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"I Heard You Went to Nam": Frontier Mythology, Violence, and the Afterlife of the Vietnam War in Percival Everett's *Walk Me to the Distance*

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Historian Daniel S. Luck has noted in *Selma to Saigon* that "the civil rights movement and the debates over the Vietnam War were at the center of the turbulence of the 1960s" (1). While true, one also recognizes that the afterlives of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War are momentous historical events with which America continues to contend. Several African American writers of the post-civil rights/post-Vietnam era, including Percival Everett, have written works of fiction that continue to grapple with the afterlives of these cataclysmic historical events. Set in the American West, Everett's 1985 novel *Walk Me to the Distance* finds its protagonist, David Larsen, a returning Vietnam veteran, at loose ends. David winds up stranded in a small, remote town, Slut's Hole, Wyoming, where he eventually decides to stay. His decision to settle in the West is as much influenced by his romanticization of life on the American Frontier as it is with his disgust for a rapidly changing country where he feels he no longer belongs. In this essay, I argue that *Walk Me to the Distance* is not only an astute meditation on Frontier Mythology and Frontier justice associated with the early settlement of the American West but also that the novel reveals that these foundational myths and ideas continue to be paradigmatic features of American culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.



Addressing the American Historical Association in Chicago in 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner ended his speech, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” with the declaration that “The frontier has gone, and with its closing has gone the first period of American history” (*The Frontier in American History* 13). However, despite his strident declaration, Turner likely could not have imagined the significance of his words on historical and sociopolitical thought in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The primary thesis of Turner’s essay is that in the nineteenth century the American Frontier’s demands for dominant individualism engendered by the region’s untamed “stubborn American environment” (Turner 13) is responsible for bestowing upon America its unique character. He argues that the American West presented opportunities for economic success and power—a chance for reinvention, regeneration, and renewal—to those Easterners for which these opportunities often were foreclosed. Though Jackson declared the closing of the American Frontier at the end of the nineteenth century due to westward expansion and continental settlement, many of the ideas he outlines in his essay have been taken up by numerous twenty and twenty-first century historians, cultural critics, filmmakers, and novelists to theorize and explain subsequent periods of sociopolitical and economic transformations in American history.

In *Gunfighter: The Myth of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century*, Richard Slotkin, arguably the most significant scholar to write about the American Frontier and its mythologies, maps the American Frontier Myth, its transformations, and its reverberations in the twentieth-century through mass media and popular culture: novels, commercial films, and television shows. His multi-volume work examines hundreds of classical and contemporary popular Westerns and their metaphorical iterations since the nineteenth century to examine how tropes associated with the American Frontier and Wild West Myths reflected the sociopolitical environment of the times they were produced, including the Vietnam War era.¹ As Slotkin and other scholars have contended, myths and tropes associated with the American Frontier and Westerns are not static but instead “are creatively revised and adjusted to changing circumstances” (*Gunfighter Nation* 664).² Several other historians, cultural, and literary scholars, including Susan Jeffords, Robyn Wiegman, James J. Donahue, and Michael K.

¹ Richard Slotkin begins with an examination of Turner’s essay and its importance to American history but concludes that it is Theodore Roosevelt’s multivolume work *The Winning of the West* (1889–1896), which justified white supremacist ideology and American expansionism through Roosevelt’s notion of populist progress, that has most influenced American foreign policy in the twentieth century, including the Vietnam War (*Gunfighter Nation* 22–26).

² Slotkin’s trilogy on the American Frontier includes *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (1973), *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the American Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (1985), and *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (1992).

Johnson, to cite just a few, have produced generative studies on the American Frontier Myth and the Vietnam War from various critical perspectives, including examinations of Frontier Mythology in contemporary American fiction.³

Percival Everett's 1985 novel *Walk Me to the Distance* is a contemporary Western⁴ whose protagonist, David Larsen, is a returning Vietnam War veteran who eventually settles in Slut's Hole, Wyoming, to start a new civilian life.⁵ He soon becomes enthralled with life on what he perceives to be the Frontier and comes to know and love Chloë Sixbury, an older rancher with whom he resides, and a young Vietnamese girl, Butch, whom he eventually "adopts." Although the narrator describes David to be as "unremarkable as he had been when he left" for Vietnam (*Walk Me to the Distance* 3), over the course of the novel, as he begins to feel at home among the Slut's Hole residents, he begins to adopt many of the characteristics one might associate with the Frontier culture one finds in Western genres and the Frontier Mythologies that support them. One of the more salient aspects of these characteristics in *Walk Me to the Distance*, which is also the focus of my essay, is the proliferation of Frontier violence and grammars of violence connected to David's Vietnam War experiences. Additionally, my essay examines in *Walk Me to the Distance* many of the tropes associated with Frontier Mythology and

³ Susan Jeffords' *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (1989) doesn't directly address the myth of the American frontier but echoes its examination as she "elucidates the gendered structure of representations of the Vietnam War in America" (xv) in various genres, mostly written by men who served in the war, and the discourses that formed a constellation of texts around the "remasculinization" of America after its defeat in the war. Robin Wiegman's *American Anatomy: Theorizing Race and Gender* (1995) treats the instantiation and reification of white racial supremacy in the representations of masculinity and race in American culture since the end of segregation. Michael K. Johnson's *Hoo-Doo Cowboys and Bronze Buckaroos: Conceptions of the African American West* has a chapter on Percival Everett's Western fiction. However, the chapter primarily focuses on Everett's 1996 collection *The Big Picture: Stories* and addresses disability as a metaphor for race in Everett's work. James J. Donahue's *Failed Frontiersmen: White Men and Myth in the Post-Sixties American Historical Romance* (2015) briefly mentions Everett's *Walk Me to the Distance* in conjunction with several other Black, Native American, Latina/o, and Asian American writers whose work "allud[es] to the mythology of the American frontier" (171).

