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TRAVELLING THE GENDERQUEER SLIPSTREAM

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ABSTRACT

"Travelling the Genderqueer Slipstream" uses contemporary theories of time arising from western generic studies to offer a new reading of Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis," arguing that the representation of time throughout that piece is unstable. This part of the work coheres in the concept of "frontier iconicity": that Turner created a representation of the western in time that is so far removed from linear representations of time that it constitutes an aesthetic point of entry into slipstream time-travel. This line of thinking, which follows Foucault and Baudrillard, is primarily explored through the work of Michael K. Johnson, Mark Rifkin, Grace L. Dillon and Peter Boag.

The second part of the paper explores the potential of considering Native Slipstream as a reading strategy for all texts that invoke frontier iconicity, demonstrated by a recuperative approach to transmasculine, gender nonconforming and genderqueer presence in the literary western. The argument culminates with the suggestion that considering the frontier icon as fundamentally temporally unstable, has set the conditions for one of the most generative discussions of queer futurity that has been possible to date. Authors and theatre makers explored in this discussion include Willa Cather, Zane Grey, Louise Erdrich and Charlie Josephine, among others.

KEY WORDS: Native Slipstream, Westerns, Queer Studies, Gender Studies, American Literature

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Over the last three years, a provocative trend has emerged in Anglo-American theatre: the use of the western genre—which has not had a particularly powerful stage history—in plays that engage with gender identity and queer sexuality. The long lens might identify this trend as beginning in 2015 with *RoosevElvis*, a significant offering by Brooklyn theatre company The Team that invokes western generic signifiers throughout an imagined road trip undertaken by two drag kings, one of whom appears as Theodore Roosevelt, the cowboy president, and the other as Elvis Presley. In 2023, the West End played host to Charlie Josephine's *Cowbois*, Matt Gurr's *Cowboy* and Ashley Robinson's *Brokeback Mountain*; in 2024, the trend continued, with Freddie Love's one-hand show *Queer Cowboys*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the weight of its Hollywood heritage, *Brokeback Mountain* is the outlier in terms of the content of these plays. This is a straightforward reiteration, with careful scoring that once again states the importance of music to this particular story, of the story of Jack Twist and Ennis Del Mar, and their inability to overcome the attitudes of their time and place in the American West of the 1960s.[2] Whilst *Brokeback Mountain*, in Annie Proulx's short story and Ang Lee's 2005 film, was certainly crucial in establishing the western as a site of queer exploration in mainstream culture, the other plays are all united by something more profound than the union of queer identities and western topos: they are all, in some fashion, speculative narratives. They explore the potential for better understanding queer presence and endurance through imagining queer pasts and asserting them as possible, or through recuperating queer histories and rendering them in three dimensions. All of these texts assert that there is a queer history of the

[2] Throughout this article, "West" is capitalised where it refers to the geographical region of the western United States. This is consistent with contemporary scholarship in the field and with the material cited in herein.

western and the western genre that has something to offer in terms of understanding current queer experience and imagining queer futurities.

The question we must ask is why the western is chosen as this site of queer reimagining. One of the key tropes that enables these queer speculative narratives is what Mark Rifkin terms "iconicity" (131): the elevation of a historic moment, in Rifkin's study, the Ghost Dance at Wounded Knee, to the significance of an icon, evocative and emblematic of much more than the portrayed events. For these plays, it is the frontier in and of itself that carries this iconicity. Michael K. Johnson addresses this phenomenon in his significant 2023 intervention *Speculative Wests*. Early in this text, he addresses the questions of "authenticity" and "authority" in the western. He writes:

> subordinating the western to another genre helps create a critical distance from the form.… Speculative westerns, by intentionally bringing the fantastic and the futuristic to the form, undermine the western's claims to 'authenticity' and 'frontier realism' and challenge the 'stories about history' that westerns have told. (Johnson 10)

This excerpt forms part of a foundational argument about the way that classic westerns' relationship with a real land mass imbues them with a sense of authenticity: these are historically indexed stories about a real place. It also goes some way towards establishing how and why the western genre has proliferated so many sub-genres, often "revisionist" in some specific way, actively encoding a critique of the early colonialist suppositions of classic texts. Thus, we have the establishment of a genre of historical fiction that is serially repeated in order to critique its own origins. Later in the text, Johnson explores the complexity of adding time travel to this already over-signified topos. In this passage, he dramatizes the dual present tenses of historical fiction: that

of the setting and the reading, arguing that: "[t]ime-travel narratives, in particular, depict history both in the 'reading present' and in the narrative present, as the time traveler's experience of the past… reflects on that of the reader's" (Johnson 135).

