have relations with his own wife, a fact which must contribute to her infidelity. However, Pendrake's asceticism does not extend itself to his eating habits. The obese reverend's gluttony both astounds and impresses Jack, who enjoys watching him efficiently put away huge meals, a habit that eventually

kills him.<sup>6</sup> Though the reverend defines sin for Jack as the “works of the flesh” based on his interpretations of St. Paul’s writings, his list of fleshly offenses apparently does not include gluttony (122). Jack spends about a year with the Pendrakes, and many years later, he concludes that the reverend’s problem was that he “was talking about how things *should be* rather than how they *was*” (361 [Berger’s italics]). This view contributes to Pendrake’s myopic obsession with the sinfulness of sexuality and blindness to the insidious nature of his own gluttony.

Jack also learns that capitalist competition, with its possibility of making large sums of money, often breeds corruption. He finds the hope of material success alluring, but he also realizes how foreign it is to the Cheyenne view of life: “I had got onto the idea of ambition. You can’t make anything of yourself in the white world unless you grasp that concept. But there isn’t even a way to express the idea in Cheyenne” (171). When he reaches Denver, he partners with two other men in a mercantile enterprise, and he begins to imagine himself climbing the social and economic ladder and perhaps even running for governor at some point. His initial success allows him to get married, build a house, and start a family. Jack’s love affair with progress, though, is dampened somewhat when his business partners in the mercantile embezzle the store’s profits and leave Jack legally responsible for the debts the business has incurred. To make matters much worse,

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<sup>6</sup> Jack describes a typical Pendrake meal: “For lunch he’d eat two entire chickens with stuffing, potatoes, couple vegetables, five pieces of bread, and half a pie swimming in cream. In the afternoon he’d make housecalls to the parishioners, and they wouldn’t never be so under the weather that they couldn’t see to it he got an enormous hunk of cake or a dozen cookies along with coffee or tea” (110). At their meeting many years later, Lavender relates that, not long after Jack left, Pendrake “[e]t himself to death” when he “packed away one of them gigantic dinners that Lucy made for him one noontime, then took a nap directly after, and some of that meal backed up and clogged his windpipe and he suffocated afore anyone knowed the difference” (360).

as the Crabbs escape Denver and the financial consequences of his business failure, Jack's white wife and child are abducted by Cheyenne during a raid on a stagecoach.

The Cheyenne circular view of life differs sharply from the white view of life in which all individuals, even family members, are essentially viewed as competition that must be overpowered by whatever means necessary, a fact which Jack learns when he becomes a drunk following his hardships in Denver and earns his drinks by making a fool of himself for bar patrons. Though his sister Caroline rescues him from being beaten by a particularly nasty patron, she seems to prefer him as a drunk because when Jack gets sober she brings him jugs of whiskey and encourages him to drink. Jack compares her with his Cheyenne family, who "would have been depressed to see a fellow tribesman gone to rot; they would have believed it reflected discredit upon all Human Beings. On the contrary, an American just loves to see another who ain't worth a damn" (194). Caroline's attempts to return Jack to drunkenness suggest strongly her desire to maintain her sense of superiority.

When whites failed economically, they found the Indians convenient scapegoats, and Caroline is no exception. Jack's burly and masculine sister refashions her embarrassment at not being raped by the Cheyenne, who had assumed she was a man, into a clear memory which she relates to her incredulous brother: "You was probably too young at the time to recall how attractive I used to be as a young gal afore my maidenhood was brutally stole by them dirty beasts" (193). Jack recognizes this as "an excuse for her failures at love," and notes that members of his family "wasn't the only ones who found the Indians right useful in them days for explaining every type of flop"

(193). He recognizes what many of his fellow Americans seem unable to understand or admit to themselves: the one thing that capitalism guarantees is that there will be both winners *and* losers. Jack finds the losers to be anxious for a place to pin the blame for their failures. For example, he relates the local sentiment toward the Arapaho Indians in Denver:

Now I have told you I got a white taste for building a community where previous only “the savage and beast had aimlessly wandered,” which is to quote from the old type of journalism, and as a result I found them local Arapaho uninspiring. But they wasn’t doing any harm except to stink and carry lice—which was also true of a good many of the early white citizenry of Colorado, I might add. Still, there was always talk of wiping them out, and the way I remember is that this was less said by the prosperous than by them who had had no luck at finding gold. If you sold all your belongings to go West for fortune and ended up busted, why, it seemed like the fault of the Indians. (154)

Making scapegoats of the Native Americans and viewing them as “savage” allows whites to vent their frustrations and avoid self-scrutiny, but it also makes it possible for them to reconcile dispossession and genocide of Native Americans with their moral and ethical ideals. The cry to wipe out the Indians that Jack heard among whites in Denver in 1858 is repeated in the Black Hills gold rush in 1876 after a Sioux treaty with the U.S. government gave them exclusive rights to the Black Hills, though the Army did not strictly enforce the terms of the treaty to keep whites out. Jack recalls that it “was like the Colorado rush again: progress versus savagery; the Army should go in and wipe out

the Indians rather than prohibit fellow whites from making a pile” (342). The white assumption of the superiority of their way of life over that of the savage Natives fuels the belief that, if the Indians cannot be converted, they must be wiped out.

This assumption of racial superiority leads to the climactic event of the novel, Custer’s last stand at the Little Big Horn. The part of the novel which recounts this historic confrontation brings together two of the main themes of the novel with which I’ve been concerned: the conflicting loyalties that claim Jack, and the view of the Native Americans as “savages” who must be defeated if they cannot be converted to allow the unhindered march of progress. Jack first encounters and develops a desire to assassinate Custer at the Washita River where the “boy general’s” troops massacred the Cheyenne, including members of Jack’s immediate family unit. His desire for revenge eases over the years, and in 1876, he is more concerned with following the gold rush to the Black Hills. Instead, he stumbles upon the army preparing to attack Sioux and Cheyenne who have left their assigned reservations to gather in Montana near their traditional hunting grounds along the Powder River, and he decides to go with the troops, both because his interest in Custer has been rekindled and because he is hoping to warn Old Lodge Skins and the tribe. Jack’s loyalty to the whites and to the Cheyenne puts him in the impossible position of rooting for both sides. Initially, he is sympathetic to the Cheyenne who, he assumes, will endure another massacre like the one at Washita, but as it becomes clear that the Natives vastly outnumber the Seventh Cavalry, Jack’s sympathies for the men and even for Custer are aroused. Jack then finds himself both outraged by and in awe of Custer’s inviolable conviction of rightness, which allows him to maintain his bravery

throughout the battle but is also the cause of every one of the men in his charge being killed—with the exception, of course, of Jack Crabb.

Custer's overconfidence causes him to engage the Natives without waiting for the forces commanded by General Terry and General Gibbon to meet up with his own Seventh Cavalry troops. Both his Indian guides and Jack warn the general that he is driving his exhausted men into a battle in which they will be outnumbered by at least ten to one, that the "hostiles" are aware of their presence, and that the rough terrain which the whites have trouble navigating is intimately familiar to these Natives. Custer ignores these warnings, preferring instead to believe at first that no such amassing of Natives exists in that place, and then when that fact can no longer be denied, that he and his troops have "caught them napping" (394). Custer simply cannot believe that the determined Natives may be gathered in force with a strategic plan to engage the whites, and this arrogance causes him to make the fatal mistakes of ignoring his scouts, dividing his troops, and choosing a poor position from which to fight. As his men are being slaughtered around him, Custer offers his assessment of the Native American:

Taking him as we find him, at peace or at war [... ] at home or abroad, [... ] waiving all prejudices, and laying aside all partiality, we will discover in the Indian a subject for thoughtful study and investigation. [... ] It is to be regretted that the character of the Indian as it is described in Cooper's interesting novels is not the true one. Stripped of the beautiful romance with which we have been so long willing to envelop him, transferred from the inviting pages of the novelist to the localities where we are compelled to meet him, the Indian forfeits his claim to

the appellation of the *noble* red man. [...] We see him as he is, and, so far as all knowledge goes, as he ever has been, a *savage* in every sense of the word. (410 [Berger's italics])

Jack, in turn, recognizes Custer as “the type of man who carries the whole world within his own head and thus when his passion is aroused and floods his mind, reality is utterly drowned,” that characteristic of seeing the world “as it should be,” which evidences itself at the Little Big Horn (395). The reality of the devastating battle does not mesh with Custer’s solipsistic view of his own heroism and courage or the savagery of his enemy, so he cheers and whoops and encourages the corpses that surround him as though his forces were alive and carrying the day. Jack believes the general lost his mind because he could not “endure the thought of another person than he having the capability of courage in the grand degree” (412). Rather than recognize a reality that might force him to reassess the Sioux and Cheyenne or revise his battle plan, Custer creates his own reality, even as his men die around him.

Jack survives the battle because a Cheyenne whose life he once saved recognizes him and repays the debt. He reunites with Old Lodge Skins, who is gleeful at the Natives’ victory in the battle but recognizes that ultimately the whites will win the war, leaving the Natives who survive to live on the reservations designated for them. Berger leaves his readers with a final image of the Little Big Horn, a reminder that this war against the Natives is a war over resources. As Jack tours the battleground with Old Lodge Skins to find the body of Custer, he notices “hundreds of dollars in greenback bills [...] scampering along the earth in the wind, now and again blowing over a naked corpse to

give him some decency” (426). The image of the money, the soldiers’ pay, strewn about their bloody corpses captures the most significant cost of the campaign against the Natives to secure America’s natural resources: that of human lives.

In “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” Frederick Jackson Turner recognized that the free land in the West, which offered this wealth of natural resources and allowed for the economic and political development of the United States, also encouraged greed, corruption, and lawlessness:

So long as free land exists, the opportunity for a competency exists, and economic power secures political power. But the democracy born of free land, strong in selfishness and individualism, intolerant of administrative experience and education, and pressing individual liberty beyond its proper bounds, has its dangers as well as its benefits. Individualism in America has allowed a laxity in regard to governmental affairs which has rendered possible the spoils system and all the manifest evils that follow from the lack of a highly developed civic spirit. In this connection may be noted also the influence of frontier conditions in permitting lax business honor, inflated paper currency, and wild-cat banking. (32)

Clearly, Berger captures both the positive and negative manifestations of individualism in capitalist pursuits that Turner highlights in his essay. However, *Little Big Man* also calls into question the Eurocentric assumptions Turner reveals in this essay as he argues that “expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces of dominant American character” (3). Turner views the Native Americans as one aspect of the “savagery” in the “recurrence of the

process of evolution in each western area in the process of expansion” and accepts Indian wars as a necessary part of that evolutionary process (2). Berger depicts the savagery of both the Natives and the European-Americans; he also depicts the civility, the cooperation, and the tolerance of the Cheyenne, thereby complicating the assumption of the superiority of white society and calling into question the belief that ethical and moral ideals did not need to be considered when determining how to deal with them. But more than that, Berger’s novel captures the flaws in the American character that have caused the desire to shape the world to fit its vision of “how things *should* be,” a vision largely based on capitalistic values, to become corrupted into a will to dominate and concomitant abuses of power which stifle democracy not only in the Old West but throughout the nation’s history.

Echoing Godfrey Hodgson’s assessment of the turbulent 1960’s, John Gourlie and Leonard Engel connect Sam Peckinpah’s interest in Western films to his determination to comment on the “cultural turmoil” of his own era, which was

comparable in some ways to Peckinpah’s vision of the “Old West” as a time when codes failed or were severely tested. The period of the 1960s, especially, was characterized by astounding technical advances, a sea change in race relations, urban riots and upheavals, and brutal assassinations, all in the context of the escalating violence of the Vietnam War. For Peckinpah, the America of the 1960s found its parallel in the America of the “Old West.” Each period saw a historical

era come to an end. Indeed, in his rendering of the “Old West,” Peckinpah raises questions about the meaning of history—be it the 1880s or the 1960s—when violence and cultural turmoil sweep the old verities into oblivion. (9)<sup>7</sup>

Released in 1969, Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* effectively captures and comments on the turmoil and violence of his era, and reflects the breakdown of the assumptions or “verities” of the liberal consensus. In the film, Peckinpah in effect “recasts” the stock Western characters by upsetting our expectations with regard to the conventions of the genre: here, the law is corrupt, the cavalry incompetent, the “heroes” are a band of outlaws, and even the children possess a hunger for violence. Neither heroes nor lawmen protect townspeople, especially women and children; instead, they use them as commodities and as shields during gunfights.

Much of the commentary and controversy surrounding the film has centered on its violence. As Stephen Prince argues, “Peckinpah did not merely attach a new level of violence to screen images but exploded the moral absolutes that had given shape and meaning to screen narratives for decades” (xv).<sup>8</sup> Just as significant to the meaning and

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<sup>7</sup> John M. Gourlie and Leonard Engel’s “A Terrible Beauty Is Born: Peckinpah’s Vision of the West” appeared in *Sam Peckinpah’s West: New Perspectives*, edited by Leonard Engel (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> The intense and realistic violence of Peckinpah’s films often made him the subject of negative criticism, but Stephen Prince analyzes, in *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies* (Austin: University of Texas, 1998), the changes in the film production code and the distribution system, as well as changes in American culture, that allowed Peckinpah to make *The Wild Bunch* in 1969 and the ultraviolent films he made after that. Prince places Peckinpah squarely within his times in the section of his first chapter entitled “Violence in Sixties Culture and Society,” wherein he argues that the “exceptional brutality of *The Wild Bunch* cannot be separated from the social climate in which it was made because it is inextricably part of that environment, as were Peckinpah’s intentions in representing violence on screen” (27) Prince explains how the violence of Peckinpah’s films “fed off of the climate of violence endemic to the era and was a conscious response to it, not a mere reflection of it” (27). For other commentaries on the film’s violence, see David Weddle’s “Men without Women: *The Wild Bunch* as Epic” in *Peckinpah: The Western Films* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997) and John M. Gourlie’s “Peckinpah’s Epic Vision: *The Wild Bunch* and *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* in *Sam Peckinpah’s West: New Perspectives*.

impact of the film, for my study in particular, is its exploration of authoritarianism and the excesses of capitalism which threaten democracy. Peckinpah's Western captures a corrupted dominant culture in conflict with emergent cultural forces consistent with what Prince terms the "generational critique" levied against American society by intellectuals, reformers, and student radicals for whom "'the system' was laying waste to Southeast Asia in order to sustain American corporate power and a consumer culture that was deforming the spiritual and moral possibilities of the American people" (38). Peckinpah shared this view of the spiritually deadening effects of consumer culture and corrupted government on American society, and he "contextualized the contemporary conflicts as the manifestation of a deeper principle of exploitation and destruction in American culture" (Prince 28). Peckinpah expressed this belief and its connection to violence in an interview:

We all know that behind our falsely reassuring democratic facades, violence has very deep roots. It has shaped our history, and the whole country knows very well that it has more often solved its problems through violence than through the official channels of democracy. [...] Those who have been too long oppressed by the violence of power are waking up, organizing, and fighting for their rights.

Inevitably, the conflict can only resolve itself in violence. (qtd. in Prince 30)

This theme of the inevitability of violence in bringing about change reoccurs in Westerns: the conflicts in *The Virginian*, *Shane*, and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* provide just a few examples. Given Peckinpah's belief that Americans are "violent by nature" and

his desire to “understand the nature of violence” in order to discover whether there was a “way to channel it, to use it positively,” *The Wild Bunch*’s adherence to this thematic tradition is unsurprising (qtd. in Prince 31; 32 ). However, Peckinpah does not present violence as being unambiguously heroic even when employed by the ostensible heroes. In an interview discussing his *Once Upon a Time in Italy*, which concerns Sergio Leone’s Westerns, Christopher Frayling argued that he finds violence in association with a “crusading element” disturbing, but he enjoys Leone’s Westerns because Leone avoids this association by severing his heroes from motivating ideologies, particularly Manifest Destiny, which justify their violent actions in nearly religious tones.<sup>9</sup> Instead, Leone’s heroes are motivated solely by money. Peckinpah’s Bunch<sup>10</sup> share this trait: they are violent men with few characteristics which would allow us to view them as morally righteous, and they do not adhere to any ideology that justifies their violence in moral terms. Their most shining qualities may well be that they are less corrupt than the antagonists they find themselves in conflict with and that they try to stick together.

The opening of *The Wild Bunch* depicts the title characters entering the frontier town of Starbuck in southern Texas. Sketches of the Bunch reminiscent of illustrations one might find in a dime novel, overlaid with the film's credits, unfreeze into shots of the Bunch entering the town dressed in military uniform. This juxtaposition of the actual men with the representations of the popular culture mythology of the Western creates the expectation that the audience will experience events that will become part of that

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<sup>9</sup> Terry Gross’s interview with Christopher Frayling aired on NPR’s “Fresh Air” on 1 August 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Throughout my discussion of *The Wild Bunch*, I employ “Bunch” as a plural noun, which seems to me to capture their essence as individuals struggling to operate as a cohesive group. In taking this bit of

mythology. Once the film has been viewed, though, this opening scheme, in retrospect, seems to suggest the breaking down of the figures of myth and legend into flesh and blood (and often, bloody) human beings whose character flaws and moral shortcomings are as apparent as their heroism. Particularly disturbing in this opening series of shots are cuts to a group of children who have trapped two scorpions in a makeshift pen on a red ant hill, eventually setting the pen and its living contents ablaze. Peckinpah's camera captures the gleeful faces of the children as they watch the ants torment the scorpions and dispels the assumption that children embody and represent innocence. For the director, no such exemplars of goodness or evil existed: "things are always mixed," he believed.<sup>11</sup>

Capitalism, represented in the film by both Pike Bishop (William Holden) and his Wild Bunch and by Harrigan (Albert Dekker) and the railroad, does not appear as a force with evolutionary (or, in Hodgson's terms, revolutionary) potential for social justice, as the liberal consensus would have it. In fact, the railroad promotes inequality, violence, and injustice in the terms of the film; it aims to eliminate risk, no matter the cost. The Bunch attempt to rob the railroad office in Starbuck only to find themselves ambushed by the railroad's posse that has lured them into a trap. Starbuck's citizens, and in particular the members of the Temperance Union who parade down the main street at the time of this clash, are massacred in the ensuing gunfight between the competing forces of capitalism. The corporate power and wealth of the railroad provides the resources to

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grammatical license, I follow in the lead of a number of scholars who have written about the film, some of whom will be discussed in this chapter.

<sup>11</sup> Aljean Harmetz, "Man Was a Killer Long before He Served a God," in *Doing It Right: The Best Criticism on Sam Peckinpah's The Wild Bunch*, edited by Michael Bliss (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994), p. 173.

protect that wealth by whatever means necessary, even if it means that the townspeople quite literally become collateral damage in the war between monopolists and the outlaws who would like a share of the proceeds. Furthermore, the railroad's stature allows it to manipulate the system to protect its interests even when those interests are in conflict with the common good—in this case, the survival and safety of the citizens of Starbuck. Peckinpah's cinematography visually depicts Harrigan, the railroad representative who hires the bounty hunters to ambush the Bunch, as being above the law and the people: when an enraged group of Starbuck's leaders confront Harrigan over the massacre, the townsfolk are shot from a high angle at medium distance, while Harrigan, who arrogantly spits out that he and his men “represent the law,” stands on a platform above the angry men and is shot in medium close-up, from a low camera angle. That Harrigan and, by extension, the railroad can manipulate the law becomes even more obvious with the revelation that he has had Deke Thornton (Robert Ryan), Pike's former friend and partner, released from jail on the condition that he hunt Pike down and eliminate the threat he poses to the Railroad's interests. Harrigan's complete corruption manifests itself in his consistent reduction of human beings to the prices on their heads or the price he can name to buy their services or their loyalty. Moreover, Harrigan's influence extends itself to the US Army. The Railroad's posse of bounty hunters is dispatched to protect a shipment of arms that the Bunch plan to steal for the Mexican Federale, General Mapache (Emilio Fernandez). The corporate mercenary army usurps the Cavalry role of protection of the weapons and pursuit of the Bunch, leaving the young soldiers, many of

whom look to be barely in their teens, to trip over themselves in an attempt to avoid being trampled as they try to round up their horses.

Like the large cattle interests depicted in *The Virginian*, *Shane*, and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, the railroad in *The Wild Bunch* represents a corporate entity that seeks to eliminate competition by consolidating its wealth and power and manipulating governmental and legal bodies to ensure conditions favorable to its interests. Railroads often appear in Westerns because of the power of the locomotive as a visual symbol, both of progress and of industrialization's encroachment on agrarian life. Their depiction as antagonistic to populist heroes and sympathetic frontier denizens grows out of the intimate connection between the growth of railroads and the growth of the nation at the end of the nineteenth century, as well as the rise of corporations in the late nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century. As the nation became larger, more industrialized, and more complex, its legal system had to reconsider and interpret the law in light of the rapidly changing conditions, and railroads played a significant role in the court cases that established and expanded the rights of corporations. For example, *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad* (1886) extended to corporations the rights of due process and equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment that had previously only applied to individuals, a decision which, according to author and journalist William Rivers Pitt, "created the formidable distinction between the citizen and the super-citizen" (a term which he applies to the corporation), who "has a thousand times the power and influence

of a natural person over the economics and politics of the country.”<sup>12</sup> Railroads were also a major player in court cases involving labor laws. The Great Railway Strike of 1894 against the Pullman Company,<sup>13</sup> which had so negatively affected Owen Wister’s sentiments toward organized labor, also opened the door for courts to impose injunctions more often against striking unions. In 1936, the *Harvard Law Review* analyzed the American courts’ treatment of labor issues for the previous fifty years and found that the Pullman strike first indicated the “full possibilities of the injunction in the field of labor disputes,” and as a result, the “period from 1895 to the beginning of the present decade saw a progressive increase in the number of labor injunctions granted by the state courts,” a fact which legitimized, for *Review* writer Sidney Post Simpson, complaints that the courts gave the advantage to corporations in disputes with labor (194).<sup>14</sup> Railroads and

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<sup>12</sup> Pitt explains that, “[b]efore the Santa Clara decision, this amendment applied only to living, breathing people. After Santa Clara, it applied also to massively wealthy corporations, groups of people authorized to act as individuals, but beyond the kinds of legal liabilities natural persons are subject to. [...] Both have purchasing power, both can give money to whomever or whatever they please, but the difference lies in the extent to which this can be done. A natural person can buy a house and give money to a politician. A wealthy corporation, on the other hand, can buy a thousand homes and give money to a thousand politicians.” This editorial, “The Supremacy of the Super-Citizen,” was published 30 June 2005 at [www.truthout.org](http://www.truthout.org), of which Pitt is managing editor. Kevin Danaher and Jason Mark’s *Insurrection: Citizen Challenges to Corporate Power* (New York: Routledge, 2003) offers a similar assessment of this case. Danaher and Mark open their study recounting recent incidents of social activism challenging corporate power with a chapter detailing the history of the rise of corporations in the United States, and they emphasize *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad* as the “biggest boost to corporate power”; in that same year, 1886, the “Supreme Court tossed out 230 state laws designed to regulate corporate behavior. The idea of public control of the corporation was being turned on its head” (35). See also Charles Derber, *Corporation Nation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 129-130.

<sup>13</sup> See David F. Schloss, “Report of the Chicago Strike Commission,” in *The Economic Journal* 5 (Mar. 1895): 83-86.