⁴ Everett rejects the designation of his novels as Westerns, preferring to think of them simply as novels set in the American West. For Everett, American Westerns follow certain long-established conventions. However, Everett scholars such as Michael K. Johnson generally hold that *Walk Me to the Distance* (1985), *God's Country* (1994), *Watershed* (1996), *Grand Canyon, Inc.* (2001), and *Assumption* (2011) are examples of modern-day Westerns because these novels traffic in the conventions of the American Western while simultaneously subverting these conventions. Everett, however, recognizes that his Western fiction "exploit[s] the fact that there is a mythic West" and that these myths are "really the American story" ("Percival Everett" 37).

⁵ The town's name is a satirical and parodic nod to the Frontier's "virgin land myth," which, according to Slotkin, "insists on the amenability of nature to the works and projects of mankind" (*The Fatal Environment* 214). Further, "the 'pastoral' version of the Frontier Myth, Slotkin writes, 'sees the wilderness as more innocent than the city and a place for spiritual regeneration'" (*Gunfighter Nation* 246). These romantic and pristine designations of the American Western landscape are ironically and wildly at odds with the vulgarity embedded in the name of Slut's Hole's, and, as Michael K. Johnson writes about Everett's Western fiction, "counter[s] idealistic representations of unspoiled western nature" (189).

conventions of classical Western genres: reinvention, masculinity and male bonding, “rugged individualism,” and misogyny, also often associated with violence in American Westerns, to demonstrate how Everett contests these characteristics in his novel through parody and satire that undermine the authenticity of these tropes and conventions while simultaneously reifying these conventions by addressing real world sociopolitical events during the Vietnam War era through a re-presentation of Frontier justice, a term meaning, “[v]igilantism or lynch law,” as Richard Slotkin writes, [which] “envisions the use of private violence” in the defense of a community through “the elimination of criminal elements from a Frontier society” (*Gunfighter Nation* 99).

The Critical Reception of *Walk Me to the Distance*

Percival Everett’s fiction has garnered him numerous literary accolades and an ever-increasing readership over the span of his forty-year career. Like other Black writers of his generation—Ishmael Reed, Clarence Major, Toni Morrison, and John Edgar Wideman—Everett, who was born in 1956 in Fort Gordon, Georgia, was profoundly impacted by the modern civil rights era (1954–1968). While some contemporary scholars cite this era as the quintessential line of demarcation between writers associated with the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 70s and “post-soul” writers of the 1980s and ’90s, I argue that they fail to consider the significance of the Vietnam War (1955–1975) in shaping Everett and other writers of his generation.⁶ As much as critics have attempted to demarcate various political and literary movements since the 1960, Everett’s novel *Walk Me to the Distance*, one of several of his novels set in the American West, engages with the Vietnam War as a frame to examine mythologies of the American West and its connection to America’s long history of legitimated acts of Frontier justice.

Of the few literary critics who have engaged with the novel, French scholar Claude Julien has published two important essays on *Walk Me to the Distance*, “From *Walk Me to the Distance* to *Wounded*, or The Undesirable Appropriation of Frontier Justice” (2010) and “The Real and the Unreal, or the Endogenous and the Exogenous: The Case of *Walk Me to the Distance*” (2013).⁷ Both essays examine the theme of violence in Everett’s novels

⁶ The term “post-soul” derives from African American artist Thelma Golden, who described “post-soul” artists as those Black artists who came after the civil rights era whereby “the traditional meanings of blackness... are too confining” and whereby “new forms of black identity are multiple, fluid, and profoundly contingent” in these Black artists’ conceptions of “race and identity” beyond essentialist ideologies of the BAM era (qtd. in Mccaskill 178).

⁷ Other Everett scholars’ treatment of *Walk Me to the Distance* varies widely in terms of interest. For example, French critic Michel Feith’s essay “Philosophy Embedded in Space: Rethinking the Frontier in Percival Everett’s Western Novels” is a rigorous, general overview of European and American philosophical notions about geographical spaces as embedded in Everett’s Western novels, including *Walk Me to the Distance* (1985), *Watershed* (1996), *Glyph* (1995), *American Desert* (2004), and *Wounded* (2005), to name a few. Derek C. Maus’s study *Jesting in Ernest: Percival Everett and Menippean*

Walk Me to the Distance and *Wounded* (2005). Rightly claiming that violence is a central theme in all of Everett's work, Julien declares that "each is haunted by violence under several guises" ("The Real and the Unreal" 243). In "The Real and the Unreal," Julien regards both novels in terms of fictional world-building in which "two contending forces come into play: 'exogenous representations' ('the real world') and 'endogenous mental contents' (the unreal world, the world of the writerly and readerly imagination and expectations)" (244). Both exogenous and endogenous representations, according to Julien and other French scholars he cites (Jean-Marie Schaeffer and Gilles Deleuze), are critical to the construction of literary creations, which may or may not be mimetic representations of the real world (244).

