WRITING FROM A PROFOUND EDGE: THE CONSTRUCTION OF
(RADICAL) BLACK WESTERN IDENTITIES, 1856-1997

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Abstract

This study examines African American Western narratives by James P. Beckwourth, Nat Love, Oscar Micheaux, Robert Greer, Walter Mosley, Toni Morrison, and Octavia E. Butler. Spanning 1856-1997, I locate their texts within what bell hooks would describe as the 'profound edge' of Western historical, literary, cultural and mythic discourses. I identify a shared concern of creating literary spaces in which these writers can insert blackness into the white spaces and discourses of the West. I employ an intersecting conceptual and structural framework of the Frontier Myth, the Western literary form, and the racial project to critically interrogate the extent to which a textual engagement with the historic and contemporary formulations of Frontier and the conventions and structure of the Western form complicate and problematise literary representations of alternative and potentially radical black identities.

In critically examining the relationships between these concepts and the consequences for identity construction, I demonstrate that those texts which are unable to resist the gravitational pull of the Western form struggle to realise self-determining and self-defined black Western identities. My conceptual approach utilises Michael Omi and Howard Winant's notion of the racial project to convey the racial, literary and gendered motivations of the narratives to show a range of racial projects from the conventional to the radical; bell hooks' 'spaces of radical openness' to explore the limits and possibilities that being located on a profound edge has for identity construction; and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s theory of Signifyin(g) which informs an analysis of the critical tensions and complexities of these literary representations.

I argue that the Western form itself is a series of contesting cultural, racial, literary and gendered frontiers or contact zones, and that the porosity of the form enables a transformation of the black Western. Importantly therefore, my argument repositions these African American Western texts as agents in the evolution of the black literary Western.

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Chapter One: The Legacy of Western Fables – Contexts and Concepts

Introduction

> Our living depends on our ability to conceptualise alternatives, often improvised. Theorising about this experience aesthetically, critically is an agenda for radical cultural practice.
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> For me this space of radical openness is a margin – a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a 'safe' place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance. (hooks, "Choosing" 149)

In *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, bell hooks reconceptualises the idea of the margin as a site of resistance that can potentially foster radical black identities. She defines radical as identities which are both "oppositional and liberatory" and, as such, she challenges a hegemonic assumption that marginal spaces are spaces of the oppressed and powerless ("Postmodern" 29). I locate the texts historically and culturally within the profound edge of Western historical, literary and mythic discourses and explore the extent to which this positioning enables or inhibits textual expressions of radical black subjectivities. The seven Western texts examined are: *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*, and *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer* by Oscar Micheaux which were published between 1856 and 1913. Robert Greer's *The Devil's Hatband*, Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* were all published in the 1990s.

This study takes as its subject the intersection of the Frontier Myth, the Western Literary Form, and the Racial Project. I critically interrogate the extent to which the narratives' engagement with the historic and contemporary formulations of the Frontier, the conventions and structure of the Western form, and the African American cultural resources of Signifyin(g) and the black trickster figure complicate and problematise literary representations of black Western subjectivities. Therefore, despite the historical span of the publication of these texts, the racial projects of these texts all share a

concern to challenge, disrupt, or revise either implicitly or explicitly the hegemonic whiteness of America's foundational narrative of nation-building and American identity by inserting blackness into Western discourses and spaces. As a result, they demonstrate a range of conventional and radical racial projects. For example, I argue that Beckwourth's, Love's and Mosley's texts employ the black vernacular figure of the trickster to express alternative black Western identities, but it is not until the works of Morrison and Butler that we witness a gendered resistance to the gravitational pull of the Western and critical opposition to monolithic Western myths. Consequently, it is in *Paradise* and *Parable* that the articulation of radical black Western subjectivities is most fully realised. This distinction allows both Beckwourth's and Morrison's texts to be recognised as trickster narratives albeit with very different outcomes for character identity formation.

Writing from the profound edge of American Western history and myth is itself a strategy of Signifyin(g); a strategy which enables the narratives to contest the cultural, generic, racial and gendered frontiers of the form. I demonstrate that, importantly, the Western form itself is a series of contested frontiers or contact zones and that the critical interaction between my texts and the frontiers of form crucially establishes the narratives as agents in the evolution of the black Western form. With this in mind, I prefer to use the term 'Western literary form' to highlight the porosity of its generic boundaries.

The Shape of the Thesis

"Cultural crisis is the mother of myth . . ." (Richard Slotkin 636)

My study employs the 'ends of centuries' as a temporal structural device that frames and informs the organisation of the thesis and the choice of texts. The 1890s and the 1990s were decades of social, cultural, political and economic crises in the United States. This turbulence fostered the need in both decades for new narratives of American national identities to be told. For historian Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893, it was the story of the settlement of the West by tenacious pioneers that provided the cultural resource to write a celebratory history of Western settlement and American progress that mythologised settlement and created a particular kind of American national identity that was white and male. As a narrative of American selfhood and national belonging contemporaneous with the early texts, Turner's Frontier Myth offers those early black authors an opportunity to inscribe their protagonists into a national imaginary of citizenhood and create positive black identities.

At the tail end of the twentieth-century the United States witnessed a decade of civil unrest that reflected continued deep-seated black American discontent with white America (a discontent that today is manifested in the Black Lives Matter movement). The challenge to white hegemonic power structures takes place not only on the streets of Los Angeles but also within academia in the debate over the creation of an African American literary canon. At the same time, Turner's celebratory Western narrative is being rewritten as a narrative of conquest and violence by New Western historians. Paralleling this historical revision is a renaissance in Western literature and film during the 1990s. My study is underpinned by an enquiry into why African American writers in the late twentieth century engage with Turner's white historical-mythic narrative and appropriate the Western literary form to write narratives of black identity as a means by which to question and challenge the contemporary racialism of white America.

In establishing the 1890s as the historical and conceptual starting point for my study, I use chapter Two to explore the three early Western narratives of Beckwourth, Love, and Micheaux which I approach chronologically. The significance of a chronological approach is that it allows chapter two to achieve three outcomes. The chapter demonstrates that the different black literary representations of the heroic Frontiersman as pathfinder, cowboy, and yeoman farmer mirror the social progress of Turner's mythical Frontiersman. The three texts therefore show a development in the literary representations of alternative black Western male identities. As such, this development in the construction of the male protagonist along with the ways in which the narratives engage with the Western form establishes these early texts as 'hypotexts' for the contemporary texts.[1] Chapter two therefore functions structurally, conceptually, and thematically to lay the foundation for the subsequent analysis of the contemporary texts and to highlight a black Western literary history.

Chapter three onwards explores narratives written in the 1990s. Once the study moves to this contemporary focus, there is a structural shift from the chronological approach in chapter two to a discursive structure. This shift facilitates a focus on the evolution of the black Western form. Thus, while Greer's novel was published six years after Mosley's and three years after Butler's texts, it is the first of the contemporary texts to be explored in chapter three. This is because I argue that Greer's novel oscillates the closest towards the conventions of the form and consequently is the most conservative in its representation of a black Frontiersman. In the subsequent chapters on Mosley, Morrison, and Butler's texts I explore how the narratives evolve the black Western form and the relationship between the development of the form and potentially more liberating scripts for black identities.

The continuity of concerns in terms of how all seven texts engage with myth, form and racial identity is illustrated by a repeating internal chapter structure. This logical structural format is important because it creates for each chapter a discursive

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[1] See discussion of Gérard Genette's concept on page 20.

space for a critical interrogation of the complexities, overlaps, and distinctions between the conceptual terms Frontier, Post-Frontier, Western, Post-Western and the consequences for constructions of (radical) black Western identities. This means that, across the study, I take up the Frontier themes of Western violence, individualism and self-transformation, redemption and mobility in order to examine the construction of different kinds of Western gendered identities. My study recognises that the Frontier Myth still has a cultural value for those contemporary narratives which seek to present the experiences of those excluded from its narrative of national identity.

Furthermore, the internal organisation functions to underline three key motivations of this study. They are to demonstrate the evolution of the black Western literary form and to show that the genre is a site of contesting frontiers; to explore the extent to which the narratives can resist the gravitation pull of genre and mythic Frontier narratives; and to explore the consequences of navigating white forms for literary representations of black identities. My discussion on racial identity focuses on the different ways that the narratives use the black cultural and literary concepts of 'spaces of radical openness' and 'Signifyin(g)' as rhetorical and thematic strategies in their character construction. In using the Racial Project as a critical and discursive structure to embed these concepts, my approach recognises the connections and nuances across the narratives which I term 'signifyin(g) threads' and the complexities of interweaving black and white forms for African American Western narratives.

Western Literary History

Absences in "the greatest American story ever told" (Katz xii-xiii)

This study is temporally framed by two significant cultural events that dramatically changed how Western history and settlement were viewed and represented: Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 thesis "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" and Patricia Nelson Limerick's 1987 book *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. Emerging out of the cultural, social and political crises of the late nineteenth century,[2] Turner's narrative set out to prove how the settlement of the West had been a heroic process of taming, civilising and Americanising the landscape. Turner, as Richard Slatta points out, "made the Frontier experience *the* central force in creating American identity and values" (83; emphasis in original). Problematically however, this American character formed on the Frontier was white, male and predominantly Anglo-Saxon, leading William Katz to state that in "the greatest American story ever told . . . black people were unceremoniously dropped from the cast" (xii-xiii). Turner's thesis underscored a version of American Western history which, in the words of Neil Campbell, "ignored or nullified the other histories that were already there" (*Cultures* 8).

Nearly one hundred years after Turner's paper, Limerick presented a new historiography of Western settlement which sought to challenge what she describes as the "creation myth" of Turner's thesis (*Legacy* 323). Known as New Western History, this revisionist approach was part of a wider critical consciousness that sought to challenge official histories and redress historical amnesia. "The 1990s", writes Marni Gauthier, "became the decade of truth-telling and redress" (4). Although incredibly important in influencing a significant shift in how historians would approach Western historiography past and present, Limerick's work and that of New Western History has,

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[2] For further discussions on the social, cultural and economic crises of the late nineteenth century, see Slotkin 1992; Klein 1996; Ostler 2007; McVeigh 2007.

nonetheless, been criticised for not recognising that prior to the 1980s other disciplines, such as literature and film were revising Turner's monolithic Frontier.[3] In *Legacy*, Limerick recognises that there is a "black-centered" Western history (291), but she does not acknowledge the work of historians revising the black West prior to the 1980s. As early as 1947, African American historians John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss identified that African Americans had been involved in settling the West since 1804, when William Clark, took his personal slave, York, on the famous government financed Lewis (Meriwether) and Clark Expedition to the West of the Appalachians.[4]

In the 1960s and 1970s, there begins a sustained endeavour to establish a black Western historiography that presents the lives of black trappers/traders, cowboys, homesteaders and soldiers; most notably Philip Durham and Everett L. Jones's *The Negro Cowboy* (1965),[5] Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy's *Anyplace But Here* (1966), William H. Leckie's *The Buffalo Soldiers* (1967), William Loren Katz's *The Black West* (1971), and Sherman W. Savage's *Blacks in the West* (1976). These African American historians were revising Frontier history to include the role of black settlers in the creation of a new country. Their revisionist approach expresses the zeitgeist of the period which witnesses a new social and political consciousness as marginalised groups, such as African Americans, Native Americans, and women fundamentally challenge the status quo of American society.

A consequence of African American erasure from traditional Western historiography was their omission from cultural representations. Quintard Taylor explains that Turner's narrative was reproduced through an array of cultural artefacts, such as paintings, literature and film in which African Americans "had no place in the region's historical saga" (*In Search* 19). As early as 1966, Durham and Jones had

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[3] See for example: Tatum 1997, Allmendinger 2003. Limerick herself has admitted that she forgot to acknowledge her predecessors in *Legacy* (Robinson 2004).
[4] According to Quintard Taylor, the first African to explore the American West was Esteban, a slave who accompanied Cabeza de Vaca in 1528 ("From" 4).
[5] Durham and Jones had published earlier in 1955 and 1964 two articles on the black cowboy (Glasrud, "Don't" 4).

argued that "Despite African Americans' role in the West, they rarely appear in Western fiction" (220).[6] The absence of African Americans from the historical and mythic Western narratives is mirrored in the genre. The popular trajectory of the Western begins with James Fenimore Cooper who establishes the form with the *Leatherstocking Tales* (1823-41). In the second part of the nineteenth century, it diverges into the formulaic pulp fiction of the dime novel before returning to the legacy of Cooper in Owen Wister's 1902 *The Virginian*. The form is then cemented in the work of Zane Grey in the early to mid-part of the twentieth century.[7] The narrowness of a traditional Western literary history reinforces the idea of a white literary West. However, in an essay on early black Western print culture, Eric Gardner argues that "It flies in the face of the sense – still often predominant – that there was no black literary engagement with the early West" ("African American" 199). Krista Comer provides a possible reason for this absence by identifying that "the literary history of African Americans up to the 1960s and 1970s had been charted mainly through New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, and most parts of the South" ("New West" 251).

In 2014, Michael K. Johnson reiterated a concern he had initially voiced over a decade earlier in 2002,[8] which is that it seems to take literary critics longer than historians to engage with a black West. Whereas "the *history* of African Americans in the West has become an emergent field of study" ("African American" 162; emphasis in original),[9] Johnson argues that African American "literary history is still lagging far behind" (*Hoo-Doo* 4). Along with his *Hoo-Doo Cowboys and Bronze Buckaroos* (2014), Johnson identifies three other book length studies which focus on the African American

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[6] African Americans may have had a "relatively modest" presence on the American Frontier (Walsh 141), but they played a visible part in the founding and settling of the West. It is estimated that several thousands of African Americans worked as cowboys in the late nineteenth century (Allmendinger, *Imagining* 67). According to Taylor, African Americans constituted 12% of the region's inhabitants in 1870 and 7.1% in 1990. Notwithstanding the fluctuation in figures, Taylor states that "they show black Westerners represented a substantial component of the Western populace" ("From" 3).
[7] See Cawelti 1977; Tompkins 1992; Mitchell 1996; Kitses 2004.
[8] *Black Masculinity and the Frontier Myth in American Literature*
[9] For a list of recent works on the historical African American West, see Johnson 2014. To which can be added *Freedom's Racial Frontier: African Americans in the Twentieth Century West*, edited by Herbert G. Ruffin and Dwayne A. Mack. U of Oklahoma P, 2018.

literary West: his 2002 *Black Masculinity and the Frontier Myth in American Literature*, Blake Allmendinger's *Imagining the African American West* (2005), and Eric Gardner's 2009 *Unexpected Places: Relocating Nineteenth-Century African American Literature* (*Hoo-Doo* 5). To this list, we can add Emily Lutenski's 2015 *West of Harlem: African American Writers and the Borderlands*. Lutenski brings a new dimension to the discussion of a black West. She examines the role of "the borderlands that were once Mexico and Indian Territory" on the imagination of the black writers of the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro movement (22). The contemporary shift in reading the American West beyond its geographical borders evident in Lutenski's study can also be found in the earlier work of Johnson[10] and demonstrates the flexibility of the Frontier motif.

Of relevance to this study, both Johnson's and Allmendinger's texts offer early interventions into the field of black Western literary studies. In *Black Masculinity*, Johnson explores how the "masculinised ideal" of the Frontier has been interrogated and extends his analysis from the Western Frontier to the frontiers of the American South, Europe, and Africa (10). His unique contribution to scholarship on the black literary West considers a range of African American authors, including Oscar Micheaux, Nat Love and Toni Morrison who have "participated in the creation of the literature of the Frontier" (*Black* 19). Underpinning Johnson's analysis is the question of what happens when a black writer engages with white mythic constructions of manhood. Significantly, I expand the discussion to focus upon the evolution of the form and whether, or not, this evolution allows for the expression of subversive and liberating black Western subjectivities. In his discussion of Western films, Jim Kitses states that the variety of the genre illustrates that "first and foremost the Western is a historical fable" (*Horizons* 19). The inherent tension within the form between fact and

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[10] Susan Kollin, Neil Campbell, Krista Comer, Stephen Tatum, for example, also critically engage with this Post-Western approach which challenges, according to Kollin, "a narrowly conceived regionalism" of the West that historicises the West and its cultures ("Postwestern" xi). However, I have not included them at this point in my discussion because their work does not specifically focus on a black West.

fiction/history and myth is exploited by the writers under consideration here who engage with the genre in flexible and creative ways, for example, by acknowledging elements and influences which may not be compatible with white Western mythic discourses. For example, Nat Love wrote his autobiography within a six-year period of the seminal texts of Owen Wister, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Love not only wrote himself into the mythic Frontier narrative, but his autobiography has intertextual references within and outside the white Western narrative tradition that do not quite fit with the conventional view of Western literary history in terms of its literary and cultural production. Central to my discussion is the premise that the genre has always been more flexible than conventional criticism has proposed.[11]

Following on from Johnson's study, Allmendinger's slim volume provides a wide-ranging survey of black Western literature and film. For the first time (until now), his book includes all the literary works in my study. Allmendinger's ambitious approach means that the length and depth of discussion for each text varies considerably.[12] The result is that *Imagining* has been critiqued as lacking "a unifying analysis of these works" (Reich 617), with Tyina Steptoe arguing that he "misses some key opportunities to fully interrogate his sources because he introduces so many topics in so few pages" (82). Nonetheless, Allmendinger establishes a basis for further study through his survey of key authors and by exploring Western themes and the appropriation of these by black writers. Although he does not consider how myth and form inform the construction of black identities and the effect of this engagement upon the form itself, *Imagining* is important in the literary analysis of the West. It made readers aware of a diverse black West and initiated debates about black Western writing. In focusing upon a handful of texts in greater depth, I develop Allmendinger's introductory work to

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[11] Johnson, et al also explore the flexibility of the Western genre in the recently published *Weird Westerns: Race, Gender, Genre.* U of Nebraska P, 2020. Their focus is on exploring the weird Western as a hybrid genre of the Western and speculative fiction (3).
[12] Beckwourth and Micheaux receive the most attention in dedicated chapters. Coverage of Love, Mosley and Greer ranges from one paragraph to just over a page. Morrison and Butler appear in his final chapter "Women Rewriting History" alongside other female Western texts.

explore the critical consequences for identity construction of engaging with white Western narratives and forms.

In the same year that Allmendinger's work was published, Dan Moos' *Outside America: Race, Ethnicity, and the Role of the American West in National Belonging* appeared. Moos explores a selection of early to mid-twentieth century African American, Native American and Mormon literature and offers a compelling discussion of how these texts appropriate the mythic narratives of the West for identity construction. His discussion is a critical response to what he sees as an oversight on the part of New Western historians in not considering how marginalised groups could be empowered by the creation myth of the American nation. Moos argues that engagement with the Western myth offered empowerment to these excluded groups and opportunities for a "reformulation of identity" rather than a modifying of the myth (13). Moos' analysis and this study share similar interests in terms of an African American appropriation and engagement with the mythic West and constructions of identity. However, Moos' focus is primarily on the Western mythic narrative and he "considers the ways this narrative was appropriated by those Americans who resided structurally outside the story" (4). I contribute to and develop further this line of argument by critically examining the possibilities that an employment of the Western literary form may or may not facilitate a challenge to the mythic narrative of the Frontier. While Moos considers inclusion in the national narrative as offering an empowering script for marginalised groups, this notion of empowerment is too broad for my study. Fundamentally, I explore the extent to which the texts' engagement with myth and form problematises the textual representations of different and/or radical black subjectivities. I identify radical identities as transgressive, transformative and transforming.

The following sections focuses on the key conceptual elements of the Frontier Myth, the Western Literary Form, and the Racial Project. This conceptual triad informs the structural, thematic and critical approach of my study.

The Frontier Myth: Place and Ideological Narrative

"Every human group has a creation myth – a tale explaining where they come from and why they are special" (Limerick, *Legacy* 322)

Turner's thesis presented a "progressive cultural history" of the United States which entailed the settlement of the American West (Crooks 69).[13] The American Frontier as place and ideological narrative was crucial to the process of Americanising the West. Defined by Turner as "the meeting-point between savagery and civilisation" which "lies at the hither edge of free land", this Frontier was "the line of most rapid and effective Americanisation" ("Significance" 7-8). The Frontier operated, according to Crooks, as place "where European-American settlement or colonization of North America ends" (68). It was also a trope for a way of looking at the world that was informed by a colonial mentality and the doctrine of Manifest Destiny which promulgated that the nation "was impelled to expand westward by divine providence and natural rights" (Nickel 363).

In what Limerick termed a "whites-only" history, Turner simplified and naturalised not only the historical process of settlement but also the construction of Western identities ("Adventures" 93).[14] "In passing from history to nature", Roland Barthes explains, "myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts . . . does away with all dialectics" (143). Turner's Frontier operates as a boundary between two distinct spaces: one primitive (the wilderness and its inhabitants), and one cultivated (those areas settled by the pioneers). Underlying this definition of the Frontier is the idea that America was a nation created at the boundary between 'civilisation' and 'wilderness'. The early texts of Beckwourth, Love, and Micheaux fit

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[13] For Turner, the American West was "an area of free land" pre-1890 and a settled area post-1890 (3). Frontier and West were then, and are today, ambiguous terms and they are sometimes treated as interchangeable. I employ Taylor's definition of a geographical West as "beyond the 98th meridian – North Dakota to Texas westward to Alaska and Hawaii" (*In Search* 18). But I also explore the West as a real and imagined place, and as a site of mobile and contested frontiers.

[14] Other notable New Western scholars include William Cronon, Richard White, and Donald Worster.

within this nineteenth century cultural and historical framework with Love and Micheaux explicitly seeking to insert their protagonists into the narrative of nation-building. Although Beckwourth's narrative sits outside this cultural frame, it anticipates many of the themes and issues (for example: Frontier violence, self-transformation, and constructions of black Western masculinities) that the later texts engage with and transform through a process of repetition and revision. Whereas the early texts of Beckwourth and Love embrace this spatial and ideological notion of the Frontier in order to establish their protagonists as agents of civilisation, Morrison and Butler invert the Frontier dichotomy in order to interrogate the implications of the nation's originary story for non-white peoples.

The revised Western historiography of the late twentieth century recognised that Turner's "monologic account of US national progress" as "white, settler, masculine, agricultural" is "insufficient to represent its diverse cultures" (Goldberg 22). The extent to which the texts disrupt and challenge the Frontier Myth is complex and varies across the narratives; for example, Greer does little to challenge the myth's masculinised discourse, but he does insert black experiences, voices and places into the white mythic narrative. Butler, on the other hand, significantly challenges the racial and gendered assumptions of Turner's mythic narrative. Importantly, I locate three conceptual shifts in the narratives' use of Frontier that inform my interpretation of them as Post-Frontier texts. It is also possible that the narratives of Beckwourth, Love and Micheaux may unwittingly reveal Post-Frontier elements but these do not make the narratives Post-Frontier texts in terms of historical designation.