<sup>14</sup> *The Review*’s analysis by Sidney Post Simpson, “Fifty Years of American Equity,” which appeared in the *Harvard Law Review* 50 (Dec. 1936): 171-251, follows this trend in the courts’ handling of labor disputes and points to the issue of violence in the struggle for equity: “So far, then, as labor’s criticisms are directed to the proposition that American equity courts have developed doctrines of tort law unduly restrictive of labor’s use of means not involving physical force or fraud in its competition for a larger share in the product of industry, they are in large measure well taken. But, conceding legitimate grievances as to both procedure and substantive law in labor injunction cases, the uncomfortable suspicion still remains that some at least of the pressure for the abolition of the labor injunction springs from a realization that

their practices were seen as sufficiently menacing to merit their being targeted by legislation to regulate their rates, such as the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887 and the Hepburn Act of 1906, and to break up monopolies, such as the case of *Northern Securities v. The United States*. The view of railroads as monopolistic oppressors that led to such legislation has survived in the legend of Jesse James<sup>15</sup> and in such film Westerns as *Cat Ballou*. Peckinpah's film, too, offers resonances with some of the historical figures that contributed to the negative reputation of the railroads: Harrigan's name sounds very similar to that of notorious railroad financier E. H. Harriman, whom Teddy Roosevelt famously accused of being an "enemy of the Republic."<sup>16</sup> The posse he forces Deke Thornton to lead against the Bunch may call to mind the Pinkerton Detective Agency that supplied posses to act as security services for the railroads and were at times accused of being overzealous and preemptive in performing their duties.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the conjunction of the Cavalry and the corporate posse calls to mind Eisenhower's warning

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injunctions tend to prevent violence in labor disputes just when it would do most 'good'" (198). Though the author's placement of the word "good" in quotations suggests irony, Peckinpah's comments suggest he would acknowledge without irony the connection between violence and gaining equity. *The Review* concludes by acknowledging the advantage corporations have over individuals and even unions by finding that "the traditional American system of judicature and bar organization gives a large advantage to the long purse in any lengthy and complex litigation. The individual workingman is for this reason almost helpless so far as judicial relief is concerned, and few unions have war-chests comparable with those of the employers against whom they must litigate if they litigate at all" (205).

<sup>15</sup> See Richard Slotkin's discussion of "Reconstruction Outlaws" in *Gunfighter Nation*, pp. 129-139, especially p. 137.

<sup>16</sup> Edward Henry Harriman already owned Union Pacific Railroad when he bought the Southern Pacific Railroad and declared, "We have bought not only a railroad, but an empire" (13), according to Don L. Hofsommer in *The Southern Pacific, 1901-1985* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M UP, 1986). Harriman was one of several financiers who combined their financial resources and property in Northern Securities, which was deemed a trust and broken up in 1904 by the decision of the Supreme Court in *Northern Securities v. The United States*. For an interesting study of Harriman, see Maury Klein's *The Life and Legend of E.H. Harriman* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> See Slotkin's discussion of the Pinkertons in *Gunfighter Nation*, pp. 139-143.

about the dangers of the military-industrial complex. In *The Wild Bunch*, the Railroad bows to no one and serves only its own economic self-interest.

Throughout much of the narrative, economic self-interest also motivates the Bunch, though they view themselves as being equally motivated by an ethic of group loyalty. The tension between their professed belief in loyalty to the group and their economic self-interest first becomes clear as the Bunch make their escape from Starbuck. One of the men has been shot in the face and can no longer stay on his horse. Pike shoots him before he even finishes his pitiful request to "Finish it, Mr. Bishop" to avoid allowing him to jeopardize the Bunch's successful escape. Lyle (Warren Oates) and Tector (Ben Johnson) Gorch want to stay and give him a proper burial, a notion that Pike and Dutch (Ernest Borgnine) scoff at because it would likewise jeopardize their escape. Later, the Gorch brothers threaten the cohesion of the group by disputing dividing up the take from the railroad office into equal shares because they feel they've done more work than either Angel (Jaime Sanchez), a Mexican who hasn't been with the Bunch very long, or old Sykes (Edmond O'Brien), who cared for the extra horses. Pike makes it clear that they will accept the usual terms or take on the rest of the Bunch: "If you two boys don't like equal shares then why in the hell don't you just take all of it?" Again, Pike's belief in loyalty to the group holds the Bunch together when they discover they've been set up and that their take from the Railroad office heist consists of worthless washers. In their initial frustration, the Gorchs turn again on Angel, but the rest of the Bunch stand behind Pike to restore order. Pike enforces group loyalty by reminding them that this loyalty prevents them from being mere animals, and he derides Harrigan for being a man who "can't stand

to be wrong or learn by it.” Dutch identifies this shortcoming as "pride," and his question to Pike—“You reckon we learned anything, being wrong today?”—must echo in Pike’s subconscious throughout the Bunch’s time in Agua Verde. Before Pike fully learns from his mistakes, though, he must continue to make them: the murder of the Mexican woman he loved and Deke Thornton’s arrest, revealed in flashbacks, are followed by Pike’s failure to protect Angel from Mapache and his decision to leave Sykes to die in the desert. Further, Pike’s apparent belief in the ethical value of loyalty to the “men you came with” often appears weakened by his greed (“10,000 cuts an awful lot of family ties”) and his pride (“I either lead this bunch or I end it right now”). Even Pike’s suggestion that the Bunch bury their gold *together* before returning to Agua Verde seems more strongly motivated by a desire to mitigate an eruption of mistrust than by a sense of loyalty and common good, especially since it occurs just after Pike has decided that Sykes must be left behind.

The tension between these competing values appears on a more personal level for Pike in the flashbacks that constitute his memories of Deke Thornton (he escapes from the whorehouse while Deke is being arrested) and the woman he loved (he does not hunt down the husband who murdered her). For Pike, these events reveal a failure of skill as much as of loyalty: it is his job “to be sure,” but his failure in assessing the risks in both situations leads to his failure to protect those he cares about. In order to maintain his leadership of the group and to enforce the ethic of loyalty, Pike must exercise his professional skill successfully. Peckinpah employs two parallel scenes that indicate the connection between Pike’s successful execution of his skills and his ability to maintain

his leadership role that facilitates the maintenance of the group's cohesion. As the Bunch make their way to Agua Verde the first time, Tector Gorch and Sykes get into an argument over Sykes's apparently sloppy handling of the horses, which Pike mediates by sermonizing about the loyalty ethic. After giving his speech, Pike breaks a stirrup with his injured leg, and he falls to the ground trying to mount his horse. The Gorch brothers respond by deriding him for his weakness, and Pike silently gets on his horse and turns to ride away, hunched over and clearly humiliated. At this point in the film, Pike's leadership and the survival of the Bunch seem tenuous. Later, after Pike successfully leads the Bunch's raid on the Army train and escape from Thornton's posse and the Cavalry, there occurs a pregnant moment when Pike once again prepares to mount his horse. This time, he does so successfully, and Tector Gorch saunters his horse over to Pike to share his liquor bottle with him in a congratulatory gesture. This time, the bottle is tossed from man to man in a kind of alcoholic agape until the bottle reaches Lyle Gorch, who finds it empty, and the Bunch share a hearty laugh over the joke they've played on him. At this moment, Pike appears at the height of his ability, and the Bunch seem, once again, unified.

The conflict between greed and loyalty continues until it is resolved in the moment that Pike summons the Bunch to rescue Angel, who has been detained by Mapache for having stolen one of the cases of guns and ammunition to give to the members of his village who have joined Pancho Villa's rebels to fight Huerta's Federales. When they reenter Agua Verde to escape Thornton's posse, Pike offers to buy Angel from Mapache but swallows his pride and backs down quickly enough when the

General's henchmen warn him not to "change the General's mood" and encourage the Bunch to enjoy the "bonitas" and the alcohol instead. The turning point comes as Pike completes his tryst with a pretty young woman who has been exchanging meaningful glances with him since he first entered Agua Verde. The young woman bathes herself while Pike dresses himself and then downs the last of the liquor in his bottle. The crying of the young woman's infant breaks the silence, which is followed by the sound of the Gorch brothers arguing with a crying whore in the next room over the price of their transaction. Pike's face registers utter disgust, as though all of his failures have converged on him at this moment: Angel and Sykes are apparently lost, as is whatever happiness he might have enjoyed with the murdered woman he loved; the pressures and corruption of money once again disrupt the peace. When Pike rises and commands the Gorches with his trademark "Let's go," he seems intent on regaining his pride by employing his professional skills effectively and uniting the Bunch to "get it right" this time. They then go to rescue Angel.

Peckinpah's manipulation of cinematic style initially encourages the audience to interpret the Bunch's actions as heroic and then undercuts this evocation through skillful editing. The Bunch ready their weapons and then march, in formation, four abreast, towards the courtyard where Mapache and his retinue carouse and hold Angel captive. The tension increases as diegetic Mexican folk music competes with non-diegetic military snare drums which build in intensity and volume as the Bunch march towards the courtyard. The snare drums increase until they abruptly stop as the Bunch strike Western-hero poses at the entrance to the courtyard where Mapache can see them and understand

that they have come to resolve their business with him. While this combination of visual and aural images builds the heroism of the Bunch, the editing seems designed to produce a disturbing sense of cognitive dissonance in the audience. Shots of the Bunch as they make their way to Mapache in their formation, from both front and rear view, are intercut with shots of the Mexican civilians in Agua Verde, many of them women, old men, children, and even infants. Peckinpah even offers a perspective shot of the populace from the Bunch's point of view as they scan their surroundings, aware of the people who will be affected by whatever action they take.

A tense, pregnant moment occurs after the Bunch shoots Mapache in retaliation for Angel's murder when it appears that the Mexicans will do nothing, or perhaps even surrender, but this conclusion would neither be realistic nor mesh with Peckinpah's belief that violence is inevitable in the dismantling of entrenched power. Dutch's ominous giggle punctuates the brief caesura before Pike wheels and shoots one of Mapache's German military advisors to begin the massacre in earnest. Pike, Dutch, Lyle, and Tector perish but not before taking out more than their fair share of Mexican Federales (and civilians) and many of the weapons the Bunch stole for them from the U.S. Army.

Certainly, Pike and his Bunch possess a keen awareness that their survival would be the least likely outcome of the mission they undertake, which suggests that successfully rescuing Angel holds less importance than attempting to, or than finally rising to meet their ethical standard. Prince suggests a reading of the Bunch's motivation as particularly characteristic of a late Sixties ideal of heroism based on comments from

Todd Gitlin, a former member of SDS. Gitlin “diagnosed violence as ‘the siren song of the late Sixties’” that became an obsession in a culture

fixated on a mythology of “death as the final refutation of plenitude,” with sacrifices extending from JFK to Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Bobby Kennedy, Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, and the outlaw heroes of *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Easy Rider*. Peckinpah's outlaw heroes in *The Wild Bunch* partake of this mythology of death, achieving transcendence and release from a corrupting social history through a violent martyrdom. As with these other cultural heroes, their passage to a house justified would need to be a violent one. (qtd. in Prince 29)

The Bunch's deaths refute “plenitude” in the sense that they irreversibly punctuate their refusal of the General's offer to work for him and make a lot of money and permanently separate them from the gold they have buried in the desert outside Agua Verde. The honor of this refutation, however, appears somewhat diminished by the fact that the Bunch's options are clearly limited. Jim Kitses has gone so far as to argue that the Bunch's decision, in fact, reflects nihilism, but the idea of their death as a release that allows the Bunch to transcend a corrupt world makes much more sense, especially if one reads Pike's facial expressions and gestures in the scene with the young Mexican woman before he rounds up the Bunch to rescue Angel as I have done.<sup>18</sup> If Pike registers at that

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<sup>18</sup> Kitses argues that the hostility of the Gorch brothers towards Angel and Sykes is particularly revealing: “Embodying the past and the conscience of the Wild Bunch, the old Sykes is created by Peckinpah as a mocking (“My, what a Bunch”) liability, ever threatened by Tector, finally left to die in the mountains when wounded by the bounty hunters. Angel is similarly opposed to the Gorch boys by virtue of his impulse (as in the assistance he provides to his village) to *extend* the ideal by which the Bunch try to live. Outside law, society, politics—‘We’re not associated with anyone’—the Wild Bunch have but two choices

moment disgust with all of the factors that have corrupted his life and his ethic of loyalty, then the decision to face overwhelming odds and likely death to save Angel reflects the ultimate loyalty to the ethic of staying with a man you've decided to side with. In living up to their ethic of loyalty even as they die, the Bunch finally transcend the corrupting influences that have caused them to fall short of it over and over again.

The film does not end with the massacre, though. Thornton and his posse arrive on the scene to collect their bounty, and when the bounty hunters have left (soon to meet their own deaths at the hands of either the Cavalry or rebel fighters, the film does not make clear), Thornton remains and meets up again with Sykes, who has been taken in by the rebels from Angel's village. The two former compatriots join forces again, this time to aid the rebels in their battle against Huerta. The film closes with a reprisal of scenes of the Bunch laughing together after their troubles in Starbuck and then with scenes of the warm sendoff they received from Angel's village as they headed out for Agua Verde. The combination of these aspects of the closing of the film might lead one to conclude that the Bunch are heroic in their deaths because they have in some way fought for the village's democratic, communal cause against oppressive authoritarians. However, I would argue that Kitses, in *Horizons West*, comes closer to the truth when he describes the massacre at Agua Verde as "the nightmarish struggle necessary before balance and identity can

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for survival: they can give way to complete brutalization by serving a corrupt society, or can embrace the vision and future that Angel's simple communism offers. The tragedy is that the Bunch do neither, making the right choice for the wrong reasons" (77). Kitses concludes, "For the Bunch it is too late, and history—their own way of life compromised rather than extended in a changing world—has gone too far. Finally, the group act not for Angel's values—the "dream of love"—but for the dead Angel, their own inadequate code, the *past*. More simply, they do what they do because there is nowhere to go" (79). He reads Lyle Gorch's "Why not?" in response to Pike's "Let's go" command to rescue Angel as evidence which supports his conclusion.

emerge" (74). Though the Bunch, and particularly Dutch, sympathize with the villagers' cause, they never accept it as their own. And though they admire the village's rebels, it is primarily for the skill they show in sneaking into the Bunch's camp to retrieve the cache of guns and ammunition Angel has purchased for them. The battle that the Bunch incite with Mapache's army clears the way for the rebels to continue their fight for freedom, and it clears the way for Thornton and Sykes to join that fight.

In Peckinpah's violent world wherein the pursuit and protection of wealth trump ties of family and friendship and even the value of human life, the mercenary "heroes" of the narrative fight against two sets of antagonists who represent the forces that Peckinpah saw as threatening the survival of democracy: the railroad, associated with the excesses of corporate power, and the Mexican Federales of Huerta, associated with the authoritarianism of a government bent on control. For the Bunch and their antagonists, the obsession with material sources of power—money and guns—eclipses the role of moral ideals or ethical standards. Like *Little Big Man's* Jack Crabb, the members of the Wild Bunch struggle with conflicting sets of values: will they be motivated solely by economic self-interest, or will they be united by a sense of loyalty to each other as a community? For much of the narrative, the Bunch invoke their ethic of group loyalty while abandoning it, time and again, when that standard conflicts with their material interests. Ultimately, though, the film depicts the *reforming* of moral possibility for the Bunch and, particularly, for their leader, Pike Bishop (William Holden): they finally renounce material self-interest in favor of loyalty to their small community. Their violent act of renunciation makes manifest Peckinpah's belief that violence was inevitable in

power struggles. It both redeems them and destroys them, but it also opens the way for the surviving members of the Bunch to extend the sense of community to others outside of their private circle of friends with the suggestion that they will contribute to the fight for democracy in Mexico.

Like Thomas Berger and Sam Peckinpah, Robert Altman reflects the breakdown of the liberal consensus in his revision of the Western, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971). Paul Arthur, in "How the West Was Spun: *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and Genre Revisionism," places Altman's project with those of other directors who "targeted a decaying system thought to be complicit with America's most oppressive, destructive domestic ills and foreign policies while simultaneously espousing alternative, if not necessarily radical, values" (20).<sup>19</sup> Maurice Yacowar argues that Altman's "very choice of subject matter constitutes an assault upon our assumptions of a progressive history" (14).<sup>20</sup> The Western was in particular need of revising because of its position as American genre par excellence and its popularity but also, as Arthur argues, "because it harbored the strongest, most virulent array of social beliefs, from racism and sexism to vigilantism and imperialism" (18). *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* reveals the racism and sexism embedded in the genre, but at its heart, the film is a tale of American capitalism. It contrasts the American ideal of capitalism, in which anyone with a little ingenuity and a

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<sup>19</sup> Paul Arthur's essay appeared in *Cineaste* 28 (Summer 2003): 18-20.

<sup>20</sup> Maurice Yacowar's "Actors as Conventions in the Films of Robert Altman" appeared in *Cinema Journal* 20 (Autumn 1980): 14-28.

willingness to work hard can be successful, with the cutthroat corporate capitalism that sprang up during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Altman's *Western* chips away at the liberal-consensus view of capitalism as the economic tradition which frees individuals from oppression and promotes democracy, instead revealing it as an economic system that, left unregulated, evolves towards monopoly and social Darwinism, enslaving individuals to the rich and powerful and eroding the moral and civic fabric of the nation.

*McCabe and Mrs. Miller* is set in 1902; in historical terms, its action occurs about ten years after Frederick Jackson Turner announced the closing of the frontier, in the period Mark Twain coined the "Gilded Age." Certainly, study of this period reveals egregious examples of the excesses of capitalism and a decline in business ethics combined with political policies that tolerated a widening gap between the rich and the poor. Robert McElvaine, in his study of "The Origins of the Great Depression," argues that the application of "eighteenth-century theories" (i.e. those of Adam Smith) in dealing "with twentieth-century reality" resulted in "a growing maldistribution of income in twenties America. No cause of the Great Depression was of larger importance" (38).<sup>21</sup> Adam Smith published his *Wealth of Nations* in 1776. Smith, as McElvaine notes, "called himself a moral philosopher," and he "advocated a laissez-faire approach because he believed it would produce the greatest benefits for all and so *was* moral" (197). The economists who followed Smith, however, like David Ricardo and Jeremy Bentham,

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<sup>21</sup> The chapter entitled "The Origins of the Great Depression" appears in *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York: Times Books, 1993), 25-50. Though McElvaine concentrates, as his title suggests, on the social, historical, and economic factors that immediately led to the Great Depression, this chapter

detached Smith's moral philosophy from his economic philosophy: "The marketplace came to be seen by most classical economists as a natural realm in which morality had no place. It was not *immoral* but *amoral*. The results of the free play of the market might sometimes be harsh, but nothing could be done about it" (McElvaine 197). By the end of the nineteenth century, the practice of laissez faire in the new industrial economy, combined with the voraciously acquisitive agendas of the most powerful business magnates, was already having a detrimental effect on competition and the exercise of democracy in the United States. My discussion above of *The Wild Bunch* gives some indication of the monopolistic business practices and extra-legal policing tactics employed by the railroads, as well as the Supreme Court's complicity in elevating the power of corporations over those of individuals and laborers. During this time of immense growth, efforts to maintain a balance between the aims of democracy and capitalism seem to have fallen by the wayside as the significant actors in politics and business rushed to develop the nation's resources, amass great fortunes, and consolidate their power with little regard for those not wealthy or powerful enough to compete with them. The combination of laissez-faire economic policies that appealed to American individualism, social Darwinism, and industrialization had a radical and, many would argue, negative impact on both fair trade and the ethics of economics in Gilded-Age America.<sup>22</sup>

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along with his ninth chapter (see note 22 below) highlight American attitudes and practices which are rooted in the Gilded Age and significant to my discussion.

<sup>22</sup> For an excellent discussion of the intersection of laissez-faire, American individualism, and social Darwinism in the period of industrialization and its ethical impact on economics, see McElvaine's chapter entitled "Moral Economics: American Values and Culture in the Great Depression" in *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York: Times Books, 1993), 196-223.

In his 1946 study of the major corporate players of the Gilded Age, Chester McArthur Destler compared the robber barons most unfavorably to the prominent and powerful businessmen who preceded them:

Politically, the United States was governed until 1860 by a coalition of merchants, bankers, southern planters, and farmers with a modicum of railroad promoters and their spokesmen. All these, and most politicians as well, were staunch churchgoers, adherents of old-fashioned Christianity and a code that laid less emphasis upon caveat emptor and unrestrained avarice than upon giving the customer and the public value for value received. The religious mold of American life, the ethics of mercantile-planter capitalism, the relatively small area of operations of individual firms, and the popular opposition to monopoly and special privilege were important factors that restrained the promoter-speculators and held the tariff to the low-water mark. (33)<sup>23</sup>

Destler points to three causes that opened the door to the robber barons and gave rise to the Gilded Age: the Civil War, the acceptance of social Darwinism, and the negative effect this theory had on American Protestantism. He argues that, as "idealists in the North" joined the war and turned their attention and efforts towards it, a vacuum opened up in which "the unprincipled, the bigoted, and the corrupt reached for the reins of political power, and the unscrupulous in a number of cases seized the leadership in important fields of business" (33). This allowed the growth of a "regime of business

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<sup>23</sup> "Entrepreneurial Leadership Among the 'Robber Barons': A Trial Balance" appeared in *The Journal of Economic History* 6 (May 1946): 28-49.

politics and of entrepreneurs who sought special advantage through government favoritism or other forms of privilege" which "lasted until it was terminated by Theodore Roosevelt's accidental rise to power" (33). Destler points out that, though the nation's moral values, engendered by its Protestant tradition, had previously encouraged ethical business practices, the rise of social Darwinism "placed American Protestantism on the defensive" (33). The belief that business practices were within the realm of morality began to be replaced by the belief that business practices were governed, with God's assent, by social Darwinism:

"The survival of the fittest" became the rationale of those who shed moral scruples, in the business field at least, in their climb to wealth and economic power. As John D. Rockefeller declared to his Sunday school class, in rationalization of his own business career: "The growth of a large business is merely survival of the fittest....The American Beauty Rose can be produced in the splendor and fragrance which bring cheer to its beholder only by sacrificing the early buds which grow up around it. This is not an evil tendency in business. It is merely the working-out of a law of nature and a law of God." (Destler 33)

Though Rockefeller and others of his milieu saw social Darwinism in the world of business as sanctioned by God and justified their tactics as good for the growth of the nation, Destler's methodical study of the robber barons' practices and achievements indicates that these often stifled the technical innovation that fair competition engenders rather than promoting the development of the nation's resources and technology or the common good.

Herbert G. Gutman also studied the impact of social Darwinism on American Protestantism and found its adherents divided by the social theory.<sup>24</sup> Some, like Rockefeller, re-sculpted their Christianity so that it would not conflict with Gilded Age capitalism; others, mostly in the working and middle classes, armed and emboldened themselves with a Christianity based largely on Jesus' teachings on the poor, such as the Sermon on the Mount. Gutman explains the schools of thought that affected American Protestantism in the Gilded Age:

Two seemingly contradictory ideas especially sanctioned industrial laissez-faire. Related to the decline of traditional religious sanctions and the growing importance of secular institutions and values, the first insisted that no connection existed between economic behavior and moral conduct. [...] The second concept, identified with traditional Calvinist doctrine, reinforced the business ethic by equating poverty and failure with sin. [...] Henry May, Aaron Bell, and Charles Hopkins have shown that a small but quite influential group of Protestant clergymen and lay thinkers broke free from institutional Protestantism's social conservatism and traveled a different route in pioneering the social gospel, but in the main Gilded Age Protestantism is viewed as a conformist, "culture-bound" Christianity that warmly embraced the rising industrialist, drained the aspiring rich of conscience, and confused or pacified the poor. (76)<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> "Protestantism and the American Labor Movement: The Christian Spirit in the Gilded Age" appeared in *The American Historical Review* 72 (Oct. 1966): 74-101.