While Julien's "The Real and the Unreal" is a fascinating examination of *Walk Me to the Distance* and *Wounded*, like many other Everett scholars, Julien's analyses primarily eschew "social considerations" (245) in the discussion of violence in the texts. Moreover, although his essays map "Frontier justice" in *Walk Me to the Distance* and *Wounded* and list examples of exogenous violence in Everett's oeuvre "against others, against animals, against oneself" (245), "The Real and the Unreal" doesn't address Frontier violence and its metaphorical connections in *Walk Me to the Vietnam War* and other real-world historical events of the 1960s and 70s that inform the novel's plot. Nor do either of Julien's provocative essays discuss the profoundly negative effects that these historical events have on David Larsen's psychological trajectory, particularly his consistent turn to violence, which culminates in his use of Frontier justice to mete out punishment for the rape and near-murder of his "adopted" Vietnamese daughter, Butch. Further, Julien suggests that Everett's work is largely ambivalent about the sociopolitical realities of (Black) American life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and that his fiction is "not in the protest novel tradition" because, according to Julien, regardless of his characters' race, Everett critiques the ills of society as a whole: its failure "to live up to decent standards of tolerance, justice, and understanding" ("From *Walk Me to the Distance* to *Wounded*" 201). Yet, (Black) protest fiction, as Everett demonstrates in *Walk Me to the Distance* and other novels, need not center on issues confined to the so-called Black experience. For example, why shouldn't Everett's novel *The Water Cure* (2007) be considered in the tradition of (Black) protest fiction? One could certainly argue that even though the novel's protagonist, Ishmael Kidder, is African American that his race

Satire (2019) considers Menippean satire and humor across Everett's oeuvre "as an analytical strategy" to help understand his fiction's "deliberate ambiguity" (9). Anthony Stewart does not directly engage with *Walk Me to the Distance* in his monograph *Approximate Gestures: Infinite Spaces in the Fiction of Percival Everett* (2020) but turns to French literary-cultural theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to examine the ambiguous nature of Everett's fictions through the "schizorevolutionary figure" (24) as a response to the "constraining expression of convention" that prevents us from "imagining another mode of living, imagining, and desiring" (24).

is subsidiary to the book's sociopolitical concerns. More so, the novel can be read as a critique of Kidder and America's use of legitimated violence and Frontier justice in the interrogation and torture of "enemies of the state" during the height of American's global war on terror. However, this is also a sociopolitical issue that concerned many Black Americans during the George W. Bush Administration. Similarly, I argue, *Walk Me to the Distance*, despite its apparent "racelessness" (David Larsen and most of the other characters' race remains unidentified in the novel), is a socially conscious (Black) protest novel that points to the insidiousness of legitimated violence committed by "concerned" (white) citizens and law enforcement as modern day instances of Frontier justice, as Claude Julien has argued, in America's "national culture of violence" ("From *Walk Me to Wounded*" 207).

As Claude Julien and other Everett scholars have noted, violence is a consistent theme in all of Everett's fiction; however, very few have examined war as an important sociopolitical concern for Everett and a critical backdrop in many of his novels. For instance, *God's Country* (1994) references the American Civil War, *The Water Cure* (2007) stingingly critiques the George W. Bush Administration's abuses of military power during the war on terror, and *So Much Blue* (2017) harkens back to America's misguided intervention in the Salvadorian Civil War of the 1980s. Notably, African American writers from Phillis Wheatley to Colson Whitehead, and even those as wildly innovative as Percival Everett, have always addressed sociopolitical and sociohistorical concerns in their work. As leftist African American writer Anne Petry once put it, "Many a socially conscious novelists is simply a man or a woman with a conscious" (qtd. in Griffin 148). If not exactly the kind of militant activist that Black Arts creatives such as Amiri Baraka and others called for in the 1960s and 70s, Everett is certainly a socially conscious writer. My point here is that as much as many critics, and even Everett himself, have downplayed overtly political concerns in his work, choosing to focus on, as Margaret Russett identifies, his "demanding style and recondite subject matter" (359), Everett consistently wrestles with real-world sociohistorical and sociopolitical events, including issues around the construction and realities of race. Everett's fiction, though highly experimental, brilliantly satirical, and heavily parodic, does what Linda Hutcheon and others have noted about much of contemporary fiction: it astutely interrogates "cultural forms of representation" in which "all art is ideologically grounded" [and] "cannot avoid involvement with social and political relations as apparatuses" (3). Across his oeuvre, Everett suggests that the evasion of history and politics in works of fiction is neither possible nor even desirable.⁸

⁸ My reading of *Walk Me to the Distance* aligns more with Susan Kollin's critical examination of Cormac McCarthy's fiction as Westerns-anti-Westerns [is that the term, or rather "Western anti-Western"?]. McCarthy's violent, sanguinary novels *Blood Meridian* (1985), and the *Border Trilogy* (1992, 1994, 1998), Kollin asserts, straddle the line between the

As a new arrival in the small enclave of Slut's Hole, Wyoming, David Larsen feels like a stranger in a strange land, not only because he is originally from the American South, but also because he is recently returned from combat in Vietnam.⁹ Initially, he finds himself adrift on the outskirts of the sleepy town, literally in the desert wilderness, when he accidentally shoots a hole through the radiator of his Dodge instead of the jackrabbit for which he was aiming. Everett presents this initial scene of violence in the novel as innocuously humorous: a parody of the Western gunslinger. Yet this scene also provides an early glimpse of David's violent impulses that manifest in several key scenes later in the novel. As he drives through western territory with his ".45 in his lap" (*WMD* 4):¹⁰

The game he played went one bullet per jackrabbit as he spotted them along the roadside. He hit only one, knicked its ear, hardly disturbed its stride. Then one of the tall, slender hares leaped across the highway in front of the car. He fired over the hood of the Dart, missed the rabbit, but got his engine. The bullet passed through the radiator. He studied the wound, the afternoon sun hitting the back of his neck. (*WMD* 4)¹¹

David's aim is not to kill jackrabbits for sustenance and survival as homesteaders might have done during Frontier days; instead, for him, taking leisurely pot-shots at jackrabbits from the comfort of his car is merely a game to relieve his increasing boredom. As scholar Sonja Schillings informs us, generally, legal scholars consider

glorification of violence one finds in classical Westerns and the inherent parodic nature of the novels. These novels' complicated relationship to the classical Western genre, according to Kollin, fail to offer "a stable, immutable critique" of the author's novels as Westerns and "poses problems for revisionist efforts to read the novels" monolithically (561). While Everett's *Walk Me to the Distance* deploys satire and parody to challenge the classic conventions of the American Western in the first half of the novel, the second half takes a decidedly less satirical turn. Several violent acts that occur then—Patrick's rape of the Vietnamese girl, Butch, who is seven years old, or the lynch mob led by David, seriously undercut the satirical and parodic tone of the novel's first half. The emotional shift from humor and absurdity to high seriousness and dread thwarts facile analyses of legitimated violence in the novel.

