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Revising National Myths Through Queer Kinship in Percival Everett's *Wounded*

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This article reads Percival Everett's 2009 novel *Wounded* as a narrative of new regionalism that engages with coalitional politics and reimagines important figures in the Western genre, such as masculinity, the family, and the frontier. By engaging with the remediation of Matthew Shepard's murder, Everett refutes the power of metronormative narratives and showcases the ways in which crossing social boundaries can create inclusive community in places considered hostile to queer individuals. While many binaries are displaced in the novel, ultimately those of backward/progressive and us/them are reasserted, which displays the frontier's powerful conceptual hold on the Western genre. The novel, however, does imagine a new role regionalism can play in imagining an American identity—a role that eschews more traditional, individualistic depictions of cowboy masculinity and instead emphasizes collectivity and responsibility toward others that accepts difference in favor of a broader ethic of care.

Percival Everett's 2007 novel *Wounded* ends with these words: "'This is the frontier, cowboy,' Elvis said. 'Everyplace is the frontier. Take care of your uncle.' I nodded and stepped away" (207). These few lines pull the main threads of the narrative together: masculine identity, the construction of the frontier, and the imperative to care. Throughout the novel, the main character, John Hunt, a Black horse trainer living in Wyoming, wrestles to find his place within these constructs, particularly in caring for others. Though familial in these closing remarks, care expands slowly throughout the story, bending the traditional notions of what "family" is. This emphasis on care and connection is particularly affective, because the novel is a fictional exploration of historical violence; it is based on complex remediation surrounding the death of Matthew Shepard. Though reviews have mentioned that the story is "clearly inspired" by Shepard's murder, and that "one inevitably thinks of Matthew Shepard" when reading it, the narrative importance of this event in *Wounded* remains uninterrogated (Beason; Parini). Though Matthew Shepard's death and the cultural response to it provide the background for this novel, I eschew attempts to locate historical truth about the case; rather, I will be examining how Everett uses the real event to craft a fictional world that comments on the Western genre. This focus allows me to explore three key elements at play in this novel and in recent studies of Western America and its literature more broadly: first, the question of whether marginalized groups are more or less visible and threatened in rural spaces; second, the potential for coalitional politics to prosper or fail;[1] and third, the way frontier logic retains a powerful hold on the Western genre. By introducing a new and reimagined story that grows from a pivotal moment in queer history, Everett explores the many ways nationalism and identity come to have meaning in our understanding of the American West, and he redefines regional expectations of family, masculinity, and homosocial bonds.

Wounded in Context

The plot of *Wounded* starts with a violent death: like Matthew Shepard, the first victim in the novel is a gay college student, who is mutilated and left out in the freezing landscape (12, 14). In the wake of the highly publicized crime, John meets David, his friend's son, who is in town with his boyfriend, Robert, for a gay pride rally being held in reaction to the murder (50). David and John connect quickly, and John asks if they would mind having a "straight cowboy" at the rally (53). While at the rally, two

[1] In theorizing coalitional politics, Cathy J. Cohen states: "Only through recognizing the many manifestations of power, across and within categories, can we truly begin to build a movement based on one's politics and not exclusively on one's identity" (479).

"rednecks"[2]—a term to which I'll return—start a fight with Robert (61). The sheriff interferes, and one attacker is arrested. John invites David and Robert to recover at his ranch, where they end up staying over because of inclement weather. Around Christmas, David and Robert break up, and David comes to work for John for a few months, setting the stage for their friendship to grow and change. Their relationship, however, is brutally curtailed when David becomes a second victim, so that the novel begins and ends with an echo of Shepard's murder.

Wounded is not Percival Everett's first Western; he has written several, including *Walk Me to the Distance* (1985), *God's Country* (1994), *Watershed* (1996), and *Grand Canyon, Inc.* (2001), as well as various short stories. These works have been fruitfully considered in conjunction for their central thematic similarities[3] and examined in varying combinations in studies of Black Western writing.[4] *Wounded* has rarely been considered on its own, perhaps because it is less "openly metafictional" and more "true-to-life" than Everett's other Western fiction, as Marie-Agnès Gay points out (1).[5] As in his previous works, *Wounded* displays the author's disdain for the mythical American West of rugged, masculine individualism, but this novel stands apart for its reconfiguration of social boundaries. It not only re-imagines the place of masculinity and race in frontier mythology but also uses the murder of Matthew Shepard—one of America's most infamous hate crimes[6]—to craft an origin story for a specific kind of frontier justice and community creation.