The first shift is from a monolithic Frontier that functions as a meeting-point between savagery and civilisation to the notion of frontiers as sites of human contact. Two important scholarly texts published in 1992 offer a useful redefinition of Frontier. Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* presents a postcolonial critique of European travel writing about non-European parts of the world. She reformulates the "colonial frontier" into "contact zone[s]" (6) which are "social

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spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (4). In "Letting Go Our Grand Obsessions", Annette Kolodny also argues that the frontier should be seen "as a locus of first cultural contact" (3). She points out that this contact is "circumscribed by a particular physical terrain in the process of change *because of* the forms that contact takes, all of it inscribed by the collusions and interpenetrations of language" (3; emphasis in original). This view of the frontier as a site of intercultural contact recognises that this contact will be of a contestatory nature involving unequal power relations between different groups of people. At the same time, an integral element of this redefinition of frontier is the shift from Frontier to frontiers. Nearly a decade after Pratt and Kolodny, Noreen Groover Lape explores "multiple frontiers" which, she argues, are "occupied by diverse cultural groups at disparate geographical points" (3). This contemporary re-imaging of frontiers also signals a shift from an ideological Frontier to spatial frontiers. Hence, in the twentieth century 'frontier' becomes a flexible concept that can be appropriated beyond its spatial context of the 1890s; that is, it becomes detached from its rural Western terrain. Both Greer's and Mosley's novels engage with this spatial definition in their representations of the Mekong Delta and the Battle of the Bulge as contemporary frontier spaces for expressions of black Western masculinities.

The contemporary shift to intercultural contact informs the second conceptual revision. For Turner, if the Frontier was the place where the American nation was born, it was also the place where an exceptional American identity was created. Turner emphasised the transformative qualities of the Frontier. The Frontier experience "promoted a composite nationality for the American people", an identity which held dear American values of "individualism, democracy, nationalism" ("Significance" 23, 34). Problematically, Turner's vision of this American Frontiersman was white, male, Protestant and primarily of Anglo-Saxon origin. Significantly, Post-Frontier narratives challenge this monolithic cultural construction. They present different racial and ethnic

groups that, according to Lape, "mediate their multiple ethnicities to construct a national identity that is neither inherently separatist nor homogenously unified" (2). This shift in focus therefore "involves subaltern voices" (Tatum, "Postfrontier" 461-2). However, the legacy of Turner's white "self-made man" who, according to Turner, was "the Western man's ideal" remains a powerful mythological symbol of Americanness ("Problem" 191). Consequently, even as the narratives interrogate the whiteness of Turner's figure, critical contradictions appear in their constructions of alternative Western identities. For example, an appropriation of the heroic Frontiersman allows Beckwourth to mask his protagonist's racial identity and thereby gives him a physical and psychological freedom that his peers in the South would not have had. Troublingly however, the blackness of his character remains hidden. In *Paradise*, Morrison explores how the internalisation of white narratives of Western identity restrict and oppress the black community of Ruby. Although Beckwourth's and Morrison's texts show very different outcomes in appropriating and revising Turner's figure, they both show the difficulty in reconciling white narratives with expressions of black subjectivity.

The final conceptual shift to Turner's Frontier that I explore emphasises a more complex relationship between people and Western spaces. According to Stephen Tatum, places exist "as *sites* produced by the circulation of peoples, of technologies and commodities, and of cultural artifacts, including of course images, stories, and myths" ("Postfrontier" 461-62; emphasis in original). Hence, the texts in my study engage in a re-imagining and re-interpretation of Western places and spaces. In *The Devil's Hatband*, I argue that Greer draws attention to how informal black spaces challenge a hegemonic Western appropriation of space in order to express a critical race consciousness. At the same time, both Greer's and Mosley's novels illustrate that the individual agency that Tatum suggests above is difficult for their black protagonists to achieve in the white spaces of a racialised West. While the conceptual revisions to Frontier mean that, to borrow from Kolodny, "neither the black cowboys nor the Black Seminoles of the nineteenth century are any longer anomalous" in the history of

Western settlement (8), it does not necessarily follow that the textual constructions of radical black subjectivities is inevitable.

The significance of the pioneer figure within a narrative of nation-building is that he symbolises a moment in the historical mythology of the Frontier when the construction of American national development and the desire for individual betterment converge. Turner took the European perception of the farmer as a labourer and elevated him to a "peer of the realm" whose contribution to society was fundamental (Smith 192-193).[15] Turner was not alone in constructing this national mythic discourse. The other key player at the tail end of the nineteenth century was Theodore Roosevelt.[16] Both men were working within existing traditions of the Frontier myth. Turner was influenced by "the myth of the garden" with "Its emphasis on agrarian settlement [that] places it clearly within the stream of agrarian theory that flows from eighteenth-century England and France" (Smith 251). In contrast, Roosevelt was, according to Richard Slotkin, influenced by the heroic characters of the literary mythology of the West and by seventeenth century concepts such as 'savage war' and 'regeneration through violence' (33,10-11).[17]

In the same year that Turner presented his thesis, Roosevelt's *The Wilderness Hunter* was written. Instead of farming, Roosevelt championed hunting as the task which "cultivated vigorous manliness . . . the lack of which in a nation, as in an individual, the possession of no other qualities can possibly atone" (137). Like Turner, Roosevelt stressed the connection between the qualities of an individual and the qualities of a nation. He described the hunter-turned-cowboy as "brave, hospitable, hardy, and adventurous, he is the grim pioneer of our race" (*Ranch* 153-54). Roosevelt

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[15] Both mythic narratives of the yeoman farmer and the hunter-cowboy are class-conscious and operate to distance their heroes from the semantics of pioneer as a labourer, excavator and foot soldier (*Chambers* 1178). These figures are ennobled which elevates them from the historical reality of the Frontier experience which was manual labour for the farmer and the cowboy.
[16] William F. Cody, Owen Wister, and Frederic Remington are also considered to have significantly contributed to the mythic narrative of the Frontier (see Stephen McVeigh, Richard Slotkin, Gerald Nash).
[17] In Roosevelt's *Autobiography*, he writes that he met many men who could have walked out of Owen Wister's stories or Frederic Remington's paintings (63).

also believed in the transformational properties of the Frontier. His Anglo-Saxon heroic figure was a superior being and had proved himself so by adapting and evolving his skills, thus ensuring his survival. This type of man had his superiority "rooted in 'blood' or heredity" which Roosevelt saw as being "genetically transmissible to future generations" (Slotkin 38). Both Beckwourth (implicitly) and Love (explicitly) challenge the assumed hereditary whiteness of Roosevelt's Western figure and present an alternative Western legacy of black heroic figures. However, their constructions of black Western masculinity are critically complex in that both texts are also complicit with the ideological mythical content of Roosevelt's narrative of Western masculinity and nation-building. The fabrication of the 'nobility' of the hunter-cowboy figure and his adaptability to different periods would enable the cowboy to become a malleable metaphor suitable for any age. Because of this flexibility, the cowboy has fared better in popular culture than the heroic figure of the farmer who was tied to the specific historical context of the agrarian frontier.

The Frontier myth has, according to Slotkin, "represented the redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or 'natural' state, *and regeneration through violence*" (12; emphasis in original). The mythic narrative of 'regeneration through violence' essentially involved the colonisation of the land and its people. Hence, the heroic figures of the yeoman farmer and the hunter-turned-cowboy were not only harbingers of civilisation they were also vehicles of racial subjugation (Limerick, "Adventures" 93). The outcome of regeneration through violence for the white Western figure is "The compleat 'American' of the Myth". This is, Slotkin argues, someone "who had defeated and freed himself from both the 'savage' of the western wilderness and the metropolitan regime of authoritarian politics and class privilege" (11). For the African American writer, "the adaptation of the frontier myth's basic dichotomy (wilderness/civilisation, savage Indian/civilised white) is complicated by the dominant culture's construction of black manhood as similarly savage or primitive"

(Johnson, *Black* 240). Beckwourth, Love, and Micheaux approach this dilemma in different ways. Whereas Beckwourth encodes the black racial identity of his protagonist so that blackness exists within the hidden narrative of the work, Love's and Micheaux's texts are open about the racial identity of their protagonists. Consequently, their texts have to work much harder to prove their characters' Western masculinity. I describe the appropriation and revision of "one of the nation's dominant narratives of the development of masculine subjectivity" (Johnson, *Black* 4) as a signifyin(g) thread that weaves through my study complicating the constructions of potentially radical black Western masculinities.

The Western Literary Form: Transformation and Evolution

"[T]here have always been dissents, deviations, aberrations, revisions" (Kitses, Introduction 17)

Through a process of creative transformation, African American writers expand the 'historical fable' from narratives of realism and expressions of the Frontier Myth to narratives that disrupt the traditional realism of the genre with their incorporation of black vernacular mythology and African American spiritual belief systems. Hence, Morrison's use of a non-realist narrative strategy combined with a black vernacular mythology in her construction of the Convent women and Lone presents not only a powerful critique of a hegemonic masculine Western discourse but also creates a discursive space in which the potential for radical subjectivities can be expressed. Similarly, Beckwourth's construction of his protagonist via a latent sub-text Signifies on the trickster figure and therefore inserts a blackness into the Western form that destabilises its hegemonic whiteness. Problematically however, his implicit use of vernacular mythology promotes a masculinised narrative of nation-building. Engaging with both black and white discourses, the texts reveal critical tensions in the construction of black Western identities. The potential for creating radical identities is

further complicated by the extent to which the narratives are able to resist the gravitational pull of the Western form.

The Frontier Myth, according to cinematic scholar Jim Kitses, "defines" the world of the form (*Horizons* 14) and both have been intimately interwoven since James Fenimore Cooper's Western narratives.[18] Susan Kollin recently described the Western as "that continually evolving genre so closely aligned with the mythical Turnerian struggle between savagery and civilisation on an ever-shifting frontier" ("PostWestern" 59). In an earlier work, Kitses had argued that the tendency to focus on a traditional cohort of Western writers has meant that a "major problem bedevilling discussion of the genre . . . has been the persistent and narrow identification of the Western with its traditional model, as if it were a monolith. In fact, . . . there have always been dissents, deviations, aberrations, revisions" ("Post-modernism" 17).[19] This challenge to the traditional Western model emerges out of a wider intellectual discussion on the nature of genre initiated by Jacques Derrida. In "The Law of Genre", Derrida dismantles the boundaries of genre and argues instead for "the enigma of genre" (56). He explains that the "law of the genre" insists on the "essential purity of . . . [genre] identity" which means that "one must not cross a line demarcation, one must not risk impurity" (57). As a consequence, "the law of genre", according to Derrida, erases the historical complexity and difference of forms and structures making them appear "typical" and "natural" (60). Contemporary Western scholars, for example Campbell, Comer, Garrett-Davis, Kitses, Kollin, and Mitchell have significantly reconceptualised the Western genre and created a critical space which recognises the complexities and tensions of the form. Encapsulating the shifting and complicated nature of the contemporary Western, Campbell writes that Westerns travel "across generic boundaries, poaching and borrowing from many different earlier traditions, whilst contributing to the innovation of the genre" ("Post-Western Cinema" 409-410). The porous boundaries of

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[18] I cite Cooper here rather than Beckwourth because Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* (1823-1841) predates Beckwourth's autobiography of 1856.

[19] While Kitses and Rickman refer to the cinematic Western, their critique that traditional concepts of the genre are narrow is applicable to the literary Western genre.

the genre lead Western historian Josh Garrett-Davis to write as recently as 2019 that "the genre lives on in its many revivals and playful adaptations that may look quite unlike the Westerns of old" (4).

In seeking to insert their own African American Western stories into this historical fable, the selected texts challenge "the racism of the Western" and "its exclusion of minorities" (Kitses, *Horizons* 101). In recognising that there is no fixed generic model, we can describe Beckwourth's autobiography as a pioneering Western text in its anticipation of some of the themes that would come to dominate the form. Thus, within the diversity of the genre there are recurring themes which the selected texts engage with in their constructions of black Western identities. Themes explored in this study are those of Frontier violence; individualism and self-transformation; redemption; mobility; and the construction of Western gendered identities. I examine the extent to which the texts oscillate towards and away from the conventions of the genre enabling some of them to resist the conservatism of the form. I demonstrate the implications this movement has for the construction of black Western identities.

The implications of identifying recurring thematic conventions across a range of Western narratives means that the three early works function in this study as black proto-texts or, what Gérard Genette might describe as, 'hypotexts'. Under the label of "*transtextuality*", which Genette defines roughly as "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other text'" (1; emphasis in original), 'hypotexts' are texts that significantly inform subsequent texts. He has called this relationship 'hypertextuality'. It is "any relationship uniting a text B (. . . *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (. . . *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary" (5; emphasis in original). While Genette is specifically interested in those texts which are intentionally and explicitly intertextual (9), my interest is in what he describes as "the general notion of a text in the second degree" (5) and the idea that the existence of the contemporary texts would not be possible without the early texts. This is the kind of derivation, according to Genette, "such as text B not speaking of text

A at all but being unable to exist, as such, without A, from which it originates through a process I shall provisionally call *transformation*, and which it consequently evokes more or less perceptibly without necessarily speaking of it or citing it" (5; emphasis in original). Greer's novel may not make any mention of Love's narrative, but Greer's construction of the black cowboy, CJ Floyd, could not have existed without Love's cowboy and can be read as a contemporary revision of Love's black frontiersman. Exploring the implicit intertextual relationships underlines the idea that signifyin(g) threads connect the contemporary novels with the early narratives in my study. Thus, Butler's inversion of the Frontier Myth in her textual re-imagining of California, for example, repeats and revises Beckwourth's description of California as a primitive place. On the other hand, Morrison's construction of the patriarchs of Ruby has literary echoes of Micheaux's construction of Western manhood in his protagonist, Oscar Devereaux. At the same time, these relationships emphasise a black Western literary history and underscore an aim of my study to present a modest counter to what Johnson refers to as the "paucity of critical literary . . . work on the black West" (*Hoo-Doo* 5).

I have already established New Western history as an important cultural frame for the contemporary narratives. The novels themselves are participants in the cultural milieu of revisionism taking place in the 1990s. Written at a time when American society, according to Brigette Georgi-Findlay, was "politically and culturally polarized" (14), the narratives emerge out of a cultural crisis where traditional power structures and hegemonic discourses were being challenged. The texts represent a shift in theoretical, political and cultural thinking that was emphasising cultural heterogeneity, diversity and difference. It is a decade where an intersection of influences – a revival in Western film, New Western History, the enduring legacy of the Frontier Myth – provide a critical space and a receptive audience for black Western voices. These writers are composing texts in the cultural context of a renaissance in the cinematic Westerns of the period (Cawelti "Rough"). African Americans had been producing what Susan

Savage Lee describes as "minority adaptations of the Western" since the 1930s (par. 11). Allmendinger, like Lee, focuses on the black films of Herb Jeffries' and his character, Bob Blake. According to Allmendinger, the Herb Jeffries' film quartet were ground-breaking as "No subsequent race Westerns pushed the boundaries as far" (*Imagining* 72). Essentially, these films helped to "initiate a historiography of black cinema" which, Lee argues, "focuses on forming black identity and communities in films" of the 1970s and beyond (par. 26). Josh Garrett-Davis identifies films such as Sidney Poitier's 1972 *Buck and the Preacher* and Mel Brooks' satirical *Blazing Saddles* (1974) as "contend[ing] with race and other social problems" (24). Western films in the 1990s build upon this cultural, political and racial positioning as they "pushed persistently toward historical and narrative redress" (Garrett-Davis 25). Films such as Clint Eastwood's 1992 *Unforgiven* which, according to Stephen McVeigh, "deconstructs, quite consciously, the American Western" (204); and Mario Van Peebles' 1993 *Posse* which "revise[s] the historical record by presenting racial minorities in prominent roles" (Allmendinger, *Imagining* 80) indicated that the American West was no longer, and actually never had been, the preserve of the white Anglo male.

In setting their works in the American West, the authors signal the West as a special place for black agency and independence. The West, Bruce A. Glasrud and Laurie Champion argue, is the site where the Civil Rights movement began and "most of the resistance strategies were first used in the West"; for example, the Kansas case of 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education*, the civil unrest in Watts, and the formation of the Black Panther Party in Oakland in California (7). Unlike their literary predecessors, the contemporary narratives can be more open in their criticism of and resistance to white American dominant discourses, practices and policies that historically and contemporarily seek to restrict African Americans from "the establishment of 'personhood' within the American nation" (Moos 14). However, the desire to assert the 'personhood' of their protagonists is problematised by employing a white literary form.

To some extent this difficulty can be countered by employing the Black tradition, Signifyin(g) and black experiences. But ultimately the tension inherent to the double-voiced quality of these narratives cannot be resolved. According to Johnson, utilising a white form poses challenges for the African American writer who has to "find a way to write his or her specific experiences of race and place into an existing narrative that has no vocabulary for articulating these experiences" ("African American" 165). While the characters in my chosen texts navigate different kinds of frontiers, so too do the authors as they appropriate and merge the frontiers of different genres creating, to borrow from hooks, "spaces of [creative] radical openness" ("Choosing" 149). These literary sites of contact facilitate an articulation of African American Western experiences and identities which challenge the homogenising influence of the genre. However, they are also not without their tensions in their engagement with black and white discourses. For example, in *Parable of the Sower* Butler brings together the African American homiletic narrative tradition, the female genre of journal writing, and the dystopian science fiction genre with the Western literary form in a narrative that challenges the conservatism of both myth and form and re-writes a potentially new foundational myth for the nation.

The Frontier Myth informs the 'Old West' which Nina Baym identifies as having only "one kind of story to tell". Whereas New Westerns, she argues, are interested in different kinds of Western stories and Western places (819). Consequently, New Westerns operate as revisionist narratives. In their attempt to narrate alternative Western voices and experiences, revisionist narratives present a different "attitude towards the past" (Kitses, Introduction 21) and one which involves a re-imagining of that past (Scharff qtd. in Campbell, *Post-Westerns* 3-4). They carry with them the idea of a "re-examination or correction of something that already exists" (Nelson 19). In the spirit of revisionism, New Westerns are perceived as representing a shift towards more credible historical representations and taking a more critical approach to the myth of the West and its Frontier (Jaupaj). Yet these demarcations, according to Susan Kollin,

have tended to polarise Old and New Westerns and are not entirely accurate. Kollin identifies within classic Westerns (so those Westerns which one would associate with representing the Old West) "moments of resistance and self-reflection" and explains that "the Western might be better understood as a continuum", a form "structured by competing and contradictory impulses" ("Genre" 560). Terminology is further complicated by the fact that some scholars use New Western interchangeably with Post-Western.[20] Perhaps in recognition of these difficulties, 'Post-Western' is increasingly employed as a term which can overcome the binarism of Old and New West and which recognises the continuity between the two terms. Campbell provides a helpful distinction between Postwestern and Post-Western. He uses the former to "refer to the broader historical or cultural use of the concept as a period of historical time during which the USA moves beyond thinking about the 'West' as a frontier culture" and Post-Western to refer to specific films ("Defining" 2n1). Borrowing from Campbell, I also use Postwestern to refer to a historical period and employ Post-Western to indicate a conceptual rather than historical approach to the genre.

Post-Western first emerges in the 1970s,[21] but it is Susan Kollin's 2007 *Postwestern Cultures: Literature, Theory, Space* which is seen as articulating the Post-Western as an emerging critical approach, one which works in tandem with a new critical regionalism (Campbell, "Post-Western Cinema" 415). A Post-Western approach, Kollin argues, "insists that we understand the region not as a closed or bounded space but as a continually changing and evolving entity in both content and form" (*Postwestern* xi). Recognising that neither Western spaces nor the meanings that are attached to them are fixed is imperative to challenging the hegemonic discourses of the West and its Frontier. Paul Varner reminds us that "The idea of a single West no longer holds validity. We now understand that all renderings of the West are renderings of multiple Wests" (viii). According to Krista Comer, the term Post-Western is the "most

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[20] See Arthur Jaupaj.
[21] Susan Kollin writes that Post-Western was first used in the 1970s by scholars such as the British film critic Philip French who was "critically restructuring the Western" ("Postwestern" xii).

frequently used of all [terms] to frame critical work across historical periods"
(Introduction 10). She adds, "it is capacious and useful for what it can include; at the
same time, it is slippery and can signal mutually contradicting ideas" and, furthermore,
"It often gestures more towards a mood, a condition, a sense of place and people as
disembedded or deterritorialised" (10). To attempt to counter the 'slipperiness' of the
term, I draw upon three elements that define a Post-Western approach.

First is the idea that in Post-Western texts, there is an overlaying of different
kinds of Western spaces – historical, temporal and cultural. In the Post-Western, "there
might live on", according to Campbell, "the haunting presence of the past within the
present and future and that *together* these multiple stories provide some fuller and
better understanding of the contemporary West itself" (*Post-Westerns* 2; emphasis in
original). The palimpsest Wests of Greer's, Morrison's and Butler's novels emphasise
the shifting nature and meanings of Western spaces and resist readings of a
homogenised Western identity. They reveal the tensions inherent in narratives where
past, present and future converge. Second is the idea that the Post-Western utilises
the mythic discourses, conventions and tropes of the classic Western, but does so in
order to challenge, resist and question the ethnocentric, masculinist narrative of
Western settlement and Western identity. Not surprisingly, Morrison's and Butler's
novels take issue with the masculinist discourse of Western settlement while
simultaneously contesting the generic boundaries of the Western. Campbell states that
Post-Westerns "'participate' in many of the formal, thematic and tropic discourses of
the genre whilst 'not belonging' entirely within its borders, offering instead a challenge
through interruption" ("Defining" 5). And finally, this "critical interaction"[22] opens a
creative space where writers can disrupt the form via engagement with other genres
and modes of discourse, whilst simultaneously contributing to the evolution of the form.

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[22] According to Campbell, "form folds outward whilst maintaining a vital connecting tissue to its
'inside', allowing relation, reflection, *and* critical interaction simultaneously" ("Post-Western
Cinema" 413; emphasis in original).

The texts reveal how "the Western and Westness", according to David Rio and Christopher Conway, "can be dismantled and reinvented" (xi).

In challenging and revising the ethnocentric and masculinised narrative of the genre, writers like Greer and Butler especially have engaged critically with the trope of the Western landscape. The importance of the landscape and eco-criticism as a context for constructing positive black Western identities signals a development of the form that brings it into the twenty-first century. Both the Frontier Myth and the genre have envisaged a white Western landscape with the literal and metaphorical erasure of the indigenous peoples. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the tamed landscape, Paul Outka argues, was seen "as a sign of racial identity, 'civilisation'. And the concomitant right to possession" (214). Turner's mythic narrative of regeneration through violence conveyed a hierarchy of white masculinity over nature in its emphasis on the will of man upon the landscape and his ability to overcome and tame the hostile forces of nature. Problematically, African Americans were placed outside the triumphalist narrative of settlement and therefore outside an American narrative that affirmed the individual self in a liberatory relationship with the land. This discursive and historical positioning leads Kimberley Ruffin to state that African Americans "have had no entitlement to speak for or against nature" (1). The texts under consideration show engagement with the metaphorical meaning of nature, whether that is nature as "a refuge or nature as a resource, or nature as the space of the outcast, of sin and perversity, nature as a space of metamorphosis or redemption" (Clark 6). For Beckwourth and Love, nature is a liberatory space for their protagonists. It allows them to present their characters as men of mobility and agency. However, as I show below, Greer's and certainly Butler's texts go further than this by demonstrating an environmental engagement with the landscape.