⁹ Significantly, none of the characters in the novel, except for the Vietnamese child, Butch, is specifically raced, including the protagonist, David Larsen. As such, in various works of fiction, Everett challenges long-held narratives about race in America. Moreover, although originally from the South, David doesn't have a discernable Southern accent, which several other characters note. While beyond the scope of this essay, literary scholar Michael K. Johnson compellingly advances that in Everett's "unraced" fiction that "disabled characters and metaphors of disability (physical and mental) ... [indicate] a racial subtext that otherwise might pass as unremarkable" (187).

¹⁰ *Walk Me to the Distance* will be cited as *WMD* in subsequent references.

¹¹ Samuel Colt invented the Colt .45 Peacemaker in 1835. During the Indian Wars of the late-nineteenth century, the revolver became the most popular gun manufactured in the US. In the late-twentieth century the Colt's Manufacturing Company was responsible for the invention and production of the M-16, the standard issue rifle American soldiers heavily used during the Vietnam War. As a wannabe cowboy, David's use of the Colt .45 to kill defenseless rabbits for sport satirizes and parodies his harrowing combat experiences in Vietnam. Clearly, David believes that jackrabbits have no inherent value; thus, there need not be any moral or ethical consideration in their destruction.

legitimated violence to be defensive acts usually in the protection of a community, and that established notions of “legitimate violence against nonhumans” (2) applied to hunters who killed animals for food or protection. Neither of these scenarios apply to David Larsen’s violent actions against the harmless jackrabbits.¹² Moreover, although comical and highly parodic, this scene marking David’s sojourn into the Frontier also echoes earlier American settlers’ attitudes towards “Indian Country.”¹³ In *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890*, Richard Slotkin presents what he calls “the hunter myth” (64) to describe early Frontier settlers’ relationship to western territory. He explains that American frontiersmen were men who chose to emigrate into “the wilderness willingly ... [and] beyond the boundaries of [civilized Eastern] society” (64). Like Twain’s Huck Finn, David, too, seems to disdain the “civilization” and the progressive sociopolitics of the Eastern Establishment. In awe of Wyoming’s stark but beautiful landscape, after a few weeks, he concludes, “He’d found a home. He liked the people and he loved the terrain” (*WMD* 37). Although in large measure parodic, David’s character fits Slotkin’s description of “the [frontier] hunter-hero” as a man who is “an individualist” and who represents, to the establishment, “social outcasts, rebels or renegades” (*The Fatal Environment* 64). Literary scholar Christine Bold concurs in remarking that the Western genre transformed in the contemporary era, “as modern corporatism” arose seemingly “erasing traditional values” and that “popular fiction came to emphasize the elegiac qualities of a West” that prized “individualism [that had] been destroyed by powerful social forces of modern life” (xii). David’s antipathy towards his sister, an antiwar protester and Vietnam veteran’s advocate living in Savannah, Georgia, encompasses his disdain for the country’s sociopolitical turmoil and its transformation of “America values” that he associates with the Eastern Establishment.

After “killing” his car, David later learns it will take “two weeks” until a replacement radiator arrives (*WMD* 5). Until his car is repaired, he is stuck in Slut’s Hole. Although dejected, he is immensely curious about the town’s provocative name and its history. Mitch, the service station attendant, humorously tells him the town’s name was established long ago by “‘cowboys ... because everybody comes here and then they leave. That’s the story anyway,’ Mitch says, because ‘the name ain’t never been changed,’”

¹² A broader discussion of legitimate violence and animal rights is beyond the scope of my essay. Note, however, that in 1966, at the time of the Vietnam War, Lyndon Baines Johnson signed into law the Animal Welfare Act, which provided very limited protections for animals used in research, exhibitions, and transport. Moreover, The Endangered Species Act became federal law in 1973, two years before the end of the Vietnam War.

¹³ Slotkin and others have written extensively about the confluences between nineteenth century actualities and mythologies of the Western Frontier and America’s New Frontier Cold War policies in the 1960s and 70s, which the Kennedy Administration implemented to contain and defeat Communism in Asia and the Caribbean. See *Gunfighter Nation* 1–3.

insinuating the town's historical relationship with the Wild West and its infamous brothels (*WMD* 5).¹⁴ In fact, David is no stranger to having sex with prostitutes during his tour of duty in Vietnam and when he returns home to the States. After an awkward date and uninspired sex with Sarah Newman, an advocate for Native Americans who chides David for having volunteered to enter the service to “go fight,” as Sarah puts it, “in that dreadful war” (*WMD* 23):

He kept thinking that he had felt better, more satisfied, after his bout with the whore in Georgia. There may not have been passion in that bed, either, but at least he had been after his money's worth, at least he had come.¹⁵ He remembers how he had enjoyed holding a woman with some flesh on her bones, so unlike the skeletal whores he had been with in Nam. (*WMD* 27).