An important starting point for discussing the text as a Western is a brief look at critical definitions of the many "Wests" involved in literary study of this region. I will necessarily begin with Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Frontier in American History,"

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[2] The term "rednecks," which is the main characterization used for the antagonists in *Wounded*, appears over and over in reports of Shepard's murder.

[3] Notable examples include M. K. Johnson's chapter "Looking at the Big Picture: Percival Everett's Western Fiction" (2014), which discusses how race, marginalization, the uncanny and disability are intertwined in Everett's Western fiction; Michel Feith's "Philosophy Embedded in Space: Rethinking the Frontier in Percival Everett's Western Novels," which probes a "philosophical seam" in Everett's Westerns that "engages Turner's geographical determinism and Locke's 'possessive individualism'" (87); and Claude Julien's "The Real and the Unreal, or the Endogenous and the Exogenous: The Case of *Walk Me to the Distance* and *Wounded*," which examines the shifting social concerns and thematic through-lines of the two novels, published two decades apart.

[4] Such as in John Munby's "African American Literature: Recasting Region Through Race," and Michael K. Johnson's "African American Literature and Culture in the American West."

[5] Gay's article, "'Wanted: Straight Words' in Percival Everett's *Wounded*," is one very notable and detailed exception I'd like to highlight. The piece contains a thorough, engrossing reading of linguistic misfires in the novel.

[6] Though there is now discussion of whether the murder's classification as a hate crime is accurate, it is undeniable that Shepard's murder was treated as such; it's important to note at the beginning that Everett's novel reflects a specific and popular cultural narrative of Matthew Shepard's death that had an incredible effect on LGBTQ acceptance and hate crime legislation at the time (Sikk and Meyer).

an 1893 essay that holds incredible influence over the field of Western American studies. In this essay, Turner puts forth his "frontier thesis," which posits the Western Frontier as *the* element that made the United States distinct among nations. He claims the "peculiarity" of American political institutions stems from "the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people—to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life" (2). The cyclical nature of this process is paramount; Turner sees "American social development" as "continually beginning over again on the frontier," creating "perennial rebirth," "fluidity," and "new opportunities" that "furnish the forces dominating American character" (2–3). Though Turner's "frontier" was more prescriptive than explanatory—Patricia Nelson Limerick called it "an unsubtle concept in a subtle world" (*Legacy* 25)—it gave Western historians an important handhold for defining their version of history. Kerwin Lee Klein argues that the broad acceptance of the frontier thesis points to "the importance of a unifying problematic for an academic discipline interested in upward intellectual mobility" (21). Because the thesis granted this unity, it became the core to a field of study—an inheritance that is difficult to shake.

Though historians and literary critics have long since rejected the legitimacy of Turner's argument, the idea continues to have influence over narrative creation. William R. Handley states that "it is in large part by means of Turner's literariness that we can discern why it continues to have more significance and longevity than one might expect from a superseded historiographical artifact" (*Marriage* 43). History and literary studies have long been interrelated disciplines, but Handley argues that the two are even more entwined in Western studies. "The West," he claims, "has…inextricably wedded what we conventionally refer to as the historical and the literary, the experiential and the imaginative" (1). While in the early days of scholarship about the American West, as Nina Baym explains, "[m]yth study gave popular materials enough legitimacy for westernists to claim that their field deserved serious consideration," the "story" of the West has shifted many times since (814). Baym puts it concisely: "According to students of western literature, the Old West had more or less one kind of story to tell, the New West has many different kinds of story, and the Postwest worries about the ontological status of any story a western historian or writer or literary academic might want to narrate" (819).