In this passage, Johnson reflects on Erin Murrah-Mandril's useful work on historical fiction by Mexican American authors; he is also bringing it into direct contact with the western landscape, and with Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 frontier thesis. He precedes this reflection on Murrah-Mandril's work, which takes us towards considering time travel and multiple presents, which will be significant to the rest of this argument, with this quotation from Turner's thesis: "[t]he United States lies like a huge page in the history of society." Here, Turner actively asks us to read the USA as a text with a linear narrative, in which the "closing" of the frontier in 1890 is a foundational chapter.

It is impossible to overstate the influence of Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," on western literary and cinematic scholarship, as well as on the historiography of the West. There is no significant work of criticism on the western genre since 1893 that has not referenced it. Latterly, this usage has primarily served to debunk claims like the one Johnson addresses here, which ask us to look at a place as a construct, divorced from the ongoing passage of its history. The persistence of Turner's presence in contemporary criticism of the western, however, stems not only from the fact that it was influential in its time, and had a significant impact in inculcating a colonial mythostructure from which the territories of the American West have never fully escaped. It also, simultaneously, established the aesthetic theory of the western, creating a frontier icon, or a practice of frontier iconicity, that has accorded the

western landscape and the frontier chronotope with a unique symbolic power in terms of the access it gives readers and audiences to the sensory experience of U.S. history.

The most often cited lines of Turner's thesis in terms of the creation of a frontier icon, an over-defined or hyperreal moment in American history that has been used as an index ever since, are these:

> … the frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin… Little by little, he transforms the wilderness…. The fact is, that here is a new product, that is American. (198-9)

I have written elsewhere about Turner's interest in undressing the emergent "American" in this passage, and the identification of national identity with the specific comportment of the individual body remains important in the current discussion (Savage). We should also notice that this passage of transformation is written in an insistent present tense: the transformation of the European colonist into the American who has learned from "his" environment is a key part of the construction of the frontier icon. In this thesis, the frontier is frozen in time in 1890: before it could become a site of nostalgia, and when it still seemed to be a continuous part of the nation's current identity. Thus, it has maintained this status ever since. As Peter Boag has it in *Re-Dressing American History*: "…Turner conveniently defined the first epoch of American history as the counterpoint to

the growing complexities of his age, locking away the frontier in a place and time where it would forever remain unchanged" (184).

Boag's book goes the furthest of the many treatments of Turner's "Frontier Thesis" thus far in identifying the source of its staying-power, and the work that he does around the disconnection of the frontier from its continuous history is crucial to the concept of the "frontier icon" that I posit here. There is, however, one key moment in Turner's thesis that escapes Boag's notice, or is referred to only in paraphrase. Consider the version of American history that Turner puts forward here:

> American social development has been continually beginning over and again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic Coast, it is the Great West. (197)

The work of identifying what Turner does both in concretizing the myth of American becoming, and in crystallizing that myth as a discontinuous historical moment, has been thoroughly undertaken by Boag, Johnson, and many others. What has not been brought to the forefront of this discussion as yet, is that the present tense that Turner isolates is unstable. The statement, which seems to be so concrete in its definition of the "American character," is written in the present perfect continuous: "has been." So when Frederick Jackson Turner isolates the moment that he wants to see as the foundation of colonial American history and the final point of reasoning in the myth of Manifest Destiny, he chooses something that is fundamentally incomplete, and ever changing. Even the "forever unchanged" appearance of the frontier that Boag draws out, is in itself illusory.

It is, nevertheless, the case that this is an account of American history from which assumptions have been made and on which action has been founded. In re-opening this text and its assumptions with an eye on the shifting temporality that is already a part of it, we can gain access to the icon of the frontier as it is rendered by Frederick Jackson Turner as the doorway to new, speculative, versions of American history – and, thereby, American futures.

The practice of re-visiting the past to edit the record and lay the groundwork for new futurities is well established. Thinkers and practitioners who do this include Saidiya Hartman, Freddie Love, and Mishuana Goeman. This reconstruction of the past enables us to read the present; by extension, Black, Indigenous, and queer presents, imply the reality of Black, Indigenous, and queer pasts. As Hartman has it, her writing emerges from "inside the circle" (10). She blends her own Black experience with extensive archival research to reconstruct the "rich landscape of black social life." She attests:

> The endeavour is to recover the insurgent ground of these lives to exhume open rebellion from the case file, to untether waywardness, refusal, mutual aid, and free love from their identification as deviance, criminality, and pathology; to affirm free motherhood (reproductive choice), intimacy outside the institution of marriage, and queer and outlaw passions; and to illuminate the radical imagination and everyday anarchy of ordinary colored girls, which has not only been overlooked, but is nearly unimaginable. (Hartman 10)

That the past is "nearly unimaginable" here is particularly significant; verifiable actions that we know happened are nevertheless marginalized and fragmented, insufficient foundations on

which to build a solid and unruly future of the kind that Hartman posits. Her writing makes those "wayward" and "beautiful" experiences concrete, explaining the if not linear, then at least generational, process of development and Black becoming through which contemporary Black lives have evolved. In the case of communities of color, there is a clearer genetic case for the veracity of this continuity. For queer subalterns (not necessarily distinct from Black lives, of course), the same is not so tangibly true. Indeed, whilst queer people have often been the subjects of acts of violent suppression properly written as they were in Nazi Germany (Ruediger Lautman suggests that as many as 10,000 gay men may have died in concentration camps between 1937 and 1939) they have also been the victims of genocide by statistical rigging and editorial tampering (Lautman 142). We are seeing this take place today in the U.S.A., with the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention recalling medical journals in order to remove "certain language relating to gender," and especially transgender issues (Heidt).