In considering David and Sarah's argument about the ethics and morality of the Vietnam War, Mitch's crude joke about the origin of the name of Slut's Hole's supplements a history of sexist and misogynist discourses that have helped to define American manhood and masculinity in the popular imagination via perpetuated myths about the American West. Mitch's joke symbolizes the Frontier mindset of (white) masculine power as an antidote to the feminization of American masculinity after the country's defeat in Vietnam. The town's name reduces women purely to sexual objects (their genitalia) and nothing more. In the wake of the Women's Rights Movement of the 1960s and 70s, the town's name signifies upon real and imagined ways women were viewed during the settlement of the American West. Moreover, inherent in Mitch's explanation of the town's name is an ironic commentary upon the sexist and misogynistic way the men of Slut's Hole (and American society at large) in the twentieth (and indeed twenty-first) century continue to view women. Further, it is a commentary on the existential threat that many men believed the Women's Rights Movement presented, as James J. Donahue has remarked in *Failed Frontiersmen: White Men and Myth in Post-Sixties American Historical Romance*, to the “hegemonic masculinity that came out of the

¹⁴ Sex workers feature prominently in *Walk Me to the Distance*. At Mitch's repair shop, Craig Hraboy, a supervisor for the “STATE DEPT. OF ROADS” (*WMD* 14) offers David a job as an attendant at a remote rest stop along the highway. One of David's coworkers, Cecile, is “a legend” and a prostitute who “runs a hooking business” (*WMD* 31) out of the rest stop. Further, David becomes foolishly involved with, Olivia, a (perhaps underage) prostitute whom he and Sixbury hire to have sex with Sixbury's mentally disabled adult son, Patrick, which goes nowhere. David is not necessarily in love with Olivia but rather feels sorry for her, and like the hero in a classic Western, he wants to save her from life of vice—a life she has no interest in giving up. His relationship with Olivia also ends badly.

¹⁵ David's off-color thoughts echo Mitch's vulgar joke recounting how Slut's Hole got its name. Like the early frontiersmen Mitch refers to in his joke, during uninspired sex with Sarah, David comes and then immediately leaves.

1960s” (34), as women found themselves on the frontlines of the civil rights struggle, the anti-war protests, and the demand for gender equality.¹⁶

Yet, Everett’s depiction of toxic masculinity and patriarchy in *Walk Me* is not so clear-cut in David’s case. During his evening out with Howard, May, and Sarah, in the middle of their argument, a violent altercation occurs between “a man [who] had come in and found his wife at the bar surrounded by miners” (WMD 25). The woman refuses to leave the bar with her husband, and as his threats escalate, she runs off screaming. Gun in tow, he wounds her “in the shoulder [and] fired five more shots before anyone reacted” (WMD 25). What Everett presents here is a classic trope found in many Western genres, the barfight and its requisite outlaw violence and Frontier justice: Quickly, “several miners covered and subdued him. They broke his hand and took the pistols. They kicked him in the face and ribs and punched him in the back of the head” (WMD 25). While Howard momentarily hangs back with the women, David comes to the rescue and prevents the men from killing the shooter. His “white hat” moment demonstrates not only his rugged individualism (he doesn’t participate in beating up the shooter) but also his sense of decency and care. While Howard administers rudimentary medical aid to the two women who were shot, one of whom later dies, David helps to save the other woman’s life.

While it may appear in this scene that David symbolizes law and order, later in the novel, in another bar fight, it is David who is directly involved in a violent altercation. He, along with a reluctant Howard, goes to Casper in search of a young prostitute, Olivia, with whom David seems to have fallen in love.¹⁷ He doesn’t like that she is a prostitute, and in a wildly romantic gesture, he hopes to convince her to give up her unwholesome ways. He doesn’t find Olivia at the Rodeo Tavern, where “[m]en cussed at the bar, reached for women, got their faces slapped and laughed” (WMD 65); instead, he finds a whole lot of trouble when he gives “a whore” (WMD 65) money for information on Olivia’s whereabouts. The woman takes his twenty dollars, but no information is forthcoming. When David demands that she return his money, she refuses. A full-fledged bar brawl ensues, during which he and Howard face off against a mob of miners

¹⁶ In *Failed Frontiersmen: White Men and Myth in the Post-Sixties American Historical Romance* (2015), James Donahue makes an important point that in the 1960s a resurgence of interest in “frontier mythology was working similarly to the developing narrative of the American soldier” (34) as different interest groups began directly challenging both the foundational national mythology” and its accuracy (34).

¹⁷ In her study *The Remasculinization of America*, Susan Jeffords analyzes the transformation of the sidekick role in classic Westerns into the relationship between law enforcement officers in “buddy films” of the 70s, 80s, and 90s. I would argue that in *Walk Me* Howard Dale also represents a revisionist iteration of the cowboy sidekick that one often finds in Western genres: The Lone Ranger and Tonto, Hopalong Cassidy and Windy, Roy Rogers and Cookie, and Tom Mix and Fuzzy, to name just a few.

(WMD 65). Subsequently, “[t] he faded out hooker ran over and clawed at David’s shirt, talking about *her* money. David hit her again. Howard grabbed his arm and ... they ran down one block and around the corner. Simple” (WMD 67).