Wounded is a New Western tale, which questions simplified narratives told about the mythic West, but posits its own contribution to a contemporary Western ideal. Limerick defines the New Western historian as one who "reject[s] the notion of a clear-cut 'end

to the frontier' in 1890," emphasizing a cultural continuity that has been "ruptured by attempts to divide the 'old West' from the 'new West" ("What on Earth," 63). The New Western, then, rejects the Turnerian mythmaking that would split pre-history—the West before the "civilizing" influence of frontier conquest—from a post-history in which Westward expansion has accomplished its homogenizing purpose. New Western philosophy instead views the contemporary American West as an outgrowth of conflict and violence, especially the murder and displacement of Indigenous peoples, an invasion which is so often re-narrated as the march of progress that produced the nation. Lydia R. Cooper explains that texts are often categorized as a traditional Western or a New Western depending on whether they "participate in reinforcing or in challenging that 'white male center'" common in tales of frontier adventure (11). Perhaps the paramount feature of a Western is its depiction of gender and especially masculinity—a masculinity that has shifted as the genre evolves.

In *Wounded*, John provides a particularly fitting figure to study this masculinity. In many ways, he is the embodiment of what Daniel Worden calls "cowboy masculinity," which "fixates on such tropes as individualism, sentimentality, ruggedness, and violence" (4). John, however, also seems to answer a question Worden poses about new forms of American masculinity: "What about masculinities that do not emphatically endorse the autonomous individual but instead strive for forms of collective belonging?" (5) John evinces such a masculinity as he grows to take responsibility for the outsiders—or those outside Cooper's "white male center" and Worden's "cowboy masculinity"—in his town. Approaches to the New Western rely on "a complicated interplay of tropes and images of the West that rely on traditional definitions of the 'American West' and that also reinvent those definitions, often concurrently" (Cooper 12). Through his role as community leader, horse wrangler, vigilante, and surrogate father, John performs this double act of drawing on Western masculine tropes while refuting the individualism and domination that accompany such roles in earlier touchstones of the genre. Worden argues that "[m]asculinity reflective of frontier mythology was so often cited, experimented with, and imitated in American modernism precisely because of its excessive heterogeneity, pliability, and style" (5), and Everett continues in this vein as his depiction of masculinity plays with mythological cowboy tropes but ultimately exhibits a flexibility that undoes notions of authenticity and fixed identity.

An important question in considering Western American literature has long been a preoccupation with authenticity. Lee Clark Mitchell sees authenticity as merely a display used to create and distance outsiders, adding that when there is too much focus on authenticity, "the literature as literature becomes absorbed by other disciplines: geography, say, or history, or sociology" (99). Though Gay notes, as I mentioned

above, that *Wounded* is more "true-to-life" than Everett's other Western works, this attribution has more to do with a realistic narrative mode, character psychology, and timeliness than with historical accuracy regarding any single event. While many of the sources that represent Shepard's death do attempt to forge authenticity in their telling—finding a new angle, telling the *real* story—Everett moves past such claims to authenticity. He is not looking to clarify the past but rather to engage with its fictional possibilities, such as interrogating cultural narratives surrounding Shepard's death.

Ignoring this background altogether leaves a crucial aspect of Everett's work unexamined. Matthew Shepard's death has been called "[t]he murder that changed America."[7] Beth Loffreda puts it best when she refers to the event as "a killing that made homophobia newly legible for many" (159). The details of Shepard's murder will most likely be all too familiar to some readers; for others, Shepard may be an unknown.[8] In just under 25 years, his narrative has undergone a multitude of transformations through retelling and remediation. Beyond its treatment in news media contemporary to the murder—which I'll explore in more detail below—the case has been artistically explored in the form of poetry (much of which is displayed on the Matthew Shepard Foundation page), plays (like *The Laramie Project* and *Matthew Passion*), documentaries (like *Matthew Shepard is a Friend of Mine* and *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later*), visual art (such as "The Passion of Matthew" by William Hart McNichols), and film (*The Matthew Shepard Story*). Details of the event have become understandably muddled in editorial sensationalizing and in these continual generic alterations, but I'll relay the salient facts.