The closure of the frontier, and the finalizing of its narrative, is one such case of queer erasure and unbecoming, as explored by Peter Boag. What Boag also demonstrates in this text, is that there is something crucial about the way that over-defining "the frontier" in the ways that Frederick Jackson Turner does, cuts it off from continuous understandings of history. An unexpected side-effect of this is that it renders the frontier icon as a unique point of access to the experience of the reader as a time-traveler, as per Michael K. Johnson. In the same text, Johnson explores the proliferation within speculative westerns, of a particular form of time-travel narrative: the Indigenous Futurist form of "Native Slipstream," a term coined by Grace L. Dillon via Gerald Vizenor in 2012 (Dillon 3). Literally, a "slipstream" is the space opened up by a fast-moving object,

usually in water, allowing another object to move behind it at a comparable velocity. "Slipstream time travel," in science fiction, refers to time-travel that permits movement between different versions of history. "Slipstream fiction," an alternative to "mainstream fiction," was initially offered by Bruce Sterling and Richard Dorsett as a term for speculative fiction that makes reality strange, without wholly embracing either fantasy or science fiction genres (Sterling). "Native slipstream" is a combination of these two: it is fiction that problematizes settler colonial versions of contemporary reality, whilst supposing Native constructions of time, many of which tend towards quantum mechanics, and therefore, simultaneous temporalities that it might be possible to navigate between. The added recognition of Turner's temporal instability put forward here enables us to see that in divorcing his still-ever-changing frontier icon from the linear progression of history, Frederick Jackson Turner created a slipstream: an alternate reality in which all periods of history of that place (and the United States which it represents), have access to one another simultaneously. According to Grace Dillon:

> Native slipstream exploits the possibilities of multiverses by reshaping time travel.… [S]lipstream also appeals because it allows authors to recover the Native space of the past, to bring it to the attention of contemporary readers, and to build better futures. It captures moments of divergence and the consequences of that divergence. (5)

Mark Rifkin takes this manner of temporal thought, or "orientation" in his term, beyond the question of works of speculative fiction. Rifkin asserts:

> Native peoples remain oriented in relation to collective experiences of peoplehood, to particular territories…, to the ongoing histories of their inhabitance in those spaces,

> and to histories of displacement from them. Such orientations open up "different worlds" than those at play in dominant settler orderings, articulations, and reckonings of time. Developing such notions of temporal orientation and multiplicity opens the potential for centralizing Native continuity and change in ways that move beyond the modern/ traditional binary.... (2)

It is for precisely this effect that the western is an inviting genre for texts that wish to "revise" U.S. history and the U.S. national myth: it exists as a parallel universe, suggestive of the possibility of further alternative worlds in both the past, and the future. It is ironic that in creating the frontier icon, Turner seems to have stumbled into a mode of using time that is closer to Native than to European thought, particularly in 1890; it is also because of the specific territorial boundaries of the frontier that I believe it is appropriate to posit that the western-as-slipstream is a form of Native slipstream, rather than any other form of slipstream time-travel. The land eventually dictates the terms in which it would like to be considered.

Throughout Rifkin's work, he explores ways in which literary and cinematic texts give their audiences access to Native orientations to time. He offers the concept of "iconicity," taken up here. In his terms, a temporal moment that takes on "iconicity" "operates as a site for generating Native futures not bound by the presumed givenness of settler national geographies and destinies" (Rifkin 131). That is to say, the "iconic" moment is a "site" that exists beyond settler time: it is a point of access to the slipstream. Two instances of Native writing that enable us to see this in operation—and there are many—are Anishinaabe Turtle Mountain band poet Mark Turcotte's poem "Burn" and Ojibwe and German writer Louise Erdrich's novel *Last Report on the Miracles at*

Little No Horse (Turcotte 136; *Little No Horse*). Both writers are enrolled in the same tribe at the same North Dakota reservation. In the first instance, we see Native Slipstream in operation in the space of a short poem. In the second, we see the potential for both the frontier in literature as an icon, and the form of the literary western as an icon. A brief reading of Turcotte's poem is offered here as an illustration of how we can see the past as haunting the present via interaction with "iconicity." Throughout his career, Turcotte has been noted as a poet who "renders his own life experiences against the background of ancestral drumbeats" (Redd 85); and as a writer who is able to summon ancestral figures from "the farthest reaches of the cosmos" (Rosenberg 97). The poem opens as follows:

> Back when I used to be Indian
>
> I am crushing the dance floor,
>
> jump-boots thumping Johnny Rotten
>
> Johnny Rotten…. (Turcotte ll. 1-4)

Time has interesting work to do in this poem. "Back when I used to be Indian / I am": the poem has a sense of distance from identity and belonging, that is confused by some form of ongoing feeling of present tense. This is a work of art in which a schism between ways of being, and especially of "be[ing] Indian," are dramatized. The poem turns, both emotionally and temporally, on an interaction between the speaker of the poem, and a "white girl" who is watching him on the dance floor (l. 5). The interaction plays out as follows:

> …She moves to me,
>
> dark gaze, tongue hot to lips. The music

is hard, lights louder. She slides low

against my hip to hiss, *go go Geronimo*.

I stop. (ll. 8-12) (italics in original)

The very first thing to note in terms of the kinetics of this poem is that this poem reads, "*go go…* I stop." Clearly, the invocation of Bedonkohe Band leader Goyaałé, known in English as Geronimo, interrupts the flow of present-tense experience for the "Indian" dancer in the poem. There are several layers of meaning in this moment, and the irony that "*geronimo!*" is often used in English as an expression of unrestricted movement, is present and inflects the bitterness of the current interaction, in which identifying the dancer with a historic figure who has no bearing on the current moment except that they are one of few famous Native people that the "white girl" knows the name of, causes the dancer to cease experiencing time as a subject, and become objectified. The white girl reduces them to their race, with all details of time and context stripped away. Both Mark Rifkin and Peter Boag write about how the imposition of a colonial telling of history, via the frontier narrative, causes Native presence to be identified with the past, a fetishized and aestheticized relic that acts as a barrier to thinking about Native continuance. Essentially, what the "white girl" in the poem does is to make the live, dancing figure of the "Indian" synonymous with a relic, the dead figure of Goyaałé. Thus, in the poem, the dancer obtains access to a world that is usually foreclosed to the living. In the final part of the poem, the dancer has a face-to-face interaction with an ancestor, who may or may not be Goyaałé: this in itself is an act of restoration after the destructive work of the white girl, because she has opened up a world in which it doesn't matter which ancestor it is.

The interaction runs as follows:

All silence he sits beside the fire

at the center of the floor, hands stirring

through the ashes, mouth moving in the shape

of my name. I turn to reach toward him,

take one step, feel my skin begin

to flame away. (ll. 13-18)

Again, the poetics at work in this piece are dense, and there is a good deal that could be said about these few lines. What matters for the present argument is that, in this moment, the two Native figures confront and recognize one another. In the words "mouth moving in the shape / of my name," we see the recognition of the dancer as a subject, with his own name, by the ancestral figure. In "reach[ing] toward him," the dancer feels his skin "begin / to flame away": the boundaries of the self disintegrate; the ashes that the ancestor is "stirring / through" might be the ashes of the dancer. By that reading, this is a full-circle slipstream experience in which the figure in the present encounters the moment in which their death was prophesied in the past. Alternatively, in the removal of the skin, we see the removal of the borders of the self: these two subjects become one, and the two moments in time, the present and the historic, are indelibly fused. Both readings sit side-by-side in this poem and both have something to tell us about the idea of slipstream as a reading practice: the mimetics of poetry can enable us to become immersed in the experience of the slipstream, momentarily understanding what it means for all of time - past, present and future - to co-exist in the same instant. In terms of the second reading, it is important to hang onto the action

that caused the past and present to collide. The "white girl" spoke the name "Geronimo," invoking a fetishized, stereotypical version of indigenous being; the poem is infused with sexual energy from the beginning. This invocation reenacts the violent suppression of the Apache in Goyaałé's lifetime, as the white girl denies the subjective becoming of the dancer in the present moment. Of course, we must wonder how much the "white girl" really knew about this particular historic figure, who reportedly (and disputedly) died believing that he "should have fought until [he] was the last man alive" (Craig and Colt).

The function of including this reading of Turcotte's poem has been twofold. First, the argument in this article hinges on identifying the way that the same colonial practices have been instrumentalized to suppress queer and indigenous people. The majority of the work from this point on will focus on queer narratives; but the reading apparatus is based on Native thought and Native creative practice, and it is therefore essential that the Native case be established first. Second, in this article I am moving the concept of "Native Slipstream" away from the field of speculative science fiction. The condensed space of a short poem like "Burn" makes this an ideal illustrative piece, and also demonstrates clearly how the idea of Native Slipstream can be useful in interacting with the stereotypes, archetypes and fetishes that establish frontier iconicity, particularly the fetishization of indigenous bodies.