The narrator’s declaration that the two friends’ escape from the bar fight was “simple” is an understatement. The implications of the fight are far more complex; for as I want to suggest, David’s violent tendencies manifest once again in this scene. In fact, he later admits to Howard: “You know I really enjoyed hitting that bitch” (WMD 67), and he mirthfully contemplates the loss of his money: “The twenty dollars were gone. He laughed. The punches were worth it” (WMD 67). In terms of Frontier Mythology, David seems to revel in this act of violent lawlessness. That he takes pleasure in striking a woman, someone he views as a commodity rather than a human being, demonstrates that his behavior draws increasingly on tropes that we find in classic Westerns. Furthermore, social and gender differences greatly influence his desire to exert his virility, and I advance that they are at the heart of his inability to make deep personal connections with women other than Chloë Sixbury, his landlord.¹⁸ As Susan Jeffords theorizes about gender, the Vietnam War, and the shifting terrain of blame for America’s loss in the conflict, she concludes that eschewing the feminine in Vietnam War narratives “establish[es] a centralized masculine unity,” as society came to blame America’s loss of the war in Vietnam squarely on the shoulders of women and the qualities that men believed they exemplified: “deceptiveness, indecisiveness, and weakness” (147). Importantly, the bar fight further cements the masculine bond between David and Howard, another key trope in Western genres.

David is quickly enthralled by life on the New Frontier, but he is not able to completely escape the problems of the modern world. Even on an isolated ranch in Wyoming, he can’t escape the war. Like the male characters in the novel, Sixbury is also curious about David’s tour of duty in Vietnam, primarily because her deceased husband was a soldier “in the Second War,” and, as she surmises about David, “was with lots of women over there” (WMD 8). Thus, David reminds Sixbury of her late husband, whom she dearly misses, and soon comes to view him as the “normal” son she never had. Meanwhile, Sixbury’s intellectually disabled adult son, Patrick, begins to harbor feelings of jealousy

¹⁸ In *Walk Me to the Distance*, Everett does not depict Sixbury as traditionally feminine. She’s not at all motherly towards her mentally disabled son, Patrick, and she has very little compassion for weakness in others. David admires her for her no nonsense toughness: “He was impressed by this old woman, comfortable with her. She was hard and honest, solid. He looked out over the rolling grass, the buttes in the distance, and pictured it all covered in snow” (WMD 13). In addition, even though elderly and disabled, she manages the ranch by herself. Later in the novel, the narrator also describes Joshua Lowe, a local rancher and father-figure for David who participates in Patrick Sixbury’s lynching, as “solid” (WMD 133), which situates all the townspeople in the novel, except for Patrick, as insiders.

towards David, a stranger whom he feels has insinuated himself into their lives.¹⁹ One morning during a torrential rainstorm, Sixbury asks him to accompany her and Patrick to a local livestock auction in the nearby town of Ross. She orders Patrick, who's dressed in a yellow rain slicker, to ride in the open truck bed during the downpour. This is where David first witnesses Sixbury's resentment towards her son. As far as she's concerned, she later tells David, "I have no children" (*WMD* 12).

Her unmotherly behavior towards her son dehumanizes him and makes him feel even more bitter towards David. Shortly after arriving at the livestock auction, a group of bullies attack Patrick, call him an "idiot" and trip him so that he falls in the dirt scattered with "livestock shit" (*WMD* 11). Although older and much stronger than the bullies, Patrick does not fight back but tries to walk away; yet once again, they knock him to the ground. However, like a hero out of a classic Western, David intervenes, "stepping between Patrick and the kid and knocking some of the shit off Patrick's slicker" (*WMD* 11). His calm but menacing demeanor is enough to turn the bullies away, and it is illustrative of his Frontier temerity, dominance, and virility. Patrick's timidity against the bullies suggests that this was not his first confrontation with them, and it undermines any remaining notions about his masculinity stereotypically associated with Frontier machismo.²⁰ That Patrick dons a yellow slicker is symbolically significant to our understanding of his otherness, his "feminization," in conjunction with his mental disability. Today, as in the Old West, being called "yellow" is an epithet used to deride a man's virility.²¹ Because he does not occupy a position of authority, unlike David, his victimization frames him within a stereotypical "feminine position" of submissiveness outside of heterosexual masculinity and tropes associated with Frontier Mythology.²² David's heroic rescue of him and his insinuation into their lives, however, has a galling effect on Patrick. He sees David as a rival and as a threat to his ambivalent position as paterfamilias on the Sixbury homestead. Indeed, as the narrative progresses, the novel's satirical tone dramatically shifts and events take a much more sinister turn.

¹⁹ That some of the other characters in the novel refer to Patrick as the "retarded man" (*WMD* 127) reveals their prejudice and ignorance, and importantly, the modifier "retarded" dehumanizes Patrick and their view of him as a "real man."

²⁰ David's status as a returning Vietnam War veteran automatically lends him a position of authority amongst the townspeople.

²¹ About the Vietnam War and the crisis of American masculinity, historian Robert O. Self asserts, that "the war became a stage on which drama of a weakened and incoherent manhood played out" (qtd. in Ireland n.p.).

²² During the altercation, one of the bullies demands that Patrick "tell us what it's like" (*WMD* 11). Although Patrick doesn't respond, David later discovers what the young men ostensibly already know: Patrick regularly has sex with sheep. Thus, Patrick practices outlaw sexuality, which is condemned in the Bible: any person who has sexual relations with animals must be put to death, along with the animal. (See Leviticus 20:15-16 and Exodus 22:19).

In *Gunfighter Nation*, Richard Slotkin maps American society's interest in Western genres and Frontier Mythology at the beginning of the Cold War, a fascination which was to surge in the Vietnam War era. "The failure of the war in Vietnam," writes Slotkin, "provided a frame in which alternative approaches to the political and ideological problems of the Cold War era could be imaginatively entertained" (347). One of the political and ideological problems that Everett queries in *Walk Me* is the apparent dissolution of the nuclear family during the Vietnam era due to feminist demands and, as Robin Wiegman asserts in *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender*, "its political commitment to patriarchal disruptions" (167). Traditional family configurations are fractured in the novel. David is twenty-six years old and unmarried, and he is alienated from his only sibling, Jill, who is adamantly against the war and his voluntary participation in it. However, the arrival of Butch, a young, orphaned Vietnamese girl, into their lives gives David and Sixbury a new sense of purpose. Their ad-hoc family, a recurrent motif in Everett's fiction beginning with *Suder*, becomes a kind of parodic analogue to the all-American nuclear family.²³ David and Sixbury become the child's primary caretakers while Patrick is pushed further outside of familial and communal bonds. As tension between the two men intensifies, twice in the novel David ominously awakens in the night, fearing, "Something awful would happen" (*WMD* 27, 47) to disrupt his new-found contentment.