What is certain is that on October 6, 1998, Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson beat Matthew Shepard and left him to die in the cold in Laramie, Wyoming. He was found near a fence, still alive, by a passing mountain biker, who reported that he was uncertain at first if Shepard was human, because he looked like a scarecrow lying on the ground. Shepard was taken to the hospital, where he died four days later. At this point, the case was already the focus of national news attention. People all over the United States held vigils for Shepard, prayed for his recovery, and expressed grief at his passing (Marsden).[9] As Scott W. Hoffman relates, "The fall of 1998 was a key historical

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[7] Specifically, in Jude Sheerin's reflective article of the same title, "Matthew Shepard: The Murder that Changed America."

[8] In their introduction to *The Legacies of Matthew Shepard: Twenty Years Later*, Helis Sikk and Leisa Meyer argue that their anthology is made timely by the "cultural amnesia around the murder": "Several of the articles in this collection point out that younger generations do not know anything about Matthew Shepard, despite living in a culture that many would argue has been dramatically changed by his murder" (2).

[9] Although these details are available through many other news sources, it is important to note that Marsden's account is my main source because it comes from The Wyoming State Historical Society; however, Marsden is a former friend of

moment that allowed greater attention to be focused on [Shepard's] death than perhaps before. Gays and lesbians hovered on the edge of the mainstream as empathy for them grew among many Americans" (143–44). Alongside this shift, the tentative promise of legal changes marked the event's reception: "the push for a new federal Hate Crimes Prevention Act was drawing upon this well of empathy to foster a sense of injustice for gays and lesbians among bystanders" (Hoffman 144). This cultural climate turned Shepard's death from a local horror into a national news event. Shepard became a secular saint—or as Hoffman puts it, a "popular martyr" (122)—so swiftly sanctified by gay rights groups and liberal media, or demonized by extreme religious groups and conservative politicos, that the particularities of Shepard's life and death became obscured. In the desire to make Shepard part of a political narrative, much of his actual narrative was buried.

Though *Wounded* also narrativizes Shepard's death, it plays a different role from previous retellings and the news media's spectacle-making. The novel draws on the public narrativization without directly referencing it, so that instead of laying claim to a specific interpretation of the murder, Everett examines how this endless remediation circumscribes both the people and places involved. *Wounded* re-imagines Western mythos by building around what Heather Love refers to as a "historical injury," or "the history of marginalization and abjection" that queer people have faced for centuries, and which queer politics sometimes discounts in favor of contemporary gains and future dreams (1). Love, in other words, insists on remembering the painful past, in order to put present freedoms into perspective. In *Wounded*, I see the engagement with Shepard's murder as way to revisit a more contemporary injury and to place it within a longer genealogy of historical injury, specifically of violence against marginalized people in the American West. Focusing on this moment of violence disrupts the town's peace, revealing its fragility, and reminding some residents—like John and his Indigenous neighbors—that they, alongside the gay community, have suffered a history of injustice in this space—injustice that is not the same, and yet is shared and capable of producing social and political bonds.

John Hunt and the New (Western) Family

When considering the social bonds of characters in *Wounded*, it is necessary to turn to an especially powerful source of queering potential in the novel: marriage and family.

Shepard, and served as the Executive Director of the Matthew Shepard Foundation for 11 years (matthewshepard.org). This intersection of encyclopedic information and personal connection should illustrate to readers the complicated and often insular nature of information surrounding Shepard's life and death.

Handley argues that "much of the literary West's recurring preoccupation is with marriage," and that, contrary to "the prevailing cultural myth that the frontier chiefly produced the masculine individual…the nation we find epitomized in so much literature of the West resembles what we might call (to put it mildly) a dysfunctional family" (*Marriage* 2). While Worden sees "masculinity reflective of frontier mythology" as having "excessive heterogeneity, pliability, and style" (5), the same is true of familial depictions. Handley sees marriage and family as expansive figures, explaining that marriage—and particularly conforming to an ideal of proper marriage—becomes an important identity marker in early Westerns and defines who is considered an outsider: "[m]arital nonconformists, such as Indians and Mormons, were most commonly defined as racially different from the white majority, even when, in the case of the Mormons, they were white" (3). Marriages and families that fell outside normative expectation were racialized, meaning that the "whiteness" of specific characters was more dependent on their strict heteronormativity than on any physiological markers.