<sup>25</sup> As Destler indicates, a number of Protestant clergymen were deeply disturbed by the adverse effects of the growing power of corporations and robber barons and were shocked by the poverty they witnessed in America's growing urban centers. Washington Gladden, Josiah Strong, Richard Ely, and Walter Rauschenbusch, among others, sought to apply Christian principles, the "Social Gospel," in regulating

The shift after the Civil War to an industrial economy, coupled with the acceptance of social Darwinism, allowed a kind of economic growth to occur in which the most powerful, and often the most unscrupulous, dominated to the detriment of the individual small business owners and farmers, as well as the laborers employed by the new captains of industry. Though laissez-faire had worked fairly effectively in the much less centralized business economy before the Civil War, during the industrial growth and consolidation of power that occurred after the war, little thought seems to have been given to preserving the conditions necessary for participatory democracy, with individual citizens as its fundamental element. These economic and political realities of the Gilded Age provide the backdrop and rules of play in Altman's film.

At first glance, Altman's version of the Western, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, offers the stock characters and conventions that usually people the Western genre: the town, filled with decent, ordinary Americans, poised to engage in social and moral progress if the individualist hero can expel the bad guys or savages. However, Altman calls into question the values normally associated with the conventions, starting with the moral character of the town itself. John McCabe (Warren Beatty) arrives in Presbyterian Church, Washington State, in 1902, bearing only those belongings that will fit on his packhorse. He finds the town to be little more than a mining camp consisting of a hotel/saloon, the church that gives the town its name, and the squalid huts of the mineworkers. The men of the town gather in the saloon owned by Sheehan (Rene

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business practices and remedying social ills. For studies of the Social Gospel, see the following: *The Age of Social Responsibility: The Social Gospel in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920*, by Donald K. Gorrell (Macon: Mercer UP, 1988.); *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism* by Charles Howard Hopkins

Auberjonois), who is portrayed, as Gary Engle notes, "as a cheap, exploitative, religiously hypocritical man whose power seems to derive not from strength or intelligence, but strictly from possession of property" (290).<sup>26</sup> The town also has a reverend named Elliot (Corey Fischer), a dour man who enters the saloon to purchase food and does not greet the townsfolk gathered there or return Mrs. Sheehan's attempts at friendly conversation. McCabe acts as a "harbinger of social progress" in Presbyterian Church whose "arrival provides a stimulus for development as he becomes the focal point of the group's sense of communal spirit" (Engle 270). He has more charisma and verbal skill than Sheehan and proceeds to supplant him as the town's unofficial leader, first by engaging the men in a game of poker, and second by becoming an entrepreneur. However, the basis of the "social progress" he heralds differs vastly from the establishment of a wholesome farming community, as in *Shane*, or a prosperous, civically engaged town with a newspaper and a school, as in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. Paul Arthur finds that, in the film's economy, the "engine of progress, aka Manifest Destiny, appears to hinge on the supply-and-demand dynamics of an exploited female orifice" (19). The church, which might be expected to provide a moral center for the citizens of Presbyterian Church, exists largely as part of the scenery of the town, as does the Reverend Elliot. On the one occasion when Elliot engages with the life of the town, he gives a funeral sermon reminiscent of "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" that can hardly be assumed to give comfort to the widow or neighbors. Instead, McCabe

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(New Haven: Yale UP, 1967); *Protestant Churches and Industrial America* by Henry May (New York: Harper, 1949).

<sup>26</sup> Engle, Gary. "McCabe and Mrs. Miller: Robert Altman's Anti-Western." *Journal of Popular Film* 1 (Fall 1972): 268-287.

provides a center for the town and spurs its growth by bringing in prostitutes from neighboring Bear Claw and employing the miners to work in the evenings to build a saloon and gambling house. The “ladies” arrival, which attracts a great deal of attention, coincides with the raising of a cross on the church’s steeple, which apparently attracts no attention at all.

Altman further chips away at the value associations of the Western’s generic conventions in his development of the "hero." McCabe, a gambler with a "big rep" for killing a man (at least according to Sheehan), may have the entrepreneurial spirit and the verbal facility to bargain effectively with the likes of Sheehan, but it is also clear that his ethics and his competence are questionable, his intelligence limited. For instance, McCabe's racism against "Chinks" makes him wary of staying in Sheehan's hotel. He pompously reminds the miners that he's paying them fifteen cents an hour so they'll have something to do in the evenings besides going home to "play with Mary five fingers"; he’s employing them to build a whorehouse in which to spend their evenings instead. McCabe's inability to provide for or manage the women in his employ effectively reveals a lack of experience and knowledge necessary to his success in the field of business upon which he has embarked. When Mrs. Miller (Julie Christie) arrives in Presbyterian Church, she points out all of the considerations McCabe has not addressed: avoiding the spread of disease, keeping the whores from getting lazy or "getting religion," and making the business attractive enough to become more prosperous. The dark past in which McCabe shoots the formidable Bill Roundtree turns out to be the stuff of legend rather than of history; McCabe has never killed a man and lacks the gunfighter’s certain aim.

Unlike the classic Western hero, McCabe does not possess impeccable professional skills, experience employing lethal force, or a strict code of honor. In spite of all that he lacks in comparison with the classic Western hero, though, McCabe's hapless charm makes him a sympathetic figure. His appeal derives not from competence or code but, rather, from the impression that he is an average guy tossed about by forces much larger than he.

Altman contrasts the version of capitalism that promotes democracy with the version that impedes democracy by depicting both in the film. McCabe begins his tenure in Presbyterian Church as the individualist entrepreneur who builds his own business quite literally from the ground up; he eschews Sheehan's offer to partner with him in order to prevent other prospective businessmen from being able to operate in Presbyterian Church without giving McCabe and Sheehan a "cut," preferring instead friendly competition. McCabe recognizes that Mrs. Miller has skills and knowledge that he requires and wisely accepts her as a silent partner (quite possibly the only type of partnership available to a female in such an environment as Presbyterian Church). Their business becomes profitable and competes with Sheehan's on the terms of fair trade: McCabe's saloon and Mrs. Miller's whorehouse are successful because they provide a "quality product" to their clientele in a pleasant environment. McCabe's business success and social ascent in Presbyterian Church reflect a Horatio Alger version of the American Dream.

The arrival of representatives from the mining corporation and their monopolistic, robber-baron tactics heralds the demise of small business and fair trade in Presbyterian

Church. Sheehan, perhaps aware that defying the corporation will place him in peril, sells his property to the corporation without further ado and thereafter plays the obsequious hanger-on to the company's representatives. Mrs. Miller, well aware of the threat the company's Pinkerton-like hired guns pose to those who get in its way, tries to warn McCabe of this. However, McCabe prefers to bargain to attain the best selling price he can get. Clearly, he enjoys his role as successful businessman and prominent citizen; his pride in the business he has built largely because of Mrs. Miller's business acumen engenders his confidence to bargain with the Harrison Shaunessy Mining Company's representatives as an equal. Mr. Sears (Michael Murphy) and Mr. Hollander (Antony Holland), representing "one of the most solid companies in the United States," clearly feel that McCabe bears an obligation to accept the deal they offer him. Hollander, his sense of entitlement offended, perceives McCabe as a "fool" who is "impossible," and he warns him that some of the company's people will be "concerned, if you know what I mean." From his perspective, the company's right to buy the town's businesses supercedes the right of its citizens to retain their businesses or set their own price to sell. To Hollander, the ungrateful McCabe does not know his place or show the proper deference to the corporation he represents, so he decides to turn McCabe over to the company's hired gun, Jake Butler (Hugh Millais), to remove him as a problem.

From this point on, the film appears to build towards the expected climactic shootout that will free the hero from his antagonists and allow the town to fulfill its Manifest Destiny. Jake Butler and his posse arrive in town, and Jake makes it clear that he does not negotiate. Hoping to resolve the situation without violence, McCabe goes to

the mining company's office in Bear Claw only to find that Sears and Hollander have left town. Finally, he consults Clement Samuels (William Devane), a lawyer who parrots William Jennings Bryan and encourages McCabe to fight the mining company through the courts. Though he preaches against the trusts and in favor of "fair play and justice" for "the little guy," Samuels' true aim is to be "the next senator from the state of Washington." He convinces McCabe that, given enough public and media attention, the company won't be able to threaten him without jeopardizing its reputation.<sup>27</sup> However, Mrs. Miller immediately squelches McCabe's newfound "principles" and sense of optimism with a dose of reality; she tries to convince him to start over "someplace where people are civilized," but McCabe decides to stay and face his adversaries.

Just as Altman revises the generic conventions of the Western town and the Western hero, the climax of the film revises the conventional showdown. McCabe is clearly "outgunned," both in the sense of being outnumbered and in facing gunmen much more skilled and experienced than he. In a significant number of point-of-view shots that Altman employs in this section of the film, the audience peers with a palpably terrified McCabe out of his various hiding places as he tries to track the gunmen without being seen by them in his desperate attempt to survive. Arthur describes the climactic showdown as a "bitingly anti-High Noon (sic) affair" which "features befuddled, cowardly, pussy-whipped McCabe shooting two hired gunmen from ambush and killing the third with a concealed derringer. Take that, Gary Cooper!" (19). Though he manages

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<sup>27</sup> Paul Arthur describes the "fustian" Samuels as a "figure suggesting a curdled version of The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance"(19), and Helene Keyssar describes him as "a humorless inverse of the keenest American voice of the nineteenth century" (15) in *Robert Altman's America* (New York: Oxford Press, 1991).

to kill Butler and his associates, McCabe is hit twice and dies of his wounds in the midst of a blizzard, leaving his business for the taking and rendering his victory, such as it is, meaningless.

Altman parallels the dismantling of the life McCabe has built for himself with a narrative that dismantles the Western notion of social and moral progress. As McCabe attempts to deal with the mining company and its representatives, the town appears to welcome Butler and his posse. In one scene, McCabe attempts to negotiate with Butler as he holds court at Sheehan's, explaining the genius of the railroads' use of Chinese workers as human explosive devices given that the fine is only \$50 for "killing a Chinaman." Not one of the gathered citizens of Presbyterian Church questions the morality of Butler's assertion or stands up for McCabe as Butler and his posse threaten him. Even more disturbing, when the mean-spirited, trigger-happy "Kid" (Manfred Schulz) kills the simple, good-natured Cowboy (Keith Carradine) for no reason, Sheehan and other citizens stand by on the balcony watching; Sheehan's hands are in his pockets, his mouth agape, but he does not step in or say a word. Engle argues that by "failing to respond the town has identified itself with the killers and has exposed the acceptance of savagery which belies the ideal of social progress" (272). Perhaps more importantly, at least to my thesis, the townspeople have sold their property, which in the Jeffersonian ideal of democracy gives citizens both the autonomy and the investment to participate in civic life in ways that promote the common good. These townspeople have literally sold out to the corporation: they have sold the town they built together, and they have also sold their voice, their right to set and maintain any kind of moral standard by which to live.

The church also figures prominently in the climax of the film. McCabe employs the church steeple as a lookout to track the men who hunt him. He sets his rifle down in the body of the church, but when he returns from the steeple, he finds the preacher aiming the gun at him saying, "This is a house of worship," and forcing McCabe outside to face his killers without it. The preacher experiences an immediate comeuppance, though, as Jake Butler opens the church door to see the gun in the darkened church, and, assuming he has McCabe cornered, he shoots the preacher and in the process shatters a lantern, setting the structure ablaze. When the fire in the church becomes apparent, the citizens of Presbyterian Church join together to employ all of the town's resources in saving the building.

Though the fire-fighting effort on the part of the townspeople seems indicative of a strong love for their church and sense of its importance to them, several facts undercut this interpretation of their actions. First, the film contains a number of scenes in which townsfolk are gathered together in the bordello, at Sheehan's, and at the gravesite. No scene depicts the townsfolk gathered in the church, which, in fact, looks more like a barn or garage inside of which amassed junk usurps the place for pews and congregation. Second, the preacher, as I've noted, maintains an existence peripheral to the life of the town; the sentiment seems mutual as the townspeople fight the fire in the church without seeking the preacher or expressing concern for his welfare. As spiritual guide and as participating member in the life of the town, he is irrelevant. Finally, the activity surrounding the church fire distracts the citizens from McCabe's struggle for his life and property against the corporation's hired guns. No evidence in the film suggests that the

citizens of the town would be willing to engage in this battle or understand why it might be important to do so. Certainly, Mr. Elliot has provided no guidance on the matter. Their willingness to pull together to save a structure that apparently has no significance in their daily lives contrasts sharply with their unwillingness to pull together to save their town from a corporation more interested in mining deposits than in people. McCabe bleeds to death in the deepening snow, Mrs. Miller languishes in a Chinese opium den, and the townspeople save an empty symbol. The only question remaining at the close of the film is how long it will be before Harrison Shaunessy arrives and begins razing the buildings to gain access to the mining deposits beneath them.

Without the civic investment and authority that the maintenance of their businesses and properties would encourage and without the spiritual guidance or moral authority that a deeply held religious faith might engender, the people of Presbyterian Church lack the tools with which to recognize the threat the mining corporation poses or to fight its encroachment on their freedom. *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* effectively captures the tensions between democracy and capitalism by depicting a point in the nation's history when corporate power was rising and businesses' sense of responsibility to the common good was diminishing. At the same time, the aspects of American culture which Robert Bellah and his colleagues saw as tempering greed and selfishness, the biblical and civic republican strains of the nation's character, had been weakened both by the immense power of the corporations and the wide acceptance by mainstream churches of social Darwinism. The intersection of these elements resulted in the claims of capitalism overriding the claims of democracy.

The corrupt world which provides the setting for *Little Big Man*, *The Wild Bunch*, and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* critiques the “crusading elements” which motivated both the settling of the West and the policies of the liberal consensus. Armando Jose Prats describes the world of Peckinpah’s films as the “postmythic,” a term that could be applied equally productively to all three of these Westerns. It describes the world after the hero’s mythic action has made the way safe for the progress of civilization, a world marked by “the rapacity and venality that thereupon become indicia of the American character. [...] In the very instant of their emergence, civilization’s blessings become its curses, and the better angels of the nation’s nature mutate grotesquely into its demons and furies” (26).<sup>28</sup> In this world, assumptions about the conventions of the Classic Western, and specifically assumptions about the moral meanings of those conventions, no longer obtain. Prats connects the “rapaciousness and venality” of the American character as it appears in Peckinpah’s films to the corruption of American society in terms that strongly resonate with the American West that Berger presents in *Little Big Man* and that Altman presents in *McCabe*:

Peckinpah’s postmythic appears before us not as a perversion of America’s Edenic hope but as *the full measure and utter fulfillment of that hope*. [...] To an America that deifies progress and commerce, and that values law and order only

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<sup>28</sup> Armando Jose Prats’ “Auguries of Redemption: Peckinpah’s Mythological Critique of American History” was included in *Sam Peckinpah’s West: New Perspectives*, edited by Leonard Engel (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2003).

as ways of imposing conformity, Peckinpah offers a hero whose deeds *redeem the dream from its fulfillment*. The Peckinpah hero therefore enters this corrupt world not as an instrument of revision but as revision incarnate. (21 [Prats' italics])

Jack Crabb and John McCabe also function as such "revisions"; they are protagonists of ambiguous character who, in conflict with antagonists representative of the forces that threaten democratic freedoms, must also struggle with and rise above their own venality.

The corrupt world and revised Western conventions presented in these three Westerns reflect the breakdown of the liberal consensus. Berger's novel provides a counterpoint to the version of Frontier mythology employed by the elite policymakers who based their foreign policy toward Third World countries on the liberal consensus assumption that the people of the underdeveloped nations, whom they sought to provide with the benefits of capitalism and democracy and protect from communism, had only "primitive" political and cultural systems that would easily bend to the Western notion of "progress." His revision of the last stand myth of the Little Big Horn now seems prophetic as commentary on American policy in Vietnam, and Arthur Penn's 1971 film adaptation overtly reads the novel in that context. Like Custer on the frontier, America in Vietnam faced a much rougher road and many more long-term repercussions than their assumptions led them to foresee. Peckinpah's film reflects, in turn, his disgust with a government corrupted by power and greed and a "system" that anesthetized its citizens with television and consumer goods. He presents violence and greed as endemic to humanity, not just to powerful governments or outlaws, and suggests that violence may be the necessary tool to overthrow oppressive forces in order to maintain democracy.

Altman's film also calls into question the triumphalist narrative of progress related in the Western. By extension, the film expresses disillusionment with the contemporary notion of progress employed by elite policymakers to justify continued involvement in the Vietnam War and to suppress domestic dissent. The set of Presbyterian Church was built in Canada, and Altman employed on the production crew American men who had fled the draft who must surely have provided an incarnate reminder of the troubled society back home. The gloomy town and the film's dismal ending belie the ideal of America's progressive history. By revising the generic conventions of the Western, Berger, Peckinpah, and Altman capture the uncertainty of their age and a sense of lost faith in the ideals of American exceptionalism and progress.

Though artists like Berger, Peckinpah, and Altman effectively used the genre to critique the flawed assumptions and failures of the liberal consensus in these memorable Westerns, many scholars have noted that the change in the structure of feeling in the United States resulted in a significant falling off of the production and popularity of Westerns. The genre could no longer provide a coherent national narrative or reinforce the sense that Americans shared an exceptional destiny. The social, political, and military events of the 1960s damaged the sense of coherence and destiny; they highlighted differences, exacerbated doubts about exceptionalism, and caused Americans to question the version of history presented in the Western. Robert Bellah finds that Vietnam “forced many Americans [to] face the dark side of our history,” and Vince Brewton discusses the Vietnam War as “the logical conclusion of the ideology of Manifest Destiny” that permanently damages the nation’s conception of itself as “innocent”; Kellner and Ryan

have argued that “[i]dealized cultural representations of public authority in the western and detective genres, for example, could no longer hold in a society in which young people scorned public figures and repudiated authority.” The genre was adapted during the 1960’s and 1970’s to reflect the liberal critique of American policies and institutions, re-envisioning American history to include the struggles, shortcomings, and even atrocities that Westerns often marginalized or downplayed. However, the genre could not continue in this mode and enjoy its former popularity. The breakdown of the liberal consensus and the economic and political difficulties of the late 1970’s left a nation sharply divided along liberal and conservative lines. The result was that the Western’s enjoyment of four decades of significant production and popularity ended, and the themes it addressed began to be covered by films in other genres.<sup>29</sup>

However, the Western continues to survive. The writers and directors who make Westerns are acutely aware of the conventions of the genre and the meanings attached to those conventions; they use them purposefully as instruments to critique the corruptions of American society and domestic and foreign policies of the last twenty-five years, as well as to look back nostalgically to the heroic individual action possible in the period before the United States was transformed "from a small business economy into a full-

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<sup>29</sup> Vince Brewton’s “The Changing Landscape of Violence in Cormac McCarthy’s Early Novels and the Border Trilogy” appeared in *The Southern Literary Review* 37 (2004): 121-143; see also Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 78; Robert Bellah, “Seventy-five Years” in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101 (Spring 2002): 253-265. Richard Slotkin discusses the end of the Western’s mass popularity in “Gunsmoke and Mirrors” which appeared in *Life* 16 (April 15, 1993): “When the Vietnam War ended, so did the western’s 30-year boom. Other genres have taken over some of the western’s themes. The town-tamer gunfighter westerns gave way to fables of gunslinger cops and urban vigilantes in the *Death Wish* and *Dirty Harry* series. *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* replaced the cavalry and counterinsurgency westerns, substituting the ‘final frontier’ of outer space for the wild frontier of the Old West” (60).

blown transnational corporate economy,"<sup>30</sup> as Kellner and Ryan have phrased it. In the remaining chapter, I will examine a number of Westerns from the post-consensus period for the ways in which they deal with the tensions between democracy and capitalism as global corporations take advantage of national insecurity and a renewed conservative faith in the free market to consolidate their wealth and power.

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<sup>30</sup> Ryan and Kellner, 81. The authors provide an interesting analysis of the relationship of the Western to the success of liberal Democrats after Watergate and their fall due to the recession of the mid-1970s: "The Hollywood liberals could debunk the conservative myths of the traditional genre, but by not filling the gap with an alternative vision, they portrayed themselves as a negative force and left the discovery of a positive alternative to conservatives." This inability to provide a positive alternative vision was shared by liberal Democrats in government whose triumph was short-lived because "the negative critical spirit of seventies liberalism could not respond to the psychological needs for reassurance generated by the crisis" caused by the severity of the economic recession (81).

### **Chapter Three**

#### **"No Longer a Poor Man's Country": The Anti-Incorporation Western in Post-Consensus America**

Though the Western experienced a long period of immense popularity and significant production, scholars like Richard Slotkin and John Cawelti have noted the decline in the popularity and the decrease in the production of Westerns after the period I discussed in Chapter Two when the social and political upheavals of the 1960's broke apart the Cold War liberal consensus. However, the rhetoric and symbolism of the Western frontier have continued to be applied in interesting if competing ways in American politics and popular culture. The structure of feeling in post-consensus America might most succinctly be defined as intensely partisan, with the left most concerned with preserving democratic freedoms and equality and the right most concerned with preserving free-market capitalism and national security. Post-consensus employment of the frontier myth reflects similar partisanship: the left is more overtly critical of the myth and more pessimistic about the existence and the value of the American Dream and American exceptionalism; the right exhibits a resurgent faith in the free market and a nationalistic desire for a strong, unitary leader reminiscent of the cowboy hero who can deliver the United States from its perceived internal and external enemies. The myth of the frontier with its tropes and rhetoric has clearly not yet breathed its last.

The fate of Westerns is, thus, tied to the cultural crisis in post-consensus America. For Slotkin, the frontier myth has been discredited by a more multicultural view of the Western experience and by American foreign policy failures, especially Vietnam. Bellah and his colleagues, in *Habits of the Heart*, argue that the current cultural crisis in America results from an emphasis on individualism at the expense of investment in the common good. Both Slotkin and Bellah agree that the current crisis was intensified by Ronald Reagan's economic and political policies. Reagan employed the concepts of the frontier myth and cowboy ethics in fashioning himself as a Western-hero figure, which contributed to his popularity, but both Bellah and Slotkin see Reagan as having promoted individualism and capitalism in ways that have damaged consensus building and the democratic ideal of the common good. For Bellah, the former president's fault was in reducing Americans' sense of common ground solely to economic pursuits by asserting that "We the people" are "a special interest group" because when "our concern for the economy [is] the only thing that holds us together, we have reached a kind of end of the line. The citizen has been swallowed up in the economic man" (271). Slotkin argues further in *Gunfighter Nation* that it would be a "mistake" to view Reagan's employment of frontier mythology "as proof of the restoration of a true public myth capable of organizing the thought and feeling of a genuine and usable national consensus" because Reagan's "repair of public myth was partial and incomplete":

as the 1988 presidential election made clear, it has helped to polarize political discourse by reviving (in more polite form) the old symbols and codes of racial prejudice, anti-intellectualism, and red-baiting. Reagan sailed into the presidency

by smiling and waving Old Glory; his successor won by brandishing the flag, playing “the race card,” and deriding his opponent’s Americanism. (653)

Slotkin emphasizes that Reagan and the first President Bush employed Western rhetoric in a manner that encouraged an emotional surge of patriotism and discredited dissenting opinions as un-American, thereby shutting down the type of dialogue that might aid in consensus building. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, George W. Bush again revived the rhetoric of the Western to market and to justify his War on Terrorism and the economic and political decisions his administration made to support that war, both abroad and in the homeland. The employment of the national myth proved effective in the second Bush administration’s achievement of many of its initiatives, but it also further polarized the nation as the administration’s critics point to these policies as the causes of international strife, damage to the United States’ international relations and reputation, huge federal deficits, truncation of democratic liberties, and widening domestic economic disparity.