Throughout this article, I am interested in processes of extension and extrapolation. Regarding slipstream history, my focus is on the way that frontier iconicity enables a practice, within fiction, like that in Saidiya Hartman's scholarship: creating scenarios that carry the ring of history, and therefore, employ aesthetics to create a sense of having always been present, reinstating

diversity of various kinds in a literary and social mythographic canon that has used the same techniques to erase them or suggest their impossibility. Secondly, with specific regard to gender identity and queer history, I want to extend Judith Butler's assertion that "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition" (Butler "Performative Acts" 519; and *Gender Trouble* 179). Typically, this is taken up as referring to the performance of gender in an individual life. This paper asserts that genderqueer presence, and particularly the presence of gender nonconforming women, has been rehearsed throughout the literary history of the western, and that both fictional and state records of the kind that Boag interacts with have tried to reduce and de-nature these presences. By looking at the practices of contemporary authors enacting genderqueer presence in their writing, we can begin to see more clearly that genderqueer and gender non-conforming figures have been insistently present throughout the western archive, reiterating stylized tropes and constituting the recurrence of what Louise Erdrich calls the "man acting woman" in historic, rather than individually experiential, time. Erdrich uses this phrase, fully explored later, in the novel *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No-Horse* (*Little No-Horse*), the sixth volume of her *Love Medicine* series of novels. Written between 1983 and 2004, these books explore every different kind of loving relationship, within the perimeters of the fictional Little No Horse Anishinaabe reservation.

In what follows, I am going to offer three brief case-studies. The first compares the character of Father Agnes Damien in *Little No Horse* with moments of gender nonconformity in Willa Cather's Great Plains Trilogy, to demonstrate how the reiteration of western narrative

structure asks us to reconsider past moments in the western canon in the light of contemporary discourse. Louise Erdrich and Willa Cather have been discussed together in the past, but never in this specific comparison. The second case study focuses on Zane Grey's *The Vanishing American*, exploring Butler's question of "stylized repetition" in conjunction with Boag's work on queer erasure to show how the insistent re-telling of a particular gendered narrative has created a fetishized version of the female cross-dresser, which we can take on as a sign of the presence of everyday gender variance in the past. Throughout the history of the western, it has been necessary to account for the presence of gender nonconforming bodies in the western landscape. At times when American identity is under particular international pressure, as it certainly is in *The Vanishing American*, we see an intensified effort to suppress queer readings of those bodies: in 1920 as in 1890, as now, in 2025, when the second Trump administration attempts to re-define the role of American presence on the world stage. The final case study turns to two brief passages from Cather, which stand as the clearest representations of genderqueer or gender-nonconforming (applying contemporary labels to historic identities is always complex; doubly so when those identities are fictitious) presence in historic western American literature. For more on the alternative queer possibilities enabled by Cather's own life, Melissa J. Homestead's *The Only Wonderful Things* is an excellent point of entry.

Turning, then, to Louise Erdrich and Willa Cather, the relationship between these authors as it materializes in *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No-Horse* is a rich one. The most obvious point of contact lies in Cather's 1927 *Death Comes for the Archbishop*: both novels revolve around French Catholic ministry in indigenous communities: Latour and Vaillant among the Navajo and the Hopi,

Agnes DeWitt, disguised as or becoming Father Damien Modeste, in an Anishinaabe community probably located somewhere in present-day North Dakota. There is enough re-mapping of the textual territory of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* for the later novel to approach the status of pastiche (by which I mean no criticism: the act of amending past uses of our histories is essential to this study). Crucial to this is the fact that on their way out to the Native territories in which the stories take place, both Father Damien Modeste and Bishop Jean-Marie Latour seem to die; both symbolic deaths are brought about by water. Father Damien is drowned in a flood, which enables Agnes DeWitt to take on both his identity, and his mission at Little No Horse. Bishop Latour is shipwrecked near Galveston, Texas, and further injured on the journey to New Mexico. The sense of rebirth may be more concrete in *Little No Horse*, but the comparison between the two figures and the life of Christ is essential to both texts and strengthens the formal echoes between them.

Whether Agnes is disguised as or becomes Father Damien is a relevant thought to this discussion, and a division amongst readers; the type of revanche offered to the Catholic church is substantially altered by perspectives on this question. Maintaining the ambiguity of this figure is a useful tactic in Erdrich: it enables us to access and reconsider historic presences without insistence on over-defining them by contemporary standards. Thinking of Father Agnes Damien as a genderqueer figure in Butlerian terms is useful to the present discussion. What we want to hold on to from Butler here is the idea of gender as an identity "constituted in time" through "stylized repetition." What I am exploring is how contemporary fiction illuminates the "stylized repetition" of gender difference that already exists in the western, but that we have been directed away from encountering directly, recuperating and stabilizing genderqueer presence as a key part of life in the

western, and the West. Consider this notion in contact with the moment of (disappointed) revelation in *Little No-Horse*, when Agnes appears to confess to Nanapush that she is in disguise as Father Damien: "So you're not a woman-acting man, you're a man-acting woman. We don't get many of those lately. Between us, Margaret and me, we couldn't think of more than a couple" (Erdrich 232).