Eco-criticism has its roots in the American pastoral. Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden,* published 1964, is considered the 'forerunner' of American eco-criticism with his analysis of the American pastoral. Marx's purpose was, he stated, "to describe

and evaluate the uses of the pastoral in the interpretation of the American experience"
(10). However, the American pastoral is a problematic literary trope for African
Americans. Greg Garrard explains that the "pejorative edge to 'pastoral'" lies in "its
identification with masculine colonial aggression directed against women, indigenes of
the land, as well as its deployment in the literature of the slave-owning South" (54).
There has been, according to Paul Outka, "the terrible historical legacy of making
people of color signify the natural, as a prelude to exploiting both" (3). Hence, racialist
stereotypes of African Americans as primitive beings have skewed and distorted
perceptions of a black relationship with the environment. "[A] long history exists",
Kimberley Ruffin argues, "of making non-human nature reflect racist exploitation and
violence" (4). Nevertheless, Garrard observes that Paul Outka locates in the works of
black writers of the Harlem Renaissance, the "beginning [of] a detoxification of
racialised pastoral that is, perhaps, not complete today" (62).

The need to deconstruct white hegemonic narratives of the Western landscape
is emphasised by Dianne D. Glave. She states that "Enslaved people did not stumble
upon or discover wilderness. Instead, African Americans actively sought healing,
kinship, resources, escape, refuge, and salvation in the land" (8). This positive
connection to the land is embraced in *Parable* through the textual construction of
Lauren as a propagator of oak trees and a belief system called Earthseed. Butler's
construction of Lauren as an ecological agent critiques the stereotype that "African
Americans are physically and spiritually detached from the environment" (Glave 3). In
Greer's novel, the protagonist CJ Floyd is presented as the ecological agent of a
domesticated landscape as he successfully prevents an eco-terrorist group from killing
thousands of cattle and people with a deadly virus. Although the narrative appears to
contest the white rural spaces of the Western, it is decidedly ambiguous in its treatment
of the black female presence in the landscape and that of the indigenous people.
Consequently, the critical contradictions of the narrative significantly inhibit its radical
potential. The use of landscape in both texts reflects a Post-Western approach to the

relationship between racial identity construction and the landscape, but it does not

necessarily entail the construction of radical black Western identities. Therefore,

although the selected narratives exhibit racial consciousness, they are not all Post-

Western in their approach to myth and form.

The Racial Project: Signifyin(g) and "spaces of radical openness"

"[A]n aesthetic of blackness – strange and oppositional" (hooks, "Aesthetic" 113)

A central concern of this study is the extent to which racial projects facilitate potential

radical black Western identities enabling the texts to challenge and/or transcend

Western narratives of identity prescribed by both myth and form. It is attentive to the

ways in which the narratives through their racial projects seek to express a blackness

that disrupts hegemonic white discursive, cultural, geographical, social and historical

Western spaces to create those liberatory discursive spaces described by hooks as

radical spaces. The construction and discussion of black Western identities is

embedded within the framework of the racial project. Social scientists Michael Omi and

Howard Winant define racial project as:

> *simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial
> identities and meanings, and an effort to organise and distribute resources
> (economic, political, cultural) along particular racial lines*. (125; emphasis in
> original)

Their updated *Racial Formation in the United States* is now in its third edition and their

theory on racial formation "stands as one of the most influential contemporary theories

of racial and ethnic matters in the social sciences" (Feagin & Elias 931).[23] Omi and

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[23] Feagin and Elias offer a sustained criticism of the second edition of *Racial Formation* arguing
that Omi and Winant's "innovative theoretical model is inadequate for explaining the magnitude
of racial oppression in the USA", and that they "fall short of providing an adequate compass for
understanding the power, stability and perpetuation of racial oppression" (932). Omi and Winant
argue that in Feagin and Elias's "'systemic racism' account white racist rule is so

Winant explain that "Racial projects connect what race *means* in a particular discursive or ideological practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially *organised*, based upon that meaning" (125; emphasis in original). According to Omi and Winant, racial projects can operate at many different social, political and cultural levels to link and articulate the relations between identity construction and social structures. They identify varied and diverse racial projects ranging from individual racial projects and state activities, large scale public action, to artistic and academic projects. A racial project may therefore have the potential to resist and challenge dominant belief systems and practices. For example, Butler creates a liberatory racial project for her protagonist that enables the narrative to challenge the colonial masculinised narrative of the Frontier Myth, whereas Micheaux constructs Deveraux's racial project as one of accommodation to and acceptance of the hegemonic status quo. Consequently, the narrative is unable to realise a radical black Western identity for its protagonist. Importantly, I read Turner's historic-mythic narrative of the Frontier and Western settlement as a large scale hegemonic racial project of white supremacy. In its representation of the white Anglo-Saxon male as agent of civilisation, it functioned to organise and allocate Western spaces and resources along racial (and gender) lines privileging those of Anglo-Saxon, Teutonic German, and Pennsylvanian Dutch origin and in so doing determined who could be included in the foundational mythic narrative of the American nation.[24]

There are racial projects that occur at individual and vernacular (local) level within the narratives of the texts; projects which, according to Omi and Winant, "operate at the level of everyday life" (126). These projects seek to either resist and challenge dominant hegemonic racial projects, or to perpetuate and support dominant racial projects. Significantly, the texts under consideration reveal that racial projects do not have to be either/or, they can also be contradictory in their intentions. This is

comprehensive and absolute that the political power and agency of people of colour virtually disappear". Furthermore, "without intending to do so" Feagin and Elias "dismiss the political agency of people of colour and of anti-racist whites" ("Resistance" 961, 962).
[24] Turner, "Significance" 22.

evident in Beckwourth's text which appropriates a white mythic narrative of national growth and progress and aligns the personal progress of its protagonist with the national narrative. At the same time, the narrative, via an intertextuality with a white discourse of exploration and discovery and the black slave narrative, resists a racialist discourse of the nineteenth century that sought to marginalise African Americans economically, culturally and spatially. Importantly, the following chapters demonstrate that the contrary nature of racial projects mirrors the tensions that are inherent when black writers adopt white forms to construct black identities. Therefore, I argue that the racial projects of the selected texts contest the racial project of the Frontier Myth, seeking to re-appropriate and reallocate cultural resources and thus redefine racial meanings and re-present racial identities. Fundamentally however, they do not challenge the notion that the West is the birthplace of an American nation and national identity. Nevertheless, positive racial projects are employed to inform the construction of positive individual identities and counter negative racial ascription and are, according to Omi and Winant, "the building blocks in the racial formation process" (13).

I utilise the term 'black difference' to denote a blackness that is rooted in black experiences and the black vernacular. Bernard Bell and bell hooks have argued that African American ways of inhabiting and seeing the world stem from unique experiences. "These experiences – of Africa, the transatlantic or Middle Passage, slavery, Southern plantation tradition, emancipation, Reconstruction, post-Reconstruction, Northern migration, urbanisation, industrialisation, and racism", according to Bell, "have produced a residue of shared memories and frames of reference for black Americans. The most insidious and iniquitous of these experiences is racism" (62). Textual expressions of blackness are also found, according to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in the intertextual and rhetorical strategies of Signifyin(g), what Gates defines as, tropological revision and the black vernacular (Introduction xix, xxv). Gates' focus upon the textual and discursive devices of a narrative reflects the shift in literary interpretation in the poststructuralism of the 1980s. Gates acknowledges Derrida's

neologism 'differance' as a source of inspiration, describing it as "a marvellous example of agnominato, or the repetition of a word with an alteration of both one letter and a sound" which "resists reduction to self-identical meaning" (*Signifying* 51). Gates' creation of 'Signifyin(g)' repeats and revises the English 'signifying' with "the bracketed and aurally erased g" signalling the orality of the black vernacular and is "a figure for the Signifyin(g) black difference" (*Signifying* 51). Texts themselves, as Gates points out, can also function as Signifyin(g) structures. In his discussion of Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Gates explains that the novel is "a structure of intertextual revision, because it revises key tropes and rhetorical strategies received from . . . precursory texts" ("Blackness" 692). In her essay "The Bounded Text", Julia Kristeva describes a text "as a permutation of texts, an intertextuality" (36). The idea that "any text is the absorption and transformation of another", Kristeva argues, is "an insight first introduced into literary theory by Bakhtin" ("Word" 66). Gates employs this idea of intertextuality when he writes that African American literary history is "characterised" by "*tertiary* formal revision, by which . . . its authors seem to revise at least two antecedent texts, often taken from different generations and periods" ("Blackness" 692; emphasis in original).

African American texts "talk to" other African American texts and non-African American texts (Gates, Introduction xxv) mirroring the call and response pattern of the black oral tradition. For example, both Micheaux's and Butler's texts repeat and revise the black trope of a narrative of ascent first articulated by Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington to Signify on individual agency and spatial freedom. Micheaux in the early part of the twentieth century writes a narrative of personal progress and liberty for his protagonist Oscar Devereaux represented through land acquisition. Butler utilises the black trope for her female protagonist but revises it to reveal a black female heritage and history. Through a process of repetition and revision, the intertextual and rhetorical strategies of Signifyin(g) resist, challenge, disrupt or dismantle the hierarchy of whiteness that is embedded within the Western genre and the Frontier Myth.

Signifyin(g) involves, according to Gates, "the obscuring of apparent meaning" (*Signifying* 59). It therefore facilitates a decentring of dominant ideologies, beliefs and values. Furthermore, I show how Signifyin(g) as a rhetorical and intertextual discursive device fosters hooks' "spaces of radical openness" in which the potential for "oppositional and liberated" black subjectivities can be realised.[25] In his construction of a black literary criticism, Gates appropriates a mode of European literary interpretation and gives it a specific and significant African American racial dimension.

A recurring Signifyin(g) figure is that of the black culture hero, the trickster figure. Broadly speaking, this subversive figure exists, to borrow from Gates, "at the margins of discourse" (*Signifying* 57). African American trickster tales, writes Ayana Smith, "have their roots in slavery" and therefore "As a whole, the tradition embodies a narrative method of dealing psychologically with power struggles and lack of self-determination" (180). Initially African in origin and transformed by a system of brutal oppression,[26] trickster tales were "weapons of defence" (Martin, Introduction 9). Considered a cultural expression of resistance to the status quo, the trickster is a transgressor of boundaries who, according to Winnifred Morgan, challenges what America deems "settled", "true", or "factual" (7). Furthermore, I argue that the trickster motif has a specific value to the Western literary form. As previously argued, the Western literary form is itself a frontier zone. In this generic space, different cultural realities meet and contest the space. The trickster motif contests the Eurocentrism and realism of the form and counters the white male heroism of the genre. The narratives harness an alternative cultural resource to challenge the racial project of the Frontier Myth. The trickster becomes a critical tool in the challenge to the foundational myths of an American national identity, enabling the construction of new Western identities while also creatively transforming the genre.

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[25] I appropriate these quotes from hooks throughout my thesis. Respectively, they are from her essays "Choosing" 149; "Postmodern" 29.
[26] See Morgan, *Trickster Figure* 15.

In *Hoo-Doo Cowboys and Bronze Buckaroos*, Johnson reveals that as early as the 1930s African American minstrel performers, musicians, writers and film makers were employing the trope of the trickster figure in black Westerns. Johnson presents a variety of written and audio-visual media in order to explore racial erasure and double-consciousness within a Western context. "One of the threads" to his book, he writes, is "the character type of the African American Westerner as trickster" (13). Consequently, Johnson's intention is not to offer a substantial critical reading of the trickster figure. Importantly however, he draws attention to the subversive quality or "dissembling mask" of the figure and "the existence of a continuing tradition of shared imagery and themes in African American literature of the American West that stretches from the late nineteenth-century to the present" (44, 17). Of critical importance to this study is the argument that by Signifyin(g) on the black trickster tradition the writers under consideration here transform the Western form. Moreover, if they are to construct radical black Western identities, then the trickster figure has to be both oppositional and liberatory. It is not enough for the trickster to be only a subversive figure because, as Elizabeth Ammons and Annette White-Parks point out, this "merely reinscribes white power at the centre of discourse" (xi). In those texts, such as Beckwourth's and Butler's, where the trickster figure is both oppositional and liberatory, it opens a cultural and discursive space for possibilities of expressing a radical black identity. On the other hand, although Love and Mosley also draw on this cultural figure to create protagonists who transgress boundaries, neither creates a protagonist who is able to completely free himself from white hegemonic discourses, values and ways of being. In demonstrating that Morrison's and Butler's texts Signify on the trickster figure and tradition, I contend that their racial projects importantly recover and revise the traditional black male trickster figure for their female characters and, as a consequence, they present a gendered resistance to white and black dominant discourses. Moreover, I argue that instrumental to Morrison's textual positioning is the construction of *Paradise* itself as a trickster text.

Gates considers the black vernacular to lie at the heart of the black tradition. The former is a vehicle for the articulation of black self-definition and black history. Thus, Easy Rawlins acknowledges in *Devil in a Blue Dress* that he can only truly express himself though the black vernacular. The black vernacular is the speaking black voice and "has assumed the singular role as the black person's ultimate sign of difference, a blackness of the tongue" (Gates, Introduction xix). According to Gates and Nellie Y. McKay, the black vernacular "consists of forms sacred – songs, prayers, and sermons – and secular – work songs, secular rhymes and songs, blues, jazz, and stories of many kinds" ("Vernacular" 6). The writers in this study use the black vernacular to varying degrees to inform their African American Western narratives, and in doing so they "ground" their "literary practice outside the Western tradition" (Gates, Introduction xxii). The result is a black text which, as Gates defines in his earlier essay "Criticism in the Jungle", is "double-voiced" and whose "'heritage'" is "a double heritage, two-toned as it were. Its visual tones are white and black, and its aural tones are standard and vernacular" (4). Gates' employment of double-voiced echoes Kristeva's description of intertextuality: "each word (text) is an intersection of word (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read" (sic) meaning that "poetic language is read as at least *double*" ("Word" 66; emphasis in original). Double-voiced texts themselves operate at a frontier crossing over the boundaries between black and white. In Mosley's novel, Easy Rawlins' ability to code-switch between African American vernacular and Standard American English mirrors his movement between white and black spaces in the text and is a form of resistance to the white authority and power of men like Todd Carter. Whereas in *Paradise* and *Parable of the Sower*, the black vernacular is expressed through a vernacular mythology, such as in dreams of flying, tales of conjuring and tricksterism. This double-voiced quality of African American Western narratives has the potential to resist the hegemonic discourses of the American West and provide a means for challenging racialist discourses and stereotypes by constructing positive life scripts.

The reprint of Gates' book in 2014 emphasises the continuing influence of his literary theory in African American literary studies. Houston A. Baker, Jr., defines the book as Gates' "magnum opus" (831). While Katherine Clay Bassard applauds Gates' affirmation of "a black literary tradition with internal formal coherence and historical movement" (850-51). On the other hand, Gates' theoretical approach has been criticised for being ahistorical and elitist in its approach to black culture and black communities (Joyce 2008, Warren 2015). The employment of the concept racial project along with hooks' reminder for a critical consciousness counters a reading of the texts that risks reifying and dehistoricising black experiences and racial identities.[27] hooks' emphasis on the significant role that black culture plays in the construction of black identities is a warning that we do not "fall prey to the contemporary ahistorical mood" ("Chitlin" 39). Whereas Gates equates the "blackness of black literature" with "specific uses of literary language that are shared, repeated, critiqued, and revised" (*Signifying* 132), hooks views blackness as cultural expression. She argues that "a distinctive black culture was created in the agrarian South" resulting from the "experience of rural living, poverty, racial segregation and resistance struggle" ("Chitlin" 38). Importantly, Gates and hooks are not arguing for some kind of black authenticity that essentialises blackness. Instead, hooks writes that it is about "embody[ing] in our life practices aspects of that cultural legacy" (38) and recognising that there are multiple ways of being black.

Omi and Winant define racial formation as "*the sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed*" (109; emphasis in original), to which we can add that racial identities are also informed by cultural processes. Drawing upon hooks' concept of "spaces of radical openness" ("Choosing"

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[27] Joyce sees Gates' work as a form of intellectual elitism that has removed the critic and the scholar (Gates) from his black community. Hence her comment at the end of the essay where she states that "While watching the news as eight Philadelphia policemen beat mercilessly one black man who lay helplessly on the pavement, I thought of Gates's idea of Esu and the signifying monkey and his treatment of them as tropes and tricksters. I wondered how intellectual Gates would be if he were the man on the pavement" (379). See the well-noted debate between Joyce, Gates and Baker.

149), the construction of racial identities in the selected Western texts are also informed by the different kinds of Western spaces they inhabit.[28] hooks writes of the need for "an aesthetic of blackness" which is "strange and oppositional" ("Aesthetic" 113). In *Yearning*, she defines aesthetics as "more than a philosophy or theory of art and beauty; it is a way of inhabiting space, a particular location, a way of looking and becoming" ("Aesthetic" 104). hooks links blackness not just to cultural expression but also to a spatial positioning that is critically conscious and challenges racialist thinking.

This study takes as given contemporary racial thinking that defines race as a fluid socio-historical construct that is unstable and flexible. Yet the formulation of blackness in negative and fixed stereotypical ways by a dominant white culture persists, leading Cornel West to state in 2001 that despite undeniable racial progress in America, "the legacy of white supremacy lingers" (Preface xiv). Nearly twenty years later, Barbara Harris Combs expresses a similar sentiment: "While anti-black sentiments in America are less overt and vocal than in the past, they not only exist but also persist in nuanced, complex, and multi-layered ways" (41). In her discussion of everyday racism and violence upon black bodies, Combs argues that "racialisation is a spatial process and that traveling from place to place is fraught with peril, especially for certain bodies in certain spaces. Spaces become racialized, and containment and subordination are by-products of that racialization" (41). The white racialisation of space can be found in the black neighbourhoods of Watts in *Devil in a Blue Dress* and Five Points in *The Devil's Hatband*. Racialised space operates as a dimension of hegemonic urban racial projects that historically, politically and spatially have sought to keep African Americans contained and separated; for example, through residential covenants. John W. Frazier et al refer to this allocation of resources as "racial geography"; a term which "recognises the role of the controlling society in the creation of the racial ideology that governs the use of space, often restricting access to places

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[28] I note that there is no index entry for 'space', 'spatiality', or 'racial geography' in Omi and Winant's text.

and resources to preserve the privilege of the controlling group" (16). However, for hooks these marginal spaces need not be sites of domination and oppression, but as stated earlier can be read instead as potentially subversive spaces. She writes:

> I am located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance – as location of radical openness and possibility. This site of resistance is continually formed in that segregated culture of opposition that is our critical response to domination. . . . We are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world. ("Choosing" 153)

hooks identifies such spaces as being informed by a critical black consciousness which seeks to foster radical black subjectivities. Within the texts, these marginal spaces may be physical; for example: the black informal spaces in *The Devil's Hatband* such as Rosie's den, the Convent in *Paradise*, and the establishment of Acorn in *Parable of the Sower*, but spaces of radical openness can also be discursive and Signifyin(g) provides such a space. For example, Mosley utilises the subversive discursive space of vernacular mythology in his construction of Mouse as does Butler in her creation of Lauren. hooks emphasises that the process of constructing black identities which are oppositional and liberatory involves "the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse found not just in words but in the habits of being and the way one lives" ("Choosing" 149). The narratives reveal that the potential for constructing radical black subjectivities lies in those marginal spaces where physical marginal space merges with subversive discursive space and is played out in the actions of the characters. I demonstrate that the possibility for articulating radical identities is found in the homeless characters of Dittier and Morgan in Greer's novel; in the character of Mouse in Mosley's novel; in the figures of the Convent women and Lone in *Paradise*; and in the character of Lauren in *Parable of the Sower*.

At the same time, the sense of marginality that characters like CJ Floyd and Easy Rawlins experience locates them on a 'profound edge' and encourages a

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perception of the world that has a feel of double-consciousness about it; that is, a sense of being placed between two worlds, one white and one black. "[T]his sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others", Du Bois' argued, has meant that "One ever feels his two-ness" (2). Approximately half a century later, Frantz Fanon in "The Fact of Blackness" would analyse his experience of a "third-person consciousness" (83). This mode of consciousness expresses the debilitating psychological conflict of experiencing a black self within white society. Fanon argues that "not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man" (82). The consequence of having one's being "woven" by the white man "out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories" (84) results in a third-consciousness which "compels him", Sylvia Wynter explains, "to know his body *through* the terms of an always already imposed 'historico-racial schema'; a schema that predefines his body as an impurity to be cured" (41; emphasis in original). The white constructions of blackness for both Du Bois and Fanon "imprisons"[29] the black man who, according to Fanon, "has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man" (83). hooks' reconceptualisation of marginal spaces can be considered an intellectual, cultural and gendered response to Du Bois' and Fanon's representations of the estranged and liminal positioning of the African American male within white society and their call for a self-determined black consciousness. hooks demonstrates that in order to overcome the alienating and debilitating effects of double-consciousness, it is necessary to reconfigure marginal spaces as positive and liberatory sites for black identities. This spatial-racial repositioning enables African Americans who, according to Du Bois, are "gifted with second-sight in this American world" (2) to look "both from the outside in and the inside out" ("Choosing" 149). For CJ and Easy, the ability to read the white world that comes from this positioning confers an agency on them that ensures their survival in a world where a black man's life has less value than a white man's. Therefore, the idea that marginal spaces are possible sites of radical openness for the

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[29] Fanon's use of the word (85) Signifies on Du Bois' analogy of the hegemonic racialism of white America as a "prison-house" (2).

black individual is pivotal to the racial projects of the texts and the identity construction of their protagonists.

Potentially transformative therefore, individual racial projects can seek to challenge the effects of racial labelling. The difficulty with racial labels, according to K. Anthony Appiah, is that they carry certain scripts for identity. "[W]e expect people of a certain kind of race to behave a certain way", Appiah argues, "not simply because they are conforming to the script for that identity, performing that role, but because they have certain antecedent properties that are consequences of the label's properly applying to them" ("Synthesis" 79). Significantly, Appiah acknowledges that there is the possibility to resist such racialisation because "there is a gap between what a person ascriptively is and the racial identity he performs" (78). Like Gates' concept of Signifyin(g), Appiah's challenge to scripted identities reflects a poststructuralist mode of interpretation. He argues that racial classification relies on the false notion of a stable relationship between the signifier (the racial label) and the signified (the individual or group); instead, identities are much more fluid than racial labelling allows for. This fluidity is possible, Appiah explains, not because individuals are completely free to choose their identity, but because the self is dialogically constructed from available labels and identities ("Synthesis" 78, 94).