While conservative employment of Western symbolism in political discourse emphasizes individual responsibility over community cooperation and the necessity of heroic violence in defeating the forces of “evil” that threaten capitalist Western society, the majority of Western films and fiction produced from the Reagan era forward reflect a left-leaning critique of America. Cawelti notes in *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel* that the current producers of Westerns

are responding to the same uncertainties that have beset America in the last quarter of the twentieth century: a profound loss of confidence in America’s

uniqueness, moral superiority, and global omnipotence. In the context of this ongoing spiritual crisis, the South and West, which once helped define America mythically and symbolically through their otherness, are now being pursued by both intellectual critics and conservative fundamentalists as symbols of the real truth of America. (117)

The tensions between individualism and community concerns, democracy and capitalism, and the use of force versus political/diplomatic resolutions evident in contemporary American international and domestic affairs have always been apparent in the Western, as I have attempted to show. What seems to mark the current engagement with the myth in more recent Westerns and distinguishes them from “classic” Westerns is that, rather than promoting a consensus toward the myth of progress and American exceptionalism, these post-consensus Westerns continue the work of the revisionist Westerns I examined in the last chapter of critiquing the frontier myth and contemporary American foreign and domestic policy. They confirm the Western’s efficacy as a medium for offering overt criticism of the ways in which corporate capitalism threatens fair trade, individualism, and democracy by depicting the violence of the Western as exploding when private corporate powers wrested the nation’s resources away from its citizens.

Richard Maxwell Brown’s historical study of how actual violence in the West has contributed to the “mythology of western violence” provides a useful paradigm for analyzing the emphasis of Westerns produced since 1980. In “Western Violence: Structure, Values, Myth,” Brown, who finds the West to have been a particularly

turbulent place,<sup>1</sup> defines the violence which occurred from 1850 to about 1920, roughly the period which provides the setting for the Western, as part of the “Western Civil War of Incorporation.” Drawing on Alan Trachtenberg’s *The Incorporation of America* (1982), he argues that “From 1850 to 1920, the conservative, consolidating authority of modern capitalistic forces infused the dynamics of the Western Civil War of Incorporation. These forces propelled [...] the incorporation of the whole of America during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century” (6).<sup>2</sup> Under the umbrella of this civil war, Brown includes the Indian wars and cattle wars, the battles between labor and capital, and various other acts of outlaws and vigilantes of various affiliations. Although much of the incorporation of the West was achieved through legislation, the courts, and the market, the movement towards incorporation was frequently opposed by westerners to the point of violent outbursts. The Johnson County Cattle War, which I discussed in detail in Chapter One,

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Maxwell Brown’s essay “Western Violence: Structure, Values, Myth” appeared in *The Western Historical Quarterly* 24 (Feb. 1993): 4-20. Another school of scholarly thought attempts to prove that the Western frontier was not as violent as we have been led to believe. Robert R. Dykstra argues in “Overdosing on Dodge City” (*The Western Historical Quarterly* 27 [Winter 1996]: 505-514) that, though our culture holds a “vested interest” in the “delusion” that the West was “relentlessly homicidal,” his research indicates that business interests suppressed street violence, which “was thought very bad for business,” with “relatively large and expensive police forces and strict gun-control laws,” the result being that street violence was held to a minimum. The argument over the amount of violence in the West does not seem, however, to detract in any way from the view of the settlement of the West as a process of “incorporation,” though it might influence whether one accepts the concept of this process as a “Civil War.” Given the fact that the conclusion must largely be based on a subjective interpretation of how many murders per year one considers “a lot,” I accept Brown’s assessment of the process of Western incorporation as a Civil War. For further reading on this controversy, see Robert R. Dykstra, *The Cattle Towns* (New York: Knopf, 1968); W. Eugene Hollon, *Frontier Violence: Another Look* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); and Roger D. McGrath, *Gunfighters, Highwaymen, and Vigilantes: Violence on the Frontier* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Alan Trachtenberg defines “incorporation” as “the reorganization of perceptions as well as of enterprise and institutions. I mean not only the expansion of an industrial capitalist system across the continent, not only tightening systems of transport and communication, the spread of a market economy into all regions of what Robert Wiebe has called a ‘distended society,’ but also, and even predominantly, the remaking of cultural perceptions this process entailed. By ‘the incorporation of America,’ I mean, then, the emergence of a changed, more tightly structured society with new hierarchies of control, and also changed

presents one of the most famous examples, as does the Battle of the Little Big Horn; Brown would include as part of the Civil War of Incorporation the labor strikes which began to arise in the late nineteenth century, in which “an alliance of capital with federal, state, and local government used paramilitary violence to pacify the industrial work places of the West” (7). Brown also discusses the historical gunfighters, who informed the creation of the fictional Western gunfighters, as representing one of what he sees as the two categories in the civil war: “incorporation gunfighters,” those who, like Wyatt Earp and Pat Garrett, fought on the conservative side of the War; or “resister gunfighters,” those who, like Jesse James and Billy the Kid, earned the title of “outlaw” by fighting against incorporating forces but often were “paradoxically widely admired by law-abiding members of society” (8). Interestingly enough, given the intense partisanship of the post-consensus American political and cultural climate, the gunfighters of the incorporation period lined up along partisan lines as well, with incorporation gunfighters most often associated with an allegiance to the Republican Party and resister gunfighters most often supporting the Democratic Party. Brown concludes that in the Civil War of Incorporation, the conservative incorporationists won, establishing a status quo that allowed for the continuation of many of the incorporating practices started before the turn of the century and that held until the 1960s.

Another analysis of the effects of incorporation on American history after 1860 comes from sociologist Charles Derber, who offers a somewhat different paradigm. In *Regime Change Begins at Home*, Derber defines a “regime” broadly as any “system of

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conceptions of that society, of America itself” (3-4) *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in*

rule” so that “the U.S. government is also a regime, and the history of the United States—as of other nations—can be seen as a succession of regimes” (21).<sup>3</sup> Derber distinguishes between corporate regimes, those that subvert democracy through “corpocracy,” which he defines as “the marriage between big business and big government,” (38) and other regimes that promote, or at least protect, the common good and democracy. He traces American history since the Civil War to discover an alternating series of these two types of regimes. In an argument written for an American audience preparing to vote in the 2004 presidential election, Derber asserts that the United States under George W. Bush is in the third corporate regime in its history. This regime’s “roots lie in the Gilded Age of John D. Rockefeller, who helped shape the first corporate regime, and in the Roaring Twenties of Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover, the leaders who presided over the second corporate regime” (22). Corporate regimes are not synonymous with capitalist or market systems, as Derber explains:

A corporate regime puts corporate monopoly above the competition of markets, corporate power above that of citizens, and profits above people. [...] The regime rules in the name of the free market, but it has actually become a statist [sic] system, dependent on state intervention for the management of the overall economy, and for regulation and control of competition. (184)

Regime changes occurred when the Populist movement encouraged the ascension of the Progressive era and its reforms, and again when the stock market crash and Great

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*the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> Derber, Charles. *Regime Change Begins at Home: Freeing America from Corporate Rule*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2004.

Depression allowed Franklin Roosevelt to institute his New Deal reforms. Derber's jeremiad calls for another regime change that would replace the third corporate regime with a "New Democracy."

Both Brown and Derber suggest that America's history, particularly since the Civil War, has been determined by the tensions between democracy and corporate capitalism, and Derber emphasizes the current increasing difficulty of maintaining democracy as corporations have grown in wealth and power and cut off the avenues available to citizens to curb their power. Trachtenberg, in *The Incorporation of America*, pointed to the myth of the West as being instrumental in justifying and promoting acceptance of incorporation:

Land and minerals served economic and ideological purposes, the two merging into a single complex image of the West: a temporal site of the route from past to future, and the spatial site for revitalizing national energies. As myth and as economic entity, the West proved indispensable to the formation of a national society and a cultural mission: to fill the vacancy of the Western spaces with civilization, by means of incorporation (political as well as economic) and violence. Myth and exploitation, incorporation and violence: the processes went hand in hand. (17)

In other words, the reality of the West was that the "translation of land into capital, of what once seemed 'free' into private wealth, followed the script of industrial progress" and not the script of the populist Western myth (Trachtenberg 23).

Brown and Derber recognize the influence of popular culture in promoting awareness of the exploitation and violence and in revealing the process of incorporation that classical Westerns often obfuscate or justify. Brown concedes that “the socially conservative myth of the western hero dominates (but not by much) in our culture—probably because it confronts and engages our fear of anarchy”; still, he finds that “the mystique of the losing side in the Western Civil War of Incorporation attracts both the thought and the emotion of many Americans” (20). Brown concludes that both the conservative hero and the insurgent hero survive “because Americans are deeply ambivalent about established power and dissident protest” (20). Ambivalence about extravagant wealth has been expressed by many American writers and directors (one might call to mind Dreiser, Dos Passos, and Welles, just to name a few), and Derber recognizes this tendency in post-consensus popular culture as well: “In the 1980s, in films like *Wall Street* and *Other People’s Money*, Hollywood took on the unexpected role of populist educator, going after the fat cats who buy companies only to chop them up and sell them for parts” (189). He cites Michael Moore as an example of more recent filmmakers who have taken on the role of educating Americans by exposing corpocracy.

The Westerns that have been produced since 1980 can productively be analyzed as “Anti-incorporation Westerns,” engaging in the work of “populist education,” to varying degrees. Anti-incorporation Westerns critique the dark side of the frontier myth: they reveal the settlement of the West as a process of incorporation, and they highlight the violence, the victims of corpocracy, the targets of nationalist bigotry, and the tensions between democracy and capitalism. These novels and films value individuals and

communities over the powerful union of governmental and corporate power in their exploration of the struggles of those individuals and the effects of violence. The revisionist fiction of the 1960s and 1970s opened a space for fiction by writers of the post-consensus period like Louise Erdrich, M. Scott Momaday, Gerald Vizenor, and Larry McMurtry to critique the Western story by setting the record straight from the points of view of women, Native Americans, and the ordinary citizens who were often the victims of more powerful forces in the incorporation process. Further, changes in the film industry since 1975, the beginning of what Thomas Schatz has termed the "New Hollywood,"<sup>4</sup> opened up a space for the production of independent films that offer overtly liberal critiques of American culture, a number of which have offered sympathetic portraits of the Westerners who were victims of the Civil Wars of Incorporation.<sup>5</sup> My focus in this chapter will be on three Westerns which all tell the Western story from the point of view of an apparently traditional white male hero, but all

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<sup>4</sup> In "The New Hollywood" (*Film Theory Goes to the Movies*. Ed. Jim Collins, et al. New York: Routledge, 1993: 8-36), Schatz argues that the release of *Jaws* in 1975 "marked the arrival of the New Hollywood" because it "brought an emphatic end to Hollywood's five-year recession, while ushering in an era of high-cost, high-tech, high-speed thrillers" (17). Schatz saw something of a "leveling off" of the "blockbuster mentality" in the early 1990s, with the "New Hollywood [...] producing three different classes of movie: the calculated blockbuster designed with the multimedia marketplace and franchise status in mind, the mainstream A-class star vehicle with sleeper-hit potential, and the low-cost independent feature targeted for a specific market and with little chance of anything more than 'cult film' status" (35). Note 5 below discusses the third class of film, while my chapter will concentrate on several Westerns which fall into the first two categories. Schatz also mentions "established genre auteurs" who "are the most perplexing and intriguing cases--each of them part visionary cineaste and part commercial hack, whose best films flirt with hit status and critique the very genres (and audiences) they exploit," a description which can be applied to each of the directors I am including in this chapter (35).

<sup>5</sup> I offer as specific examples Maggie Greenwald's *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993), which depicts a woman who must adopt a male persona to survive in the West and also addresses the plight of exploited Chinese immigrant workers; Mario Van Peebles' *Posse* (1993) that narrates a tale of Black cowboys and the attempt to establish a "Freedom Town" on the frontier; and Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995) which offers a sympathetic, magical realism view of Native Americans as it depicts the protagonist's migration to the West as a descent into hell. More recently, Ang Lee has employed the figure of the American cowboy to relate a homosexual love story between two cowhands in the American West of the 1960s in *Brokeback*

three of these Westerns implicitly critique the Western myth of progress in terms of the tensions between democracy and capitalism by presenting the Western story as a Civil War of Incorporation. The two films I will analyze, Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* (1980) and Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992), are mainstream Hollywood Westerns, one in the category Schatz calls the "blockbuster" and the other in the category of "mainstream, A-class star vehicle," which he distinguishes from high-priced, heavily marketed blockbusters. While most mainstream films since the mid-1970s, especially blockbusters, tend toward the reinforcement of conservative ideologies,<sup>6</sup> the films I will discuss highlight the tensions between democracy and capitalism as these play out in the late twentieth century. Finally, I will discuss Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), the first novel in his Border Trilogy. McCarthy's novel inverts and interrogates many of the traditional concerns and conventions of the Western by offering an Anglo-American protagonist who illegally crosses the border *into* Mexico to recapture a way of life no longer possible in the United States because of the process of incorporation. Each of these post-consensus Westerns accepts the settlement of the West as a Civil War of

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*Mountain* (2005); and Tommy Lee Jones tackles the current debate over illegal immigration in his directorial debut, *The Three Burials of Melquiades Esatrada* (2006).

<sup>6</sup> Schatz argues that the "fantasy" blockbusters, particularly of the 70s and 80s, generally avoided dealing in any meaningful way with the social and political issues of the times in which they were released: "From *The Godfather* to *Jaws* to *Star Wars*, we see films that are increasingly plot-driven, increasingly visceral, kinetic, and fast-paced, increasingly reliant on special effects, increasingly 'fantastic' (and thus apolitical), and increasingly targeted at younger audiences" (23). In *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, Robin Wood argues that these types of films promoted conservative ideology by providing "reassurance" as they "diminish, defuse, and render safe all the major radical movements that gained so much impetus, became so threatening, in the 70s: radical feminism, black militancy, gay liberation, the assault on patriarchy" (164). Wood sees the increasing employment of expensive and dazzling special effects as reassuring audiences with regard to capitalism: "the unemployment lines in the world outside may get longer and longer, we may even have to go out and join them. But if capitalism can still throw out entertainments like *Star Wars* (the film's very uselessness an aspect of the prodigality), the system must be basically OK, right?" (166).

Incorporation and works to promote a national recognition of the ways in which the process of incorporation has constrained democracy.

Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* (1980) revisits the Johnson County Cattle War of the late nineteenth century. Cimino's version of this particular battle in the Civil War of Incorporation differentiates itself both from Wister's perception of the conflict in *The Virginian*, which presents the cattle barons sympathetically, and from Steven's *Shane*, which presents the small ranchers and farmers as innocent victims of the greedy cattle barons. Cimino's rigorously realistic film acknowledges that at least some of the homesteaders do steal cattle from the cattle barons; however, he mitigates their guilt by stressing the harshness, poverty, and institutionalized victimization these immigrants endure as they attempt to build lives from scratch out of the unforgiving frontier of Wyoming.

Many discussions of *Heaven's Gate* include analyses not only of the film as text but also of the life of the film itself, not surprising given its glorious failure at the box office and disastrous impact on its studio, United Artists. Like *Apocalypse Now*, it generated a great deal of negative publicity over its runaway costs even before it was released. Further, the film's narrative system and mise-en-scène set the film apart from the types of films its contemporary mainstream American audience was accustomed to viewing, and some critics assign the film's box-office failure to the choices Cimino made in these areas. One way of reading the film's failure suggests that the film failed both

economically and artistically because the filmmaker's method and his project's sympathies were fast becoming passé in a changing world: specifically, Cimino's auterist approach to making the film was no longer viable in the late nineteen-seventies' rising New Hollywood environment, and his challenging narrative structure and huge cast of characters would have been more appropriate in a film marketed to the diminishing cinéliterare audience in the U.S. than in a film intended as a mainstream epic.<sup>7</sup> I will not focus on the economic failure of the film or of United Artists;<sup>8</sup> instead, my analysis will discuss the film, not as one that failed artistically, but rather as one that diverged from the dominant structure of feeling regarding capitalism and democracy when it was released in 1980. Specifically, Cimino's sympathetic view of impoverished immigrants in a class struggle against patriarchal, Anglo-Saxon robber barons no longer coincided with the dominant structure of feeling of an increasingly conservative America on the verge of electing Ronald Reagan as its president. Cimino's unusual narrative structure and large cast did not mitigate this disconnect but, rather, made it difficult for many viewers to become emotionally invested in the characters and share the film's sympathy for the long-suffering immigrants.

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<sup>7</sup> Robin Wood discusses the complexity of Cimino's narrative structure in his chapter entitled "Two Films by Michael Cimino" in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986). He argues that the film was challenging for audiences who expected American films to "take you by the hand and guide you safely, step by cause-and-effect step, to the final resolution," but that "it is absurd to suggest that the film lacks structure. Its structure is simply of an order radically different from anything to which the Hollywood cinema has conditioned us" (301). Cimino's structure, he goes on to explain, alters "the relationship between foreground (the emotional problems of individuals) and background (the movement of history)" (302). See especially pp. 298-317.

<sup>8</sup> The subject of the making of the film has been covered extensively in Stephen Bach's *Final Cut: Dreams and Disaster in the Making of "Heaven's Gate"* (New York: Morrow, 1985) with the benefits provided by his insider's view.

*Heaven's Gate's* screenplay was actually begun in 1973<sup>9</sup> during the heyday of liberal critique of American cultural and political institutions in popular cultural forms including those films that I discussed in Chapter Two, and had it been released by the mid-seventies and marketed to the cinéliterate audience, it might have experienced a more positive reception. Instead, Cimino set the project aside to work on *The Deer Hunter*, and *Heaven's Gate* was not released until 1980. By this point, as Ryan and Kellner have argued, many Americans had had enough of the economic problems brought on by recessions, enough of the liberal critique of America's complicity in racial inequality, and enough of the foreign policy and military failure in Vietnam; they were turning towards the "more affirmative and positive vision offered by conservatives in the eighties" (*Camera Politica* 76).<sup>10</sup> Analyzing the national mood in the lead-up to the 1980 election, Laurence Radway describes a "truculent nationalism" that had "been gathering force in America since 1974, soon after the conclusion of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam war," and that resulted from "foreign pressures" on Americans' "jobs, prices,

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<sup>9</sup> Barry Langford notes in "Revisiting the 'Revisionist' Western" (*Film & History* 33:2 [2003]: 26-35) that "With *Heaven's Gate* we at last meet with the 'revisionist' Western in its fully blown, even definitive, form. Although *Heaven's Gate* was not produced until the end of the 1970s and so usefully stands as the culminating statement of that decade's revisionist project, Cimino's original script originated around 1973 at the high-water mark of Hollywood genre revisionism" (32).

<sup>10</sup> Naomi Greene also points, in her "Coppola, Cimino: The Operatics of History" (*Film Quarterly* 38 [Winter 1984-1985]: 28-37), to this change in the dominant structure of feeling as she notes, parenthetically, that "The failure of *Heaven's Gate* may be partially attributed to the fact that by the time it appeared, the national mood was already changing" from what it had been in the mid-1970s (29). Greene analyzes *Heaven's Gate* as one example of "a new kind of cinematic melodrama" developed in the 1970s, which is comparable to historical melodrama of the French Revolution and Napoleonic periods and to 19<sup>th</sup>-century opera, particularly in the ways it focuses on issues of national destiny and privileges music and spectacle, at times at the expense of narrative coherence: "in *Heaven's Gate*," she argues, "sequences of spectacle are given their greatest weight—far more weight and length, in all probability, than ever before in American film"; however, "the gains of spectacle seem to be made at the expense of narrative conventions which are treated very casually. (This unusual balance may be one of the reasons, in fact, that the film's initial reception was disastrous [...].)" (32).

and energy supplies,” as well as on America’s international image (61).<sup>11</sup> Liberalism and the Democratic Party that espoused it seemed able to offer criticism but not solutions to these pressures. Conservatives espoused a stronger military and tougher foreign policy, and they also exploited fears over economic problems and successfully blamed the recessions of the 1970s on the Democrats, claiming their tax policies "not only cut income, but also curtailed investment and jobs, while supporting unnecessary social programs funded by government borrowing (deficit spending) that increased inflation" (Ryan and Kellner 106). In addition, the Democratic Party's very nature as a coalition party made it appear weaker in comparison to the unified Republicans who

represented the exclusive interests of one powerful constituency—the rich. They therefore could offer a single-minded and firm program of economic renewal to increase income through tax reductions and cuts in social spending. That these programs would ultimately benefit the rich exclusively at the expense of the poor and the middle class meant little at the time. In 1980, many white working-class Democrats switched to Reagan and bought the line. (106)

Republicans were able to cast suspicion on the liberal gains made in the areas of labor rights, income, and racial and gender equality by using the "excuse of the recessions," exacerbating racial and ethnic tensions, and promoting the enforcement of law and order, both at home and abroad (107).

Significantly for the reception of *Heaven’s Gate*, immigrants during this period often functioned as scapegoats who were perceived as threats to the economic, and

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<sup>11</sup> Laurence Radway. “The Curse of Free Elections.” (*Foreign Policy* 40 [Autumn 1980]: 61-73.)

sometimes physical, security of more established Americans. Elliot R. Barkin's analysis of California Field Polls from the 1980s and 1990s concerning immigration concluded that

California has proven to be a mirror reflecting the subsurface ambivalence of many Americans: tolerant, if not proud, of the nation's heritage of diversity; ambivalent and mercurial about the long-term social and cultural impact of that same diversity; and periodically unnerved and suffering from bouts of uncertainty during times of economic instability. (270)<sup>12</sup>

Edwin Harwood found that, after a period of liberalization in American public attitudes toward immigration following World War II, "American public opinion began to turn against this wider opening of our door during the late 1970s and early 1980s" (202).<sup>13</sup>

While Harwood rejects the assertion that this attitude reflects racism, ethnic prejudice, or a public perception of a "link between increased crime and illegal immigration," he agrees that "it is undoubtedly true that the stagflation and recession of the past 10 to 15 years [approximately 1971-1986] are important factors in the emergence of

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<sup>12</sup> Elliot R. Barkin's essay "Return of the Nativists? California Public Opinion and Immigration in the 1980s and 1990" appeared in *Social Science History* 27:2 (Summer 2003): 229-283.

<sup>13</sup> Harwood discovered that "In a March 1982 Roper Survey, 66 percent of those polled said they wanted legal immigration cut back. Only 4 percent said more aliens should be allowed to enter. The August 1981 survey by the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) found 65 percent of the public wanting fewer immigrants admitted, compared with only 5 percent claiming that more immigrants would be desirable" (202). The public also became less sympathetic towards refugees: "An August 1979 Gallup poll revealed that 57 percent of the public opposed admitting the boat people fleeing Communist-ruled South Vietnam. Only 32 percent favored their admission. In May 1980, both the Harris and Gallup surveys found Americans opposed to admitting the Mariel boatlift refugees from Cuba by roughly a two-to-one margin" (202). Harwood's study, "American Public Opinion and U.S. Immigration Policy," appeared in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 487 (Sept. 1986): 201-212.

neorestrictionism" (205).<sup>14</sup> Like Barkan's study of Californians, Harwood found Americans generally ambivalent about the effects of immigration on our culture but noted that during times of economic crisis, they were more likely to feel threatened by immigrants in regard to jobs and wages, and he concludes that it "is plausible to argue that the neorestrictionism of the past decade [approximately 1976-1986] was mainly owing to rising public anxieties over the health of the U.S. economy," at least as far as legal immigration is concerned (207).<sup>15</sup> Given the dominant national mood, it seems unlikely that Cimino's film would find an audience sympathetic to the plight of its heavily accented and strangely dressed immigrants in their struggle against upper-class Anglo-Saxons, who, like Frank Canton (Sam Waterston), can include as members of their old, established American families "the Secretary of War to Harrison." Instead, *Heaven's Gate* engages a residual cultural element, providing a left-leaning critique of the attitudes that inform and conditions that exacerbate the nativism espoused by the dominant culture of America in 1980. In doing so, it depicts the social and political issues of the period as manifestations of tensions between democracy and capitalism.