Butch's arrival on the ranch instigates a series of violent incidents that both undermine and reinscribe classical tropes in American Westerns and Frontier Mythologies within the frame of the war in Vietnam.²⁴ David now has the family for which he has apparently longed. His happiness, however, is short-lived. Years of anger and frustration loosens Patrick's murderous rage, and he absconds with Butch, taking her further into the wilderness to an abandoned, remote cabin near an "old sheep camp" (*WMD* 120) where he subsequently rapes the little girl and attempts to murder her. In classic cowboy fashion, David gathers a posse of armed men to search for the child. The very formation of a posse indexes Old West Frontier justice in the twentieth century but additionally generates another instance of male bonding in the novel.

²³ One day while working at the rest stop, "out of a van came a crowd of Vietnamese people." A woman, Butch's mother, "looked at David's G. I. jacket," and tells David that he is the child's father. He denies paternity and hides in the men's room until he hears the van leave. Believing himself safe, he discovers the abandoned child "sitting on his desk." He reluctantly takes Butch to the ranch and introduces her to Sixbury who immediately falls in love with her. State agencies and law enforcement are not particularly interested in locating her real parents. Thus, she is left in David and Sixbury's care (*WMD* 93-102).

²⁴ Butch is abandoned by her mother at the rest stop where David works. Unable to pronounce her birth-name, he nicknames her Butch. Her gender and renaming parodies Frontier Mythologies around manhood and masculinity.

This is what Susan Jeffords refers to as “remasculinization” in the Vietnam era in which “the groundwork for regenerating masculinity [at that time] is the mythos of masculine bonding” as a “‘separate world’... depending on the exclusion of women and the feminine” (*Remasculinization* 168). These men are self-fashioned representatives and defenders of the community and by extension “the American way of life.” They come to believe that their subsequent murder of Patrick is an ethical and moral response to violations against the community as a whole. They are a band of brothers in the service of (New) Frontier justice. What’s more, as Jeffords concludes, male bonding in Vietnam War narratives “collectivity fulfills... structural [patriarchy] in Vietnam representation” and “a denial of difference amongst soldiers” (*Remasculinization* 59) regardless of extrinsic factors such as race and class, and they do so by eschewing the feminine. As such, symbolically, Patrick’s relegation to the wilderness, outside of civilization, marks him further as (feminized) other.

The lynch party’s search for Patrick is a metaphorical script Everett adroitly uses to merge tropes inherent in Western genres with those associated with Vietnam War discourses. The men’s search-and-rescue mission for Butch is just as much a search-and-destroy-mission to eliminate Patrick, who, like the guerilla tactics used by the Viet Cong to evade American troops, goes underground.²⁵ When the posse finds and subdues Patrick, they discover that he has brutally raped and attempted to murder Butch. In this disturbing scene, Everett enmeshes acts of violence that mark both outlaw (sexual) transgressions often associated with the settlement of the American West and some American troops’ outlaw (sexual) transgressions against Vietnamese women during the Vietnam War.²⁶

²⁵ What makes this correspondence a bit more complicated, though, is that if this scenario had taken place in Vietnam, regardless of her age and noncombatant status, there would not be as much of a distinction between “hostiles” and “friendlylies,” as it was not unheard of for the Viet Cong to use civilians, including children, to target American troops. However, on American soil, despite being Vietnamese, the community loves and accepts Butch while it comes to view Patrick, who is an American, as the enemy. This turn of events demonstrates the community’s generous tolerance and brutal intolerance.

²⁶ I would also suggest Everett frames Patrick’s abduction of Butch as a rearticulation of tropes found in early-American captivity narratives such as Mary Rowlandson’s 1682 *Sovereignty and the Goodness of God: Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, which chronicles her eleven-week captivity in the New England wilderness by the Wampanoag, Narragansett, and Nashaway tribes during the King Philip’s War (1675–1676). Of course, Butch being a young Vietnamese girl (racially) revises American Frontier Myths and captivity narratives. As Slotkin writes, “The hero of the captivity narrative” [is usually] a White woman or (minister) captured by Indians during a ‘sav- age war.’ The (white) captive symbolizes the values of Christianity and civilization that are imperiled in the wilderness war” (*Gunfighter Nation* 14). Notably, in his foundational text *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1651), William Bradford recounts the conviction and hanging of Thomas Granger or Graunger in 1642, the first juvenile to be executed in the American colonies for bestiality.