Here, it is helpful to consider the queer individual's relationship to the heteronormative family. As Jack Halberstam argues, "[q] ueer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction" (10). While Halberstam is thinking more widely about queer temporality and spatiality, I want to pick up on the issue of living outside reproductive futurism, or as Halberstam puts it, "the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing" (10). Throughout *Wounded*, John and David's relationship represents the "unscripting" of such conventions. In this section, I will consider their relationship as queer in multiple senses, because while David disrupts John's understanding of his own sexuality (and therefore his clear-cut investment in his upcoming marriage), he also acts as a kind of surrogate son, tangling family ties and sexual attraction in a rather dysfunctional manner.

Throughout the novel, John's relationship to his family provides both unique insight into his character and opportunity for queer reading. When the reader first meets John, he is living with his uncle, Gus. Gus himself has a somewhat mysterious marital status; we know he went to prison for killing a man "who was raping his wife" (9). Gus's wife, however, is never mentioned again. It is unclear if she died while he was in prison, if she left him, or if she didn't survive the assault—all potentially important insights into Gus's past life that are left unknown. This omission is even more startling because John is a widower himself, and he has a fraught relationship with his own dead wife, Susie, who was killed in a horse-riding accident. Though Gus came to live with John after Susie's death, there is no clue as to how much of John's experience is shared between them. The omission could be in keeping with the stoicism and "individualism" of the

cowboy figure, but I read it as a connection that Everett purposefully doesn't explore. The reader sees the men as analogous figures, with similarly ill-fated spouses binding them together even more tightly than an average family tie allows. Despite this common history, Gus's wife is sidelined to highlight how powerful Susie's memory is. Gus was punished for the violence someone else visited on his wife, but John punishes himself for an accident he couldn't have stopped.

Though John becomes engaged to Morgan, a neighbor woman he's known for a long time, Susie continues to haunt the story as a figure of John's inability to protect his family. When Morgan and John first discuss their relationship, John admits to Morgan that he is attracted to her, but keeps thinking about "things," to which Morgan replies, "Susie's dead, Hunt" (37). John responds, "Well, that's it. I blame myself...I honestly think she was trying that horse so I would see her as brave" (37). John's self-blame is one example of the difficulty he has in untangling his responsibility toward others, as he feels an overwhelming burden of care. Despite knowing that his temporary ranch hand, Wallace, may have committed the first murder—it is rumored that he killed the young man for coming onto him—John still does Wallace a favor and calls the man's brother to inform him of Wallace's arrest. With other characters, John's role as protector becomes much more emotionally involved. John rescues and adopts a coyote pup with a burned paw and trains her to live inside, like a member of the household. He also answers Daniel White Buffalo's call for help when his cow is shot. Though the sheriff is already on his way to investigate, Daniel says he called John because "he's like family," which John thinks is odd, "because I seldom saw the man" (93). In this novel, the family becomes the main source of coalitional care, and anyone can be accepted in—a friend's gay son, a wild animal, a vulnerable neighbor. John's nonconformist family explores possibilities outside heterosexual coupling, forming bonds that cross lines of difference.

My concept of care here is taken from Nel Noddings, who emphasizes relationality and "reciprocity" as the center of her ethics of care (4). She offers the most succinct explanation of this ethic in her 1984 book, *Care: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Morals*, in which she states: "The relation of natural caring will be identified as the human condition that we, consciously or unconsciously, perceive as 'good.' It is that condition toward which we long and strive...It is this ethical ideal, this realistic picture of ourselves as one-caring, that guides us as we strive to meet the other morally" (5). Caring, then, comes from an intention to be in relationship with another—and not necessarily with the goal of receiving care in return. Rather, as Noddings explains, "we recognize human encounter and affective response as a basic fact of human existence. As we examine what it means to care and to be cared for, we shall see that both parties

contribute to the relation; my caring must be somehow completed in the other if the relation is to be described as caring" (4). Caring is reciprocal in the sense that it increases the affective bond one forges with another.