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<sup>14</sup> Radway suggests that this neorestrictionism may also have been connected to foreign policy insecurities. He cites the Iran hostage crisis and the continuing struggle with the Soviet Union, intensified by the invasion of Afghanistan, as contributing to this insecurity, in addition to economic factors: "The 1980 presidential campaign, like earlier ones, is stimulating incumbents as well as challengers to adopt narrower conceptions of the national interest, display greater readiness to use the diplomacy of confrontation, and express heightened concern about U.S. prestige and power" (70). For further discussion of the significance of the Iran hostage crisis with regard to American cultural and political responses, see Catherine V. Scott's "Bound for Glory: The Hostage Crisis as Captivity Narrative in Iran" (*International Studies Quarterly* 44 [Mar 2000]: 177-188).

<sup>15</sup> Harwood pointed to a June 1984 Gallup poll in which "61 percent of the public agreed that immigrants improve our culture with their own cultures and talents"; in the same poll, 59 percent of respondents "agreed that many immigrants wind up on welfare and raise taxes for Americans" (207). Sixty-one percent of respondents "agreed that immigrants take jobs from U.S. workers, but 80 percent also agreed that many immigrants work hard and take jobs Americans do not want" (208).

The most encompassing and most emphasized conflict developed by the film's narrative system pits the Eastern-establishment robber barons, led by Frank Canton, against the immigrant homesteaders who have recently arrived in Wyoming. The other conflicts include Frank Canton versus James Averill (Kris Kristofferson), the wealthy Easterner who has become marshal in Johnson County and insists on protecting the homesteaders against his own social and economic peers; Averill versus Nate Champion (Christopher Walken), a hired gun for the Stock Growers Association who competes with James for the love of Ella (Isabella Huppert), the financially successful madam; James versus Ella, as they attempt to walk a line between freely-given love and possession; and James versus himself, as he struggles with how much to involve himself in the apparently hopeless battle of the homesteaders against their wealthy and powerful adversaries. The first two of these conflicts develop most strongly the theme of the curtailing of democracy by incorporating capitalist forces.

Frank Canton and his compatriots in the Stock Growers Association draw their sense of justification from their positions of privilege and proudly trace their lineages back to American colonial times. In their view, this lineage entitles them to control the lands in Wyoming that have been deeded to more recent immigrants by the U.S. government, presumably as part of the Homestead Act of 1862. This Act, though, and other similar legislation enacted by Congress and the Senate, neglected to include financial aid and so left potential homesteaders who lacked means unable to claim their land; this situation, as well as a number of loopholes within the act, allowed private entities to claim large amounts of this land, subverting the act's original intent, and

disclosing, as Trachtenberg has argued, in the “logic of events in the 1870s and 1880s [...] not an agrarian but an industrial capitalist scenario” (20).<sup>16</sup> This reality is reflected in the film in its portrayal of the hardships faced by the homesteaders who sometimes found themselves starving as they attempted to get their homesteads up and running. The time periods covered by the film give some indication of how quickly the big cattle ranchers incorporated the Wyoming frontier. The graduation of Averill and Billy Irvine's (John Hurt) class from Harvard occurs in 1870; the central events of the Johnson County War that the film narrates occur in 1890, the year that, Turner noted, marked the closing of the frontier.<sup>17</sup> The competition for rapidly dwindling resources on the frontier draws out the tensions and the biases that seem to justify, in the minds of the "American" stock growers, the use of whatever means necessary to retain control of the land and water sources needed for them to continue cattle ranching at a profit. Canton's distaste for the poor reveals itself in his conflation of poverty and illegitimacy or illegality. Further, in a Stock Growers Association meeting at the Cheyenne Club in Wyoming, he asserts to his fellow SGA members that America "is no longer a poor man's country" and that "unenforced law is an invitation to anarchy." Canton and other SGA members promote

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<sup>16</sup> Trachtenberg argues that, though the Homestead Act was intended to encourage fulfillment of the “promise embodied in the idea of the West as a yeoman’s garden,” by “provid[ing] an agricultural ‘safety valve’ for surplus or discontented urban workers, and a Western population base for an enlarged domestic market for manufactured goods,” it did not actually achieve these goals (21). For one thing, it “did not provide necessary credit for people without savings to take up their cherished 160 acres,” and secondly, “its clauses permitted land grabbing by speculative companies, and the eventual concentration of large tracts in private hands,” thereby abetting the process of incorporation (22).

<sup>17</sup> Turner opened “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” with the following conclusion of the Superintendent of the Census’s 1890 report: “Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it can not, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports” (qtd. in Turner 1). For Turner, therefore,

the racial and ethnic stereotypes of immigrants that would have been familiar, albeit in more contemporary phrasing, to Cimino's audience: they have "large numbers of ragged children," they are really "thieves" and "anarchists," and they are "an ignorant and degraded gang of paupers." The stock growers use these slurs to justify raising a mercenary army to wipe out 125 people, a significant portion of the homesteading community in Johnson County, whose names they put on a "death list." The stock growers claim the support of the government, particularly the president and the senate, which has come to be known pejoratively as the "millionaire's club." Their claim is verified when the cavalry, in the form of the National Guard and on the orders of the president himself, rides in to rescue them from the homesteaders who have them and their mercenary army surrounded.

Averill does not share the perspective or the priorities of the Stock Growers Association, though he comes from the same socio-economic class and graduated with many of its members from Harvard. In Wyoming, Averill tells Billy Irvine that his memories of the "good gone days," presumably those at Harvard, become clearer to him as time passes, and this comment sheds light on why his priorities differ so markedly from those of his peers. At the graduation ceremony that opens the film, the Reverend Doctor (Joseph Cotton) sermonizes to the graduates, charging them with a mission of noblesse oblige. He states that if their "sacred valedictory rites" are not "a mere farce," then they obligate the students to a "mandate of imperative duty" to "diffuse a high learning and culture among the people." He charges the graduates with the duty to "look

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the 1890 census report marked "the closing of a great historic movement," or the conclusion of the period

well at the influence we may exert, a high ideal, the education of a nation." Billy Irvine, serving officially as the class orator and less officially as the class clown, responds by offering an irreverent valedictory address, proving that the valedictory rites are, in fact, a farce to these privileged young men; his speech asserts that they reject, with an argument based on social Darwinism, the mandate the Reverend Doctor has given them to improve the educational and cultural level of the nation, preferring instead "No change." James appears, during the ceremony, to be more interested in flirting with a pretty young woman, but the seed the Reverend Doctor planted appears to have brought about a conversion in James at some point.

Of course the title of the film itself— *Heaven's Gate*—pointedly alludes to Christ's warning in the gospels that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the gates of heaven.<sup>18</sup> Developing the theme this title suggests, the narrative of the film makes clear that Averill's decision to become marshal is not merely the choice of taking a "strenuous" vacation, like the ones taken by Theodore Roosevelt, Owen Wister, and their contemporaries, but, rather, a moral choice presented in overtly religious terms on at least two occasions. The first occurs when Averill confronts Canton about the death list at the Cheyenne Club. Canton expresses exasperation with Averill for choosing to side with the immigrants over his own class of people. Averill responds, "You're not of my class, Canton, and you never will be. You'd have to die first and be born again." The second occasion occurs when Averill and Mr.

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of the nation's development influenced by the Western frontier (1).

<sup>18</sup> This warning appears in three of the gospels: *Matthew* 19:24, *Mark* 10:25, and *Luke* 18:25. I have used the *New International Bible* as my source. In *Luke*, the verse reads as follows: "Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

Oggleston (Brad Dourif) implore the captain of the National Guard, Minardi (Terry O'Quinn), to protect Johnson County from the SGA's mercenaries. In this tense scene, Averill accuses Minardi of cowardice for obeying the orders of the wealthy and powerful men who are "gobbling up," incorporating, the state of Wyoming. Clearly wounded by this accusation, Minardi retorts, "You know what I really dislike about you, Jim? You're a rich man with a good name. You only pretend to be poor." He goes on to advise him, "You can't force salvation on people, Jim. It doesn't work." Minardi suggests that, because of his status and resources, Jim does not know what it is like to suffer real risk in this situation and does not comprehend the futility of his mission in the face of bigotry, greed, and the obdurate determination of the wealthy and powerful to retain their capital and their position. Minardi's comments also highlight Averill's rejection of the social Darwinism that soothed the consciences of so many Gilded Age robber barons in favor of a moral system more akin to the social gospel I discussed in the previous chapter.

The broader conflict of the film, the one between the immigrant homesteaders and the stock growers, finds its most effective expression in the film's *mise-en-scène*. Obviously, differences in costumes, props, and employment of accents convey the socio-economic differences between the homesteaders and the cattlemen, but Cimino also presents larger thematic concerns through the contrasting of comparable settings. In doing so, Cimino offers a moral critique of the class conflict and the injustice of the incorporation process for the newest and poorest Americans.

The film's opening graduation sequence introduces several motifs that invite a comparison between the social gatherings of the wealthy members of the stock growers'

milieu and those of the homesteaders. The marching band, the architecture, and the trappings of the ceremony (gowns, speeches, podium, and segregation of graduates from both dignitaries and audience) suggest a long-established tradition in the privileged Anglo-Saxon world of Harvard. This sequence also emphasizes the patriarchal structure of this society as the women are excluded from participation and physically relegated to the position of spectators for all parts of the ceremony with the exception of the waltz, which, traditionally, the male partner leads. Tradition and patriarchy are also emphasized at the Cheyenne Club. As the scene at the club begins, the camera focuses on a butler of advanced age stiffly serving tea from a silver service in the club where the opulent decor seems reminiscent of law offices in London or Boston more so than a cattlemen's meeting place in Wyoming. No women or children are present in the Cheyenne Club, and, presumably, they are not permitted there. In contrast to this rigid formality, all of the group scenes involving the homesteaders suggest a naturalness and exigency with regard to behavior; they include both men and women, and usually children as well. When they gather in the communal hall for a roller-skating party to celebrate Ella's birthday and again for their frenzied meeting about how to respond to the SGA death list, they seem an organic entity, teeming with life and still in the process of growing into a unified community; the intermingling of the genders and the presence of children suggest the fertility and growth of that community. This contrast highlights the rigidity and suggests a kind of infertility, a lack of productivity and change, in the society of the monopolistic forces represented by the stock growers that results from the stifling of the productive innovation capitalist competition should encourage. It also points to the historical

resolution of the Johnson County Cattle War: as I discussed in Chapter One, the exploitation and inefficiency of the use of natural resources in cattle ranching were significant factors in the demise of the big Eastern-owned cattle ranches, which were largely replaced by farming and other industries. The SGA and their mercenaries experience a reprieve from a major defeat in the battle depicted in *Heaven's Gate*; the historical figures they approximate would suffer little or no legal punishment for their extra-legal invasion of Johnson County, though they would ultimately lose the cattle war on economic grounds. As Captain Minardi's comments to Jim Averill point out, however, their wealth and social position meant that the actual burden of risk they shouldered was minimal. The risk in the Civil War of Incorporation for the immigrants, the new "citizens," as they proudly refer to themselves, is made quite clear: Cimino's camera lingers on the suffering of the homesteaders, in effect acknowledging and giving dignity to their deaths and their significance to those they leave behind. The murder of Cully (Richard Masur), the railroad porter, perhaps represents the harsh reality of the homesteaders' condition most explicitly: alone and on foot on the frontier, Cully is overpowered and gunned down by the fifty-man army of mercenaries hired by the SGA.

Though Averill kills Canton in retaliation for Canton's murder of Ella, Averill himself survives the war and returns to the East to resume the life of privilege he left behind when he embarked upon his moral mission in the West. The film closes with a very quiet scene aboard a well-appointed yacht off the coast of Rhode Island in 1903 in which a much aged and defeated-looking Averill lights the cigarette of the beautiful woman he danced with decades earlier at Harvard, who now appears to be the frail victim

of terminal ennui. Yet Averill's moral mission is not a complete failure. Though it cannot be said that the homesteaders win the battle depicted in the film, many of them do survive it, at least in part because of Averill. When the merchants of Johnson County decide, out of fear for both their lives and property, to try to negotiate with the stock growers, Averill refuses to act as a go-between, though it costs him his job; he angrily scolds them, "They are fifty, and together you are two hundred." He encourages them to band together and fight alongside of the homesteaders because the stock growers "had the law on their side" but "threw that away" when they began murdering homesteaders suspected of cattle stealing and when they raped Ella. In his view, the homesteaders have right and power on their side if they will cooperate rather than allow themselves to be forced out by incorporating forces. Averill again influences the homesteaders and fulfills the Reverend Doctor's mandate by teaching them a classical Roman battle technique that allows them to surround the SGA army and would likely have resulted in their victory had not the cavalry rescued the mercenaries. Ultimately, the consolidated wealth and power of the incorporating forces defeat the homesteaders as they did in the actual Civil War of Incorporation. However, the homesteaders win a moral battle in claiming their citizenship and recognizing the value of community.

The film presents, then, the homesteaders as heroic for their hard work, their entrepreneurial spirit, their perseverance, and their willingness to pull together to fight for their property and the survival of their community. At the same time, however, *Heaven's Gate* offers little hope that individuals can defeat the powerful entities who wish to consolidate the nation's resources by incorporating their property and productivity into

the larger market system over which they have control. Its sympathetic portrayal of the struggle of poor immigrants and its depiction of middle-class merchants joining forces with them to protect their community place it at odds with an America that had become uncertain about its diversity and willing to place its faith in powerful, incorporating forces to lift itself out of economic recession and political uncertainty. Had it successfully engaged its audience, the film might have served as a warning to Americans to resist the efforts of the ascendant post-consensus Republican corporate regime to breed suspicion and division between the various socio-economic and racial and ethnic groups in order to divert attention from its economic agenda of establishing a corpocracy. Sadly, though, the film itself became the victim of incorporation, swallowed up by the expectations of the New Hollywood blockbuster.

The concept of a *civil war* of incorporation implies the eruption of violence resulting from resistance to reallocation of resources and reaction against curtailment of autonomy or freedom individuals experience as the corporate system exercises more and more control over their lives and the opportunities available to them. This is the case in *Heaven's Gate*, where the Stock Growers Association attempts to designate the entire class of homesteaders as guilty of illegal activity in order to incorporate their homesteads into the cattlemen's available grazing lands and to limit the homesteaders' options for protecting themselves from this move. Another source of violence in the civil war of incorporation is the frustration of those left behind as a kind of detritus of the

incorporation process, those who receive little benefit from, and are often not even recognized by, the corporate system. These segments of society are often feared as threatening to the system and can face repressive control measures when capital aligns itself with government and law enforcement to enact its will. The repression they face, particularly in the form of delegitimized or criminalized avenues for expressing dissent or seeking redress for perceived wrongs, can exacerbate tensions and increase the likelihood of violence. This type of repression operates as a central motivating factor in Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992), which probes the tensions between democracy and capitalism at their intersection with the relationship between repression and violence.

*Unforgiven* captures the structure of feeling of its time most effectively in its treatment of violence. Film editor Joel Cox purposefully situated *Unforgiven* in a contemporary American dialogue about violence, saying the film “set a tone about anti-violence stuff that was actually going on at the time in society.”<sup>19</sup> Actor Morgan Freeman described *Unforgiven* as portraying the Old West “without romance, without glamour,” and claimed that the violence “is shown at its agonizing worst” to deliver the message that violence “corrupts the soul.” Screenwriter David Webb Peoples denied that he had set out to write an anti-violence script but, rather, intended to write one in which violence and its effects were portrayed realistically. Many people interpreted *Unforgiven* as an anti-violence film, he said, because

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<sup>19</sup> Cox, who won the Academy Award for film editing for *Unforgiven*, offered these comments in “All on Account of Pullin’ a Trigger,” one of the special features included on the DVD release of the film. Freeman and Van Peoples’ comments also come from that feature, which Freeman narrates. *Unforgiven*. Dir. Clint Eastwood. DVD. Warner, 2002.

so many other films are at least intellectually pro-violence. In other words, they suggest that if the good guy just beats up the bad guys it will make everything better, and I don't think life's like that. I don't think it's ever as simple as that. I think it's really hard to figure out who the good guy is and who the bad guy is to begin with. From each person's perspective, the other guy might be the bad guy. As Cox and Freeman proudly highlight the film's anti-violence message and Peoples complicates this message, scholars also line up along opposing sides in the argument over whether the film, in fact, condemns violence or if it ultimately subverts that condemnation.<sup>20</sup>

Many Americans, but perhaps especially those living in and around Los Angeles and other urban centers, were concerned about violence in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and *Unforgiven* engages those concerns. Philip French asserts that "like all serious Westerns," the film offers "an allegorical commentary on the state of the Union. Watching the movie we inevitably think of Rodney King and the Los Angeles Police, of the invasion of Panama and the 'turkey shoots' of the Gulf War."<sup>21</sup> The success in early and mid-1991 of two films that deal overtly with violence in American urban ghettos, *New Jack City* and *Boyz in the Hood*, would seem to indicate that the issues they address were very much on the minds of the public as *Unforgiven* went into production. The cast

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<sup>20</sup> See the following for various considerations of the violence in the film: Carl Plantinga. "Spectacles of Death: Clint Eastwood and Violence in *Unforgiven*." *Cinema Journal* 37 (Winter 1998): 65-83; John C. Tibbets. "Clint Eastwood and the Machinery of Violence." *Film/Literature Quarterly* 21 (Jan. 1993): 10-17; Gail Jardine. "Clint: Cultural Critic, Cowboy of Cathartic Change." *Art Journal* 53 (Autumn 1994): 74-75, and Richard Slotkin. "Gunsmoke and Mirrors." *Life* 16 (15 Apr. 1993): 60-68.

<sup>21</sup> Philip French's "Unforgiven" appeared in *The Observer* 20 Sept. 1992.  
<http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,,1050445,00.html>.

and crew of *Unforgiven* gathered in Alberta, Canada, to begin filming in the fall of 1991, roughly seven months after the conclusion of the Gulf War and the beating of Rodney King by a group of LA police officers and about six months before the riots that erupted when an all-white jury acquitted the white police officers indicted in the case. The King beating, which was videotaped by a bystander, and the LA riots entered into a larger national conversation about violence and, more specifically, a discussion of increasing urban violence and the incidents of brutality by police forces trying to fight it.

The events in Los Angeles brought to the fore discussion of the impact of race *and* class on urban violence and police brutality. While the media provided a narrative to explain the riots as a tale of black gangs against white cops and white cop brutality leading to a black riot, urban theorists and cultural scholars familiar with Los Angeles pointed out that the history and the reality of this violence were much more complex than this simple black-and-white narrative. Mike Davis argues that aspects of racial tension came together with harsh economic realities to create the conditions that exploded into rioting when they were ignited by the Rodney King verdict.<sup>22</sup> For example, in addition to higher rates of unemployment in the ghettos, Davis argues that few of the larger retail chains that can offer both jobs and lower prices to consumers are willing to set up stores there. Instead, small businesses in these regions, like family-run ethnic grocers, “provide the necessities of life, daily shopping for people. The economics of it are that they generate a profit, they survive by price gouging and dumping poor-quality products, and

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<sup>22</sup> Cindi Katz and Neil Smith’s interview, “L.A. Intifada: Interview with Mike Davis,” appeared in *Social Text* 33 (1992): 19-33. Mike Davis is professor of history at the University of California, Irvine. He is an urban theorist and author of *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future of Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990).

that tends to generate grievances with customers” (22). Norman Klein also discusses the economic conditions in Los Angeles that detract from the mainstream media’s simplistic narrative of events in “Open Season: A Report on the Los Angeles Uprising.”<sup>23</sup> Klein attributes the uprising to “subtle erosion—declining services along with growing pauperization”; these services include consumer services, police protection, and education (117). In his January 1994 State of the Union Address, President Bill Clinton also acknowledged the impact of economic conditions by arguing that urban crime resulted from “the loss of values, the disappearance of work, and the breakdown of our families and communities.”<sup>24</sup> Davis and Klein present a scenario in which harsh economic realities contribute to the resentments and competitions between people who experience dwindling opportunities and access to resources within impoverished geographic areas.

These conditions can lead to illegal behavior, including violence, and also offer an excuse for law enforcement authorities to respond with repressive measures that exacerbate existing tensions. Police may target, for instance, both those who operate outside the law and law-abiding citizens simply because they share the same race, socioeconomic class, or neighborhood. Davis specifically indicts “Operation Hammer,” a program of pre-emptive law enforcement designed by Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl Gates to fight gang violence, which, Davis argues, institutionalized a “systematic

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<sup>23</sup> Norman Klein is a professor of urban and cultural studies at California Institute of the Arts and UCLA who has written a great deal about Los Angeles. His essay, “Open Season: A Report on the Los Angeles Uprising,” appeared in *Social Text* 34 (1993): 115-120.

<sup>24</sup> President Clinton’s comments from the State of the Union Address were quoted in “Move Along, Please” (*Economist* 29 Jan. 1994: American Survey).

harassment and repression of black youth” that “criminalized black youth almost regardless of socioeconomic membership” (20). Davis argues that the King case “has assumed an almost Dred Scott status, a kind of fundamental test of what black citizenship means. You know what redress, if any, black people possess” (19). When the police officers who beat Rodney King were acquitted, it reinforced the perception that the American legal system was a racist system that left African Americans without a legal voice or legitimate route for redress.

While racism frequently factors into these incidents, police brutality is not solely directed at victims on the basis of race. As Jerome H. Skolnick and James J. Fyfe argue in *Above the Law: Police and the Excessive Use of Force*, police tend to use excessive force against any members of the community viewed as “undesirable, undeserving, and underpunished by established law” (24).<sup>25</sup> Often, these individuals are considered outcasts because of their class. Skolnick and Fyfe describe a “divided” nation:

America is, culturally speaking, two countries. One is urban, cosmopolitan, and multicultural. It suffers disproportionately from crime, gang violence, poverty, and homelessness. The other is suburban, relatively safe, relatively prosperous, and—most important—unicultural. Like Simi Valley [where the King trial was held after a request for a venue change was granted], and the King trial jury, it is predominantly white and middle class. (xi)

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<sup>25</sup> Jerome H. Skolnick and James F. Fyfe refer to the King beating and trial as their beginning point for a study of this problem in *Above the Law: Police and the Excessive Use of Force* (New York: The Free Press, 1993).

These two Americas respond very differently to the police and receive very different treatment from the police; Skolnick and Fyfe's explanation for these differences suggests that they could be interpreted as being dependent on the extent to which the populations of each of these "Americas" participate in "incorporated" society. The authors argue, for instance, that "when police go astray they are often fulfilling the unwritten assignments of those of us who have real and personal property to protect," designated by the authors as citizens of the second America (90). By contrast, many members of the first America have been unable or unwilling to participate in incorporated society, a condition made most obviously manifest in the form of unemployment. The authors cite William Julius Wilson's observation in *The Los Angeles Times* in 1992 that contemporary poor black communities "are no longer organized around work. A majority of adults in inner-city ghettos are either unemployed or have dropped out of the labor force" (qtd. in Skolnick and Fyfe xv). This prevents them from enjoying the positive benefits of work and being valued as productive members of society:

Work is a positive and benevolent instrument of social control. Not only should work afford people a source of income, *a living wage*; work organizes lives by assigning responsibilities. Industrial workers do *not* hang out on streetcorners.