Appiah goes on to say that a person's individual identity is composed of personal and collective dimensions. The personal dimensions of self can mean an identity that is "not too tightly scripted", and one which is "not too constrained by the demands and expectations of others" (99). It is the collective dimension that comes "with notions" of "proper black modes of behaviour" which provide "what we might call scripts: narratives that people use in shaping their life plans and in telling their stories" ("Synthesis" 97). Thuy N. Bui observes that by "invoking the autonomy of the personal dimension" (634), Appiah shows that African Americans do not have to accept the African American life script and can actively construct a collective identity that challenges preconceived notions and stereotypes surrounding the group. The texts

under consideration engage with the tension between individual and collective identity. They explore how individuals negotiate or even reject imposed racial identities. Beckwourth's autobiography attempts to overcome the limits of racial ascription by not stating that his character is African American, Daphne in Mosley's novel avoids the negative consequences of being labelled black by passing as white, while the community of Ruby invert the racialist narrative of racial labelling by only accepting people like themselves who are blue-black.

The following chapters are structured around the three concepts of the Frontier and its mythic narratives, the Western literary form, and the racial project. The textual struggle to contest the white frontier spaces of form and myth and establish positive (radical) black Western identities involves a creative employment of a variety of cultural resources. As would be expected, the early texts seek to align their protagonists' growth with that of the nation, thereby inserting African Americans into the foundational story of a national identity. Nevertheless, the narratives are not totally complicitous with the Frontier Myth and examples of sub-texts of narrative resistance can be found, particularly in the problematising of Turner's savagery versus civilisation dichotomy. The contemporary writers have more freedom of expression than their predecessors, we therefore witness more overt critical stances to white hegemony in the contemporary texts. However, they do not necessarily challenge the Frontier as the site of the origin story for American national identity.

Beyond Chapter One

"The advent of progress" (Love 123)

In Chapter two, my discussion focuses on the three early Western narratives of James P. Beckwourth, Nat Love, and Oscar Micheaux. Critically, I establish a historical, literary and racial context for the subsequent contemporary black evolution of the form. At the same time, I show that even these early works were to varying degrees manipulating white forms and narratives. The authorial concern of how to write black Western identities that are self-determining has its historical precedent in the slave narratives of the nineteenth century. Importantly therefore, the narratives of Beckwourth, Love and Micheaux indicate to the reader that a body of black Western literature existed that pre-dates my argument. These early texts are significant for their deliberate constructions of different types of Frontiersmen. I argue that they create new masculinities for African American men at a time when scripts for black male identities were limited.[30] Set between 1820 and 1913, the texts are African American male pioneering narratives. Representing the wilderness/exploration phase of the Frontier process, Beckwourth's autobiography, according to Michael K. Johnson, may be the earliest account of an "as-told-to-biography" of a black Western pioneer ("African American" 163). Love's and Micheaux's narratives may be considered respectively the earliest narratives of a black cowboy and a black yeoman farmer, with the establishment of civil society in Micheaux's *The Conquest* representing the settlement/domesticity phase of the Frontier process.[31] Significantly, a conceptual shift takes place from Beckwourth's and Love's narratives in their use of the Frontier as a meeting place between the forces of civilisation and those of the wilderness to Micheaux's use of the Frontier as a site of human contact. This chapter establishes that

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[30] Pauline E. Hopkins and Lillian Jones Horace also published works in this period. Hopkins' 1902 *Winona: A Tale of Negro Life in the South and Southwest* and Horace's *Five Generations Hence* in 1916.

[31] For other examples of African American Western writing, such as: Thomas Detter's *Nellie Brown; or, The Jealous Wife, with Other Sketches* (1871) and Sutton Griggs's 1899 *Imperium in Imperio,* see Johnson's Introduction to *Hoo-Doo Cowboys* (3-15).

as early as 1856 and despite the historical and cultural contingencies of their time, African Americans were motivated by a desire to refute the contemporaneous perception that they had no part in nation-building.

Chapter three explores Greer's modernisation of the black cowboy figure that we first see in Love's autobiography. However, unlike Love's text Greer's use of the Western landscape is one of racial segregation and shows how spatial marginalisation exists alongside historical, economic, social and cultural marginalisation. Greer employs the conventions and tropes of the classic Western and merges these with the conventions of the detective genre. The convergence of two conservative forms problematises the construction of a radical black subjectivity for his protagonist, CJ Floyd. In chapter four, I explore how Mosley merges the form of the Western with the hard-boiled genre. More so than Greer, Mosley appears to use this literary space to create a potentially radical identity for his protagonist, Easy Rawlins. However, what is interesting in both novels is that the opportunities for radical black subjectivity are ultimately realised in characters other than the protagonists. Greer's and Mosley's novels highlight that even for the contemporary narratives embedding a textual blackness does not automatically entail the construction of radical black identities. We need to be mindful, as bell hooks points out, that "blackness does not mean that we are inherently oppositional" ("Liberation" 8). Chapters five and six illustrate a further creative shift in the form as Morrison and Butler present novels which initially may not seem to belong to the Western literary form. This is partly because their use of Western generic conventions is less explicit than the other texts, but it is also because they draw upon other genres and discourses to inform the construction of their characters. More so than the other texts, Morrison and Butler expose and critique the gendered discourse of Western narratives and accordingly create female Western identities in which the possibilities for radical subjectivity lie.

Chapter Two: "Our Lonely Way" (Beckwourth 52), Pioneering Black Western Narratives

Introduction

"The African American experience holds a different lens up to an old tale" (Katz xvii)

The Western pioneering narratives of James P. Beckwourth (1856), Nat Love (1907), and Oscar Micheaux (1913) explore black Western identities and experiences in texts which creatively demonstrate the idea that the Western form is itself a contested literary frontier. By Signifyin(g) on "black vernacular literary traditions" (Gates, Introduction xxiii), such as the genre of the slave narrative and Booker T. Washington's narrative of racial uplift, the texts draw attention to the literary space of the genre as one of cultural contact. These early Western texts harness, "*organise and distribute*" both white and black cultural resources to inscribe moments of black difference into a white narrative of nation-building and to racially mark the protagonists (Omi and Winant 125; emphasis in original). As a consequence, the three texts Signify on the black margins of Western experience. To varying degrees, they employ the intertextual and rhetorical strategies of Signifyin(g) along with an intertextuality with white texts to create narratives that are double-voiced and which engage in the literary process of repetition and revision. Gates also refers to this textual revision as "Literary Signification" (Introduction xxvii). In holding what William Loren Katz describes as "a different lens up to an old tale" of the American West (xvii), the narratives of Beckwourth, Love and Micheaux therefore anticipate the revisionist narratives of the contemporary texts.

These early texts represent the three stages of a national narrative of Westward settlement: the discovery phase, the Frontier phase, and the settlement phase. Despite the different historical contexts, the texts engage with the idea of the Frontier as a site of contact and conflict. Beckwourth's text is situated within the early to mid-phase of

America's tradition of exploration and imperialist Westward expansion. The text utilises the captivity narrative to explore the personal development of its protagonist alongside the national narrative of progress. In its textual navigation of racial representation, Beckwourth's construction of his protagonist offers an early example of black Frontier manhood. The subsequent texts of Love and Micheaux develop and modernise this construction into alternative black Western identities. At the other end of the Frontier process is Micheaux's portrayal of the pioneer farmer making the most of the last of the land grabs in the early twentieth century. Love's narrative with its depiction of the heyday of the cattle ranges in the mid to late nineteenth century sits between the two texts and represents the transitional period from exploration and conquest to settlement. Together the texts illustrate Turner's sociohistorical background of the Frontier revealing how areas of Western land progressed from 'wilderness' to statehood. The protagonists are literary formulations of the different types of Frontiersmen who emerge as the West becomes settled: the pathfinder, the hunter-turned-cowboy, and the yeoman farmer.

In presenting a historic and literary bridge to the analysis of the contemporary novels, this chapter focuses upon the early texts' engagement with contemporaneous formulations of the term Frontier, notions of Western masculinity, and regeneration through violence with its theme of self-transformation. The motivation behind the racial projects of these narratives is to create new heroic masculinities for African American men at a time when scripts for black male identities were limited; limited by a predominantly white readership, a racially biased publishing industry, and the desire on the part of the authors to create a text that is commercially viable. The fact that Beckwourth's text is dictated to a white amanuensis and that both Love and Micheaux's texts are self-published demonstrates that these authors are working within aesthetic, social and political spaces where their freedom of expression is constrained.

The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth as Told to Thomas D. Bonner by James P. Beckwourth

The Frontier Myth

"[H]ome of the free and the land of the brave" (Beckwourth 418)

The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth (*Life and Adventures*) recounts African American James Beckwourth's varied life as mountain man, pathfinder, hotelier, Chief of the Crows, fighter of the Seminoles in Florida and later the Mexicans in the Mexican War. Crucially, the narrative obscures its character's racial identity problematising the construction of race. This racial indeterminacy creates a narrative space where a potentially subversive and radical black masculinity resides and where an abolitionist sub-text can be expressed. Because this is a dictated narrative, we can identify three distinct Beckwourths: there is Jim Beckwith, the man who told Thomas D. Bonner his life story; Beckwourth the narrator; and there is Beckwourth the character whom I refer to as 'Beckwourth' using single quotation marks. This chapter demonstrates that distinguishing between narrator and character in Beckwourth's autobiography is significant in opening a textual space where the problematical relationship between racial representation and the Frontier experience can be explored.

Born in Virginia, 'Beckwourth' as a young boy moves with his family to St. Louis in Missouri. Finding his independent and rather rebellious nature restricted in St. Louis, he leaves home for the "Great West" at the age of nineteen (21). Beckwourth's racial project is to align his character's personal progress with that of the nation. In the descriptions of St. Louis and California, the narrative embraces Turner's idea of the Frontier as "the outer edge of the wave – the meeting point between savagery and civilisation" ("Significance" 7). Surrounded by "'a howling wilderness' inhabited only by

wild beasts and merciless savages" (Beckwourth 14), St. Louis is presented as a civilised space – it has a school and is "the grand trading depôt for the regions of the West and Northwest" (18). Much further West, California is described as a primitive place where society "was in the worst condition to be found, probably, in any part of the world, to call it civilised" (506). In Chapter six, I identify a structural and thematic signifyin(g) thread that connects Butler's text with Beckwourth's. While Beckwourth employs his description of California to illustrate that civilising the region has yet to begin, Butler uses her apocalyptic images of the state to depict the consequences of Manifest Destiny and a narrative of competitive individualism.

In placing 'Beckwourth' at the boundaries where the nation was created, the text simultaneously supports the mythic narrative of Westward progress and confirms his role as an agent of civilisation. He recounts:

> I would smile at the comparison of their [emigrants] sufferings with what myself and other men of the mountains had really endured in former times. The forts that now afford protection to the traveller were built by ourselves at the constant peril of our lives, amid Indian tribes nearly double their present number. (51-52)

'Beckwourth's' personal involvement in transforming the Western landscape from wilderness to civilisation is paralleled by his personal transformation articulated through the trope of "*regeneration through violence*" (Slotkin 12; emphasis in original). The latter is embedded within the captivity narrative and provides the structural frame for 'Beckwourth's' transformation. The mythic "scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or 'natural' state, and *regeneration through violence*" is pivotal to the nation's story of development (Slotkin 12; emphasis in original). 'Beckwourth's' capture by the Crow Indians and their belief that he is a Crow establishes the process of separation from civilised life. During his sojourn with the Crow people, he participates in customs that 'civilised society' would have considered regressive: he has multiple wives, scalps his victims, and takes part in secret native rituals. Yet this behaviour is countered by the superior skills and knowledge that

'Beckwourth' possesses; for example, he compares himself to Alexander the Great in his command over his Indian soldiers and his knowledge of war strategies. This superiority over an "unsuspecting people" whom he describes as "wild children of the forest" (150, 198) provides the context for his ascendance to the position of Chief. 'Beckwourth's' superiority is established by the language which infantilises the Native Americans and reinforces their association with nature and the wilderness.

Through successful battles with the Crow against their enemies, 'Beckwourth' acquires nine names, each more "ennobling than the last" (201). These names acknowledge his bravery and skills in battle and raise his status to a heroic level but regeneration, as Richard Slotkin would argue, also requires that he gains a new consciousness which can transform the world (14). Critically, 'Beckwourth's' acquisition of a new social consciousness creates an unresolvable tension in the construction of a black heroic figure. On the one hand, his knowledge of Crow culture and their relations with other Indians has a transformative influence upon the world he inhabits. He mediates between the Crow, other Indians and whites; he saves white lives and ensures that the forts and trading posts are protected. In so doing, he paves the way for white expansion within the West and the subsequent removal and erasure of the indigenous peoples. At the same time, 'Beckwourth's' immersion into Crow life alters his perception of white people. He observes that the civilised world could learn much from the Crows' incapacity to feel envy (162), and that there is little distinction between whites and Native Americans in so far as "The morality of the whites I have not found to exceed very much that of the red man" (52).

Life with the Crows has a significant impact upon 'Beckwourth' and results in a double-voiced discourse that illustrates a complex textual tension surrounding his identity. On his return to St. Louis after fourteen years with the Crows, he is described as "a curious looking object" with "more the appearance of a Crow than that of a civilised being" (379, 380). Within the mythic narrative of the Frontier, 'Beckwourth's' 'white' identity means that this regression to the primitive will be temporary. As a

narrative strategy, it expresses a complicity with a racialised discourse that positioned the Native American as an "ecological other" and justified their removal from the Western landscape (Ray 2). However, if we read 'Beckwourth' as black, then the fact that he is sick on his return to St. Louis and yearns to return to the prairies "to wander without any man to call your steps into question" subverts the hegemonic white narrative that denied African Americans a positive transformative relationship with the land (383). Furthermore, as a symbolic response to the values of white society, the incompatibility of a life led in the 'wilderness' with that of a life led in 'civilised society' reveals a subtext which challenges the segregationist practices of the period. Such a stance is in keeping with the latent content of the narrative which as discussed later presents moments of resistance to dominant white practices and discourses.

The Western Literary Form

"I was born in Fredericksburg, Virginia, on the 26th of April, 1798" (Beckwourth 13)

 Life and Adventures is as an example of Frontier literature in that it re-presents "the scene and meaning of original contact" (Kolodny 5).[32] 'Beckwourth's' first expedition out West introduces him to "some large, dark-colored animal" and to "a country that none of us had ever seen before – where the foot of the white man had seldom, if ever, left its print" (41, 62). The idea that 'Beckwourth' is one of the first to explore such territory illustrates a textual desire to insert him into the hegemonic discourses of national and masculine construction. He is shown to explore not only the borders of the "first American West" which lay East of the Mississippi River but to travel beyond these "secured borders" to Utah, New Mexico and California (Aron 20). In his role of pathfinder, 'Beckwourth' is "a pioneer of the empire" (Smith 84). This role locates both

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[32] Kolodny refers to two types of Frontier literature in her essay "Letting Go Our Grand Obsessions". The first are the "primary or proto-texts", while the "secondary" texts are "composed after the fact" of first contact and is the category in which Beckwourth's narrative can be placed (5).

the protagonist and the text within the early nineteenth century tradition of exploration.[33]

Jim Beckwith accompanied John C. Frémont, "the Pathfinder" and, according to James Ronda, "the most widely recognised American explorer of the nineteenth century" (69) on his 1846 excursion to California (Savage 72). In an act of literary signification, Beckwourth borrows heavily from Frémont's expeditions out West. The narrative structure appropriates the pattern of Frémont's three major excursions to the Great West and a controversial trip to Mexico.[34] The repetition of this pattern provides a structure to Beckwourth's own narrative and links the character to the historical discourse of Western expansion. In *Life and Adventures*, Western manhood is expressed through action, knowledge, and motion. For example, 'Beckwourth' builds forts, rides, fights and hunts. He knows the right trails to follow and creates new ones, and he understands Native American culture and language. 'Beckwourth's' spatial freedom to move across different Western landscapes enables him to claim ownership of Western spaces and is explicitly expressed in the naming of 'Beckwourth's Valley' and 'Beckwourth's Pass'. In demonstrating these attributes, Beckwourth wants to show that his protagonist's authority, agency and his legacy legitimise his status as a Western hero and position him within the nation's foundational story.

As an African American, Beckwourth narrates from a racial and socio-historical marginal space, but this marginality becomes a potential space of radical openness, as hooks would argue, because the narrative constructs a subversive discourse – a "critical response to domination" – which counters the racialism of the period (153). This critical response can be found in the text's literary signification with the slave narrative. At a time when slave narratives were asserting the humanity of black Americans and using individual black experiences to speak for the collective black

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[33] Promoted by President Thomas Jefferson who had a central role in defining American explorations of the West in the first decade of the nineteenth century (Ronda 53).
[34] The first major excursion begins in chapter two, the second in chapter eight, and the third in the penultimate chapter. They are interspersed by journeys to Florida, California, New Mexico and two brief returns to the West.

experience of slavery, Beckwourth chose the narrative of the Frontier to assert an individualist ethos of psychological and geographical freedom. The textual conformity with a white discourse of discovery and masculinity is nonetheless disrupted by a sub-text of black self-determination found in the text's call and response structure which reflects the black slave narrative. Significantly, the subordinate narrative can be interpreted as a concealed abolitionist text. Beckwourth's autobiography spans the 1820s to the mid-1850s and places the protagonist within a period where mainstream American rhetoric, practices and policies were increasingly restricting the rights and movements of African Americans.[35] Within this context, published black slave narratives became a major force in the abolitionists' cause.[36] Even if Beckwith had not read a slave narrative, the practice of writing slave narratives shapes and organises the text.[37]

Hence, there are significant moments when the narrative displays a black intertextual relationship with the genre of slave narratives. *Life and Adventures* begins with the sentence: "I was born in Fredericksburg, Virginia" (13). This is a common structural element of the slave narrative, according to James Olney (115), as is the "sketchy parenthood" of 'Beckwourth's' family with its reference to a white father but a noticeable absence of any reference to his mother (153). The Preface functions to authorise the narrative by a white amanuensis as it often does in slave narratives. Bonner testifies to the truthfulness of the narrative and to the exemplary character of Beckwourth when he writes, "It is unnecessary to speak of the natural superiority of his mind: his autobiography everywhere displays it" (5). Furthermore, the narrative echoes what Olney would describe as the structural features of slave narratives in its episodic

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[35] By 1854 the Missouri Compromise had been repealed, Nebraska and Kansas were open to slavery. Utah and New Mexico Territory had been opened in 1850. In places like Texas, California and Kansas "freedom was by no means guaranteed" (Allmendinger, *Imagining* 3). In 1857, the Supreme Court ruled in the Dred Scott case that Congress did not have the authority to prohibit slavery in the territories.
[36] For a more detailed discussion, see Charles T. David & Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Editors. *The Slave Narratives*. Oxford UP, 1985.
[37] Beckwith's mother was a slave and he was born in Virginia. It is therefore difficult to believe that he would not have known about the lives of slaves.

quality, the interspersed sketches of 'Beckwourth', and the concluding long poem (152).

However, the argument for a black intertextuality finds its most significant expression in the text's implicit use and revision of the black trope of vertical migration. The cycle of journeys that 'Beckwourth' undertakes encodes the black tradition of call and response. The narrative repeats and revises patterns of movement found in slave narratives, namely from oppression to freedom and from the South to North in its representation of 'Beckwourth's' pattern of movement. His journeying is a non-linear movement that frequently circles back on itself in its pattern of journey and return. This pattern emphasises his freedom of movement and his agency. The obstacles he faces and overcomes on his journeys, like those of the protagonists of slave narratives, make him a stronger and more resilient individual. Furthermore, the pattern of journey and return serves to map 'Beckwourth's' increasing estrangement from civilised life in St. Louis as he becomes more involved in the Crows' way of life.

The intersection of a white discourse of exploration with a black discourse of slavery produces a double-voiced text that resists the racial practices of the time. 'Beckwourth's' spatial freedom undermines the practices and beliefs of racial segregation. The color-line restricted African American movement and opportunity,[38] yet the narrative consistently crosses that line. With its intertextuality, the text itself becomes an example of that resistance. This resistance prevents an easy assimilation of 'Beckwourth's' racial project with that of a white national narrative of identity. The tension between the two is revealed through his homesickness for Crow life. On returning to St. Louis, he says:

> I was disappointed in my return home . . . a feeling of cynicism passed over me. I thought of my Indian home, and of the unsophisticated hearts I had left behind me. . . . My child was there, and his mother, whom I loved; a return there was in no way unnatural. (383-84)

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[38] W.E.B. Du Bois first wrote in 1903 that "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line" (9).

Inhabiting the borders of empire between civilisation and the wilderness, 'Beckwourth's' critically contradictory narrative stance towards both the Indian way of life and civilised white society becomes a constant feature throughout the narrative. This critical contradiction is mirrored in the narrative's construction of 'Beckwourth's' racial identity.

Racial Identity and the Racial Project

"Ah, Beckwourth, you are truly a wonderful man" (Beckwourth 476)

Beckwith told his story to Thomas D. Bonner, a justice of the peace, after meeting him in a gold camp in California in 1854.[39] This feature of "composite authorship" in the Western autobiography was, according to Arnold Krupat, not uncommon in the nineteenth century, and Krupat sees Bonner's influence evident in 'Beckwourth's' loyalty to white civilisation (313). Michael K. Johnson identifies Beckwourth's erasure of his race as a common trope in African American writing even for those narratives which were not filtered through a white biographer ("African Americans" 165), while Noreen Groover Lape argues that Beckwourth is aware of himself "as biologically black and narratively white" (25). However, the narrative does not explicitly state that 'Beckwourth' is not black but neither does it explicitly state that he is white. Given the racial climate of the time, it is likely that it was politically and commercially expedient for Bonner and Beckwith not to draw attention to the protagonist's racial identity.

Judith Madera explains that Bonner would have played a "role in shaping a story framed to print conventions already in place . . . and appears to have angled the text to the Frontier adventure reader" (91). Madera goes on to describe the narrative as "a collaborative formation, a compound of voices" in which Bonner's voice is

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[39] See Allmendinger (*Imagining* 5) and Raymond Friday Locke (169-176). Unfortunately for Beckwith, Bonner was "something of a con artist" (Locke 172). Despite signing a contract with Bonner, Beckwith never received any money from the sales of the book. Locke maintains that Beckwith also never saw the final manuscript and never knew that it had been revised (and possibly re-written in places) by a Mr T. B. Thorpe (176).

"generative of form and meaning" and is "complicit in masking Beckwourth as white" (91). Crucially though, Bonner's influence is not able to control all the meanings generated by the text, and there exists a Signifyin(g) narrative which de-masks 'Beckwourth's' whiteness and offers moments of a black presence. Furthermore, the character's loyalty to white civilisation is complicated by the way he is shown to fully immerse himself into the Crow way of life: he marries, has a child, acquires an adopted brother and parents whom he calls mother and father. His references to the Crow people and their way of life as "our nation" (365), "our laws and regulations" (366), and "our dominion" (367) suggest some level of identification with the Crow people that Bonner's racial project is unable to erase. Lape argues that the double-voiced dimension of the narrative is an expression of double-consciousness and focuses upon Beckwourth's presentation of himself as Crow and Anglo (25). However, the narrative inhabits three, not two worlds – white, black, and Crow – and that rather than an expression of double-consciousness, the narrative exhibits a triple-consciousness as it navigates these three worlds in its construction of the character's identity. Significantly, and in contrast to the oppressive triple-consciousness that threatens Fanon's black self, the narrative strategy of triple-consciousness allows Beckwourth to construct a character whose psychological and physical movement between three worlds creates a racial indeterminacy that offers the potential to realise a radical black subjectivity that resists white ascription of black bodies. At the same time, 'Beckwourth's' racial indeterminacy strategically provides a creative space for Beckwourth to Signify on the black vernacular mythological figure of the trickster in the construction of his protagonist.