For John, care does not rise from a principled stance, a religious edict, or a desire to be well-liked, but rather from a sense of responsibility to those around him—particularly to those who are most unable to care for or protect themselves, or those who are targeted by and vulnerable to encroaching threats. This lack of a principled stance is an important point to relational caring, because, as Noddings argues, "too often, principles function to separate us from each other. We may become dangerously self-righteous when we perceive ourselves as holding a precious principle not held by the other. The other may then be devalued and treated 'differently.' Our ethic of caring will not permit this to happen" (5). The reason that John's version of caring is so attractive to those around him is that it extends to those who *are* different from himself, and it brings them into a relation, making them, as Daniel White Buffalo says, "like family."

When David first comes to live with John, their relationship is transactional. David goes to the farm to work, and to escape his breakup. Their friendship grows as David learns about the ranch and spends more time there, but this natural affinity is disrupted when David's father, Howard, comes to town. Father and son get into a late-night argument, and David, drunk and upset, runs into the cold without shoes. John finds David, near-frozen, takes him into a cave, strips him down, and then removes his own clothes so that his body heat can bring David back to a safe temperature. John comforts the younger man, saying, "[i]t's going to be alright, son, hang on," a phrase that is immediately distorted when David, only half conscious, kisses John: "David moved his face to in front of me and he pressed his icy lips against mine. It took me a few seconds to realize it was a kiss. I had never been so confused. I let him kiss me, felt his shivering face soften to mine. I just wanted him warm, warmer. I couldn't pull away; I was trying to save his life" (149). The scene is sexual despite John's protestations. The language is that of seduction: he is confused; he wants David "warm, warmer," intensifying the statement; he "couldn't pull away," pulled *in* by the situation, the urgency, the privacy, and perhaps an attraction to the man kissing him. The situation is ambiguous and charged.

In reflection, John knows the kiss has changed their relationship. "Before the kiss," he thinks, "I might have admitted to someone who asked that I loved him. Now, that word, that sentiment, was muddled" (160).[10] David challenges John, making him more

[10] Notably, when Morgan asks him what he's thinking about, John replies, "I was thinking that I'd be a little lost without you here" (161). While Morgan thinks this response is sweet, the reader, privy to John's real thoughts, is able to under-

open to self-discovery and to connecting with other people, but also endangering his current romantic relationship. He discloses an attraction to John and in the same conversation admits, "[w]hen you call me son, I almost believe it" (163). In this way, David is a confusing stand-in for the children John and Susie never had. After David goes missing, John has a dream where Susie asks him, "Do you love him?", and when John asks who she means, she responds: "We don't have any children, John. Have you noticed that?" (183). David's death echoes the blame that John places on himself for Susie's death, and it seems that, like Susie, David undertook his final task to impress John. David volunteers to go into town to pick up Gus's medicine, saying, "I know the way there and back. If I can drive that truck, I can drive the Jeep" (170). He addresses the task as a chance to prove himself. Coming on the heels of their discussion about the clandestine kiss, John's instinctual response feels like a clearing of the air. "I suddenly felt like an overprotective father," he admits, and adds that he doesn't want to allow David to go (170). Because John was unable to save Susie, he is even more driven to protect a surrogate son. David and John's bond explores the messiness of interconnection, the possibility for misunderstanding, and the work that accompanies care—welcoming others into relationality and accepting another person whose difference may make your own life more difficult. The resulting coalitional, queer family structure points to a new regionalism, a view of the American West that expands the idea of who belongs.

Competing Fictions of Regionalism

In this final section, I will examine how engaging with the Shepard story opens up questions of regional identity alongside queer identity. Queerness in Western American literature is a relatively understudied area;[11] scholars are more likely to focus on constructions of masculinity or on the ever-productive clash of cultures that Westward expansion created. Introducing a 2016 special issue of *Western American Literature*, Geoffrey W. Bateman claims: "Given the many nationalist and heteronormative myths associated with and promoted through the literatures and cultures of the American West, it's not surprising that something as troubling and sometimes as dangerous as queerness would seem threatening" (138). Bateman goes on to clarify that although this threatening queerness can "incur violence" in heteronormative spaces, "the American West has been strangely hospitable to queerness, too" (138). The question of

stand the full implication of the statement. Without Morgan, John's response to the kiss would be much more complicated; with Morgan, he can at least feign security in his sexuality, calling on his engagement as proof.