They punch a time clock, raise families, take vacations. [...] Communities lacking in work rely more heavily on police to maintain public order. (xv)

In effect, these individuals' inability or unwillingness to be included in the corporate system not only leaves them with little access to resources but also places them under suspicion of illegal activity. When officers act on this suspicion without just cause, "the

police may create enemies where none previously existed” (114). In Los Angeles, where suspicion of the other had long existed on both sides, the police acted on their suspicions and responded with excessive force, and when the members of the first America felt justice had been denied them by a legal system dominated by the second America, the resulting violence was widespread and costly.

That contemporary concerns about violence had a direct impact on *Unforgiven* is evident in the fact that the film’s director Clint Eastwood asked actor Gene Hackman to mold his character, Sheriff “Little Bill” Daggett, after then L.A. police chief Daryl Gates. Hackman claimed to have researched Gates’s character just enough to discover that he was a man who “believed very seriously in law and order,” an apparent example of understatement given Daggett’s sadism and extra-legal law enforcement practices.<sup>26</sup> Eastwood envisioned Daggett as a sheriff who “has certain radical ideas about law enforcement,”<sup>27</sup> and his choice of Gates as a model for the character is telling. The culture of Gates’s LAPD, particularly with regard to racism in cases of excessive force, would come under fire in the Christopher Commission Report prompted by the public outcry following the beating of Rodney King. Gates resigned in late 1992, some months after the riots, unable to shake off accusations against himself and his department of racism and brutality.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> “All on Account of Pullin’ a Trigger.” Special Feature. *Unforgiven*. Dir. Clint Eastwood. DVD. Warner, 2002.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> The Report of the Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department, informally called the Christopher Commission after its head, Warren Christopher, “found that there is a significant number of LAPD officers who repetitively misuse force and persistently ignore the written policies and guidelines of the Department regarding force. The evidence obtained by the Commission shows that this group has received inadequate supervisory and management attention” (ix). More specifically, the Department “not

*Unforgiven*'s narrative overtly explores violence and its effects on both victims and perpetrators, but the subtext of the film, much like that of the L.A. riots, concerns the tensions between democracy and capitalism that set that violence in motion (though it sidesteps the particularly sensitive subject of race). Whatever the moral or lesson the film ultimately teaches about violence, it does present its narrative as a battle in the Civil War of Incorporation: in Big Whiskey, Wyoming, the film's setting, property rights outweigh human rights, and law enforcement and capital join forces to brutally repress undesirable elements of society to prevent them from interfering with the fortunes being made there.

The film opens with an extreme long shot of William Munny (Clint Eastwood) in the far distance digging a grave on the frontier. Text scrolls over the screen to divulge a brief piece of narrative background:

She was a comely young woman and not without prospects. Therefore it was heartbreaking to her mother that she would enter into marriage with William Munny, a known thief and murderer, a man of notoriously vicious and intemperate disposition.

When she died, it was not at his hands as her mother might have expected, but of smallpox. That was 1878.

Although this information might seem tangential, particularly since the narrative picks up two years later and most of it takes place several states away, it actually operates as a

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only failed to deal with the problem group of officers but it often rewarded them with positive evaluations and promotions" (iv). The Commission also found that "the problem of excessive force is aggravated by racism and bias" within the problem group of officers (iv). The Commission's report was completed in 1991, before the verdict in the King case and subsequent riots. Daryl Gates offers his own account of the culture of the LAPD and its actions in the Rodney King beating and riots in *Chief: My Life in the LAPD* (New York: Bantam, 1992).

prologue that establishes the two most important issues the film will develop, at least for my study: violence and the tensions between capitalism and democracy. The scrolling text introduces the audience to William Munny's violent history, which will be examined in more detail as the film unfolds its narrative. It also, however, suggests the tensions between capitalism and democracy by contrasting Munny's mother-in-law's expectations that her daughter would choose her marriage partner on the basis of her "prospects," presumably economic and social, with the affective, emotional factors that presumably brought the couple together.

That William's surname is a homophone for currency connects him with the Man with No Name of Sergio Leone's spaghetti westerns: both characters are motivated by money rather than by what Christopher Frayling referred to as a "crusading ideology" that morally justifies violence.<sup>29</sup> Both Munny's history and his present situation associate him with the "resister gunfighter" type Brown mentions, one who fights the forces of capital, the government, and the law in their process of incorporation. His past violent exploits include killing a U.S. Marshal and dynamiting the Rock Island and Pacific Railroad. His current exploits in the film set him against a law enforcement agent who protects the town's business interests at the expense of the well-being of its citizens, particularly those most vulnerable. Munny's predicament as an impoverished widower with two young children who is failing at being a pig farmer places him outside of the prosperous circles of incorporated society and compels him to return to a life of violence,

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<sup>29</sup> The credits acknowledge that the film is dedicated to Sergio Leone and Don Siegel, Eastwood's two directorial mentors, from both of whom he learned how to treat violence effectively in film. Siegel directed Eastwood in the first Dirty Harry film, which moves a Western-type narrative into a more contemporary

if only for long enough to gain the money to “get a new start for them youngsters,” as he tells his old friend Ned Logan (Morgan Freeman). Though he repeats the exaggerated story the Schofield Kid (Jaimz Woolvett) relates to him about a “lady” having been savagely cut up and mutilated, this “reason” is clearly secondary to his economic motivation for joining the Kid and enlisting Ned to answer the offer of a \$1000 reward for a revenge killing.

The film’s revenge plot, in turn, is set in motion by a group of prostitutes who are deemed to be property and are, on that basis, divested of any legal right to pursue redress for assault through the system, so they decide to pursue redress outside of that system. Delilah Fitzgerald (Anna Levine) has been slashed numerous times in the face by “Quick Mike” (David Mucci), who was angered when she giggled at his lack of masculine endowment. However, the sheriff, “Little Bill” Daggett (Gene Hackman), who wields a bullwhip as the emblem of his sadism, decides this is more appropriately dealt with, not as an assault case, but as one concerning property rights. Furthermore, he decides to handle the case himself, outside of the court of law, to avoid a “fuss.” Skinny (Anthony James), who owns the saloon out of which the whores work, produces a contract between himself and Delilah “that represents an investment in capital,” and he complains that Delilah, the aforementioned capital, is now “damaged property.” Little Bill fines Quick Mike five ponies and his friend Davey (Rob Campbell) two ponies, which will go to Skinny to make up for his potential loss of income. Strawberry Alice (Frances Fisher), the most vocal of all the whores, expresses her outrage at Little Bill’s version of justice:

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urban setting. Other Siegel films, for example, *Coogan’s Bluff*, share with Leone’s spaghetti Westerns an

“You ain’t even gonna whip ‘em? For what they done? Skinny gets some ponies and that’s it? That ain’t fair, Little Bill!” Little Bill’s response exposes his reasons for denying justice to Delilah: “Hell, Alice, it ain’t like they was tramps or loafers or bad men. You know, they were just hard-working boys that was foolish. If they was given over to wickedness in a regular way....” Alice’s rejoinder here—“Like whores?”—makes it clear that she understands why justice has been denied to Delilah and whom the law recognizes. Resonant with Skolnick and Fyfe’s argument, Little Bill views these women as “undesirable” and “undeserving” members of society, and he denies them justice on this basis, though he is willing to accept them in his town as capital and a source of profit.

Little Bill operates, then, as executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the local government. He does not serve the law but, rather, employs the law in the service of the business interests in Big Whiskey and his own love of power. Carl Plantinga argues that *Unforgiven* depicts “the cruelty, injustice, and violence of American civilization” and “evoke[s] a compassion for a people caught in a corrupt society” (67). This corruption results in the uneven, arbitrary, and even repressive application of the laws of Big Whiskey. For example, Little Bill has effectively suspended the Second Amendment in town; the law is posted as follows:

No FIREARMS in BIG WHISKEY ORDINANCE 14  
Deposit PISTOLS & RIFLES  
COUNTY OFFICE

In spite of this posted law, Skinny has a pistol on his premises, which he uses to get Quick Mike away from Delilah. However, when English Bob (Richard Harris) and William Munny violate this law, they are brutally beaten by Sheriff Daggett. Daggett seems more than willing to look the other way regarding prostitution in Big Whiskey, which is euphemistically referred to as “billiards”; in fact, he refrains from running the whores out of town even after learning that they are collecting reward money and soliciting revenge killers, not out of sympathy for them, but apparently out of an unwillingness to interfere with Skinny’s becoming “the first billiards baron.” At the same time, the repressiveness of Little Bill’s authority is emphasized repeatedly in his use of overkill. The horrific brutality of the pre-emptive beatings he gives to English Bob and Munny leave both men incapacitated for days. The bull-whipping session in which Little Bill attempts to get information from Ned about Munny, a session so prolonged that Ned dies from it, is apparently too brutal to be shown in its entirety, and the audience learns of it as it is related by one of the whores to Munny and the Kid.

The film conveys the corruption and repressiveness of Big Whiskey through *mise-en-scène*: gloomy, oppressive rainstorms provide the background for two scenes in the saloon, one in which William Munny, upon his arrival to town, is beaten by Little Bill and one in which Munny takes his revenge for Ned’s murder by murdering Skinny, Little Bill, and his deputies. In the scene in which Little Bill reveals the “truth” about his being a successful gunfighter in the West to the dime-novel writer W. W. Beauchamp (Saul Rubinek), the rain reveals his incompetence as a carpenter as it pours through various holes in the ceiling of the house he has built, prompting Beauchamp to suggest the

“hanging” of the carpenter, not realizing he is Daggett. Plantinga argues, “As representative of the law, Little Bill also embodies the civilizing of the wilderness, a building process in which savagery and anarchy are gradually replaced by law and order”; given this conventional theme of the Western, the corruption of Little Bill’s carpentry “metaphorically” represents “the corruption of Big Whiskey” (69).

Significantly, Munny, in the film’s early scenes in Kansas, lives as an apparently redeemed man out in the wilderness on his pig farm that seems as though it might be reclaimed by the frontier at any moment. There, he is a father, a man who has been domesticated and saved from a life of drunkenness and murder by a woman’s love. His return to civilization in Big Whiskey marks his return, at least temporarily, to a life of savagery, murder, and the demon alcohol.

*Unforgiven* also conveys the corruption of the Western myth itself through the subplot of English Bob and W. W. Beauchamp. At first, Beauchamp is engaged in writing English Bob’s much exaggerated and fictionalized biography. After English Bob is defeated and proven to be a phony by Little Bill, Beauchamp transfers his loyalties to the sheriff who seems to fit more accurately the description of the invincible Western gunfighter. Later, he relays Little Bill’s “words of wisdom” about surviving as a gunfighter in the West to the real Western gunfighter, William Munny, telling him, “When confronted by superior numbers, an experienced gunfighter will always fire on the best shot first.” Munny responds, “Is that so?” Beauchamp again finds his illusions about gun fighting debunked by a confrontation with reality when Munny reveals the true source of his success: “I was lucky in the order, but I’ve always been lucky when it

comes to killin' folks." The film peels away layers of the falseness of the myth, even as it reforms it in the fantastic shootout at the end in which Munny, alone, outguns the sheriff and his entire posse.

Though the film reforms the mythic gunfighter it has previously deconstructed, it does not present his violence as having a morally justifiable purpose or as engendering a regeneration of Big Whiskey. The Kid does not feel morally justified when he shoots Quick Mike. Instead, he struggles, near tears and ready to sacrifice his share of the bounty, with the awfulness and the permanence of the eye-for-an-eye killing while Munny sums up the taking of a man's life in basely materialistic terms: "You take away all he's got and all he's ever gonna have." The audience never sees the reaction of Delilah and the other prostitutes to the deaths of Quick Mike and Davey, so whether or not they feel satisfied with or justified by this retribution does not factor into the film's ultimate argument about violence. However, the fact that Davey (though he had not hurt her) had attempted to apologize to Delilah by offering her a special pony, not required by Little Bill's fine, certainly mitigates his already minimal guilt and emphasizes the senselessness of his death. In fact, two of the more innocent people involved in the assault and the revenge plot, Ned and Davey, suffer the most horrific and painful deaths. Ultimately, the only purpose served by these killings and the murders of Little Bill and his deputies is a pragmatic one: it earns William Munny the money to become a part of the corporate world as a successful dry goods merchant in San Francisco, a future which is revealed in an epilogue of scrolling text.

*Unforgiven* debunks many of the conventions of Western mythology that viewers would be accustomed to seeing in classical Westerns: it does not hide the realistic, technical difficulties of trying to shoot a man with a pistol from a distance, especially a man who is returning fire, as Little Bill observes; nor does it omit depicting the slow and painful death the victim of such a gunshot would be likely to suffer. It examines, too, the psychological and moral damage that meting out such violence to others inflicts on the perpetrator. Finally, the film sews together the very real threads that unite the elevation of capitalist profit motives over democratic values with the repression and violence of the Civil War of Incorporation. It is interesting to consider the film's epilogue in light of contemporary gang-related violence often centered on illegal "business" enterprises that, arguably, have allowed gang members to earn enough capital to join the corporate system that had previously excluded them in areas such as the music and fashion industries.

*Unforgiven* depicts the imbalance of America's two traditions during the period of the settlement of the West in such a way as to connect that imbalance with the violent events occurring a century later in a very different urban frontier, arguably one created by a similar imbalance in the traditions of the American ethos, democracy and capitalism. That Munny is able to parlay his skill at killing people into a successful business points to the corruption of American society; it suggests that where democracy and capitalism are out of balance, "legitimacy" is reduced to the ability to survive economically, and the law is reduced from the lofty ideal of a system that administers blind justice equitably to all to one that protects only property and property owners.

Cormac McCarthy sets *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), the first novel in his Border Trilogy,<sup>30</sup> in West Texas and Mexico in 1949-1951, several decades after the end of the Civil War of Incorporation that settled the American West. This choice of setting allows for an analysis of the effects of incorporation on the American character as represented in the Western hero and on the American national project envisioned by the founders and perhaps expressed most clearly in Thomas Jefferson's vision of a society run by independent, entrepreneurial citizens whose economic and democratic freedom allow them to participate fully in their government to preserve a nation that serves both their individual interests and the common good. Interestingly, this time also marks the beginning of the decade known for its spirit of conformity as I noted in Chapter One in my discussion of *Shane*. Gail Moore Morrison, in "All the Pretty Horses: John Grady Cole's Expulsion from Paradise," argues that the novel "is infused with the tensions of conflicting and competing cultures (the Anglo, the Comanche, the mestizo, the Mexican, the Spaniard) and economies (the agrarian-pastoral and the industrial-commercial, the legal and the illegal)" (173).<sup>31</sup> The novel thereby eschews the triumphalist narrative of a white culture pursuing its Manifest Destiny. I would add to Morrison's list of conflicts the tension between capitalism and democracy. McCarthy's novel implies that the idealistic national project of forming a sustainable society that balances these two

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<sup>30</sup> McCarthy, Cormac. *All the Pretty Horses*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1992. The second novel of the trilogy, *The Crossing*, was published by Knopf in 1994, and third novel *Cities of the Plain*, was published by Knopf in 1998. *All the Pretty Horses* was released in paperback by Vintage International in June 1993.

<sup>31</sup> Morrison's essay appeared in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, edited by Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. 173-193).

traditions has failed: the conservative forces that drive the consolidation of wealth and power ultimately corrupt and overwhelm the forces that would preserve democratic freedom.<sup>32</sup> By connecting the protagonist's attempts to achieve freedom with the fate of the idealistic instigators of the Mexican Revolution and that of the Comanche tribe, McCarthy presents an existentialist vision of this cyclical process of individuals attempting to create sustainable free societies but being obstructed by conservative incorporating forces and this struggle as the reality of the human condition. Furthermore, the novel indicates that the type of American the individualist Western hero represents has failed to establish himself permanently in the world and that he, like the Native Americans, will also vanish.

Like many classic Westerns, and Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* serves as a good example, *All the Pretty Horses* laments the loss of those aspects of the Western landscape and the possibilities it afforded for economic and social independence due to the progress of civilization. However, unlike *Liberty Valance* and similarly themed Westerns, McCarthy's novel does not ultimately decide that progress and the losses that are the necessary cost of that progress are in the best moral interests of the nation's citizens. McCarthy, in fact, seems implicitly to take to task *Liberty Valance*'s privileging of legend over fact to justify progress. Writing in post-consensus America, the author presents his Western through the lens of a critical and experiential awareness that the myths Americans have told themselves about themselves, the grand narratives of good

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<sup>32</sup> For other commentaries that mention the theme of the failure of the national project in McCarthy's fiction, see *Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American Literary West* by William R. Handley (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) and Peter Monaghan's "At 100, the Western Still Spurs Scholars" (*The Chronicle of Higher Education* 13 Dec. 2002, A12).

fighting evil that grew out of the Puritan image of America as a shining city upon a hill and influenced domestic and foreign policy from the handling of Native Americans to the Vietnam War, these myths often had disastrous, morally corrupt results.

This concern with a specifically American version of the battle between good and evil that underpins the novel acknowledges the structure of feeling out of which the novel was born. In “The Changing Landscape of Violence in Cormac McCarthy’s Early Novels and the Border Trilogy,” Vince Brewton argues that “McCarthy’s eschatology mirrors the rhetoric of good and evil that underscored the U.S.-led war of public opinion that made the Gulf War possible” and also reflected “a significant cultural yearning to be able to distinguish clearly between good and evil” that “made itself felt in the early 90s” (134).<sup>33</sup> John Grady Cole, the earnest sixteen-year-old protagonist of *All the Pretty Horses*, appeals to this yearning in that he embodies the most admirable qualities of the American character; however, McCarthy does not offer this character uncritically, as he also embodies the aspects of the American character that prove most dangerous.

Despite his youth, John Grady exhibits an exceptional skill as a horseman, an ability to survive in the wild, independence, unshakeable courage, high ethical standards, an entrepreneurial spirit, and, possibly the most important skill of a Western hero, the ability to kill his adversaries to protect his own life or what he loves. Cole’s romantic, idealistic view of the world precludes him, though, from recognizing his own faults and recognizing his abandonment of his moral and ethical standards in pursuit of a romantic

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<sup>33</sup> Brewton’s “The Changing Landscape of Violence in Cormac McCarthy’s Early Novels and the Border Trilogy” appeared in *The Southern Literary Journal* 37 (2004): 121-143.

dream. The union of his romanticism and his considerable skills make him both charismatic and dangerous; they drive him to lead those he cares for into a hellish misadventure that leaves all of them permanently scarred.

The novel opens in September, 1949, just after the death of John Grady Cole's grandfather. Cole's grandfather's ranch, established in 1866, was originally comprised of "twenty-three hundred acres out of the old Meusebach survey of the Fisher-Miller grant" (6), which, like the Homestead Act of 1862, was designed to provide immigrants with tracts of land to settle.<sup>34</sup> The elder Grady's death will result in the ranch being sold to oil interests, which points to the ultimate failure of the Homestead Act and similar land-grant projects to nurture permanently the type of population Jefferson envisioned as a necessary component in the maintenance of the democratic republic.<sup>35</sup> John Grady

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<sup>34</sup> The Fisher-Miller grant allowed for the settlement of German immigrants in central Texas beginning in the 1840s and resulted in the establishment of the towns of New Braunfels and Fredericksburg, among others. For history of German immigration to Texas, see *German Seed in Texas Soil: Immigrant Farmers in Nineteenth-Century Texas* by Terry G. Jordan (Austin: U of Texas P, 1966) and *The German Texans* by Glen E. Lich (San Antonio: The U of Texas Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio, 1996).

<sup>35</sup> Trachtenberg credits historian Fred Shannon's research with revealing that "perhaps only a tenth of the new farms settled between 1860 and 1900 were acquired under the Homestead Act; the rest were bought either directly from land or railroad companies (beneficiaries of huge land grants), or from the states," and so the act did not create "a society of small homesteaders in the West." In reality, the Homestead Act "would prove instrumental in furthering the incorporation of Western lands into the Eastern industrial system" and "mocking those who lived by the hopes of cultural myth" (22). Likewise, Henry Nash Smith judges the Homestead Act a "Failure of the Agrarian Utopia" in his chapter on the outcome of the Act, which "did not lead to the settlement of large numbers of farmers on lands which they themselves owned and tilled. Vast land grants to railways, failure to repeal the existing laws that played into the hands of speculators by allowing purchase of government lands, and cynical evasion of the law determined the actual working of the public land system. [...] Railways alone, for example, sold more land at an average price of five dollars an acre than was conveyed under the Homestead Act. When the mechanical revolution introduced steam-driven tractors and threshing machines to the wheat regions of the Northwest, the pattern of small freehold subsistence farms was in danger of being wiped out. The most telling index of this change is the ratio of tenancy. Eighteen percent of the farms in Nebraska were operated by tenants in 1880, the first year for which records are available; in 1890 the figure had risen to twenty-four percent. By 1900 more than thirty-five percent of all American farmers had become tenants and the ratio was increasing rapidly" (190). Smith goes on to discuss the significance of unrealistic expectations regarding the possibility of successfully farming arid lands in the middle of the country in the following chapter, "The Myth of the

earnestly desires to maintain the ranch and the lifestyle he loves, but the realities of the incorporated, industrialized world in which he lives thwart this desire. The ubiquity of the railroads, automobiles, and oil company representatives makes horses more and more obsolete and leaves independent, entrepreneurial ranchers less and less able to operate profitably. John Grady's mother responds to his request that she lease him the ranch by telling him that the ranch "has barely paid expenses for twenty years. There hasn't been a white person worked here since before the war" (15). Her comments indicate that the changing economy also entails a change in American values such that "white" Americans like herself no longer feel that "life on a cattle ranch in west Texas is the second best thing to dyin and goin to heaven," as his mother's lawyer phrases it (17). His mother prefers the livelier and more sophisticated entertainments San Antonio affords her, and since she is the sole heir and her divorce from John Grady's father was finalized before her father's death, the ranch is hers to dispose of as she pleases. That John Grady Cole's values place him at odds with his society is further emphasized by the fact that his girlfriend has dumped him in favor of an older boy who owns a car. His impending separation, following the sale of the ranch, from the family of Mexican employees who actually raised him and the impending death of the one kindred spirit in his life, his father, an ailing war veteran who was a prisoner of war at Goshee, will leave John Grady with little to tie him to his home. Finding his options severely limited in Texas, John Grady sets out for Mexico, hoping that there he will find the freedom to pursue the ranching life he desires.

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Garden and Reform of the Land System" (*Virgin Land*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1950), 189-194 and 195-

John Grady and his somewhat reluctant traveling partner, his best friend Lacey Rawlins, continually find evidence in Texas of the closed frontier and the almost wholly incorporated, industrialized West that they hope to escape in Mexico. The ubiquity of wire fences that they encounter early in their journey prompts Rawlins to ask, "How the hell do they expect a man to ride a horse in this country?" "They don't," John Grady replies (31). Like flesh and blood anachronisms, they wait for trucks to pass before crossing their horses over highways and elicit the dismay of Americans who see them riding through their towns and yards. The fences that restrict their freedom of movement in the United States do not exist in Mexico, and the two teenage boys on horseback seem suited to the more primitive environment they find there. McCarthy contrasts the border towns of the two nations in the reactions of the various citizens they encounter and also in their means of gaining sustenance. On the American side of the border, the boys buy their food in cafes and stores; at one point, when they camp within the sight of a house, the homeowner stands outside and stares at them until they leave. Once they cross into Mexico, they more often encounter other travelers on horseback, and they hunt for their food. When they engage with the impoverished citizens of Mexico, they are shown generous hospitality and even welcomed into their homes. The increasingly less commercial means of acquiring food signals the movement into a more primitive environment comparable to the old West where John Grady can test his ability to survive.