Rendered as "woman-acting man" and "man-acting woman" in English, the Ojibwemowin terms that Nanapush is probably translating here are *ikwekaazo* ("men who functioned as women") and *ininiikaazo* ("women who functioned as men") respectively; Nanapush identifies Father Agnes Damien as *ininiikaazo* in this moment. The first important thing to note here is that these concepts already exist for Nanapush and Margaret: the priest thinks that they are about to offer a shocking revelation, but not only have his friends already observed the phenomenon, but it forms a continuous part of their existing understanding of gender performance in the world. The role of *ininiikaazo* has already begun to be constituted in time among the Anishinaabe. Secondly, it must be noted that Nanapush immediately starts to talk about time. He says, "[w]e don't get many of those lately;" the insinuation here is not only is there a historic presence, but that there used to be more such people, and that their presence has diminished. No mention is made of when this reduction occurred, whether it has anything to do with the diminishing of traditional lifeways after the colonial incursion of the Catholic church, or something else. However, this sense of a history in which there were more such people is in keeping with other Anishinaabe narratives of gender plurality. Articulation between this history and the question of temporal reading strategies in this article can once again be brought about by the scholarship of Grace L. Dillon (Anishinaabe and

Irish), who in addition to defining Native Slipstream as a concrete subgenre of Science Fiction, is also a key thinker with regards to Two-Spirit history, particularly in the Anishinaabe context. The essential concept for Dillon is Indigenous Futurism, according to which concept, Native history and historiography must be recuperated in the interest of founding new possibilities. In working particularly to recuperate Two-Spirit histories, Dillon invokes the Anishinaabe concept of "*biskaabiiyang,*" or "returning to ourselves," in which the future is conceived of as the closing of a circle: indigenous Two-Spirit identities are reinstated beyond the reach of colonial strictures, whether they are theoretical, physical or social (Dillon 12; Nicholson).

In Nanapush's conversation with Father Agnes Damien here, there is the clear recollection of an Anishinaabe past; the novel, first published in 2001, offers a present in which those identities return. Written eleven years after the Third Annual Inter-tribal native American, First Nations, Gay and Lesbian American Conference, at which the term "Two-Spirit" was developed as an umbrella term for speaking of queer identities where they intersect with Native experience of colonialism, Erdrich is clearly writing in a historical moment in which this lens can be applied to representations of frontier history like those in the novel. This is a historic moment of Two-Spirit return, at least in Nanapush's invocation, if not in the person of Father Agnes Damien, who is after all a colonizing presence for most of the narrative. Additionally to this evocation of Anishinaabe Two-Spirit history, Nanapush's words transcend the boundary of the text. In a novel that clearly participates in frontier iconicity, repeating the structure of an earlier novel and exploring the relationship between archetypal western presences in the form of the indigenous Trickster, Nanapush, and the colonial priest, there is an invitation to consider what books like this have shown us; so when Nanapush and

Margaret ask each other how many *ininiikaazo* they can think of, how many "man-acting" women, there is an invitation to the reader to consider how many such characters they can recall in a place like this. The answer is, in fact, quite a few – more if we admit the stories of "woman-acting" men. This tradition includes many of Cather's western characters, from Alexandra Bergson and Frances Harling, who will be discussed here; to some readings of Latour and Vaillant themselves (Hyeojung Bun; John P. Anders); to the mid-century explorations of Martha "Calamity" Jane Canary; to characters who use cross-dressing as disguise, as Father Agnes Damien does, like Huck Finn's comical Sarah-Mary, or the two little cowboys dressed as dancing girls in Sebastian Barry's *Days Without End*. Nanapush asks us to look at complex gender expression in western history: and it is always there to be found.

In building on Peter Boag's foundational work in this area, there is one key thought to hold on to. The most important reason that there are many western texts that amend the way we are asked to look at cross-dressing, transgender or genderqueer figures in western American history, is because they are too numerous to be ignored. Boag's study begins with Alfred Kinsey's 1948 discovery that "the highest frequencies of homosexuality in America that he uncovered were in fact in rural communities in the most remote parts of the country, particularly in the West" (3). He further cites historic records of white people assigned female at birth living as men going back to 1910, and actively suppressed records of indigenous people moving across gender categories before those (Boag 183). These presences must be accounted for, because it cannot be denied that they are present. Either, they must be indexed, as male cross dressing, trans women, or male homosexuality tend to be, as indicative of the decadence of post-frontier urbanization; or, as is usually the case for

lesbians, female cross dressing, trans men and trans masculinity, they must be explained away as the necessary work performed by heterosexual women in order to survive the hostile space of the frontier. In becoming American, their transitional genderqueer identities can be left to one side. David Butler's 1953 musical *Calamity Jane* is perhaps the clearest pop-culture representation of this: as Jane's life becomes settled, embedded not in coach rides over the deadwood plain, but in a shared and permanent home, she is able to embrace traditional heterosexual femininity, and realize the potential of the woman hidden within her earlier masculine comportment. In the opening "Deadwood Stage (Whip Crack Away!)" number, Doris Day dramatizes this gendered difference by exclaiming that she has "calico and gingham for the gals," and adopting a performative wink when she wraps herself in the fabric: clearly, she is not among the "gals" who might be expected to wear such fabrics.