[11] Notable recent exceptions include *Weird Westerns: Race, Gender, Genre* (2020) edited by Kerry Fine, Michael Kyle Johnson, Rebecca M. Lush, Sara L. Spurgeon, and William R. Handley's "'The Very Borderland of Our Act': The Queer West, Historical Violence, and the Intersectional Future" (2022).

queer identity in the rural West is itself shifting; Loffreda argues that "if regionalism traditionally has entailed a retreat from the differences and the complexities of the present into a mythic and monolithic past, then what we can see in Laramie [in the wake of Shepard's death] is the inchoate beginnings of a new regionalism, a struggle between the nostalgic form of regional identity and a queer remaking of it" (170). This "new regionalism," I am suggesting, is a key factor in Everett's construction of Highland.

This construction both reveals and challenges the power of another popular myth concerning the American West—that of "metronormativity." Metronormativity condemns rural spaces—like Laramie and the fictional Highland—as hostile to queer communities by default, and thus as something meant to be escaped from and avoided. Halberstam first used the term to describe a tendency to view the city space as more progressive, arguing that metronormative narratives focus on "closeted subjects who 'come out' into an urban setting, which in turn, supposedly allows for the full expression of the sexual self in relation to a community of other gays/lesbians/queers" (31). This mindset both ignores the experience of living on the margins in a rural community and naturalizes a false divide between the "rural" and "urban." Scott Herring claims that this binary, like most, is unstable, both for its "faulty logic of population density" and the value judgements that make defining the urban and rural "seem less like a descriptive act and much more like a prescriptive project" (8). Herring argues that these categories "should also be seen as a social fantasy whose cartographies are as much psychic, emotive, stylistic, and relational as they are geographically or spatially realized without and within any identifiable U.S. metropolis" (13–14). Carly Thomsen neatly summarizes all this by stating: "Metronormative narratives…implicitly naturalize urban/rural dichotomies, render the rural backward, and assign value to rural-to-urban migration patterns" (59–60).

The aftermath of the first murder in *Wounded* reveals how easily John's town is labeled as bigoted and backward: in big newspapers around the country, the killing is framed as a result of rurality. "They all said about the same thing," John reports, "with the Eastern papers offering the implication, if not outright accusation, that the crime was symptomatic of some rural or Western disease of intolerance" (34). John, who has seen much of the U.S., balks at this categorical treatment: "I thought, yes, it's called America. I wondered why the reported rash of fifty rapes in Central Park was not considered a similar indicator of regional moral breakdown" (34). Loffreda's description of the actual news response to Shepard's murder is helpful here; some sources marked Wyoming out as different, "more homophobic, more primitive, more violent and hate-filled than the rest of the nation," while others responded with claims

of Wyoming's sameness (159). Loffreda, however, felt that "neither was quite right—that it made sense to think of the West as distinctive but not unique when it came to sex and politics" (159). In *Wounded*, when David and his boyfriend first come to town, Robert evinces a metronormative attitude, which John is quick to dismiss. When the former asks what Highland is like, John responds, "It's a little town. It's okay. Mostly white. Indians get treated like shit. You know, America" (51). More than once in his short time with Robert, John is forced to remind him that intolerance of all kinds thrives outside the rural setting as well; imagining that one can escape such treatment by leaving Wyoming is shortsighted.