McCarthy develops John Grady's qualifications as a Western hero by depicting his competence in meeting the challenges he and Rawlins encounter on their journey to

and within Mexico. His perceptiveness alerts him to the fact that they are being followed by Jimmy Blevins, a thirteen-year-old riding a stolen horse, apparently on the run from an abusive stepfather. John Grady's ability to read situations and his command of Spanish allow him to negotiate with the various people they meet. His skill with horses earns the boys employment as hands on the ranch of Don Hector, a wealthy *hacendado* in Coahuila. Breaking sixteen wild colts in four days brings him to the personal attention of Don Hector, who promotes him to the position of breeding a newly-purchased American stallion to his wild mares to produce exceptional quarter horses. His forthright manner and his skills win for him the admiration and respect of both the *vaqueros* who work on the ranch and of the *hacendado* himself. Rawlins functions as a foil in this development of John Grady's character. His skills, with people and with horses, pale in comparison to the superior ones his friend possesses, and he must rely almost entirely on John Grady as a translator in Mexico. While Rawlins admits to feeling "ill at ease" (37) and wonders what their families are doing back in San Angelo, John Grady's confidence never seems to waver, and though he is a year older, Rawlins generally accedes to John Grady's judgment when difficult decisions must be made.

Like the Virginian, Shane, or Tom Doniphon, John Grady also fits the Western hero type in his character and his adherence to a strict code of ethics, even if this means placing himself in grave danger. Morrison describes him as confronting challenges with a courage, strength of character and grace that seem to emanate from an unwavering commitment to a set of significant values he has internalized, even

when he might not have been expected to do so, given his youth, his upbringing or his inexperience. (176)

His steadfast adherence to his code of honor contrasts with Rawlins' more pragmatic, situational approach to life, a difference made clear in the two friends' treatment of Blevins.

One tenet of the code is the protection of the vulnerable. Both boys are acutely aware of the trouble they would face if the legitimate owner of the horse Blevins rides were to track them down; the aura of potential trouble that surrounds Blevins intensifies as he reveals that he carries a stolen pistol, which he is very skilled at using, and as he relates his past exploits. Rawlins takes an immediate dislike to the scrawny, troubled kid, but John Grady allows him to ride along with them, apparently out of a sense of responsibility to protect the younger boy. Blevins' instability shows itself further when he loses his horse, his possessions, and most of his clothes because his desperate phobia of being struck by lightning causes him to hide from a storm, practically naked, in an arroyo. Rawlins, exasperated that the boy's irrationality has left him completely dependent on them, wants to leave him; this desire is compounded when the three ride into the town of Encantada where they spot Blevins' pistol and his horse and Blevins expresses his determination to steal them back, no matter the cost. Rawlins warns John Grady, "Somethin bad is goin to happen," and he urges him to leave the kid behind (77). John Grady, however, finds himself unable to leave Blevins in such a vulnerable position, and he says to Rawlins, "You realize the fix he's in?" (79). This code imbues John Grady with a sense of honor and altruism. Nevertheless, Rawlins' intuition will prove to have

been the more accurate guide in this instance, and this fact throws into doubt perhaps not so much the value of John Grady's ethical system as its viability in a complex and corrupt world.

John Grady's misplaced attribution of innocence and vulnerability to Jimmy Blevins reveals the kind of myopia that his romantic, idealistic worldview gives him. John Grady excuses Blevins' behavior saying, "He's just a kid," (56) and he does not seem to weigh very heavily in his judgment of the boy the fact that he rides a stolen horse, skillfully uses a pistol that he got "at the getting place" (47), or has expressed a willingness to murder his abusive stepfather. Again John Grady exposes his idealistic view of Blevins when a member of an encampment of wax workers who feed the three young Americans attempts to buy Blevins from them, assuming he is a personal slave because he is shoeless and half naked. Blevins doesn't understand enough Spanish to get the gist of the conversation John Grady has with the man, so Rawlins enlightens him. John Grady then reacts as though Rawlins has corrupted an innocent child: "What did you go and tell him that for? [...] There wasn't no call to do that" (77). At the same time, as I've suggested, Rawlins' harsher assessment, "Blevins is sick" (169), turns out to be the correct assessment as Blevins, not content with the retrieval of his horse, returns to Encantada, kills a local official, and shoots several others in an attempt to get his pistol back, as well. John Grady's tolerance towards Blevins ultimately comes at the price of making him and Rawlins accomplices to murder.

The consequences of John Grady's idealistic misjudgment of Blevins intersect with the consequences of his pursuit of an unrealistic romantic relationship with the

*hacendado's* daughter, resulting in John Grady and Rawlins being incarcerated at a hellish Mexican penitentiary. Cole and Rawlins' journey through the primitive landscape of Northern Mexico to the patrician society of *la Purísima* seems a metaphoric journey through time as well as space, back to the long-gone Wild West and then further back to the Old World of Europe, with its traditions and aristocratic hierarchies. The prison provides the most savage and primitive landscape in the novel. John Grady's dilemma results from his inability to comprehend the rigidity of traditional beliefs and the extent of corruption that he encounters in Mexico but also from his inability to understand that the freedom he so desires for himself and wants to guarantee for others may come at too high a cost to be desirable to those he wishes, as he sees it, to free.

John Grady finds himself immediately attracted to Alejandra the moment he sees her riding her Arabian mare, and when he discovers that the attraction is mutual and that Alejandra wishes to pursue a sexual relationship, he imagines there is some hope for a future for the two of them in spite of the many warnings he receives. Rawlins tells him that Alejandra is "a fancy sort of girl," and "she probably dates guys got their own airplanes let alone cars" (118). Alejandra's great-aunt, the Dueña Alfonsa, functions as the girl's godmother, and she warns John Grady not to be seen unchaperoned with the girl because it will ruin her reputation. "Here a woman's reputation is all she has," she tells the American boy; "there is no forgiveness. For women. A man may lose his honor and regain it again. But a woman cannot. She cannot" (137). Alejandra refers to John Grady non-pejoratively as "*mojado-reverso*," literally, a wetback, and his situation in her world is that of an illegal alien: he is poor and white and American working on the ancestral

lands of Don Hector de la Rocha's ranch without papers (124). John does not seem to comprehend the precariousness of his situation and ignores the many warnings. He refuses, for instance, to see Alejandra as a "fancy sort of girl," instead preferring to read her character in her horsemanship. Horses reveal the basis of John Grady's ethical system, and it is often through their relationship to horses that he judges his fellow men:

What he loved in horses was what he loved in men, the blood and the heat of the blood that ran them. All his reverence and all his fondness and all the leanings of his life were for the ardenhearted and they would always be so and never be otherwise. (6)

John subsequently attributes "ardenheartedness," a combination of desire for freedom and passion, to Alejandra, and this causes him to believe that he should free her from the restrictive patriarchal world of *la Purísima* and Mexico's wealthy upper class, that if she would agree to marry him, "he could make a living and that they could go to live in his country and make their life there and no harm would come to them" (252). Though Don Hector's ranch is named for, in an English translation, "Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception," John Grady nevertheless underestimates Don Hector's emotional and cultural investment in his daughter's virginity, and perhaps also his repugnance for miscegenation and *mésalliance*; the *hacendado*, out of revenge, turns the two American boys over to the Mexican rangers for the crimes committed in Encantada.

John Grady's romantic view of himself as the hero blinds him to a number of realities that complicate his imagined rescue of Alejandra in the name of love. The first of these involves his best friend, who will certainly share in whatever fate his choices

guarantee for them, though John Grady seems reluctant to acknowledge this. Rawlins does seem aware of this, though, and scolds John Grady, “What I see is you fixin to get us fired and run off the place” (138). Like John Grady, who apparently counts too much on Don Hector’s fondness for him, he does not anticipate the severity of the punishment that will be meted out for this crime, for the boys are jailed at Encantada and then incarcerated, without formal charges or trial, at the penitentiary at Saltillo. Neither does John Grady recognize that Alejandra’s attachment to her family, especially her father, makes the choice to go with John Grady one that involves serious emotional costs and ultimately results in her telling him that she cannot accept his proposal of marriage or go to Texas with him. After being released from the penitentiary, John Grady learns from Alejandra the extent of the emotional tie between the father and daughter. Alejandra tells him that her father had intended to kill him but refrained from doing so because he thought his daughter would then take her own life. She also reveals the great emotional wound she has suffered because of the relationship with John Grady: she despairs, “I didn’t know that he would stop loving me. I didn’t know that he could. Now I know” (252). Although John judges the unfairness of her father’s love being so heavily dependent on her virginity, he does not realize the extent of Alejandra’s need for this approval. He also learns of the power and control Alfonsa exerts over the girl who will not break the promise she has made to her great aunt to end the relationship in exchange for the aunt’s paying the boys’ way out of prison. Indeed, it may well be that Alejandra sees her best hope for a life that affords her some kind of freedom as coming through her

aunt's command of the resources of *la Purísima* and influence over Don Hector, but John Grady cannot fathom such a possibility.

John Grady's wholesale purchase of this romantic dream precludes not only a consideration of the likely consequences and conflicts for Rawlins and Alejandra, but it also stifles the kind of honest self-analysis that might have revealed the less altruistic motivations for his own behavior. In prison, the *papazote* Perez tells John Grady that the Anglo "looks only where he wishes to see," a description not unsuited to the young American (192). Not until he returns to Texas does he recognize his own complicity in his incarceration in the Saltillo penitentiary, when he admits to the Judge in Ozona that he betrayed Don Hector:

I worked for that man and I respected him and he never had no complaints about the work I done for him and he was awful good to me. And that man come up on the high range where I was workin and I believe he intended to kill me. And I was the one that brought it about. Nobody but me. (291)

Earlier in the narrative John Grady ignores or refutes Rawlins' concerns about Don Hector not "set[tin] still" for John Grady's "courting his daughter" (138). Further, when Rawlins asks him if he "has eyes for" Don Hector's ranch as well as his daughter, his response rings false: "John Grady studied the fire. I don't know, he said. I aint thought about it" (138). Rawlins' sarcastic rejoinder, "Sure you aint" (138), highlights the dishonesty he reads there. John Grady is perhaps most honest when he rides the *hacendado's* stallion and speaks to it Spanish:

I am commandant of the mares, he would say, I and I alone. Without the charity of these hands you have nothing. Neither food nor water nor children. It is I who bring the mares from the mountains, the young mares, the wild and ardent mares. ([my translation] 128)

Sounding here like some combination of god and conqueror, John Grady claims his control over the stallion and the mares— *Don Hector's* stallion and *Don Hector's* mares. John Grady never admits to coveting Don Hector's ranch, and McCarthy's decision to leave this fairly lengthy and revealing passage of Spanish untranslated in the novel seems also to allow the "English only" American reader to avoid recognizing this significant aspect of John Grady's motivation if he or she is unwilling to take the time to seek out a translation and thus to read more deeply into this hero's complex character.<sup>36</sup>

This is not to say that John Grady is primarily motivated by greed; the sincerity of his love for Alejandra and for horses seems beyond question, but his love for these creatures is complicated by his desire to somehow possess them, to possess that incorporeal quality of being ardenhearted. Herein lies the paradox: John Grady's love of those people and creatures that exude freedom and a wild passion evokes his desire to possess them and to tame them. "Breaking" the wild horses means taming them of their wild passion so they can be saddled and ridden, so they can be bent to the wills of the men who will ride them. John Grady's decision to attempt to break the sixteen wild colts in four days seems driven as much by his sense of cultural superiority as by a desire to

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<sup>36</sup> Throughout the novel, McCarthy employs Spanish, but it is usually in small, incidental bits of conversation, and the English translation is easily determined by the context or through a character repeating the Spanish phrase in English. The passage to which I refer here stands out as exceptional given

earn the *hacendado*'s attention as he agrees with Rawlins' assertion that it would be better to ride horses they broke than any "coldjawed son of a bitch broke with one of them damned Mexican ringbits" (100). And though it may not have been the outcome he intended, his relationship with Alejandra ends up breaking her of her passionate rebelliousness and her belief in her own freedom. She butts up against the reality of her position as a woman in Mexico and the power her father and aunt have over her. John Grady dismisses her culture's traditions, seeing the freer life he would offer her in the United States as superior to the restrictive one she lives in Mexico, but he does not consider the weight for her of alienation from her family and her culture and the loss of her patrimony.

Every Western hero must face a violent confrontation with his antagonists which proves his mettle, and John Grady proves no exception to this Western convention. In the savagery of the penitentiary, John Grady and Rawlins must fight almost continually to survive, and their inability to pay a protection fee to the *papazote*, who believes all Americans are rich, results in Rawlins being stabbed in the stomach in the prison yard and John Grady being set upon by a *cuchillero* in the prison's mess hall. John Grady, though badly injured, manages to kill the hired assassin. Though the odds are against his defeating a skilled professional killer, his impressive victory here nevertheless seems to be an ambiguous one. While it proves the superiority of his survival skills, it does not rid the world of the "bad guys" or win for him Alejandra or even his reputation. The *cuchillero* is merely a low-level representative of the much larger, complex, and corrupt

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its length and subject as well as the fact that there is no English translation and the context does not

system that allowed John Grady and Rawlins to be thrown into the prison and then allowed a bribe to have them released, forces that are much too large for any individual, no matter how resourceful or heroic, to defeat.

John's meeting with Alfonsa after he leaves the prison suggests that he still believes that perhaps in person, perhaps if she hears his side of the story, she might be won over. Instead, Alfonsa prevents him from telling his story by relating her own story about her relationship with Gustavo and Francisco Madero before she indicates her dismissal of his plight. Her experience has left her cynical about the value of idealism and revolution in a world wherein the "only constant in history is greed and foolishness and a love of blood and this is a thing that even God—who knows all that can be known—seems powerless to change" (239). Her comparison of John Grady with the Madero brothers foreshadows his ultimate fate and also indicates the aspects of human nature that make the forces of incorporation so difficult to arrest.

Alfonsa offers the history of Francisco and Gustavo Madero as a means of explaining her decision to move against him in terms of Alejandra, to, as Morrison argues, "justify herself and her actions across time to her youthful auditor" (186). Alfonsa recalls being "affected" by the fact that, in her childhood, "the poverty in this country was very terrible" (231). When she was seventeen, the Madero brothers returned from educational institutions in the United States and France, bringing with them ideas about democracy and political revolution that appealed to her; she tells John Grady that from them, "I first heard the expression of those things closest to my heart. I began to see how

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immediately point to a translation for the English-speaking reader.

the world must become if I were to live in it” (233). Her attachment to Gustavo Madero began in a meeting of the minds about these social and political issues and deepened when Alfonsa lost the last two fingers of her left hand in a shooting accident. The fact that Gustavo had lost an eye in a childhood accident further united the two in their shared experience of disfigurement. Gustavo and Francisco’s increasingly radical political activity began to offend their patrician friends and family, and Alfonsa’s father sent her to school in Europe, which effectively ended the relationship. The Madero brothers would eventually achieve their goal of establishing a democratic republic in Mexico, but the victory would be short-lived. Less than two years after the election, Francisco Madero would be betrayed by General Huerta and assassinated, and Gustavo would be brutally murdered by a mob.

Alfonsa’s lingering grief reveals itself in her assessment of the senselessness and injustice of Gustavo’s death: “This beautiful boy. Who had given everything” (237). She has concluded that Francisco’s flaw was his “trust in the basic goodness of humankind” (237). Alfonsa no longer believes that idealism can be victorious over the greed and violence inherent in mankind; as she tells John Grady, “The world is quite ruthless in selecting between the dream and reality, even where we will not. Between the wish and the thing the world lies waiting” (238). Alfonsa has decided, then, in the case of John Grady and Alejandra, to select for her niece, to avoid the danger that would no doubt be entailed in a life joined with John Grady. He tries to make his case to her, to explain his innocence, but she dismisses him: “I know your case. Your case is that certain things happened over which you had no control. [...] But it’s no case. I’ve no sympathy with

people to whom things happen. It may be that their luck is bad, but is that to count in their favor?" (240). Alfonsa may see something of her own youthful idealism in John Grady, and she notices in their first meeting that they both have scars, she from her shooting accident and John from an accident with a horse. They meet for their last interview in a room decorated with "the mounted head of a fighting bull with one ear missing" (227), again emphasizing that both of them belong to the community of those whose experiences have left them with scars; John Grady's scars at this point in the narrative include sutures on his stomach and his face from the knife fight in prison. It may be that Alfonsa genuinely wishes to protect her niece and to educate John Grady through her greater experience and wisdom. However, his comment to her, "I'd of thought maybe the disappointments in your own life might of made you more sympathetic to other people" (229), indicates that he interprets her motivation as bitterness.

Madero's history provides motivation for Alfonsa's actions, and it also contributes to the theme of incorporation which I have argued underpins this novel. In 1908, Francisco Madero published *The Presidential Succession of 1910*, in which he argued that General Porfirio Díaz, who had served as President since 1876, should be required to face contenders in a presidential election in 1910. He further demanded that the Constitution of 1857, which provided for the organization of Mexico as a federal republic and provided democratic freedoms and legal protections to individuals but had never been applied, be enacted and strictly adhered to. The election came to pass, but Díaz ordered that Madero and his supporters be jailed and declared himself the winner.

Madero escaped to Texas and from there orchestrated an armed uprising that forced Díaz into exile. When new elections were held in 1911, Madero won the presidency. However, as Alfonso's account indicates, Madero's coalition of revolutionary leaders represented various factions of Mexico's population that had conflicting interests, and ultimately, as Morrison asserts, Alfonso's "destroyed aristocrats, Francisco and Gustavo, were too conservative, not radical enough" (188). General Huerta's overthrow of Madero's government in 1913 inaugurated more than a decade of civil war and assassinations that finally ended with the *Partido Revolucionario Nacional* gaining a monopoly of political power and dispensing with the practice of democratically electing presidents.<sup>37</sup> Morrison judges the revolution, as presented in the novel, "a failure given the apparent changelessness of *la Purísima* and the poverty, corruption and lawlessness of the land beyond" which John Grady encounters (187).

The conjunction of John Grady with Francisco Madero, the revolutionary ultimately defeated by his own idealism, foreshadows John Grady's ultimate fate in the final novel of the Border Trilogy, *Cities of the Plain*. It also develops the theme of incorporation in that the revolution Francisco Madero set in motion in an attempt to institute democracy in Mexico was ultimately overcome by conservative, incorporating forces. John Grady, as a prototype of the Western hero, possesses idealism similar to that

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<sup>37</sup> Morrison finds strong resonances between Alfonso's version of events surrounding the Madero brothers with Stanley R. Ross's *Francisco I Madero: Apostle of Mexican Democracy* (New York: Columbia UP, 1955). Cole Blasier's "The United States and Madero" (*Journal of Latin American Studies* 4 [Nov. 1972]: 207–231) details the involvement of American Ambassador to Mexico Henry Lane Wilson in Madero's overthrow by Huerta. "Mexico," the editorial comment in the October 1913 issue of *The American Journal of International Law*, offers a more conservative view of Francisco Madero and his actions that led up to his assassination, 832-836. Douglas W. Richmond's "Factional Political Strife in Coahuila, 1910-1920"

of the Maderos that values freedom and the character necessary to fight for it. The novel suggests that his fight will inevitably result in failure as well, both because of the nature of power and the nature of human beings. McCarthy offers a subtle metaphor for this human tendency when on one occasion John Grady approaches the hacienda:

On the mornings when Carlos was to butcher he'd come up the walkway through a great conconvocation of cats all sitting about on the tiles under the ramada each in its ordered place and he'd pick one up and stroke it standing there at the patio gate through which he'd once seen her gathering limes and he'd stand for a while holding the cat and then let it slip to the tiles again whereupon it would return at once to the spot from which it had been taken and he would enter the kitchen and take off his hat. (128-129)

The passage metaphorically presents John Grady as an exceptional, and unfortunately rare, being who desires and offers a freedom that most people are unable or unwilling to maintain. Reversion back to the old hierarchies is inevitable because humans, like the cat in the above-quoted passage, tend to seek the stability and familiarity that old traditions and hierarchies afford, and those individuals with the drive to resist this impulse face the continual pressure to conform. Further, after the decades of bloodshed and strife set in motion by the revolution, it is perhaps understandable why many people would have preferred the stability of an authoritarian regime.

John Grady's final adventure in Mexico before he returns, at the end of the novel, to Texas may appear to offer cause for optimism. He returns to Encantada to take back

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delineates the competing aims of the various revolutionary leaders representing the different factions of the

his horse, along with those of Rawlins and Blevins. He kidnaps the captain who executed Blevins and incarcerated him and Rawlins, and although he has the opportunity to kill him, he does not, proving himself to be ultimately unwilling to kill out of pure revenge, as Blevins and the captain were. He returns Rawlins' horse in what is clearly the last meeting between the two friends, and the novel concludes with "horse and rider and horse" riding off into the sunset (302). Morrison sees hope in John Grady's possession of the magnificent Blevins horse at the novel's end in that it "may suggest he now has at his disposal the means and knowledge to bring" an ideal breed of horse "into being on his own terms" (179). However, McCarthy's association of John Grady with the Maderos seems to refute this reading, as does his association of the boy with Native Americans. Just after his grandfather's funeral in the early part of the novel, John Grady rides out on the plain and envisions the Comanche Indians who once rode those lands. The narrator describes the boy as riding "with the sun coppering his face" so that he shares the complexion of the people of that vanishing race, and as standing "like a man come to the end of something" (5). The narrator recalls this comparison at the close of the novel as John Grady is once more described as riding "with the sun coppering his face," and the last glimpse of him that is offered is of one who "[p]assed and paled into the darkening land, the world to come" (302). The final novel of the Border Trilogy, in which John Grady again appears, does not reveal him as a successful entrepreneur in the horse breeding business. Rather, he works as a hand on a ranch that soon will be incorporated into a U.S. Army base. In that novel, he embarks on another ill-fated romantic quest,

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population in Madero's state (*The Hispanic American Historical Review* 60 [Feb. 1980], 49-68).

attempting to rescue a young and epileptic Mexican prostitute from her pimp. Though he again kills his adversary in a knife fight, this time the wounds he incurs prove fatal, a conclusion which seems to confirm McCarthy's pessimistic view of the survival of the ardenthearted American type willing to fight for freedom.

Vince Brewton finds Cormac McCarthy's fiction, and the Border Trilogy in particular, to be cogent examples of cultural products engaging with what I've been analyzing as the structure of feeling of the 1980s up through the Gulf War:

The correspondences between McCarthy's work and his times are part of a larger cultural equation whereby contemporary historical events influenced prevailing cultural attitudes on the one hand, and cultural production on the other, a form of influence manifested in film and literature generally, but felt with equal force in the arena of national media culture, in the campaigns for president in 1980 and 1984, and in the political discourse of the 1980s. (122)

Brewton finds *All the Pretty Horses* marking a shift in McCarthy's writing in that the "heroic is not a part of McCarthy's vision" before this novel, and he sees this change as being grounded in the "reconstitution of the hero" that was "a central part of the cultural rhetoric of the 1980s" (133). While the conservative Republican administrations of this time period took advantage of the void left by the breakdown of the liberal consensus to build the image of Reagan as Western hero and the United States, particularly in the Gulf War, as the unambiguous good guys fighting evil, McCarthy's employment of the heroic is, as Brewton argues, "fundamentally characterized by ambiguity rather than certitude" (132). He credits McCarthy with having "undertaken to tell authentic westerns using the

basic formulas of the genre while avoiding the false sentimentality, uncritical nostalgia, and unearned happy endings that often characterize the genre in its popular forms” (133). Unfortunately, the film version of the novel released in 2000 emphasized the plot’s romance and adventure but failed to capture the gravitas of McCarthy’s moral vision.