Peter Boag explains the "heterosexualizing" of queer identities via the myth of the frontier as follows:

> myths developed in response to the closing of the frontier were embedded with powerful ideas about gender, tropes informed by the knowledge that the West and the frontier had been primarily male places. They held that a woman in the West might only have made it on her own had she disguised herself as a man. Once the frontier had closed, this myth easily made it possible to return western cross-dressing women (who might otherwise now raise concerns about sex and sexuality) to 'normal' womanhood – that is, to heterosexuality and to appropriate gender behaviors. (6)

Boag is drawing our attention to some clever work in the colonial project: by invoking the myth of the frontier as a hypermasculine space, the presence of gender-nonconforming women who "might only have made it… disguised… as a man" is not only explained without recourse to queer identity, but rather upholds the myth of American exceptionalism: that only the most exceptional of women were able to pass through Turner's "crucible" of the frontier, and emerge as naturalized "Americans" on the other side.

When we see this process of insistently heterosexualizing women in men's clothing in literary and cinematic texts, it is either played for humor, as in the case of Butler's Calamity Jane; or it approaches fetish via another route: the kind of intense sexualization that we see in Zane Grey's *The Vanishing American*. Consider this moment, in which Withers pretends not to recognize Marian when she takes off her eastern, feminine dress and puts on trousers:

> "Shore I thought you were a boy," he said. "Was wondering where *such* a boy might come from. You shore look good medicine to me."
>
> His frank admiration was pleasing to Marian. She would have much preferred to appear before Nophaie in distinctly feminine apparel, such as she had worn when he first saw her. But it would have been out of place here, and she had a moment of happiness in the thought that perhaps Nophaie, too, would find her attractive in this riding suit. (Grey 52)

There are three things to note here. First of all, Withers claims both that he thought Marian was a boy, and that he found that boy attractive. The invocation of queer sexuality, clearly in jest, is intended to heighten the frisson of sexual contact throughout the encounter: in invoking

transgressive sexualities, Withers brings the question of sex *qua* sex to the forefront of the exchange. Secondly, Marian is pleased that Withers sees her as attractive in her riding suit. Grey's free indirect discourse should give us access to Marian's subjectivity: what she shows instead is a vehement reinforcing of the sexual objectification that she encounters. Here, she models Boag's "heterosexuality and appropriate gender behaviors" to the letter. Finally, it is Withers, and not Nophaie, who sees and appreciates Marian in her sexually transgressive attire. This novel has the shape of a romance, and in some ways pretends towards progressive sexual politics; but Grey refuses to demonstrate sexual congress between the indigenous man and white woman. Therefore, the suffused sexual energy that drives the book must be achieved via prosthesis. When we see Marian in masculine clothing, we see her in the context of hyper-masculine, white, cis male desire: these constraints shore up the reality of women wearing trousers to ride horses for long distances against the co-contaminants of inter-racial relationships and queer sexualities.

Butler's question of "stylized performance over time" comes to mind once again: the performance of a woman's cross-dressing as a counterweight to her sexual value is insistently performed in *The Vanishing American* just as it is in *Calamity Jane*; we see versions of the same trope in *West of the Pecos*, and in the novels of B.M. Bowers, too, as the sloughing off of eastern mannerisms opens up a bolder sexual presence in the West, albeit at the cost of feminine dress.

When it comes to texts that might be seen as overlooked records of queer masculinities, however, this sense of intense performativity is not present. The current example is taken from Cather's Great Plains Trilogy, but other examples, like *The Ballad of Little Joe* (more explicit in its relationship to trans identities) are peppered through the history of the genre; Robin Wiegert's

revisiting of Martha Jane Canary in HBO'S *Deadwood* is another such example. These texts stem from the simple, and in some cases insistent, statement of the continuous presence of gender variance in the West. Let us turn to the way that the actual acts of cross-dressing, of overt gender nonconformity, are played down in Willa Cather's writing, acting as subsidiary to the stated aims of liberal feminist progress in the novel.