One complex issue, then, is John's own attitude toward the "rednecks"—men who turn out to be culpable for all the recent acts of violence, but who John treats with revulsion even before he knows the truth about them. His use of the word "rednecks" is itself illustrative of the ways that time—and particularly, progressivism and backwardness—are employed in discussions of regionalism. As Anthony Harkins explains, the term "rednecks" was often used in the Civil Rights era by journalists and activists alike to "emphasize the backward-looking racism of southern lawmen and townspeople who fought integration" (368). The use of the term has shifted, however; Harkins notes that in the 1970s, the white working class made efforts to reappropriate it. Today, the "more benign" usage connotes pride in "class and racial identity… mark[ing] opposition to (or at least distinction from) hegemonic middle-class social aspirations and norms and, less explicitly, to the relative gain in status of African Americans and other minority social groups" (369–70). In other words, John's use of the word against these men reveals a palimpsest of meaning, like many elements of the novel. In weaponizing the re-appropriated term, Everett returns its former sting, reviving a past meaning that emphasizes the conflict in defining people groups and places, from the inside or the outside.

To consider this self-imposed boundary line, I will now revisit the closing lines of the novel, and specifically Elvis Monday's assertion that "[e]veryplace is the frontier" (207). As the violence intensifies and moves closer to the main characters, the narrative's investment in a mythic past intensifies as well. The final act unfolds swiftly, as the slow-burning novel speeds up and pushes the reader through the last thirty pages at a break-neck pace. David is missing; searches are conducted; nothing turns up. John goes looking for David. John gets his gun. Gus comes along, and the two of them go head-to-head with the rednecks. As John approaches the rednecks' cabin with a loaded gun, he thinks, "[s]ometimes things were just simple…The people you expected to do the bad thing did the bad thing. I believed the rednecks had done something to David and I was going to find out" (199). John interrogates the men and finds David in a cave, where the

rednecks have beaten him and left him for dead. John takes David to the hospital, where he dies. Gus stays behind to kill the rednecks in their secluded cabin. The sheriff seems uninterested in investigating, and the reader is left with a tenuous détente—David and his murderers are gone, removing the additions that propelled the narrative and jarred both John and Highland at large out of their comfortable status quo.

In the stand-off between John, Gus, and the rednecks, the frontier retains its powerful hold on constructing a competing Western masculinity. The concept remains a tool for delineating boundaries, because, as M. K. Johnson argues, "[t]he savage/civilized dichotomy provides a structure through which cultural or political tensions can be played, especially as those tensions occur across racial lines" (*Black Masculinity* 8). In this story, the figure of the "savage" has not disappeared from the New Western, and neither has the backwardness that Thomsen and Harkins cite; rather, these concepts have been redirected into the figures of the "rednecks," recasting the white male center the men represent as the real source of brutality and chaos—flipping the binary on its head, and yet in many ways preserving it. John's naming of the "rednecks" also names a construction of us vs. them. In this way, "the frontier myth explores the border between Self and Other" (*Black Masculinity* 8)—it delineates who is like you and who is not. Before the increasing attacks on his community, John is less bothered by his racial difference in Highland. Violence, however, intensifies his separation not only from men like the rednecks but from the town at large.

In claiming a return of the frontier, Elvis Monday is acknowledging that the threat of violence and lawlessness can erupt in seemingly peaceful, "civilized" places. Everett does not reflect on this final opinion but leaves it hanging in the air, an ending that is somehow both inevitable and unsatisfyingly incomplete. There is no wind-down, reaction, or mourning—the reader is left with the brutal murder, the brutal retaliation, and no sense of how things will develop from here. Gay argues that "in *Wounded*, the greatest eloquence is to be found in silence…the most successful examples of communication lie in non-verbal language: an *expression* on a face, a body movement, an attitude, something ungraspable and yet intuitively perceptible, which can be shared only beyond, or rather below articulate language" (7). This emphasis on the non-verbal—on reading beyond what the characters say to each other—is perhaps the best explanation for the abruptness of the ending. There is nothing more to say. There is only action now.

At the end of the novel, when Gus has revenge-killed the men in the cabin, we have reached a new kind of law—where the sheriff doesn't ask questions and lets the social outsiders defend themselves, and where suspicion is validated and vigilante justice is dispensed with a cool hand. Drawing a boundary line between themselves and the

town, Elvis advises John: “Take care of your uncle” (207). Amidst a morally ambiguous ending, we return to the ethic of care—if nothing else is certain, the compulsion to look after each other remains.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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