Beckwourth's indirect subversion of Bonner's authorial intentions creates a critical tension in the representation of race. In fact, Beckwourth signals to observant readers early on that his racial project is to create a Signifyin(g) narrative. In referring to the tales told by emigrants of their experiences travelling West, he has 'Beckwourth' wryly observe that "there is in human nature such a love of the marvellous, that . . .

deeds, by dint of repetition, become appropriated to the narrator, and tales that were related as actual experience now mislead the speaker and the audience" (51). Beckwourth uses this moment to establish a heroic status for his character whose adventures and "sufferings" in civilising the West "made theirs [the emigrants] appear trivial" (52). It also presents 'Beckwourth' as a reliable narrator. However, 'Beckwourth's' statement can be read as an example of "linguistic masking" which Gates describes as the ability of a black person "to move freely between two discursive universes" (*Signifying* 82). Beckwourth employs the sub-text of the black vernacular to Signify on his readership through a "mode of rhetorical play" and indirection (*Signifying* 71-72). Encoded in the scene is a cautionary warning that the narrative is an act of mythic creation and that it is not to be understood literally but figuratively. Beckwith becomes Beckwourth and appropriates his own story to create 'Beckwourth', the mythic Western hero who commits marvellous deeds. This act of invention Signifies on the trope of personal transformation which lies at the heart of the Western form. The text also Signifies on both the black oral tradition of telling stories and the Western historical fable to create a radical discursive space. Within this space, Beckwourth presents a narrative that critically defers the representation of his protagonist's racial identity.

The narrative never explicitly states that 'Beckwourth' is white. Rather his whiteness is to be inferred. Hence, he informs readers that he is "a man who had been reared in civilised life" (232). He goes on to say that "When I fought with the Crow nation, I fought in their behalf against the most relentless enemies of the white man" and "saved more life and property for the white man than a whole regiment" (232). The 'whiteness' of the discourse is further emphasised by Beckwourth's derogatory representations of other black characters which distances his protagonist from any connections with African Americans. But 'Beckwourth's' whiteness is countered by the ease with which he is accepted as a Crow – he possesses a mole above his left eye which is taken as proof that he is a lost son. Later in the narrative when he arrives in

Tampa Bay with dispatches, he is described by an officer of the guard as "another one of those Seminoles" (409). Tiya Miles and Barbara Krauthamer point out that Seminoles and African Americans had mixed and intermarried since the eighteenth century "making distinctions between blacks and Indians difficult and arbitrary" (125).[40] 'Beckwourth's' unstable racial identity takes advantage of the gap which Appiah identifies as existing between "what a person ascriptively is and the racial identity he performs" ("Synthesis" 78). The textual indeterminacy of 'Beckwourth's' racial identity is a liberating rhetorical strategy which frees him from the historically narrow script of black identity.

This narrative strategy gives 'Beckwourth' "a new location from which to articulate [his] . . . sense of the world" and one which is informed by the Western spaces that he inhabits (hooks, "Choosing" 153). Far removed from places of settlement, the Rocky Mountain region offers "greater freedom of movement and surprisingly diverse opportunities" (Allmendinger, *Imagining* 3). The socio-historic context allows Beckwourth to construct a racial identity for his protagonist that is fluid. According to Blake Allmendinger, "cross-racial and polymorphous characteristics" were common amongst mountain men with whites "figuratively" passing as "coons" or "niggers", because they wore animal skins and coonskin caps (12). Beckwourth, Allmendinger argues, uses the label 'white' "as an honorary term" for Black Harris (Moses Harris),[41] a well-known experienced mountaineer, "to indicate that the trapper was not a Native or 'savage' but a member of 'civilisation' who worked for one of the American companies" (4). The narrative takes advantage of its specific spatial and

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[40] Escaped black slaves found refuge with the Seminoles in Florida. The Seminole Wars of the 1830s and 1840s were an attempt to drive the Seminoles further south into Florida (Miles and Krauthamer 125). 'Beckwourth' is a dispatch rider for the US army during part of the Seminole Wars.
[41] Black Harris is described as one of the "two white men" that 'Beckwourth' meets while trapping (100). Earlier in the narrative, 'Beckwourth' accompanies Harris on a journey for supplies. At this point in the text, Harris is referred to as Moses Harris and no indication is made that he is not white (22).

socio-historic context to Signify on the indeterminacy of racial labelling and create a potentially subversive black Western identity.

Life and Adventures resists the idea that Western identity is homogeneous and stable. 'Beckwourth's' identity as Western hero is constructed through the shifting roles that he performs. The roles of mountain man, trapper, pathfinder, Crow, and dispatch rider position 'Beckwourth' on the periphery of civilised settled society. In the white narrative, the 'larger-than-life' depictions of his escapades ("ten thousand adventures" – Preface) and his widespread reputation ("is personally known to thousands of people" – Preface) transform him into a legendary Western hero. But a reading of the narrative that looks for signs of a black difference may read Beckwourth's construction of his character as Signifyin(g) on the black vernacular mythological trope of the trickster figure. As "The masters of metamorphosis" who are, according to William J. Hynes, "notorious border breakers" (37, 33), trickster figures are subversive cultural expressions of blackness. Described by Gates as existing "at the margins of discourse" (*Signifying* 57), the trickster embodies contradiction, change, adaptability, manoeuvrability.[42] The slipperiness of 'Beckwourth's' textual identity – the many roles he performs as a Western man; his numerous names as a Crow; his performances of superhuman endurance; for example, he runs 95 miles in one day (124); his ability to cheat death; the cases of mistaken identity as a Crow, a Seminole, and a Shawnee; and not forgetting the three Beckwourths of Beckwith, Beckwourth, and 'Beckwourth' – is therefore a rhetorical strategy which locates 'Beckwourth' within a latent black cultural narrative of identity formation that significantly remains hidden under the "marvelous . . . tales" of the West "that mislead the speaker and the audience" (51).

The paradox of 'Beckwourth's' racial positioning is illustrated in the final chapter of the narrative. The chapter is framed at the start by the acknowledgement that "I cannot properly conclude the record of my eventful life without saying something for the Red man" (529). He concludes with "My heart turns naturally to my adopted people"

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[42] See Martin Introduction; Hynes 33-45; Ammons & White-Parks vii -xiii.

(535) and ends on a long poem to his Indian heroine Pine Leaf, but the pages in between discuss the war upon the Indians and outline his own policy for their extermination "by the simple means of starvation" (533). In Signifyin(g) on the black trickster figure, the construction of 'Beckwourth' is able to embody the contradiction of Indian lover and Indian hater blurring the boundaries between the categories of white, black and Crow. Furthermore, *Life and Adventures* is itself a trickster tale. African American trickster tales have their roots in slavery and, according to Ayana Smith, embody "a narrative method of dealing psychologically with power struggles and lack of self-determination" (180). Presented as representing the 'facts' of Beckwourth's life, the text obscures more than it reveals and "throws doubt on the concept of truth itself" (Vecsey 106). In creating a fictionalised version of himself, Beckwourth's latent racial project offers the possibility for the construction of a radical black western identity and moments of blackness are encoded that subvert readings of his character as white. These moments of a liberatory black identity for 'Beckwourth' inhabit the marginal spaces of the narrative, but crucially they do not constitute an oppositional stance to the hegemonic whiteness and ethnocentricity of myth and form. Consequently, the narrative's embrace of dominant white patriarchal discourses prevents *Life and Adventures* from fully realising a radical black Western subjectivity.

The Life and Adventures of Nat Love Better Known in the Cattle Country as "Deadwood Dick" by Himself: A True History of Slavery Days, Life on the Great Cattle Ranges and on the Plains of the "Wild and Woolly" West, Based on Facts, and Personal Experiences of the Author by Nat Love

The Frontier Myth

"[F]reedom is sweet" (Love 37)

As with Beckwourth's narrative, there is a need to distinguish between Love the narrator and Love the character whom I refer to as 'Love'. *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love* can be viewed as continuing Beckwourth's subversive racial project in its construction of a black Western masculinity. The narrative charts 'Love's' self-transformation from slave to free man and a free man who is a cowboy and later a Pullman Porter. Born as a slave in Tennessee in 1854,[43] 'Love' poignantly notes that "freedom is sweet" and leaves home for Kansas in 1869 stating, "it was the great West I wanted to see" (37, 40). At the age of fifteen, his personal transformation is aligned with a West that is transitioning from agrarian Frontier to a modernised settled West.

The Western narrative of the text is framed by two significant historical events: the completion of the Transcontinental railroad and the closing of the Frontier. 'Love's' journey to Kansas comes seven years after the Homestead Act and pre-empts the black migration from the South to the West in the late 1870s known as the Exoduster Movement. It also places 'Love' within the historical presence of black cowboys who had begun "driving cattle up the trail to Kansas soon after the Civil War ended" (Searles 90). In the year that 'Love' heads out West, the Transcontinental railroad is completed. This event signals the beginnings of the great cattle drives of the 1870s and 1880s to towns located on the railroad. Love strategically situates his character at the

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[43] This is the same year Beckwith tells his story to Bonner.

site of the most iconic of all cattle towns, Dodge City, just as "the demand for beef was growing" (Searles 90). Yet the railroad also heralds the modernisation of the West, and in 1890 'Love' transitions from cowboy to Pullman Porter in recognition that "With the march of progress came the railroad and no longer were we called upon to follow the long horned steers, or mustangs on the trail" (130). Alongside this historical positioning of 'Love', the narrative embraces several elements of both Turner's and Roosevelt's mythic discourses: the Turnerian idea of the West as "an area of free land" pre-1890 (Turner 6); the Frontier as a site of contact and conflict; and Roosevelt's mythic trope of 'savage war'. References to "the wild and free life of the plains" and "the new country" take on a different resonance for recently emancipated slaves promising an unlimited spatial and psychological freedom for the individual hitherto not experienced (Love 45). The narrative emphasises that 'Love' has "travelled every known trail, and over immense stretches of country where there were no sign of trail, nothing but the wide expense of prairie" (129). Like 'Beckwourth', 'Love' is established as a civilising agent operating on the boundaries of empire as he travels across new and unsettled territory. In fact, Love's narrative at the beginning picks up where Beckwourth's ended and goes on to show that as the Western landscape is modernised, the role of the cowboy as tamer of the wilderness and protector of isolated communities becomes redundant.

The textual representation of 'Love' as civilising agent is illustrated by the narrative's engagement with the Frontier dichotomy of civilisation versus savagery expressed through the mythic trope of 'savage war'. "Typical formulations" of the trope of savage war, Slotkin explains, present "Native Americans as instigators of a war of extermination" (12). Peripheral participants in the narrative, the Native Americans are described as "painted savages" who are "terrorising the settlers" (61, 91). Whereas Beckwourth's text presents a complex and contradictory relationship between his character and the indigenous peoples, 'Love' is presented as an Indian-hater. One can speculate that because 'Love's' racial identity is known to the reader, the narrative has to work much harder than Beckwourth's to reject the negative stereotypes associated

with the racial label of black. Significantly therefore, the unequivocal narrative stance functions to emphasise the racial and cultural distance between 'Love' and the Indians. The text presents acts of violence by the cowboys as either necessary to protect settlers and property, or acts of self-defence. Accordingly, 'Love' claims that "It was our policy to always avoid trouble if possible while on these trips, but to always defend ourselves and our rights" (71). The narrative expresses "indignation and sorrow" for General Custer and "his brave command" (95) who lost their lives in the 'massacre' that was the Battle of Little Big Horn, and the cowboys' desire for revenge against "the blood thirsty red skins" (95). In his depiction of 'Love' as an Indian-hater, Love's narrative would not have been unusual. During the 1860s and 1870s, a common feature of the popular dime novel was, according to Daryl Jones, to portray the protagonist as an Indian-hater (30).

The narrative's compliance with a colonial discourse of Western settlement serves to align 'Love's' personal ambitions with that of the nation. At the same time, it places him at the centre of the historical fable of the Americanisation of the West. A critical consequence is the extent to which this embrace of the myth allows for a revisioning of both the form and its heroic Frontiersman.

The Western Literary Form

"[A] first class cow boy" (Love 69)

The Western literary form has traditionally presented a hegemonic patriarchal white masculinity as the measure for all other Western identities. Love's narrative approach to Western masculinity is complex. There is a textual shift from engaging with a discourse of black masculinity borne out of his Southern experiences that prepare him for his Western adventures to embracing a discourse of Western masculinity. This shift is signalled at the end of chapter five. Importantly, it demonstrates that for Love the

conventions of the Western literary form offer better opportunities for expressions of an emancipated black masculinity than those of the slave narrative.

The first five chapters describe 'Love's' early experiences of slavery and Post-Emancipation. Through a complex play of motivated and unmotivated Signifyin(g), these chapters simultaneously resist and conform to the conventions of the Western form. Readers learn that it is in the "heart of the black belt of the south" where 'Love' receives "lessons in self-dependence and life's struggles" (11, 25). Critically, Love's inversion of the trope of the West as the site for the rite-of-passage to manhood locates the South as the place of origin for black masculinity while also revising a historical narrative of slavery's emasculation of black men in the South. By employing the rhetorical strategy of motivated Signifyin(g) which revises and critiques a racialist discourse of black Southern masculinity and an originary discourse of Western masculinity, the narrative crucially reveals a sub-text where the cultural resources of the literary form are confronted. A consequence of this literary Signification is that a narrative space emerges where the potential for a new black Western masculinity resides. In contrast, at the end of chapter five in an act of unmotivated Signifyin(g), the narrative structure explicitly aligns with the convention of the Western form as 'Love' embarks on his Western adventure. "I was not really needed at home", he remarks, and "started out for the first time alone in a world I knew very little about" (39). This "resemblance" to the genre's motif of the young white male who strikes out for the West brings a black difference to the convention of form, but significantly this difference does not challenge the form's structure.[44]

Love's objective is to appropriate and revise a Western masculinity for his protagonist and not to construct an overtly racial representation of Western masculinity. Although the first five chapters may suggest otherwise, the shift in focus shows that the narrative is unable to fulfil this radical opportunity once 'Love' is out West. Ironically, as

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[44] Gates describes unmotivated Signifyin(g) as implying "unity and resemblance" (Introduction xxvii)

racial representations of 'Love' recede in the narrative this seems to give Love a rhetorical freedom to encode a subversive blackness. This subversion takes the narrative beyond simple replication of a white form. Thus, the first five chapters allow Love to encode a political statement that challenges the external nineteenth century racial discourse of biological determinism which argued that "a person's potential is determined by his or her race" (Wilson 194). Five years after W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, Love's narrative of personal transformation can be read as a literary expression of Du Bois' repudiation of a pseudo-scientific discourse that sought to oppress black Americans and deny them the same opportunities available to white Americans.

From humble beginnings 'Love' is transformed into "the Western man's ideal" (Turner, "Problem" 191). In looking back as a Pullman Porter, he reminisces on his transformation: "To see me now you would not recognise the bronze hardened dare devil cow boy, the slave boy . . . or the tenderfoot" (70). The narrative embraces the core Western motifs of individual transformation and personal freedom. In the first chapter out West (chapter six), 'Love' enthuses about his life as a cow hand. "I gloried in the danger", he exclaims, "and the wild and free life of the plains, the new country I was continually traversing" (45). Set in a post-Civil War world, the text conforms to the conventions of the Western literary form to articulate the idea of freedom for the African American male. The motif of mobility is central to both Western and African American narratives of progress. 'Love's' journey from Tennessee to Kansas Signifies on the idea of the West as a place of individual opportunity, on an African American history of migration, and on the black trope of vertical ascent. Consequently, the ability to travel freely takes on a double-voiced resonance for African Americans and becomes, in the newly united nation, a pre-requisite for self-determination and autonomous action.

'Love's' mobility also takes on a different significance when he becomes a Pullman Porter. I have already shown that the autobiography functions as a transitional text in this study between the agrarian West of Beckwourth and the modernised West

of Micheaux. Within Love's narrative, the reader is presented with the transition from a West of cattle ranges and cowboys to a West of railroads and Pullman Porters. 'Love's' journey takes a different trajectory to that of his fellow contemporary fictional figure, the Virginian. Published in 1902, I view Owen Wister's modern Western *The Virginian* as a hypotext for Love's narrative with the latter responding directly to Wister's wistful call: "What is become of the horseman, the cowpuncher, the last romantic figure upon our soil?" (x). Unlike Wister's eponymous hero who rises to foreman and subsequently becomes the partner of wealthy white Judge Henry and "an important man" (316), 'Love's' progression is sideways into the service role of the Pullman profession. This progression creates a significant tension in the narrative's construction of black self-determination. On the one hand, a consequence of 'Love's' employment with the Pullman Company is a modernisation of his Western identity. The recently built railroads symbolise the final stage of settlement of the West and the beginnings of a technological, industrial and urban landscape. For the second time in the narrative, 'Love' is placed right at the centre of a progressive national narrative and he celebrates that "American railroads lead the world" (148). 'Love's' admiration for his country may seem excessive at times in the narrative, but rhetorically it works to remind the reader that 'Love' was a participant in "the greatest story ever told" (Katz xii-xiii). However, even with his "splendid memory and quick observation" (130), the narrative outcome is dictated problematically by 'Love's' race rather than his ambitions.[45] In effect, the central part of the narrative utilises the open country of the West with its cattle drives, ranches and cowboys to articulate a black Western identity that challenges the racialist' determinist script for black identities of the late nineteenth century. Nevertheless, once the narrative moves to a more modernised context, the text, troublingly, is not able to move beyond contemporaneous racialist expectations that African American men are best suited to service roles.

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[45] Scheckel points out that African American cowboys could not rise to the position of foreman (245).

The textual re-positioning of 'Love' from the margins of slavery and poverty in the South to a "first class cow boy" (69) reveals that Western manhood can be informed by alternative black experiences and heredity that are absent from both the myth and the form. In particular, the intertextuality of the narrative with slave narratives disrupts and extends the borders of conventional Western literary history to present a Western literary history that is less white. The effect is a double-voiced narrative where black experiences and narratives appropriate and inhabit the structural frame of the form. The next section explores the extent to which this textual positioning facilitates the construction of an alternative (radical) black identity for the protagonist.

Racial Identity and the Racial Project

"Let your chest swell with pride that you are an American" (Love 145)

Once 'Love' is out West, the narrative's manifest racial project is to validate and endorse 'Love's' place within the discourse of Western manhood. At the same time, his racial identity recedes to the margins of the text. This rhetorical strategy is however countered by the presence of photographs of the protagonist. Love's decision to invoke the gendered rather than the racial dimension of identity as the narrative progresses frees his construction of 'Love' from what Appiah would describe as "scripts" or "notions" for "proper black modes of behaviour" ("Synthesis" 97). In choosing the narrative of Western masculinity, and particularly Wister's construction of heroic masculinity, Love has a potentially more liberating script for his character's identity than would have been available for his contemporaries in the South.

Initially the text expresses a black Western experience as 'Love', on finding his first Texas outfit, observes that "There were several colored cowboys among them, and good ones too" (41). However, the text is not able to reconcile an explicit representation of race with the Frontier experience. The critical consequence is a

narrative shift that focuses on 'Love's' transformation into a Western man which clearly functions to demonstrate 'Love's place within the 'creation story' of the West. Thus, he claims:

> I had long since developed into a first class cow boy and besides being chief brand reader in Arizona and the pan handle country. My expertness in riding, roping and in the general routine of the cow boy's life, including my wide knowledge of the surrounding country . . . made my services in great demand and my wages increased accordingly. (69-70)

'Love's' self-affirmations are more than just boastful claims. His skills and expertise underscore his manhood, his individual value to the national project of settlement, and his individual agency. Love, as my argument goes on to show, surreptitiously subverts the dominant image of the white cowboy and creates a liberatory discursive space for his protagonist. Johnson views Love's erasure of race as a key narrative strategy which permits his character's identity to be read without fear of being interpreted as black savagery (*Black* 108). Along similar lines, Daniel Worden writes that "However problematically, Love's text erases race to envision a type of national belonging that values masculinity as marker of merit" (51). While Susan Scheckel suggests that 'Love's' rise to success as a cowboy "form[s] the basis of a new identity that transcends the limiting categories of race and class" (225).

However, the idea that race is either erased or transcended is too decisive for the way the text manipulates racial representation through a latent racial project that embeds blackness. My argument is that 'Love's' Western identity is informed by a black Southern masculinity that operates subversively to emphasise his black subjectivity. The first five chapters have critical implications for the subsequent representation of 'Love' as a cowboy who demonstrates superior skills of horsemanship. These skills are publicly confirmed in the horse roping contest at Deadwood with 'Love' announcing afterwards that he "had defeated the best men of the West, and brought the record home to the home ranch in Arizona" (97). The image of the man on horseback in the historical fable of the West is a cultural signifier of freedom and white manhood. Yet

significantly, Love's rhetorical strategy of presenting his character's early life in the South complicates this Western trope. The narrative shows that it is in the South and not the West where 'Love' first acquires his riding skills. In the Old South, the riding and ownership of horses is a privilege belonging to white men. Consequently, masculinity, dominance and control are symbolised in the image of the Southern man on horseback. Early in the narrative Love challenges this white privilege. As a freed slave, 'Love' surreptitiously breaks colts belonging to the white horse ranch owner Mr Williams. For this, he is paid ten cents by Mr Williams's sons. He acknowledges that "The experiences I gained in riding during those times, often stood me in good stead in after years during my wild life on the western plains" (32). 'Love's' horsemanship attests to his masculinity and subverts the racialist premise that masculinity is the prerogative of white men. Critically, on his journey West, the image of the white slave owner on horseback is transformed into a black cowboy. It is within this revision of a familiar trope that the narrative presents a difference and constructs a black Western identity which resists readings of conformity. Difference and resemblance are therefore embedded in a textual construction of the black heroic Frontiersman.