However, despite Patrick's reprehensible actions, Everett problematizes how we might think about the lynch party mission of justice, which, like their quarry operates outside of the law within the framework of what they believe to be legitimated violence. In *Enemies of All Humankind: Fictions of Legitimate Violence* (2017), Sonja Schillings' analysis of important legal concepts such as "*hosti humani generis* (the enemy of all humankind)" (3), legal fictions, and legitimated violence provides suggestive ways for analyzing violence in *Walk Me*. She writes that the concept of *hosti humani generis* is "a special kind of legal fiction [in which] the law adapts to contexts it had not previously considered when unprecedented conflicts arise" (3). She further adds that legitimated violence is most often viewed as "defensive" violence imposed to protect a "community" or "something [else] worthy of protection" (2). She declares:

An act of legitimate violence does not begin but ends conflict; it simply reacts to a violent attack that transgresses a boundary, puts a stop to the attack, and thus protects the boundary and everything "behind" it ... legitimate violence tends to refer to overarching values rather than to concrete interests. (2)

Thus, considering Schillings' definition, David's earlier admission of sexual violence against a Vietnamese prostitute during the war can't clearly be deemed legitimated violence. Unlike his violent altercation with the prostitute at the Rodeo Tavern in Cheyenne, the Vietnamese prostitute (seemingly) poses no threat to David. Rather, his vicious sexual encounter with her appears to have been triggered by his fear of previously having almost been killed in combat by the Viet Cong. David's sexual dominance over her is both an act of revenge and is also illustrative of what Susan Jeffords defines as "remasculinization"—"a revival of the images, abilities, and evaluations of men and masculinity" in Vietnam War narratives (xii). Moreover, I argue, the prostitute, who goes unnamed, also serves as a synecdoche for "the enemy," the Viet Cong, who for David constitutes the "*hosti humani generis* (the enemy of all humankind)" (Schillings 3). He takes out his frustration and rage upon her body, just as Patrick takes out his frustration and rage upon Butch. Importantly, though, Schillings further claims that legal fictions and their intended legitimated violence are often put in place "to bridge the gap between the familiar and the unfamiliar" (3) until laws can be effectuated to cover unprecedented situations. However, *Walk Me to the Distance* complicates, at least in part, these theories regarding legal fictions because Patrick's lynching takes place in the twentieth century, the Vietnam era, long after the establishment of laws to deal with his criminal behavior. Having been enthralled by Frontier Mythology, David and the rest of his posse ignore legal avenues for bringing Patrick to justice. Once they capture him, they lynch him with very little thought and hide the body. Thus, they embrace

Frontier Mythologies of what Slotkin calls a “fantasy-West” (*Gunfighter Nation* 215) in which vigilantism is sanctioned under the guise of protecting the community.

Much like American soldiers who transgressed combat “norms” in Vietnam, the men in the posse are further bonded by the secret of their crime. And beyond the effect of male bonding, as Ersula J. Ore notes about the sociopolitical work that lynching enables, “[l]ynching was a call to communion, a performance of political affiliation akin to citizenship in the way that it distinguished those who belonged from those who did not” (21). Patrick’s otherness denies him fraternal belonging, citizenship, and, ultimately, humanity, which—except for Howard Dale, who objects and leaves before the murder—aids the men in justifying their actions. Rather than fear or remorse, David feel at peace with Patrick’s murder. With Patrick’s death, Sixbury amends her will, and David ostensibly replaces him as “rightful” paterfamilias and heir to Sixbury’s money and property. As Schillings argues in *Enemies of All Humankind*, the contestation between the paterfamilias and the invader, “who maliciously violates the bodies and destroys the lives of the innocent” (158) in a democratic state, determines the legitimacy of the paterfamilias’ position in society only through his agency in protecting his family from the enemy.

However, rather than read Patrick’s death simply in terms of his utter abnegation and defeat, one could also read his actions as an effective act of *temporary* agency, as he both reenforces and subverts the stereotype of the ineffectual, emasculated “retarded man” (*WMD* 127) through the very act of insurgency against the Slut’s Hole community. Regardless, soon word appears to have gotten around about Patrick’s death, and the entire community appears to support the posse’s actions by remaining silent. Joshua Lowe reassures David that the fact that he even considers the moral and ethical dimensions of Patrick’s murder indicates that he is indeed a “good man” (*WMD* 206). Further, during church service, the Lutheran minister’s sermon also seems to support the lynchers’ vigilantism as virtuous and morally justified:

“There are bad things,” he said, “and there are evil things in this world. But a bad thing need not be evil. A bad thing need not be wrong. Many a right action is unpleasant. God judges us as much by our intentions as by our deeds. Here, in this harsh environment, we must be men. Even our women must be men.” (*WMD* 136)

The minister’s observation that “even our women must be men” suggests that the severity of life the Frontier makes few allowances for what might be perceived as weakness, regardless of gender. His troubles seemingly over, for a while David can relax. Yet, Everett does not let him completely off the hook. His sense of closure is not complete even as the FBI ends its half-hearted investigation into Patrick’s disappearance, leaving

him to wonder whether or when the case might be reopened. He also has to contend with the acute possibility of Sixbury's death due to her ill-health or suicide. Moreover, there is the distinct possibility that state agencies will take more of an interest in David's unsanctioned "adoption" of Butch. He wonders "[i]f Sixbury died, what would happen to the child? They'd take her from him" (WMD 198). Thus, Everett suggests that it will be a while before David can completely feel at ease in his new home.

"Life Upon This Earth is Warfare"

By the close of the novel, David has gone from being a lonesome drifter without a care for anyone else to a man who commits murder to exact revenge and ostensibly to protect his family and community. Nevertheless, Everett leaves David suspended on the Frontier of a largely mythic past and a very uncertain future. He thwarts and revises traditional tropes associated with Frontier Mythology, particularly Frontier violence, and other notions about the American West by creating metaphorical lines and sociopolitical significations that extend to David's place in America as a Vietnam War veteran. The American West signifies for him a home—a geographical space—that enacts a newfound sense of self while forcing him to confront his and America's notions of justice and "the American way of life" in the wake of an "unjust war," US Cold-War empire-building, and sociopolitical upheavals at home. As is with almost all of Everett's protagonists, at the end of *Walk Me to the Distance*, David's existential dilemma on the American Frontier, just like the vexed afterlives of the Vietnam War, is never completely resolved.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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