Throughout the plains Trilogy, we see a struggle for new making: the definition of a new way of being, which includes Ántonia and her desire to be as strong as a man, and the controversy of Alexandra's inheritance and rangeland management in *O Pioneers!* These aspects of the texts – and their index to the marriageability of those characters – are insistently re-stated. There are other questions of women's social roles, however, that may be repeated across texts, but that are very subtly written, and never reiterated, within the individual novels. Here is the first description of Frances Harling in *My Ántonia*: "Frances was dark, like her father, and quite as tall. In winter she wore a sealskin coat and cap, and she and Mr Harling used to walk home together in the evening, talking about grain-cars and cattle, like two men" (84). Something similar happens in Alexandra's first appearance in *O Pioneers!*:

> His sister was a tall, strong girl, and she walked rapidly and resolutely, as if she knew exactly where she was going and what she was going to do next. She wore a man's long ulster (not as if it were an affliction, but as if it were very comfortable and belonged to her; carried it like a young soldier)…. (7)

Both of these characters appear in masculine garb, and both take on masculine economic roles in their families. In *Willa Cather's Queer Economy*, Joseph Dimuro brings in the third of the

Great Plains novels to this conversation, explicitly linking Thea Kronborg's economically successful career to the fact that she does not raise a family: none of these women go on within the text to occupy the role of the mother, the traditional end-point of female becoming in the bildungsroman. Frances we see is "like a man;" Alexandra is not only martial in bearing, perhaps the ultimate in masculine superlatives, but she wears her man's coat "as if it were very comfortable and belonged to her." In the context of these novels, the overall narrative around gender is a liberal one: about the economic viability of female leadership in the family, the arts, or industry. It is notable, though, (and has not escaped comment) that none of these novels are dependent on heterosexual romance for narrative fulfilment. They either, as with *The Song of the Lark* and *O Pioneers!* build the life narrative around something else, with heterosexual romance forming a subsidiary plot or, in the case of *My Ántonia*, simply look away at the crucial moment of heterosexual marriage, building a submerged erotic field that suffuses the landscape of the novel, both literal and figurative, with desire, rather than expressing its fulfilment in the text. So, these novels create alternative possibilities beyond marriage for western women; and in concentrating on this more minor revision to binary gender expectations, they simply introduce the fact of apparently female characters who belong in men's clothing.

Thus, there is a queerness claimed for a singularly western way of being that is established as early as 1917, and in reaching out to Cather, with her mirror-image of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Louise Erdrich reinforces that strand of western generic history: the always-already presence of gender nonconforming women as an essential part of the western is suddenly amplified, becoming a major part of the genre's potential

and its meaning. We could think of it like a synaptic pathway: Cather's liberalism means that Alexandra's economic role takes precedence over the implied, or simply available, queerness of some characters, but in a novel with a provocative exploration of gender as one of its several hearts, which is clearly in conversation with Cather, Erdrich brings it to our minds, establishing that pathway, or slipstream, through western generic history as a significant one. Reiterating a trope allows us to re-experience all its earlier instances, traveling back not only to the time of Father Agnes Damien's arrival at Little No Horse in 1912, on our own historic timeline, but also taking us back through the history of gender nonconformity in western generic fiction.

Adherence to Turner's formulation of the frontier enables the always-already presence: he gives us a doorway into a past time, through which ghosts can slip, reinserting their voices into an experience of the past. Traveling the genderqueer slipstream with new apparatus for seeing and understanding in hand, means the plural ghosts of western life become louder in the present, as reiterations call the early and overlooked, or disguised and denatured, but nevertheless insistently present, back to our minds again.

Charlie Josephine's 2023 play *Cowbois* plays generative games with this possibility. First there is the gunslinger character Jack, a potent embodiment of the possible sex appeal of the transmasculine hero, who redresses the cissexist assumptions that trans men pose no threat to a heteronormative social order owing to a perceived (indeed, socially constructed) phallocentric absence of sexual potency. This part of the narrative is both joyous and raucous, and Miss Lillian's pregnancy after coupling with Jack is a taunting refusal of cisnormative reasoning. More speculatively, however, Josephine also offers a moment in which George, a cisgendered,

heterosexual man finds himself the only character onstage who is unable to regulate his own emotional expression. After his friends calm him down, he admits, "It scares me too… A man can keep it down most of the time, but when it comes up?... [W]here's it all meant to go?" (Josephine 104). The rigorous ideological construction of the male as loud, violent, controlling, and overstepping, is rehearsed with as much compassion and exploration as the historic desexualization of transmasculinity.

To bring this argument - which moves in circular, conversational constructions of time -back to its point of origin: Josephine identifies the western as the genre best suited to exploring new possibilities in gender expression and sexual relationships, queer or heterosexual. I began by suggesting that the play is not really, intrinsically, a western. It occupies a non-place, demarcated with western generic signifiers but with almost no interest in construction American history: an important breaking with Turnerian tradition. What Josephine asserts, here, is that the western genre is a location of generative possibility with regards to queer becoming. It has been the work of this article to make the following argument: Frederick Jackson Turner and his early collaborators set out to crystallize a single narrative of American Exceptionalism, and in so doing, created the frontier icon: an entry point into a continuous slipstream that allows for new possibilities.

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