In challenging the dominant cultural whiteness of literary representations of Western masculinity, the sub-text of the narrative's racial project emphasises the importance of a black Southern heritage. Accordingly, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love* harnesses a black vernacular mythology in its construction of 'Love' as 'Deadwood Dick'. The narrative Signifies on the white literary expressions of Western manhood found in Edward L. Wheeler's dime character, Deadwood Dick. 'Love' acquires the sobriquet in 1876 after winning a contest of "riding, roping, and shooting" in Deadwood, South Dakota (97). Not only is Deadwood Dick a fictional character, but historian Michael N. Searles also points out that "the name Deadwood Dick was claimed by no less than six individuals" whom he goes on to list (86, 85). According to Bill Brown, at the heart of the Deadwood Dick plot is the question of who's who (37). Love's appropriation of this moniker for his black protagonist subverts what Margaret

Walsh describes as "creation stories in the making" in her discussion of fictional creations like Deadwood Dick (12). On the one hand, Love's appropriation of this moniker for his protagonist emphasises his Western identity. Significantly however, the renaming of 'Love' is a rhetorical play on the character's identity and one that Signifies on the black vernacular trickster figure. A paradoxical figure who, according to Ammons, "cross[es] cultural boundaries" and "offers a different way of thinking about representation" (x, vii). By appropriating this black cultural resource, the racial project of the narrative disputes the white cultural frontier of the form and establishes blackness as a counter-discourse. The latent narrative articulates the critical contradictions in the textual representation of 'Love'. First, there is 'Love's' ability to cheat death. He is shown as having an extraordinary ability to survive despite "carry(ing) the marks of fourteen bullet wounds" (103). After the loss of his first love, 'Love' actively seeks death through conflict, but he fails claiming that he "bore a charmed life" (127). Secondly, 'Love' is presented as both a heroic figure and a villain. While he rejects the image of the "all around bad man many writers have pictured me in their romances" (70), the narrative continues to emphasise his wild and reckless ways. And finally, as a black man located historically, culturally and socially in the margins of white society 'Love' transgresses the boundaries of race. The appropriation of the sobriquet 'Deadwood Dick' for 'Love' is therefore double-voiced. In an act of "unmotivated Signifyin(g)", the moniker mythologises 'Love' within a white frame of Western masculinity. But naming also mythologises 'Love' as a black culture hero in an act of "motivated Signifyin(g)" which Gates describe as "critique and difference" (Introduction xxvii). Consequently, in Signifyin(g) on the trickster figure, the construction of 'Love', like that of 'Beckwourth', contests the cultural and racial frontier of the literary form by interweaving a latent black vernacular mythology into the historical fable of the West.

Critically, the employment of a black vernacular mythological figure brings a different understanding to an interpretation of 'Love'. Rather than transcending or erasing his race, the narrative presents a Western identity that is informed by black

subjectivity and indicates 'Love's' function as a mediator between cultures. In moving between two cultures, 'Love' transgresses the color-line. The narrative's subversion of the racialist ideology of the late nineteenth century is expressed by an external frame of reference to Harriet Beecher Stowe whom the narrator describes as "the black man's Saviour" (13). In its praise of Stowe whose novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) became a major force in the pro-abolitionist cause, the narrative resists the segregation of the period. At the same time, Love establishes an alternative black heroic figure to Uncle Tom, one which is based on a more empowering script for black male identity. The textual challenge to the contemporaneous racial context is briefly expressed in the middle of the text. Captured by Yellow Dog's tribe, 'Love' is not killed because as "a colored man . . . they thought I was too good to die" (99). In affirming the value of his black life, the incident counters a contemporaneous national narrative of racial oppression and violence towards African Americans. The period between the Civil War and the Harlem Renaissance, according to Patricia Liggins Hill, saw the lynching and burning of more African Americans than at any other period in the history of the United States and was known as "the Dark Age of African American life" (557).

"In the history of the Frontier there is recorded countless heroic deeds performed", Love writes, "Deeds that stamped the men of the Western plains as men worthy to be called men" (155). The narrative's concluding eulogy to the brotherhood of men 'Love' has known importantly serves to align the character with a mythic narrative of Western masculinity. While textual moments of an encoded blackness disrupt the whiteness of the myth and the form, they do not facilitate the construction of a radical black subjectivity for 'Love'. Ultimately, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love* does not challenge the hegemonic masculinist narrative of Western identity. The narrative does however succeed in constructing an alternative Western identity which is informed by a Southern black ancestry and experiences, and which offers an alternative script for black male identity in the form of a heroic Frontiersman.

The Conquest: *The Story of a Negro Pioneer* by Oscar Micheaux

The Frontier Myth

"He must begin with the beginning and develop with the development of the country" (Micheaux 53)

Oscar Micheaux's 1913 novel draws on aspects of Micheaux's life; namely his life as a yeoman farmer in South Dakota.[46] In contrast to the previous two narratives, Micheaux combines autobiographical elements of his Western experiences with a narrative of settlement and creates the fictional Oscar Devereaux as his protagonist. Born in Southern Illinois in 1884, Devereaux tries his hand at several different jobs including that of a Pullman Porter before saving enough money to buy a relinquishment on the Little Crow Reservation.[47] The opportunity for ownership and cultivation of the land plus the desire to settle down to a domestic life is a marked transition from the nomadic lifestyles of 'Beckwourth' and 'Love'. The status of landowner gives Devereaux a greater stake in the development of the nation and has immense significance for African Americans who were historically denied ownership of property and land. Devereaux's acquisition of three claims allows Micheaux to appropriate the cultural resource of Turner's heroic pioneer figure as he constructs Devereaux as a self-made man. This construction gives Devereaux an independence that Love as an employee ultimately lacked.

Crucially however, Micheaux problematises Devereaux's status as 'homesteader' and reveals that although Devereaux does all that is required by the

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[46] Micheaux wrote seven novels before turning to film production. *The Conquest* is the first in a trilogy which focuses on his homesteading experience. This was followed in 1917 by *The Homesteader* which is a re-write and expansion of the narrative that appears in *The Conquest. The Wind from Nowhere* (now out of print) concludes the trilogy.

[47] Its proper name is the Rosebud Sioux Reservation. Micheaux settled on a claim there in 1905 and left in 1918. Dan Moos writes that Micheaux's attempt at homesteading occurred late in the history of African American Western settlement, the most significant period being the 1880s - 1890s. ("Reclaiming" 362).

myth, as an African American he will remain outside the national narrative. One of the ways in which Micheaux demonstrates his character's outsider status is through the idea of legacy. When asked by Ernest Nicholson, a man who plays a key role in the development of Little Crow, if he will sell his claim and double his money, Devereaux firmly asserts, "I am here to grow up with this country and prosper with the growth if possible" (74). However, with the death of his son and his wife's return to her father, Devereaux is denied the opportunity to create his own black Western legacy.[48] Furthermore, the textual references to his loneliness and racial difference – Devereaux is referred to as a "d_ nigger", "a coon", and "Colored Man" by the white community – underline a sub-text of exclusion from the white national myth (62, 76, 87).

In the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth century, the discourses of settlement and progress fully champion the notion of the West as available land to be settled. Most of the indigenous peoples have been removed from the landscape allowing the last of the undeveloped land to be sold; although Devereaux begrudgingly observes that the Indians "had taken practically all the good land just west of Calias" (184). For much of the South Dakota plains, there is now only "dead Indian land" which "could be purchased at half the price" (137). With the removal of the Native Americans, the concept of the Frontier as "the meeting point between savagery and civilisation" (Turner, "Significance" 7) is re-written as a site of contest between towns over resources, principally the location of the new railroad which determines the survival and prosperity of nascent towns. The erasure of indigenous peoples is logically necessary for a narrative that endorses Turner's natural evolution of the West and its commodification. Consequently, Little Crow Reservation is seen purely in terms of the potential economic value of the land. Devereaux explains that Little Crow "consisted of about two million acres of land, four-fifths of which were unopened" and of which "to the South lay nine million acres of worthless sand hills" (94). In his role as a "booster",

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[48] Micheaux clearly reconsidered this position in *The Homesteader* – the sequel to and re-write of his first novel. The protagonist Jean Baptiste finds success and happiness both in love and as a homesteader.

Devereaux who "liked to talk" becomes a mouthpiece for the promotion of free land and

Western settlement (139). Henry Nash Smith was to note that the yeoman farmer

"deserves careful attention because it is one of the most tangible things we mean when

we speak of the development of democratic ideas in the United States" (135).

Nonetheless, in the purchase of land the narrative reveals a tension within the Frontier

myth between the self and the collective good. Devereaux acquires a claim for his

grandmother through the misfortune of a teacher who "had stood in line the long night

through . . . and then lost her place". He admits, "I was very sorry for her, but it was a

case of 'first come, first served'" (205-206). Micheaux illustrates that the symbiotic

relationship between self and nation promoted by the myth requires a competitive

individualism that sits at odds with the notion of building democratic communities and a

nation.

Devereaux's embrace of the white mythic discourse and in particular its focus

on the resourceful hard-working self-made man would seem to complement his support

for the racial ideology and practices of Booker T. Washington, who argued that African

Americans needed to prove that they could contribute productively to white society first

before they acquired equality. However, by appropriating the symbolic pioneer figure of

American democracy and grafting a black body upon a white typology, Micheaux

problematises reconciling Devereaux's racial status with that of Turner's American

pioneer figure, who "In the crucible of the Frontier" is "Americanised, liberated, and

fused into a mixed race" ("Significance" 23). Consequently, the struggle for acceptance

is expressed through double-consciousness evident in Devereaux's story of falling in

love with a white girl:

> Now during the time I had lived among the white people I had kept my place as
> regards custom, and had been treated with every courtesy and respect . . .
> when the reality of the situation dawned upon me, I became in a way frightened,
> for I did not by any means want to fall in love with a white girl. I had always
> disproved of intermarriage, considering it as being above all things, the very
> thing that a colored man could not even think of. (155)

In Devereaux's acceptance of racial segregation ("I had kept my place"), the narrative

challenges the notion of the West as place of democratic ideas and liberated identities.

Devereaux may claim that Little Crow "was one place where being a colored man was

an honorary distinction" and that "free life on the plains" had changed him (87, 92), but

Micheaux shows that freedom of movement for a black man out West does not extend

to crossing racial and social boundaries. The narrative presents a subtext which in

problematising Devereaux's marginal position in the myth and his internalisation of

hegemonic white racial values reveals a critical distance between the narrator and his

protagonist and enables Micheaux to embed subversive textual meanings in *The*

Conquest that complicate the reading of Devereaux.

The Western Literary Form

"[B]e good and try to make a man of yourself" (Micheaux 23)

Micheaux dedicates *The Conquest* to Booker T. Washington. In the novel's depiction of

the relationship between Deveraux and his father-in-law, the Reverend McCraline, the

narrative signals the contemporaneous contest for black leadership between

Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Devereaux explains that:

> There are two distinct factions of the negro race, who might be classed as
> Progressives and Reactionaries, somewhat like the politicians. The
> Progressives, led by Booker T. Washington and with industrial education as the
> main idea, are good, active citizens; while the other class distinctly reactionary
> in every way, contend for more equal rights, privileges, and protection, . . . and
> are too much given to the condemnation of the entire white race for the
> depredations of a few. (251)

The narrative's subjective description of contemporaneous black racial politics

underscores Devereaux's accommodation to white social, cultural and racial values,

and reiterates his intention, as cited earlier, to keep his place. He may see himself as

politically "radical" in aligning his racial project with that of the Progressives (252), but the narrative, as I argue later, illustrates the incompatibility of an acceptable blackness with a radical subjectivity.

In the novel, Washington's narrative of racial uplift for independent, skilled and hard-working African Americans who contribute to the economic life of the United States intersects with Turner's heroic "self-made man". Within the unique environment of access to 'free land', this self-made man is provided with "a formula for social regeneration – the freedom of the individual to seek his own" ("Problem" 191). Dan Moos describes Micheaux as a "Black Turnerian" who "chose to subordinate almost all issues of race to those of a progressive and civilising frontier" ("Reclaiming" 360). Significantly however, in appropriating black and white discourses of progress the double-voiced quality of the narrative generates an unresolvable tension within the narrative of Western identity that ironically foregrounds race. At the same time, by inscribing Washington's ideals of racial progress onto the mythic Western narrative of masculinity, Micheaux transforms them through the amalgamation with the pioneer farmer in a context not imagined by Washington.[49] Consequently, the outcome is a narrative whose black intertextuality with Washington's political beliefs brings a difference to the Western literary form. Crucially, Devereaux's embrace of the white mythic narrative and his desire to present an acceptable black Western identity is complicated by the novel's sub-text which shows a complex revisioning of the heroic figure.

The idea of social regeneration, important to both Turner's and Washington's narratives in terms of national progress and racial progress respectively, becomes bound to what Johnson would describe as a "narrative of man-making" in Micheaux's text ("Try to" 4). Unlike 'Beckwourth' and 'Love' whose masculinities are situated within the context of exploration and battle, Deveraux's masculinity is constructed via his relationship to settling and domesticating the land. With this purpose in mind,

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[49] Moos writes that Washington had very little to say on the American West as a potential place for the implementation of his accommodationist racial policy ("Reclaiming" 367).

Micheaux's racial project appropriates the agrarian landscape of Little Crow Reservation and its climate to define Deveraux's Western masculinity. The landscape tests Devereaux's grit and ability to survive as strength and determination are markers of manhood within the form. The narrative emphasises the physical harshness of the labour, describing how "it had taken a fourteen-hundred-mile to follow the plow in breaking the one hundred and twenty acres, I was about 'all in' physically when it was done" (92). The environment takes its toll physically upon the body as Devereaux observes that "While working in the rain, the perspiration and the rainwater had caused my body to become so badly galled that I found considerably difficulty in getting around" (92). The daily assaults that Western men's bodies take because of the environment they are in and their ability to recover from "being bent out of shape" is, as Lee Clark Mitchell explains, a means of confirming their manhood (*Westerns* 183). But Devereaux as a black man has to do more than prove his manhood, he also has to disprove racial prejudice. A prejudice that enslaved his grandfather "who was sold off into Texas during the slavery period" (10).

The history of slavery is just beneath the surface of this narrative with its reference also to Devereaux's grandmother "who raised a family in the days of slavery" (205) and in Devereaux's criticism of "the near-slave conditions" of working as a Pullman Porter (51). As a result, Micheaux's description of extreme physical labour experienced by Devereaux subsumes an invisible narrative of an African American experience of slavery within a conventional Western narrative of masculinity. Essentially, the narrative converts the idea of fieldwork as an expression of slavery into fieldwork as an expression of freedom. This Signifyin(g) functions to bring a black difference to the notion of Western male labour and affirms not only Devereaux's Western masculinity but his black masculinity and black heritage. The narrative shows that Devereaux's ability to push himself is underpinned by a need to disprove the racial expectations of the white community who think that "the solitary negro from the plush cushions of the P_n would soon see that growing up with the new country was not to

his liking, and would be glad to sell at any old figure and 'beat' it back to more ease and comfort" (98).

In addition to physical hardiness, ownership of property is an indicator of white hegemonic manhood. Denied ownership of land, property, even their own bodies for much of their history in the United States, land ownership within the novel works structurally to inform a narrative of vertical ascent. Gates identifies this narrative as a tropological feature of black texts (Introduction xxv). Significantly, a consequence of Signifyin(g) on the black trope is that it subtly modifies the form's convention of the self-made man by locating the latter within a black discourse and expresses the blackness of Devereaux's Western masculinity. From a heritage of slavery and a father who "could neither read nor write" and who "had not succeeded in a large way, and had nothing to give me as a start" (244), Devereaux's ownership of three hundred and twenty acres meant that his "dreams were at last realised" (100). Micheaux's literary formulation is a higher stage of development in the mythic Frontiersman than either Beckwourth or Love were able to achieve with their character constructions. The building of the railroads along with the sale of land in South Dakota for homesteading provides the social and economic context for Devereaux's progress and independence. Micheaux uses Devereaux as an advocate for both Western settlement and Washington's racial politics. A critical consequence of this double-voiced discourse is a pervasive tension in the representation of Deveraux's Western masculinity.

In observing the Western landscape from a rail car, Devereaux admits that depending on what he is reading at the time he responds to the scenery "with a feeling of romance or adventure" (43). As an avid reader, he recognises the geographical place of Medicine Bow as the location "where Owen Wister lays the beginning scenes of the 'Virginian'" (43). The black appropriation of Medicine Bow subverts the whiteness of the genre and functions to insert *The Conquest* into the literary history of Western writing. Devereaux' presence appears to challenge the exclusivity of Wister's white West. However, Devereaux views the iconic location from the window of a rail car. The

narrative signals that Devereaux resides within a spatial and racial margin. Coming as it does early in the novel, this brief scene provides a caveat to Devereaux's aspirations to belong to the historical fable of nation and man-making that is the Western literary form.

Racial Identity and the Racial Project

"I was a stranger in a strange land" (Micheaux 77)

Micheaux's racial project presents a complex revisioning of myth and form that potentially suggests a move towards a more radical way of being for the construction of his protagonist. However, a subversive textual undercurrent informed by critique and irony exists which consequently creates a rhetorical tension between the narrator and the character-figure. This means that Devereaux's racial project cannot be taken at face-value. His attempts to make his racial identity acceptable to the white community and to be a role model for the black community in order to emphasise his participation in the narrative of nation-building and his place within the creation story of the United States are countered by subversive textual moments.

Devereaux's status as role model is accentuated by presenting him as a lone black man: "I was a stranger in a strange land, inhabited wholly by people not my own race" (77). This remark is rather disingenuous as it suggests a complete absence of African Americans out West which, according to Dan Moos, "was no such rarity" ("Reclaiming" 363). However, the status of being the only African American confers on Devereaux a unique position and one which invests him with what bell hooks calls an "authority of experience" ("Postmodern" 29). In the construction of self, hooks proposes that this authority of knowledge is gained through black experiences of exile and struggle (29). Devereaux's journey from Illinois to South Dakota signifies on a long history of black migration. The knowledge and status that Devereaux acquires is bound

up with the construction of a self that is, to borrow from hooks, "oppositional" to contemporaneous racial labelling but less "liberatory" for the self (29). Devereaux considers himself to be unlike those "American Negroes . . . who are narrow in their sympathies and short-sighted in their views" (142). Instead, he aligns himself with those African Americans whom he describes as "quick to think, practical, conservative as well as progressive" (142). The narrative supports this view of Devereaux with its many references to his literacy illustrated at the start of the novel with Devereaux's citation of John James Ingalls' 1881 poem, "Opportunity". Ingalls' poem conveys the idea that man only has one chance in this world to make his way. This idea is the motivating theme underlying Devereaux's racial project, and he admits that "it was that little poem that led me to this land" (9). Devereaux's literacy is also demonstrated through the many letters he writes and his reading habits: "I fairly devoured special articles on subjects of timely interest. I enjoyed reading anything that would give me a more complete knowledge of what made up this great country in which we live" (142). This construction of Devereaux importantly counters the popular notions of the time which, according to Johnson, presented African American men as primitive and "the antithesis of white men and civilisation itself" (*Black* 79).

While the narrative clearly resists the contemporaneous racialisation of black men, it is not able to go beyond a narrow script of black role model for Devereaux. Thus, Devereaux would not "deny" his race by inter-racial marriage (162), but his lack of empathy for poor black folk fosters divisions and problematically reinforces stereotypes of poor blacks. His prejudices also alienate him from the diversity of black experiences and more than likely contribute to his loneliness. He observes how "the great part of colored people" in M_pls were "the emotional kind" (18) and were "in the most part wretchedly poor, ignorant and envious" (15). The responsibility of being a black role model results in an individual who is fearful of crossing the color-line and who harbours an intra-racial prejudice towards fellow African Americans of mixed raced ancestry. Consequently, he is unable to act according to his deepest desires and marry

the white Scottish girl whom he loves because he fears ostracism from the white community. He refuses to speak to Frank Woodring, "a nice-looking colored man" (157), on the basis that Woodring is of mixed parentage but he sees no contradiction in developing "a flirtatious correspondence with a St. Louis octoroon" and nearly "succumbed to her encouragement toward a marriage proposal" (114).

Significantly, this ironic positioning indicates Micheaux's critical distance from his character and allows Micheaux to attempt to make Devereaux an authentic figure. The narrative also implicitly reveals the pressure of operating as a black role model in a racialised society. Further instances within the text present Devereaux as a contradictory figure. For example, he assumes a French surname "for this sketch" (10), but firmly counters the idea that it indicates the presence of any racial mixing in his ancestry. He claims that he is a good judge of character, but he woefully misjudges Reverend McCraline and McCraline's daughter Orlean. The unreliability and contradictions of Devereaux's world view challenge his conviction that he is a role model for other African Americans. At the same time, his embrace of the white national myth and its construction of masculinity seeks to remove racial difference as an obstacle to such a racial project. Nonetheless, moments of black cultural expression are encoded in the text. These are not extensive, but they locate the text outside the white Western tradition of the genre and emphasise Devereaux's marginal position. They also function to resist Devereaux's attempts to separate himself from the black folk. For a man who prides himself on his literacy, it is significant that the text expresses his blackness through the oral tradition. Deveraux notes how he becomes "personally acquainted with the blues" on learning that his family think he is ignorant and unsophisticated (25). This black trope of the blues is repeated later in the narrative when after experiencing trouble with his mules Devereaux exclaims, "Well I sat down and gave up to a fit of the blues" (81). Further evidence of the text's employment of the Black tradition can also be found in Deveraux's storytelling of Jack and Jenny the mules. Popular African American folklore creatures, the stories of Jack and Jenny

highlight Devereaux's inexperience in horse trading in a comic fashion.[50] The tales

humanise the animals describing them as "crafty" with their tricks and unwilling to do "a

decent mule's work" (84). Testament to Devereaux's storytelling ability is the result that

Jenny becomes immortalised in the community as the "faint-hearted mule" (92). The

rhetorical strategy of storytelling operates to bond Devereaux with the community,

while Micheaux uses it to reveal Devereaux's naivety as a farmer.

The narrative's harnessing of black folklore, minimal as it is, allows the black

oral tradition to enter the novel. While these moments of Signifyin(g) do not enable the

narrative to move beyond a construction of an acceptable blackness for Devereaux,

they do point to a subtly revisioning of both the form and its heroic figure. However, any

textual opportunity to create a radical identity for Devereaux is thwarted by

Devereaux's embrace of the ethics of Washington's assimilationist practices and the

ethics of the hardworking pioneer in the Frontier Myth. Both narratives require the

individual to show their worth by contributing to the collective good of the people and

the nation. Nevertheless, the compatibility of the narratives is compromised by the

racial project of the Frontier Myth. The result is that while Devereaux does everything

required by the myth, he remains excluded from the nation's myth of belonging.

Conclusion

"I had proved myself a brave man" (Love 99)

Despite covering a wide historical span from 1856 to 1913 (in terms of publication

dates), the three texts reveal that the construction of independent, autonomous,

intelligent, strong, and free black male Western identities was a difficult literary

performance. Writing from "a profound edge" – a racial, cultural, historical marginal

space which as hooks reminds us "is not a 'safe' place" ("Choosing" 149) – required a

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[50] This story pre-empts Hurston's mule story in her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

resourcefulness and an acute awareness of the environment in which one was authoring these texts. In fact, Beckwourth, Love and Micheaux can be described as opportunists (and not in the derogatory sense of the word) in that they recognised that a key advantage that the historical fables of the West offered them was the scope to create new black masculinities that renounced racial stereotypes at a time when the available scripts for black male identities were limited and limiting.