In presenting this more critical type of post-consensus Western, McCarthy’s novel can be read as an “Anti-incorporation Western”; however, McCarthy’s cultural critique does not appear to come either from the liberal left or the conservative right. In a rare interview he gave to the *New York Times*, McCarthy’s comments dispel any possibility that he might entertain pacifist or progressive beliefs:

I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous.<sup>38</sup>

Neither did the interviewer, Richard B. Woodward, find an author preaching the blessings of capitalism. Rather, Woodward discovered a writer, “[l]ike Flannery O’Connor,” who “sides with the misfits and anachronisms of modern life against ‘progress.’” The heroism of McCarthy’s protagonist is tied to his desire and willingness to fight for freedom, a fight that Woodward sees the novelist, known for jealously guarding his privacy, himself making in his unwillingness to be a public figure by

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<sup>38</sup> Richard B. Woodward’s interview with McCarthy, “Cormac McCarthy’s Venomous Fiction,” appeared in the Sunday Late Edition of the *New York Times* on April 19, 1992, to promote *All the Pretty Horses*.

promoting or even discussing his own writing, to “incorporate” himself, that is, into the writing industry:

The psychic cost of such an independent life, to himself and others, is tough to gauge. Aware that gifted American writers don't have to endure the kind of neglect and hardship that have been his, McCarthy has chosen to be hardheaded about the terms of his own success. As he commemorates what is passing from memory—the lore, people and language of a pre-modern age—he seems immensely proud to be the kind of writer who has almost ceased to exist.

This concern with freedom results in a novel that is “anti-incorporationist” in a much more fundamental sense than just the political.

The position from which McCarthy critiques American culture seems more akin to what Frederick Jackson Turner called “pioneer ideals” in “Pioneer Ideals and the State University.”<sup>39</sup> Turner defines these ideals as including “conquest,” “discovery,” and “individual competition,” as well as “the ideal of nonconformity and of change. He rebelled against the conventional. [...] [T]he pioneer had the ideal of personal development, free from social and governmental constraint” (271). These pioneer ideals, Turner argued, contributed to the maintenance of democracy in America, for the pioneer “had a passionate hatred for aristocracy, monopoly and special privilege; he believed in simplicity, economy and in the rule of the people” (273). Turner worries, though, about certain evolutions of these pioneer ideals when he points out that “many of the pioneers,

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<sup>39</sup> “Pioneer Ideals and the State University” was originally given as the Commencement Address at the University of Indiana, in 1910. It was later included in *The Frontier in American History*, first published in 1920 and reprinted (the edition which I use) in 1953 (New York: Henry Holt and Company): 269-289.

following the ideal of the right of the individual to rise, subordinated the rights of the nation and posterity to the desire that the country be ‘developed’ and that the individual should advance with as little interference as possible” (273). He connects this disturbing evolution with Alexis de Tocqueville’s predictions about the danger of individualism’s tending towards selfishness in the corporate environment, noting that Tocqueville “saw the signs of change” when the Frenchman wrote,

I am of the opinion, upon the whole, that the manufacturing aristocracy which is growing up under our eyes is one of the harshest which ever existed in the world;...if ever a permanent inequality, of conditions and aristocracy again penetrate into the world, it may be predicted that this is the gate by which they will enter. (qtd. in Turner, “Pioneer Ideals” 275)

McCarthy’s critique of American society centers on the loss of individual freedom and, I believe, resonates with Turner’s concern that as capitalism tends toward monopoly and incorporation little room is left for the exercise of that freedom.

Though I have been equating freedom in my discussion of the novel with those rights and liberties guaranteed by the American tradition of democracy, freedom has a much more profound moral meaning in *All the Pretty Horses*. McCarthy’s fundamental concern seems to be the moral struggle of the individual, and he employs the Western genre here in service of depicting that struggle. In the terms of the novel, morality cannot be imposed from without but, rather, must develop within the individual as a result of experience. To be truly free, the individual must resist incorporation, must free himself or herself from the constraints of tradition and conformity, and perhaps also family and

country, to discover what it truly means to be moral, to discover the nature of the responsibilities human beings have to one another and to honor them. I do not mean to suggest that John Grady is unambiguously moral but, rather, that he does not sleepwalk through life uncritically accepting the conventions handed to him. I have read *All the Pretty Horses* as an anti-incorporation novel in that the incorporation of the West signals the demise of the national project of balancing democracy and capitalism in a sustainable, free society. One source of the fault for that failure rests, I believe, in the nation's adoption of the triumphalist narrative of the Western hero, in its acceptance of the legend as fact, which allowed for the incorporation of the West. Much like John Grady, the United States has often chosen to fit its actions into the type of romantic good versus evil narrative in domestic and foreign policy that leaves no room for a more complex and rational assessment of the problems and situations it has attempted to manage, often with, at best, morally dubious results. The nation's willingness to adopt such a narrative has left its citizens vulnerable to the corporate capitalists who first co-opted that narrative to achieve their own ends. In McCarthy's hands, the Western genre becomes a tool for interrogating that narrative. His novel suggests that any hope of discovering what it means to be both free and truly moral depends on individuals who have John Grady's courage to resist the comfort of and pressure to conform to traditional or popular conventions. However, that process of discovery is impeded by the tendency to replace a morality imposed from without with a romantic narrative that envisions the great moral battle that must be waged as being against external forces of evil rather than between the

forces of good and evil that reside within the individual himself and within the nation itself.

In *The Robber Barons*, Matthew Josephson offers this description of the captains of industry of the turn of the last century:

Like earlier invading hosts arriving from the hills, the steppes or the sea, [the robber barons] overran all the existing institutions which buttress society, taking control of the political government, of the School, the Press, the Church, and ... the world of opinions or of the people. (316)<sup>40</sup>

The end of the nineteenth century, which provides the time setting for the Western, was the historical high point of both the extravagant wealth of the Eastern establishment's Gilded Age and the Civil War of Incorporation being fought over the resources, largely in the West, required to industrialize the nation, thereby increasing the wealth of the industrialists and supporting their lifestyle. The Westerns I have analyzed in this chapter as "Anti-incorporation Westerns" all reflect a keen awareness that the myth on which the genre is based was employed in the service of extending and justifying the process of incorporation, as well as the sense that the process is occurring again in the post-consensus period. Anti-incorporation Westerns co-opt the genre in the service of what Derber termed populist education, interrogating the myth and its conventions to reveal an

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<sup>40</sup> Matthew Josephson's *The Robber Barons: The Great American Capitalists, 1861 – 1901* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934) offers copious historical evidence and analysis of the robber barons' cupidity.

America whose traditions of democracy and capitalism have been thrown out of balance by corporate powers that have invaded and conquered, as Josephson's metaphor indicates, those social institutions that should promote and protect democratic freedoms and balance those freedoms with free and fair competition. Because Westerns capture the story of America's Manifest Destiny, and because Americans are so familiar with the genre and its conventions, they provide an exceptional medium for populist education, for encouraging a reassessment of the nation's progress and the results of that progress.

In the process of relating a narrative that interrogates the myth of the frontier, Anti-incorporation Westerns also confirm the genre's ability to address the contemporary issues that result from the tensions between democracy and capitalism and the structure of feeling regarding these traditions at the time of their production. In presenting its narrative of the Civil War of Incorporation, *Heaven's Gate* reflects the debate about immigration then taking place in the United States and attempts to remind Americans of the vast numbers of immigrants who settled this country, perhaps hoping to create a more sympathetic view of these new Americans. *Unforgiven* joined a national conversation about violence by presenting a revenge narrative that suggests the interrelatedness of inequality and repression in contributing to violence. *All the Pretty Horses* tapped into a cultural desire for an unambiguous hero and presents McCarthy's protagonist's struggle as one more battle in the continuing and cyclical war for freedom against conservative forces that seek to establish a fixed and permanent hierarchy by imposing restraints that will deter those who would compete with them to share in wealth and power.

At the heart of the Western is the climactic violent confrontation between the hero and the bad guy or bad guys who are his antagonists. In the classic Western, this confrontation not only proves the mettle of the Western hero but also brings about some “good,” if not for himself and his good name, then for a decent, hardworking family or community attempting to establish themselves on the frontier, as in *The Virginian* and *Shane*. In Westerns produced during the breakdown of the liberal consensus, the hero or heroes, like John McCabe and the Wild Bunch, are more likely to be destroyed by the bad guys. One mark of the post-consensus, anti-incorporation Western is the ambiguity of the hero’s victory in the battle against his adversary; though he may win his battle, the victory is tinged with the sense that the violence it has cost may not have been worth it or that the battle is just one more in a war that may not ever cease. These Westerns reflect an awareness of the loss of freedom incurred because of incorporation, and they seem to despair that individuals can win out over the powerful corpocracy or even that the type of individuals who, like the Western hero, have the courage and honor to take up the fight still exist.

The parallels between the historical period that provides the setting for the Western and the current, post-consensus period are many. The Western thus remains a fertile genre for cultural criticism. A society is never merely an economic system, and a society that privileges its profits over its concern for people cannot long sustain itself as a democracy. And yet, as the Dueña Alfonsa asserted, greed is the most common and consistent of human emotions and motivators. Perhaps McCarthy’s vision is the most realistic: freedom will always find itself thwarted and assaulted by the conservative

forces of incorporation, and so the battle must continue to be fought, as any gains in freedom will be lost once more and will need to be won again and again and again.

## Conclusion

I have analyzed the Western as a genre that dramatizes the tensions between the two traditions upon which American society has been built, democracy and capitalism, and as one that, as it dissects those tensions in its turn-of-the-century western setting, embodies the structure of feeling regarding issues facing the nation at the time of its production. Tracing it back to the point when the genre was incorporated from its populist, dime-novel roots to become the modern Western in Owen Wister's *The Virginian*,<sup>1</sup> one discovers the repeatedly expressed concern that the balance between democracy and capitalism has been upset and that this imbalance has engendered or exacerbated some other pressing social problem or problems. For example, Wister expresses the fear that too great an emphasis on democracy threatens order, stability, and the position of his class as he indicts immigrants and labor's rebellion against the big capitalists for unleashing this chaos. *Shane* revisits the Johnson County Cattle War that also provides Wister's setting, but Stevens' film expresses quite the opposite fear that big capitalism threatens possibilities for democratic action, and as it does so, it speaks to a concern that corporations, in rationalizing work processes, enforced conformity and limited possibilities for exceptional individual action. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* also depicts the threat to democracy of big capital, lamenting the loss of individual freedom as progress establishes a more circumscribed and regimented way of life in the

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<sup>1</sup> See Trachtenberg's *Incorporation* for a discussion of the cultural incorporation of the Western from its populist roots in the dime novel, especially pp. 23-25.

West; and, as it does so, the film embodies a structure of feeling in which the increasing political and social complexities of modern life evoke anxiety as well as nostalgia for simpler times.

All three of these films, despite the differing structures of feeling they represent, share a basic faith in America's progress. Wister, a member of the same social class as the Gilded Age robber barons, believed that progress would enable the establishment of a new aristocracy based on merit, though he frequently conflated merit with wealth, social position, and whiteness. Stevens and Ford, producing their work during the period of the post-war liberal consensus, expressed concerns about and lamented the losses caused by progress, but ultimately accepted them as necessary for the greater good of the nation. However, during the breakdown of the liberal consensus in the 1960s, many Americans' belief in progress was shaken, and this, in turn, resulted in a shift in the Western from a genre that generally worked to promote or justify the march of progress to one that both highlighted and critiqued the darker motivations and the results of American progress.

As the Western became a frequent medium for cultural criticism, it expressed more openly the recognition of greed as a major motivating factor in the settlement of the West, and particularly the greed of the robber barons who incorporated that region's resources and amassed such disproportionate profits from them. This greed motivates the genocide of Native Americans in *Little Big Man*; it drives the violence in *The Wild Bunch*, and it essentially destroys entrepreneurialism and individual property ownership in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*. Although I anatomized these three Westerns in Chapter Two

in such a way as to emphasize the influence of the breakdown of the liberal consensus upon them, they also fit quite comfortably under the tent of Anti-incorporation Westerns.

I have argued that many post-consensus Westerns, especially those produced since 1980, can rightly be termed Anti-incorporation Westerns because they reveal the settlement of the West and the violence it spawned as a Civil War of Incorporation rather than as the triumphal achievement of America's manifest destiny. *Heaven's Gate's* depiction of the struggle of its impoverished immigrants against some of the wealthiest and most powerful capitalists of the late nineteenth century refutes the suggestion that individuals like Shane and the Starretts were often the victors in the many skirmishes of the historical Civil War of Incorporation. *Unforgiven* depicts a town in the process of incorporation where government furthers that process by employing draconian measures to protect the interests of business rather than those of ordinary citizens. *All the Pretty Horses* allows its readers to consider the ways in which incorporation circumscribes individual and moral freedom. The West these works depict belies the elaborate narratives Americans have historically told themselves about themselves—they present neither a shining city upon a hill nor a nation of independent, civic-minded entrepreneurs smiled upon by God. Rather, Anti-incorporation Westerns indict the incorporating forces driving the settlement of the West for being, instead, morally akin to Yeats' slow beast with a "gaze blank and pitiless as the sun"; they are revealed, in these Westerns, as implacably mercenary in spirit and devoid, for the most part, of human feeling or remorse.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I borrow this phrase from William Butler Yeats' "The Second Coming."

My study of the Western ends in the early 1990s, but the Western did not ride off into the sunset at that point. The mid-1990s saw a flurry of Westerns which related the narratives of Western figures who were not white males. To offer just a few examples, Maria Greenwald's *The Ballad of Little Jo* in 1993 relates the narrative of a female homesteader who lived on the frontier as a man; Mario van Peebles' *Posse*, also in 1993, offers the narrative of black cowboys on the frontier; and John Sayles' *Lone Star* in 1996 offers a depiction of racial conflicts between groups along the borders of Texas and Mexico. Also, several more recent Westerns revisit the project of the "Cult of the Indian" films of the 1950s and 1970s by offering more realistic and sympathetic narratives from the points-of-view of Native American characters or, at least, by depicting a more complex viewpoint with Native Americans as the moral center of narratives in which whites are culpable for violence and bloodshed.<sup>3</sup> Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990) was followed by Walter Hill's *Geronimo: An American Legend* in 1993 and Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* in 1995. Unlike these films that address race and gender directly, *Unforgiven*, though it foregrounded the harmonious relationship between Munny and Ned, avoided interrogation of the less harmonious aspects or race relations in America, perhaps because Eastwood felt it was too hot an issue at that particular moment.

In order to anatomize the Western in a way that emphasizes the tensions between democracy and capitalism as they ignited the Civil War of Incorporation, I have chosen a selection of Westerns that generally conform to the traditional conventions of the genre, particularly with regard to the Western hero. However, David R. Shumway's

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<sup>3</sup> For a more specific discussion of the "Cult of the Indian" Westerns, see Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation*, 366-378.

reassessment of Trachtenberg's *The Incorporation of America* suggests several areas for further study of the genre and its relevance to the culture as a whole. In "Incorporation and the Myths of American Culture" Shumway argues,

Books like *Incorporation* that offer serious and far-reaching arguments deserve to be thoroughly discussed with the object not of voting up or down but of deciding what elements of the argument to accept and what to reject, and how what is accepted might fit into an even larger conception of the culture. [...] Clearly one of the ways in which women and minorities were excluded was the construction of a tradition into which they did not fit. As the diversity of American culture has increasingly been recognized, the older project of characterizing the culture as a whole has largely been abandoned. While I do not favor a return to tradition building, a concept of the whole remains necessary to the project of understanding the parts. (753-754)<sup>4</sup>

Shumway's comments resonate with Raymond Williams' concept of structure of feeling; they suggest that an interesting future project might interrogate the tensions between democracy and capitalism in these Westerns at the point where they intersect with issues of race and gender to contribute to the construction of the more complete cultural conception Shumway seeks.

A number of recent Westerns offer an opportunity to analyze, too, the ways in which the nation's reaction to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 colored these Westerns' treatment of the tensions between democracy and capitalism. Kevin Costner's *Open*

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<sup>4</sup> Shumway's essay appeared in *American Literary History* 15.4 (2003): 753-758.

*Range* (2003) seems to me to address 9/11 specifically in its concern with the differences among justice, self-defense, and revenge. Pay cable channel Westerns have also cropped up in the years after 9/11, like the AMC miniseries *Broken Trail* (starring Robert Duval) and HBO's critically acclaimed serial *Deadwood*, both set in notably corrupt and gritty Old West locations.<sup>5</sup>

John Cawelti wondered in *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel* if the West as literary imaginative space might experience the type of regeneration the South experienced in the 1920s and 1930s, and several recent films suggest this possibility.<sup>6</sup> The New West becomes a site in which to work out some of our most divisive social issues in films like Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), which addresses homosexuality and, more precisely, the effects of denying a legally and socially sanctioned union for homosexuals; and *The Three Burials of Melquiades Esatrada* (2005), which unflinchingly interrogates the human flaws and human cost of inhuman policies dealing with illegal immigration. This film, Tommy Lee Jones's directorial debut, captures much more strongly the profound sense of morality of a Cormac McCarthy novel than did the film version of *All the Pretty Horses*. McCarthy completed his border trilogy with *Cities of the Plain* (1998), which is set in cities along the Texas/Mexico border in the 1950s. Fortunately,

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<sup>5</sup> Alan Geoffrian's *Broken Trail* screenplay, produced and directed by Walter Hill, was the first original AMC movie; it aired June 24 and 25, 2006. David Milch's *Deadwood* began airing on HBO in 2004. Hill, who has directed Westerns in the past including *The Long Riders* (1980) and *Wild Bill* (1995), also directed the first episode of *Deadwood*, which aired 21 March 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Cawelti noted that "[l]ate twentieth-century fiction, history, and film reflected many important changes in the perception of the West. The vitality of Native American and Hispanic voices as well as other kinds of new Western writing hinted that the West might be on the verge of the kind of literary and cultural awakening that occurred to another major American region, the South, in the 1920s and 1930s. In those years a new generation of Southern writers struggled to free themselves from the burden of Southern history and its dominant myths of white supremacy and the lost cause. The result was some of the greatest novels and stories ever written about the American dream and its tragic failure. Perhaps the final decay of the myth of the frontier will inspire such a renaissance in the American West"(112).

his most recent novel, *No Country for Old Men* (2005), which deals with contemporary drug trafficking along the nation's border with Mexico, will be adapted for film and, at this writing, the Coen Brothers have signed on to adapt the novel to a screenplay and to direct the project.

The reason, I believe, that Westerns and films set in the contemporary West are currently experiencing at least a modicum of the kind of renaissance that Cawelti anticipated has much to do with our cultural acceptance of the West as the site where tensions between democracy and capitalism are played out and also the sense, particularly in many of the more liberal and progressive segments of the population, that America embarked upon the formation of another Gilded Age, if not as far back as when Ronald Reagan ascended to the presidency, then certainly when George W. Bush did. This new Gilded Age has been allowed to achieve its full fruition because of the fear caused by the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the second Bush administration's exploitation of this fear to achieve its economic and political goals. Many commentators are making the comparison explicit. For example, in "The New Face of another Gilded Age," Kevin Phillips compared the economic and political realities of America at the turn of the twentieth century with those of America at the turn of the twenty-first century. Confirming the huge disparities in income evident during both periods, Phillips noted that in 1999,

the single largest U.S. fortune, the \$86 billion hoard of Microsoft's Bill Gates, was 1.4 million times greater than the assets of the median U.S. household; that

exceeds the ratio attained by John D. Rockefeller, whose early 1900s wealth was 1.25 million times larger than the median household of that time.<sup>7</sup>

This new period of incorporation has been driven by the “boom” in the fields of technology and finance, according to Phillips, and has been producing results reminiscent of that other Gilded Age:

Certainly the unprecedented size of American fortunes built in the 1990s, public angst about a crumbling stock market’s impact on more modest savings plus revelations of corporate misdeeds are setting up U.S. politics for a historically unduckable (sic) issue: too much money in too few hands, and too little attention paid to the ordinary American.

Another journalist’s assessment of the current Gilded Age prompted him to ask, “So if the well-paid blue-collar jobs are gone, and the creative class withers or moves offshore, if the middle class is pushed down and held there by a smaller, richer upper class, what kind of an America are we left with?”<sup>8</sup> As a testament to the perceived seriousness of the threat posed to American democracy by this new Gilded Age, the writings of a wide range of public figures who feel morally and ethically compelled to engage in populist education, including evangelical minister James Wallis and former president Jimmy Carter, populate the shelves of popular bookstores.<sup>9</sup> Adding his own jeremiad to the list and, in doing so, summoning the spirit of the American humorist who satirized and

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<sup>7</sup> Phillips’s article appeared on Page B02 of the Sunday, May 26, 2002 edition of *The Washington Post*. The article is archived at [www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A8284-2002May25?language=printer](http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A8284-2002May25?language=printer)

<sup>8</sup> Knute Berger, Editor-in-Chief of the *Seattle Weekly*, posed this question in “Worse Than the Gilded Age,” which appeared in the Week in Review section on March 17, 2004 edition.

<sup>9</sup> Wallis penned *God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005); Carter published *Our Endangered Values: America’s Moral Crisis* (New York: Simon Schuster, 2005).

named the first Gilded Age, Garrison Keillor in “We’re not in Lake Wobegon Anymore” laments: “O Mark Twain, where art thou at this hour? Arise and behold the Gilded Age reincarnated gaudier than ever, upholding great wealth as the sure sign of Divine Grace.”<sup>10</sup> If these public intellectuals (and these make up only a small sampling) are correct, we find ourselves in an historical moment when the tensions between democracy and capitalism have again exploded into a War of Incorporation, though this war has thus far been, at least on American soil, a political and economic rather than a civil war. Of course, this time the war is being waged by global, transnational corporations, and it is difficult not to imagine the calculating corporate executive salivating over the oil-rich Middle East as the latest frontier ripe for incorporation, which gives rise to questions about the motivations for U.S. military involvement there. Just as it did in the nineteenth-century Civil War of Incorporation, the West, with its natural resources, fossil fuels, and border issues, plays a central role in the current drive for incorporation.

It is not only the resonance between economic and political realities in the Gilded Age and the early twenty-first century that lend a contemporary relevance to the Western. In *Gunfighter Nation*, Slotkin discusses the Western during the period of McCarthy and HUAC in terms that suggest why it may currently be enjoying some renewed interest:

The Western was a safe haven for liberals, because its identification with the heroic fable of American progress covered its practitioners with a presumption of patriotism that was essential in Hollywood during the [...] “Red Scare.” Because

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<sup>10</sup> Keillor, essayist and host of NPR’s *The Prairie Home Companion*, features a segment about the fictional Midwestern town of Lake Wobegon as part of his radio program. This essay appeared in the 27 August 2004 edition of *In These Times* ([www.inthesetimes.com/site/main/article/979](http://www.inthesetimes.com/site/main/article/979)).

it was safely “in the past,” the tale of White-Indian conflict and peace-making allowed filmmakers to raise questions of war and peace and to entertain the possibility of coexistence without the kind of scrutiny to which a film set in or near the present would have drawn. (367)

Though the House abolished HUAC in 1975 and transferred its functions to the House Judiciary Committee, in the conservative and nationalistic climate that grew up in reaction to the incidents of 9/11, criticism of the United States or the Bush administration and even polemical debate on specific policies and issues are often met with hostility. In such an environment, the temporal and spatial displacement of the Western setting once again provides a vehicle for writers and filmmakers to employ to ask their audiences to consider the complexities of our current national and international situations, provoking, one hopes, intelligent debate and discussion.

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