Fundamental to the process of racial formation is the idea of racial uplift whereby all three characters experience some form of social regeneration and are transformed by their experiences on the Frontier into Western heroic figures. Located on different cultural frontiers, the three texts conform to the genre's expectations of Western masculinity. In representing black Frontiersmen, the texts produce new black Western identities that are a move towards the kinds of alternative (radical) black Western identities that the contemporary texts produce. Beckwourth's text comes the closest to constructing a radical black identity in the multiple identities that 'Beckwourth' performs. Nevertheless, even Beckwourth's text is constrained by a dominant white cultural need to erase blackness and so 'Beckwourth's' subversive identity can only be expressed via the marginal space that is the subordinate narrative. Similarly, Love is also unable to explicitly reconcile the racial identity of his character with the iconic figure of the cowboy as the tale progresses. While Love's insertion of a black slave narrative openly brings a new perspective to the form and contests the whiteness of the form, he is unable to resist the ethnocentric and masculinist narrative of the genre. Once 'Love' is out West, the subversive elements that mark black difference are found within the margins of the narrative. Of the three narratives, the racial project of *The Conquest* is the most conservative in its representation of an acceptable black Western masculinity and less liberating for the character. However, in presenting double-voiced narratives that disrupt the whiteness of both the Frontier Myth and the racial frontiers of the literary form, these three pioneering Western texts importantly challenge readers' expectations, assumptions and prejudices.

Over a century after Beckwourth's text, African American writers continue to critically engage with what Limerick describes as the "creation myth" of the American nation (*Legacy* 323). While the contemporary texts emerge out of different racial and social contexts, the construction of radical black Western identities for the contemporary authors in this study is no less fraught with difficulty than it was for their predecessors. Chapter three explores Robert Greer's Western novel, *The Devil's Hatband.* Of the four contemporary novels, Greer's is positioned closest to the conventions and structure of the traditional Western literary form.

Chapter Three: "You've got yourself one hell of a colored man's view here" (121), Robert Greer's *The Devil's Hatband*

Introduction

"[T]he devil's hatband . . . a signature of the West" (Greer 56)

The Devil's Hatband, published in 1996, is Robert Greer's first novel in a series of eight which features African American CJ Floyd as bail bondsman and part-time bounty hunter. Apart from *First of State* (2010), the prequel to the CJ Floyd Mystery series, the novels' narratives are contemporaneous to the period in which they are written. In *The Devil's Hatband*, CJ is approached by two black men – Lucius Womack and Peter Spence – who work for Carson Technologies. They want CJ to find Brenda Mathison, who is the missing daughter of black federal Judge, Lewis Mathison. Brenda is the leader of an environmental group known as the Grand River Tribe and has an important document that Womack and Spence want back. Her murder in the first chapter takes CJ's investigation into a world of eco-terrorism. With the help of two homeless men Morgan Williams and Dittier Atkins and loner Billy DeLong, CJ solves the murder mystery.

   While the structural conventions of the traditional detective genre inform the narrative, Greer's constructions of CJ and Western landscapes explicitly engage with the Frontier Myth and the Western literary form. Greer's development of CJ forms a signifyin(g) thread to Love's literary protagonist. The novel also Signifies on textual elements in *The Virginian* and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. Therefore, as a double-voiced narrative *The Devil's Hatband* challenges the dominant white discursive space of the Western genre. In calling attention to the hegemonic racial frontier of the genre, the racial project of the text is to insert a black presence into white Western narratives and spaces. However, Greer's re-imagining of the black cowboy within a modern

Western context reveals critical tensions in the formation of a potential radical black male Western subjectivity.

The novel's title indicates a textual concern with the spatial relationship between African Americans and the landscape and what this means for expressions of black identity. The devil's hatband – a colloquial name for barbed wire – symbolises not only the settlement of the West but it also symbolises exclusion from a white racial project. "Space is never neutral", Theda Wrede reminds us, "but always discursively constructed, ideologically marked, and shaped by dominant power structures and forms of knowledge" (11). Greer's use of Western spaces addresses and challenges the discursive spatial marginalisation of African Americans. Thus, the narrative reveals how informal black spaces, which are unmapped spaces and therefore below the radar of official discourse, can operate as sites of black consciousness and resistance to white hegemony. At the same time, in placing characters like CJ and Billy within a rural West, Greer locates African Americans within a tradition where historically they "have had no entitlement to speak for or about nature" (Ruffin 1). Greer's employment of a literary cartography involves both the description of place and, to borrow from Robert T. Tally, an exploration of "the experience of place and of displacement". Literary cartography can therefore be a potentially subversive literary technique for marginal groups of writers (*Literary* x). Significantly, it is in the construction of the two black homeless characters, Dittier and Morgan, that the narrative comes closest to realising a radical black Western subjectivity. While the men's peripatetic way of life expresses an extreme experience of place and displacement, a sub-narrative uses their exclusion from a national narrative of belonging to resist a hegemonic relationship between urban space and hierarchies of power. A critical consequence of this rhetorical strategy is the creation of potential "spaces of radical openness" in which the opportunity for subversive identities lies.

With its contemporary revision of the Frontier cowboy figure, its re-imagining of Western spaces, and its focus on the theme of exclusion and displacement in its

construction of characters the narrative suggests that we are to read *The Devil's Hatband* as both a Post-Frontier and a Post-Western novel. The extent to which Greer's novel converges with these revisionist positions and, by implication, the extent to which this textual positioning facilitates or hinders the construction of radical and transgressive Western figures will be explored in the following sections.

The Frontier Myth

"[C]attlemen had tamed the land" (Greer 76)

Greer's novel engages with the founding myth of American national identity to give a voice to those African Americans excluded from its content and a right to the contemporary myths of America. The overt narrative of *The Devil's Hatband* reproduces the myth of settlement as benign and progressive. A century after Turner announced the closure of the Frontier, Greer's novel presents a historical moment of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century known as the Exoduster Movement.[51] Willis Sundee, CJ's life-long friend and mentor, "had been born in one of four experimental colony settlements established in Colorado between 1872 and 1911" (30). The insertion of black history into Western spaces disrupts the dominant notion of the West as a white monolithic space. This disruption is further achieved through reference to "one of the West's most notorious black outlaws, Isom Dart", in the same passage that Greer references white historical figures Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (111).[52] In placing Isom Dart in the company of legendary white figures, the narrative opens up this discursive mythic space to include and mythologise Dart. The merging of black and white Western history (a double-voiced Western history)

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[51] For further discussion on black migration to and settlement in the West from 1875-1910, see Quintard Taylor's *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, W.W. Norton, 1998.
[52] Isom Dart was born into slavery in 1849. After the Civil War, he became a cattle rustler and settled in Browning Park, Colorado. During his life, he was also a prospector and a bronco rider. He was killed in 1900 (Katz 158-160).

brings a difference to both place and myth; a difference which was historically and culturally muted because it posed a challenge to a mythic white Western monoculture.

In chapter two, I showed that the mythic discourse of the Frontier lends itself well to the description of racial project. In its representation of the white Anglo-Saxon male as agent of civilisation, the Frontier Myth functioned to organise and allocate Western spaces and resources along racial lines, as well as determining who could be included in the foundational mythic narrative of the American nation. As this description reveals in its reference to the allocation of Western spaces, the narrative of the Frontier was also a symbolic spatial narrative. The interest in the West as a spatial narrative is also illustrated through the title of Greer's novel. As CJ makes his way from Denver to Steamboat Springs, the omniscient narrator observes that "barbed wire facilitated the settling of the West" (56). In the historical fable of the West, the devil's hatband symbolises a triumphalist history of settlement. The narrative buys into this mythic discourse both in terms of its nostalgia for the Old West and its overt critique of Brenda and her partner Thomas Deere for whom "it didn't matter . . . that cattlemen had tamed the land, fenced it, and turned Western dry lands lush and green" (76). In praising the cattlemen of the past, the novel signals its moral position. The nostalgia for the cattlemen is also a signifyin(g) thread to Love's concluding wistful remark that "the cowboy is almost a being of the past" (162). Greer's novel accomplishes an intertextual literary validation of Love's life on the cattle range.

However, a critical contradiction exists in the narrative's use of 'the devil's hatband'. Barbed wire functions as a "spatial practice". According to Tally, spatial practices "are employed and deployed both for repressive ends and as a means to aid political liberation" (*Spatiality* 114). Therefore, in the mythic narrative of the Frontier barbed wire is symbolic of white progress and liberty. As a Western "spatial practice", it marks ownership of land and resources and functions as a tool for the racial project of the Frontier Myth. But this overt expression of 'the devil's hatband' is complicated by a sub-text that inverts the trope to challenge a history of containment. Greer revises the

Western trope into a black trope which Signifies on and critiques white settlement, containment, violence, and ethnic and gender exclusion. The semantic and conceptual revision of the Western trope is illustrated in the use of barbed wire as a murder weapon to strangle Brenda at the end of the first chapter and in the narrative's erasure of Native American history and culture from the landscape. The devil's hatband becomes a double-voiced signifier and illustrates a critical contradiction in the mythic narrative of the Frontier. This contradiction between freedom and repression runs through the narrative. A contradiction which is revealed, for example, in the latent narrative of the history of Denver and the surrounding rural landscape of Colorado. Founded in 1858, the settlement of Denver emerged out of the gold rush Frontier. This historical narrative of opportunity and the promise of economic independence was paralleled by the repression and removal of the Native Americans from the landscape; for example, the Sand Creek Massacre in 1864 in Colorado Territory (Kiowa County, Colorado). In the twentieth century, Denver's history of containment was evident in a 1920s covenant that restricted African Americans to living in Five Points. The devil's hatband therefore becomes a significant metaphor for the tensions inherent within the Frontier Myth.

Nevertheless, the narrative suggests that the creation of a black Western subjectivity requires that the text buys into the mythic discourse of the Frontier. This latter point is illustrated in the text's conflation of Vietnam with the Frontier. In the twentieth century, the Frontier becomes a flexible concept that can be appropriated beyond its contemporaneous historical context of the 1890s. This is expressed in the text's representation of Vietnam as a new Frontier. In its external analepsis of CJ as a boat gunner on the Mekong River Delta in Vietnam, the novel engages with a contemporary cultural narrative of the 1970s where the search for "lost or damaged frontier ideals", according to Stephen McVeigh, "resulted in Vietnam" and precipitated "the adaption of such mythology to a new cultural terrain" (180). The displacement of the nineteenth century Western Frontier to a new Frontier of Vietnam discursively

constructs Vietnam as a space which is ideologically marked in that it maintains the original symbolic value of the Frontier. The spatial narrative of Vietnam shaped by hegemonic power relies upon an appropriation and reformulation of the ideological narrative of the Frontier as a meeting point between savagery and civilisation. Richard Slotkin explains how American troops would describe Vietnam as "Indian country" and 'search and destroy' missions as a game of "cowboys and Indians" (3). Historic, linguistic and spatial borders are crossed in this re-production of a new Frontier. Significantly, the transposition of the Frontier to a new context can be read as a response to the fact that the Old West no longer exists as a site to forge masculinity, while the New West is corrupted by containment, industrialised farming and land speculation. The novel engages with a cultural dialogue that constructs Vietnam, to borrow from Edward J. Soja, as a thirdspace that is both real and re-imagined as a new Frontier. While Greer's narrative does not challenge the symbolic displacement of the Frontier, the critical consequence of locating a black man within this white discursive space is a textual resistance to the mythic narrative of personal transformation that takes place on the Frontier. Hence, CJ's war experiences are described as leaving him "as fragile as Depression glass" (9).

Closer to home, Greer re-imagines Five Points as a black Frontier town where in "the back storage room 'the den'" of Rosie's garage, "you could gamble, play the numbers, buy liquor on Sundays (still against Colorado law)" (90). In this "predominantly black neighbourhood" (27), CJ is bail bondsman to the poorer black people of the community writing "nickel-and-dime paper on the street" (12). He is also a part-time bounty-hunter. Greer's technique of interweaving the past and the present creates Five Points as a space that embraces multiple meanings. It is both a violent, lawless place and a place of strong community bonds. Greer's narrative utilises a mythic discourse to convey contemporary social issues particularly in the presentation of black-on-black violence. Thus, the temporal-historical space of Five Points is overlaid with the contemporary context of the 1990s. During this period, Five Points is

beset with crime, violence and drugs. In fact, the suburb is described as 'No Man's Land'.[53] The novel picks up on the contemporary issue of black-on-black violence at the beginning of chapter four:

> All summer long and into the early fall Denver's two daily newspapers, the *Denver Post* and the *Rocky Mountain News*, had been busy trying to outscream each other . . . labelling Denver's recent gang wars a summer of violence . . . Denver's barrel of gang-banging rotten apples were busy smelling up the black and Hispanic sections of the city . . . The white neighbourhoods still wouldn't tolerate gangs. (45)

Greer utilises the idiomatic language of the hard-boiled genre to convey the hostile world that CJ inhabits of black gangs and fractured communities whose divisions are perpetuated by media hysteria. At the same time, the language maps out the racial boundaries of Denver. Intra-racial violence is contained within black neighbourhoods illustrating the spatial and racial divisions within contemporary American society. The suggestion that white space in Denver is protected space and black space is contained space is evident a few lines later in the narrative's description of the police, many of whom were born into the white neighbourhoods, and:

> it was said . . . loved to crack gang members' heads and strut their stuff, and they would just as soon snap the neck of some piss-and-vinegar black or Chicano hoodlum cruising the wrong turf as go to the Broncos game and chug down a six-pack beer. (45-46)

This example of police brutality towards non-whites shows the racial segregation of space in 1990s Denver and echoes the temporal moment of 1992 and the violent beating of black motorist Rodney King by LAPD police. The violence of the police in *The Devil's Hatband* makes them no different from the gangs and contributes to the lawlessness of Five Points. In describing the police as "would-be cowboys" and equating violence with sport (which has a long history in the conquest of the West, its

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[53] See www.denver.co; https://history.denverlibrary.org/five-points-whittier-neighborhood-history; www.blackpast.org

people and its wildlife), the narrative employs and critiques the mythic hunter-cowboy figure and the normalising of violence (45). Informed by both a spatial-temporal past and present, Five Points is constructed as a contemporary Frontier town. It is not only contested space, but it is also discursively constructed as conveying multiple if contradictory meanings. In this textual reconstruction of Five Points, the neighbourhood is both a real-and-imagined place in the merging of an imaginary Frontier space with 'real' contemporary social problems. This subversive representation of Five Points allows Greer to offer a critique of contemporary white American society and the dominant power structures and social conditions that allowed the Rodney King beating to take place and the subsequent acquittal of the four policemen.

"In truth only a landmark, an intersection formed by the confluence of 27th, Welton, and Washington streets and 26th Avenue", Five Points had been "the core of Denver's black community since early in the twentieth century" (27). Five Points' marginal position is within the hegemonic space of urban Denver and the wider rural landscape of Colorado and Wyoming. The narrative refines this spatial geography by distinguishing between different Western rural spaces. There is nature as cultivated: for example, the cattle ranges in Twenty Mile Park, and there is nature as wilderness as in the Wyoming foothills where Billy DeLong lives. As CJ drives to the house where Brenda was murdered, "a small white frame building sitting in the middle of twenty acres of irrigated land" (58), he observes "the hay and alfalfa meadows" and irrigated pastures and "couldn't help but appreciate the tenacity of people like Mavis's grandfather, who had wrestled so openly with the land, hoping to reap their tiny share of the infinite riches of the West" (56). Greer adopts the vocabulary of the Frontier Myth for his protagonist and reproduces the Turnerian narrative of man's will upon the landscape. As a consequence, an unresolvable textual tension emerges between disrupting the hegemonic whiteness of the Frontier Myth and employing its dominant tropes.

The novel shows that a landscape cultivated is also a landscape mapped and is evidenced by the many roads and highways – themselves markers of civilisation – that criss-cross the landscape. Furthermore, a landscape mapped is a landscape known. Readers witness CJ making numerous journeys along specific roads during his investigation. We learn that Wyoming State Highway 70 follows the historical routes of the Old West (71, 72). According to Alan Dumas, Greer's work has been praised as "a great guide to the state, taking readers from Five Points to the High Country" (qtd. in Barker and Pate 106). Literary cartography enables writers, Tally argues, to "figuratively map the real-and-imagined spaces of their world, both within the text and with reference to a space outside the text" (*Routledge* 3). For marginalised groups of writers, literary mapping can also represent a textual desire to reclaim the geography of the land. The narrative records how:

> Wyoming State Highway 70 originates in Baggs, a lonesome remnant of an old cow town with a population of 403. From there it gradually rises into the Sierra Madre mountains until, thirty miles east of Baggs, the road peaks at Battle Pass. The highway then descends into the Platte River Valley, ending at Encampment, an old copper mining town. . . .
>
> The first twenty miles of the route, from Baggs to the tiny hamlet of Savery, runs along the Little Snake River. . . . Soon after the idyllic ranches end, hundreds of Forest Service roads, limited access Jeep trails, and cowpaths split off Route 70 and into Medicine Bow National Forest. (71)

Greer's descriptions reveal a pocketed history of Western progress from the old cow town to the Forest Service roads – from an agrarian to a modernised West. This visible landscape merges with the idea of a palimpsest West where the presence of the Old West haunts the temporal present, and where the literary echoes of Wister's novel are heard in the reference to Medicine Bow. Later in the novel, the omniscient narrator observes that:

> In the old days, Baggs's isolation made it a sought-out destination for the likes of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. . . . Back then, Baggs was a rustic cow town with one way in and one way out. CJ drove in on one of two recently completed divided highways that had destroyed the Old West atmosphere and

left a quiet, forlorn little place severed by two overimproved government pork-
barrel roads. (111)

Greer overlays real-and-imagined cartographies: Baggs – the site of Western legends, and Medicine Bow where the tenderfoot narrator in Owen Wister's novel sees the Virginian for the first time, with contemporary and technological ones: Forest roads and Jeep trails. On the one hand, by demonstrating CJ's knowledge of the landscape, its roads and history, the narrative challenges the Frontier Myth's racial project to deny African Americans the cultural and social resources to map the landscape. Importantly, Turner's Frontier of civilisation versus savagery is rewritten as a contest over who has the authority to map and experience the landscape. The need to identify and experience the landscape is part of what Edward Said might describe as "the struggle over geography" and highlights the multiple different meanings attached to space and places. Said explains that the struggle "is not only about imperial armies and direct conquest, but also 'about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings'" (qtd. in Tally, *Spatiality* 92).

However, while this literary cartography demonstrates CJ's knowledge and claim to the landscape, it is problematically a knowledge that very much presents a white cartography. Beyond the references to the black colony that Willis Sundee was born into, there are no other textual references to the fact that other peoples inhabited and inhabit the rural landscape. The only reference to Native American people is in the use of the name Grand River Tribe which is taken from the name of a Colorado river and suggests Native American connections, but which ironically has none. And which also relies upon a stereotype that generalises Native American cultures as eco-friendly. The eco-terrorists' appropriation of an Anglicised Native American sounding name for their own purposes has a historical precedent of anthropological misappropriation and mistranslation of Native American culture. A further irony of this misnaming is that the actions of the group to wipe out the cattle industry echoes the wanton slaughter of the

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buffalo and the US army's massacres of Native American peoples, in particular the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864.

Easterners Womack and Spence give CJ a map of Colorado and inform him that "The yellow highlighted lines give you your routes. The red X's are where we think the Grand River people might be" (37). The official map of Colorado signals a historical discourse of mapping as a hegemonic project that both led to and was informed by the colonisation of America. Such maps suggest an authoritative knowledge of Western spaces. The fact that CJ "didn't need the yellow lines" and "knew how to find his way to the other side of the state" (38) illustrates a different kind of knowledge that is vernacular, intuitive and stems from experience of the landscape. Hence, CJ only "scanned the map again and knew that he would have to travel a few back-country roads to get to each of the places that Womack had marked" (38). CJ's cognitive or mental mapping of Colorado operates as a narrative strategy to subvert the official authority of the map indicating that maps may exclude more than they reveal. The instability of hegemonic mapping becomes apparent when he shows the map to Ernest Devine. Stopping overnight at a B&B Motel, CJ asks the owner, Devine, if he has heard of the V-Bar Ranch and the Grand River Tribe. Devine tells CJ that he should speak to Billy DeLong and draws him a map of how to get to Billy's place because "This map of yours ain't detailed enough to show you how to go" (114). Located in the wilderness:

> DeLong's cabin wasn't much of a home, just an old split-log cabin dug into a hillside of river rock and shale, supported on the front end by four gigantic lodge-pole pines. The road up to the cabin wound back on itself twice up a 9 percent car-killing grade. CJ kicked up a trail of mud and river rock, and the Jeep bottomed out twice before he made it to the little two-acre mesa that was Billy DeLong's domain. From the only patch of level ground for miles, CJ could see the entire Snake River Valley. (119)

In the tradition of the pioneers, Billy makes this space "with its tiers of decaying homestead cabins hanging off the mountainsides like box seats at the opera" his home (118). Greer takes the historical Wyoming landscape and the setting for Owen Wister's

The Virginian (242) to insert a black presence into a white discursive space. The literal "profound edge" that Billy's home is built on parallels the metaphorical profound edge of Western history, myth and culture where African Americans have found themselves placed. This location also symbolises Billy's racial, economic and social marginalisation and his omission from the 'official' mapping of the area. But this is not an oppressive and passively experienced marginal space. Instead, Greer utilises the spatial positioning of Billy's home to demarcate an informal black space that evades the control of dominant white practices. Perched in the foothills, Billy has a privileged view of the valley which allows him to operate above the radar of white society. From this vantage point, he can observe the movements of the Grand River Tribe. Billy's home becomes a space of resistance from where he and CJ plan the stake-out and capture of the Grand River Tribe.

The novel's engagement with historical and contemporary formulations of the Frontier potentially marks *The Devil's Hatband* as a Post-Frontier narrative. In its construction of an urban frontier of the dispossessed and Vietnam as the New Frontier, Stephen Tatum would argue that the narrative "detaches the notion of the Frontier . . . from a specific terrain" (463). Furthermore, the novel's concern with the mythologizing and normalising of violence in its representation of intra- and inter-racial violence and the violent activities of the Grand River Tribe seeks to explore "the problematic legacy of Western myths" (Rio & Hestetun, par. 3). The narrative may also be identified as Post-Frontier in its employment of a black protagonist and a black Western history which challenges the dominant white historical and spatial narrative of the Frontier. However, despite Greer's novel involving African American "subaltern voices and alternate histories", it does not fully resist the "masculinist, nationalist Frontier Myth as disseminated by Turner" (Tatum, "Postfrontier" 461). As I have shown, the narrative adheres to the mythic notion of taming the landscape and in Turnerian fashion erases the presence of indigenous peoples from the landscape. The novel's acceptance of this male mythic narrative of the West has implications for Greer's re-imagining of the black

heroic Frontiersman. The subversive potential of this figure is determined by how Greer utilises the Western literary form.

The Western Literary Form

"You're a bounty-hunter, Mr Floyd" (Greer 18)

The Devil's Hatband articulates a literary dialogic relationship between the Western and the detective genre. These two genres historically have "engaged in a vigorous dialogue of influence", according to Steve Glassman and Maurice O'Sullivan, "with each genre steadily altering and reforming the other" (229). The blurring of generic boundaries is evident in the creation of the male protagonist. Raymond Chandler in his critical essay "The Simple Art of Murder" presents a heroic figure who, according to Glassman and O'Sullivan, evokes Western masculinity as much as hard-boiled manhood (229):

> But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. . . . He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be . . . a man of honor, by instinct, by inevitability. . . . He must be the best man in his world. (qtd. in Glassman & O'Sullivan 229)

Greer's construction of a black heroic figure complicates Chandler's literary white hegemonic masculinity and reveals that for the black writer Western manhood is a complex issue. CJ's masculinity is informed by the roles of bail bondsman, bounty-hunter, accidental detective, and the double-voiced discourse of the novel. Greer employs the black vernacular, the language of the Frontier Myth, and a language that is "reminiscent of the hard-boiled world" for his protagonist (Barker and Pate 107). These multiple roles and discourses indicate CJ's textual presence as a traverser of generic and cultural frontiers.

In contrast to the hard-boiled genre's traditional use of the first-person, Greer uses free indirect discourse. This rhetorical strategy merges "third and first person, oral and written voices" which, Gates argues, "oscillate freely within one structure" (*Signifying* 26). Free indirect discourse has its roots in the Harlem Renaissance and in particular the work of Zora Neale Hurston.[54] While this rhetorical strategy locates the novel within a black literary tradition, importantly it also functions to express CJ's consciousness and a black subjectivity. At the same time, the narrative employs a figurative use of language or "blackness of tongue" in CJ's discourse along with the Standard American English of the omniscient narrator (Gates, Introduction xix). For example, CJ recognises that the Judge is using him "to be his house nigger" (23). He describes Womack and Spence as "two window-dressing company niggers in flashy suits" (22) and later as "cornbread heads" (130). Greer's use of the black vernacular explicitly locates CJ within a black cultural and linguistic heritage and is therefore an important means by which the novel challenges the racial frontiers of the literary form. Additionally, free indirect discourse brings a psychological dimension to the construction of black Western masculinity that advances the earlier Western masculinities of Beckwourth's, Love's, and Micheaux's texts. However, the critical consequences of evolving the heroic figure and contesting the frontiers of the genre does not automatically create a radical Western identity. Identifying CJ with black culture does not, as hooks would remind us, make him an oppositional figure. Rather the textual shift between black and white discourses can be read as symbolic of the irreconcilable tensions that result from adopting the white historical fable for constructions of a black Western male hero.

Structurally, the novel utilises "a fixed pattern of action" that is familiar to the detective genre and merges this with "the symbolic landscape of the Western formula" (Cawelti 192,193). In setting the final confrontation between CJ, Billy and the Grand

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[54] Gates writes that Hurston was the first to use free indirect discourse in African American narratives (*Signifying* 206).

River Tribe in the landscape of Wyoming, the text Signifies on a particular Western historical-spatial narrative of the late nineteenth century – the Johnson County Wars (1884-1892). This conflict was between small farmers and the wealthy Wyoming Stock Growers Association (WSGA) and was a rivalry over grass and water rights.[55] The WSGA, according to Slotkin, was comprised of wealthy outsiders to the county who carried out a "vigilante campaign" against the small farmers of the area and who used words such as exterminate to describe their intentions (174). Slotkin describes this campaign as an "invasion" which "was characterised by . . . deliberate planning" (174). Greer's narrative employs similar language to describe the activities of the Grand River Tribe. Brenda wants to "eradicate a ranching culture that for too many years had raped the land" and has a plan for "guerrilla warfare" (5, 76). While Thomas Deere's plan "of an ecological holy war" is supported by "People who wanted to eliminate not just ranches but the government entirely" (83). The re-appropriation of a historical discourse of violence emphasises the inherent notion of conflict that is central to both form and myth. Furthermore, the narrative Signifies on Wister's *The Virginian* in which the Johnson County Wars provides the backdrop to establishing the moral integrity of its eponymous hero. Historical and literary pasts and spaces bleed into the present revealing a palimpsest West. A critical consequence of this elision is the continuation of an Old West within a New West that enables the novel to establish CJ as guardian of the myth of Western settlement and an American way of life. Greer takes the genre's traditional conflict between farmers and ranchers over land and resources and modernises the contest as one between eco-terrorists and ranchers.

The novel's complicity with a white masculinised Western discourse is supported by a convention of the detective genre in which CJ's success in solving the murders reinstates a patriarchal hegemonic social order at the end of the novel. The narrative's reluctance to challenge the traditional male-centric perspective inherent to the genre is realised in the first chapter with the murder of Brenda. Her removal

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[55] See Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 169-175.

ensures a narrative space for a Western masculine discourse that is not disrupted by a female presence. This textual conservatism troubles the subversive potential of the narrative. Ultimately CJ's actions, while saving the lives of many people, ensure the continuation of a vast and profitable predominantly white cattle business. Thus, as an African American, CJ's role is problematic because he is co-opted into white elite business interests in the protection of the cattle industry. The text seeks to justify CJ's collusion by establishing the enemy as eco-terrorists who, according to rancher Boone Cantrell, were "trying to turn kids around here against the ranching way of life" (69).

However, there is a critical tension in the narrative's engagement with a Western masculinity predicated on violent action. The construction of CJ demonstrates the consequences of appropriating expressions of a hegemonic Western masculinity that are themselves limited and limiting. The historical fable of the West is expressed through CJ's role as part-time bounty-hunter. This role is a narrative response to the tradition established by Roosevelt's mythic narrative of the hunter-turned-cowboy. Roosevelt was emphatic that hunting fostered a "vigorous manliness" ("Wilderness" 137). Slotkin writes that Roosevelt's hero was "a man of violence and conquest" (35), whose evolution involved a shift in adversary from nature to man, who was "the most dangerous game" (41). *The Devil's Hatband* embraces the narrative of man-hunter in its assigning of bounty-hunter to CJ. He even buys "a blaze-orange hunter's jacket and a pair of leather stockman's gloves" on route to the Grand River Tribe's second reservation (108). Notably, CJ's credentials as a man of action are established before the present narrative begins. In his role as gunner's mate, CJ spent two years in Vietnam engaged in "riverine warfare" while "aboard a 125-foot navy swift boat patrolling the twisted creeks, dense jungle, and humid swamps of the Mekong Delta" (9). Like Mosley's text, *The Devil's Hatband* relies upon the cultural resource of a white military discourse of American nationalism to articulate a heroic identity for CJ who, accordingly, acknowledges that he signed up to prove that "someone just past being a gang-banging kid could be a man" (9).

I have argued that Vietnam provides a contemporary frontier space. On this new frontier, the narrative examines the Western's mythologizing of violence and in particular "regeneration through violence" (Slotkin 10). In the unfamiliar and hostile landscape of the Mekong Delta, CJ's experience of Vietnam involves a separation and regression from civilised life. While other soldiers regress to lunacy, CJ "knew that the day he started to act like them, he would be dangerously close to the edge" (139). In the mythic narrative of regeneration through violence, the success of the male hero depends upon their ability to "discipline or suppress the savage or 'dark' side of their own human nature" (Slotkin 14). CJ's ability to control his fear and emotions amidst an alien landscape confirms his masculinity and he acknowledges that the river tours were "missions to test his soul" (9). The placing of CJ within the New Frontier of Vietnam validates his role as Western hero and confirms his role within an American narrative of nation and conquest. However, it is telling that Greer chooses not to appropriate the black discourses of civil rights and nationalism that also dominated the 1960s for expressions of black masculinity. In fact, the absence of any textual references to this black struggle clearly signals that Greer's racial project for his protagonist is one of accommodation to white values.

It is therefore not surprising that when CJ is first introduced to the reader (in the novel's present), Greer describes him as "wearing one of his trademark jet black riverboat gambler's vests, rolling an unlit cheroot from side to side in his mouth" (13). He also wears a "straw Stetson" (26). This initial sartorial description of CJ is a traditional convention of the form and, importantly, links CJ to a Western masculinity of both the Old West of riverboats and cowboys and to a New Frontier of the Mekong Delta. However, Greer pairs his description of what CJ is wearing with a physical description of his character as middle-aged and over-weight with greying hair. He is also frequently on a diet but finds it hard to resist apple pie and Southern fried catfish. Geer's revisioning of the literary Western figure ensures his character's relevancy for a contemporary readership. Significantly however, the construction of CJ as an aging,

overweight Frontiersman creates a troubling latent textual indeterminacy surrounding the usefulness of the hegemonic Western figure for contemporary expressions of black masculinity. This textual concern is expressed when CJ "wonder[s] if at forty-five he was too old-fashioned for the brave new world" (283). As such, in its appropriation of the Western figure, *The Devil's Hatband* also subverts the figure. In so doing, the novel hints at a contemporaneous "crisis of masculinity (particularly that of Euro-American males)" which, according to David Peterson, emerged in the United States "as changes in gender roles, identity politics, and socio-economics began threatening male dominance" (82).

Notwithstanding this latent textual positioning of CJ, racial marginality finds its most extreme textual expressions in the characters of Morgan Williams, Dittier Atkins, and Billy DeLong. Dittier and Morgan are described as "two black ex-rodeo cowboys" and "a couple of alcoholic wrecks" (211), while Ernest Devine, owner of the B&B motel, tells CJ that "Old Billy is pretty much a legend around here . . . he was one hell of a bronc rider in his day . . . and you know what . . . he's a colored fellow too" (114). The narrative intentionally locates the three characters within the specific "popular performance" of rodeo that was used, according to Rebecca Scofield, by minority groups "to assert their definitions of Western, masculine, and American" (3). Moreover, Dittier's, Morgan's, and Billy's place within a narrative of masculinity "ultimately dominated" by "heterosexual white men" (Scofield 12) is reinforced by their achievements in the sport. For example, Billy is a legend and Morgan is a championship winner. This specific expression of black Western masculinity forms a signifyin(g) thread to 'Love' who is "champion roper of the western cattle country" (93). However, Dittier and Morgan are now homeless men who inhabit the uninhabitable spaces of the city, and Billy lives on the precipice of a mountainside. Spatially and historically, these characters are located on hooks' "profound edge". Their invisibility within mainstream society symbolises their status as outsiders to the white script of heroic masculinity. "Historically, rodeo parallels American culture", according to

Demetrius W. Pearson, "because it was participated in and influenced by minority athletes whose legacy has been marginalised and over-looked" (103). Yet, it is the very fact that Dittier and Morgan are invisible and below the radar of white authority that they are able to help solve the murder of Derrick James and save CJ's life. Therefore, and in spite of the unresolvable tension in appropriating white forms for expressions of black identities, this modern Western by Greer presents two minor and marginal characters as transforming the plot, while Billy physically assists CJ in staking out the Grand River Tribe. The extent to which this agency produces a radical black subjectivity for Dittier and Morgan is explored in the third section of this chapter.

The difficulty however facing the creation of alternative (radical) black Western identities is that the narrative is not able to resist the pull of the conservative Western form. What is the implication of this alignment with white values for the status of the narrative as a revisionist text? In some ways, *The Devil's Hatband* may be described as a Post-Western text. Greer presents a palimpsest West with the Old West visible under the contemporary narrative, be it in the references to legendary Western figures, or historical towns, or references to the garb of the cowboy. The inclusion of two homeless black characters presents an altogether different experience of Western spaces and demonstrates a creative evolution in the form. This contemporary update of the form illustrates the idea that the Western is itself a contact zone for different voices and identities. But the attraction of the myth and the conventions of the form are too compelling for the narrative. Greer presents a male-centric West that at times is nostalgic in its remembrance of the past. Brenda, the strong female opposing force, is removed in the first chapter while all the other female characters are contained within the domestic space of Five Points. Ultimately, the West remains an all-male discursive and social space. CJ is constructed within the boundaries of Western masculinity. The result is a character whose subjectivity is conservatively instead of radically constructed. Greer has seized upon a "minor chapter" in the Western history of

cowboys, cattle towns and long drives (Mitchell 5), but the novel does not challenge the hegemonic white values and conventions associated with literary form.

Racial Identity and the Racial Project

"[A] street nigger retread" (Greer 43)

While there are moments of resisting both the narrative of a monolithic white settlement of the West and the conventions of form, overall, *The Devil's Hatband* appears to celebrate the fabled story of Westward advancement and its accompanying constructions of a Western masculinity. The text's racial project to insert a black presence into white hegemonic spaces and legitimise an African American claim to America's national identity is complicated by a Signifyin(g) black narrative. This black narrative which is interwoven with white discourses presents a collective black experience of dispossession, alienation and loss and serves to cast doubt on the characters achieving a successful inclusion within the national narrative. The following section explores the extent to which Greer is able to construct alternative radical black Western identities within this context. My focus is on the spatial relationship between characters and the landscape including the text's construction of informal black spaces and the implications this relationship has for black identities with emphasis upon CJ, Dittier and Morgan, and Brenda. Therefore, two lines of questioning underpin this part of the chapter: where are the characters placed in relation to geographic and social spaces of the West, and how do they experience the landscape?

Within the urban landscape, the social spaces of Delaware Street reveal cultural and racial boundaries. The economic consequences of these spatial boundaries function oppressively for CJ. It therefore follows that part of CJ's racial project is the continuous struggle for economic resources within this space:

> The bail-bonding business on Delaware Street broke down along racial lines. Herman made sure that all the blue-collar, white criminal action came his way, by greasing the right palms and denigrating the skills of other bail bondsmen on the street. Cicero Vickers pulled down the bigger white-collar bonds and Ricky Perez scarfed up all the Chicano and Latino action. CJ was left writing bonds for black people, half of whom couldn't pay. (34)

This quotation illustrates that spatial relations are hierarchised on racial grounds locating CJ in a marginal economic space. "CJ would never admit it" but "he resented the way the bail-bonding game seemed rigged against bondsmen who were black" (19); however, it is precisely because of his marginal position that the Judge approaches him, even "His Honor couldn't afford to trust anybody white" (23). Bail Bondsman Row can be read as the site of a "material-and-metaphorical meeting ground(s) for struggles over all forms of oppression" (Soja 12). Herman Corruthers who "disliked most people, especially minorities, cops, and gays" symbolises this oppression through a constant stereotyping of African Americans (33). He tells CJ, "You people put too many fucking things on hold" (35). And CJ satirically notes that "Every time something in his building went wrong he came running CJ's way. CJ figured it was because Herman thought all black people had a special set of janitorial genes" (33). CJ's satire highlights the absurdity of Herman's racism. Similarly, CJ's ironic response "'Sorry bossman'" whilst "checking his temper and bypassing an urge to punch Herman out" (35) rhetorically plays on Herman's assumption of his own superiority and a historical subtext of white supremacy and black inferiority. Within the economic and racial marginal spaces of Bail Bondsman Row, CJ's indirect Signifyin(g) functions to affirm his own autonomy and subjectivity as a black man. The latent narrative of subversion that can be found within these textual moments positions CJ's blackness as potentially oppositional.

Like Easy Rawlins, the protagonist in Mosley's novel *Devil in a Blue Dress*, CJ is conscious that he is a black man in a white world and his behaviour is moderated by this double-consciousness. A psychological spatial positioning which, according to bell hooks, has meant that African Americans have "looked both from the outside in and

from the inside out" and which "provided an oppositional world-view – a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us" ("Choosing" 149). On pulling his gun out on an intruder in his home who turns out to be Sergeant Dellems, CJ acknowledges to himself that:

> no matter what had happened in the little reception area a moment earlier, the two men standing across from him would have told a story that fit official procedure to a tee. A story that would have played well because in the end it would always be a tale of an armed man surprising two white cops. (275)

It is difficult not to read this quotation as Signifyin(g) upon the temporal social context of the Rodney King beating and the subsequent acquittal of the four white policemen. In its repetition and revision of a story of police racism, the narrative offers an oppositional stance to contemporary race relations in the United States and highlights that even at the end of the twentieth century a black man's ability to read white people and the environment is part of his daily life and survival: "Like most black people, CJ had spent a good part of his life looking in the rearview mirror, making certain that his ass wasn't hanging out unprotected in a white man's world" (62).

In the tradition of the hard-boiled genre, CJ in his role of private investigator frequently finds himself questioned by the police, but this convention is complicated by CJ's racial identity. Greer's novel (like Mosley's) shows that CJ not only has to prove who Brenda's and Derrick's murderers are, but as a black man he also has to prove his innocence. It is in those scenes with Ralph Dellems – "a street tough, no-love-for-black-folk, white sergeant" (224) – and homicide Detective Fuller that CJ's precarious position as a black man in a white world is most clearly exposed. Detective Fuller, on questioning CJ about the murder of Derrick James calls CJ a "media-loving nappy-headed nigger" (279) and "lover boy" on questioning him about the murder of Razor Dog Hicks (280). Fuller's racial labelling emasculates CJ and reinforces a racial hierarchy that "always come[s] with rules of ascription" (Appiah, *Guardian*) and which requires "people of a certain race to behave in a certain way" ("Synthesis" 79). Earlier

in the narrative, Dellems tells CJ, "You know how your people give dope dealers around here a free ride" (235). Fuller's and Dellems' use of racial labelling relies on and perpetuates a racialism that "still sees black people as a 'problem people'" (West 5). This ideology sanctions white violence against black men and allows Fuller to openly admit to CJ that it was a "Good thing the piece you had downstairs earlier was a .38 and not a .25, or I would have shot your black ass for resisting arrest" (280). CJ's racial identity limits the extent to which he can openly resist the systemic racism that inhabits the discursive space of white law and order. Instead, by withholding information from the police and solving the murders ahead of Fuller and Dellems, CJ's actions subvert Fuller's threat that "if you're lying I'll find out. I'm just starting to scratch the surface here. Sooner or later I'll connect everything up" (279). The fact that CJ as a black man outmanoeuvres white cops and hunts down white men is a subversive revision of both genres, but it does not create him as a radical figure. Crucially, the violation of his home by Dellems and Fuller and their interrogation of CJ within his private space seriously undermines CJ's autonomy and his civil rights and illustrates the perilous position he occupies. Described by Womack as "a street nigger retread" (43), the narrative suggests that CJ's position in a white world is no more secure than that of the "street people" Dittier and Morgan (329).

CJ's racial project is the construction of self through the experience of being a riverboat gunner in Vietnam and the acquisition of Western collectibles. Engaging with the Turnerian Western ideal of the self-made man who has "the freedom of the individual to seek his own" ("Problem" 191), Greer overlays the script of idealism and freedom with a black narrative of self-expression and self-fashioning that is like a long blues song that weaves through the text. In drawing upon this aspect of the black vernacular, the text expresses a loss and unfulfillment in CJ that can never be healed and emphasises his vulnerability. This vulnerability is underscored by the fact that his male friends in the text are all his uncle's age. The exception is Henry Bales, who served with CJ in Vietnam. Greer establishes CJ as an orphan and a loner. Brought up

by his alcoholic uncle, CJ inherits the bail bonding business and the desire to own a "'57 Bel Air" (25). His collection of antiques is a way of creating a heritage for himself, but his "collectibles were the treasures of a loner, artefacts assembled by someone who had raised himself" (10). The acquisition of the Bel Air operates as a site of memory for CJ, in that it symbolises the relationship he had with his uncle: "It was CJ's link to the past. A tie to childhood memories and his uncle, an alcoholic bumbler, but the only real family CJ had ever known" (91). The Bel Air is part of CJ's individual movement towards an affirmation of his past and who he is. As a symbol, it navigates the conflict between personal progress and a painful past and provides an informal black space that offers refuge for CJ and helps him to reinvent himself.

Paul Gilroy argues that there is an "intense association of cars and freedom in black American culture" (14). This sense of freedom is reinforced when situated within the context of the vast Western landscape. In the American West, cars replaced horses and wagons and along with the railroads and other forms of public transport became a means by which people could move quickly across the West's immense landscape. In his role of a bounty-hunter, CJ frequently traverses the Western landscape and the boundaries between urban and rural Colorado. In line with the conventions of the genre, movement drives the plot, but the Bel Air suggests both a collective and personal black migration across the American West. The Bel Air also connects CJ to the black community of Five Points. Gilroy writes that the motor car works against "the possibility of collective experience" because it became "the instrument of segregation and privatisation" (22). However, by situating Rosie's Garage as "a long-established community gathering space" with its social space of "the back storage room 'the den'", the narrative resists the idea that the motor car was responsible for segregation (89, 90). On a par with Mae's Louisiana Kitchen as a focal point for the community, Rosie's Garage can be interpreted as an informal black space that operates below the radar of white law and resists hegemonic regulation. The creation of informal black spaces within the community, such as the Mae's Louisiana restaurant and Rosie's garage

provide important social spaces for CJ and the black folk of the neighbourhood. For CJ, these two places are substitutes for home and family. They are social and racial spaces that affirm who he is. This is because both Willis Sundee and Rosie Weaks knew CJ's Uncle Ike and have known CJ since he was a boy. But these spaces are also sites of black consciousness, of a collective identity and shared black experiences.

Informal black spaces utilise lieux de mémoire (sites of memory), according to Melvin Dixon, to counter "the abject exclusion of African Americans from the discourse of mainstream American history" (19). An example of this is Mae's Louisiana Kitchen with its "mahogany pulpit that had belonged to her [Mavis's] preacher grandfather but had long since been modified for more pedestrian use" (Greer 28). The presence of this pulpit as a site of memory symbolises a lived past and an African American heritage. A site of memory "limits forgetfulness" (Fabre & O'Meally 7) and is described by Melvin Dixon as the "reification of a cultural memory" (20). Therefore, collective cultural memory can resist the divisive practices of black gangs whose involvement with drugs and crime severs communities. This type of cultural reification is different to and challenges the reification endemic in twentieth century American society where everything is a commodity and where, according to Cornel West, historical amnesia is endemic. The informal black spaces that house lieux de mémoire function as "spaces of radical openness" (hooks 149). Located beyond the purview of dominant white culture, such black spaces are able to resist the negative impact of racial ascription and incorporate difference by preserving and affirming black experiences and black identities. Hence, when eating at Mae's, "The promise of a meal of deep-fried Louisiana-style catfish always made CJ feel sure-enough, down-home BLACK" (28; emphasis in original).

The Devil's Hatband shows that the hierarchical racialisation of spaces with its social and economic consequences, the racialist discourse of the police, and the bias of the legal system are attempts to contain, define and oppress CJ. These racial practices work to emphasise his alienation from the hegemonic discourse of national

identity and locate the character on a profound edge. This alienation from a national narrative is compounded by a personal dispossession of family and ancestry and CJ's loner status, and the psychological struggle and fragility that CJ experiences. CJ's individual narrative signals a collective historical black experience of marginalisation, dispossession and alienation. Therefore, as a literary technique the figure of CJ is used to critique the hegemonic racial project of American national belonging and supports the novel's racial project which is to insert a black presence into hegemonic white spaces. CJ is shown to resist racial oppression through double-consciousness, humour, irony, and connecting with his community in the informal black spaces of Five Points. However, this resistance does not necessarily construct CJ as a radical figure within the text. Problematically, Greer creates a character who exhibits characteristics and values of the white heroic Western male. Furthermore, and as I have shown earlier, in restoring order CJ protects the predominantly white interests of the cattle ranching industry. The critical tension that arises from constructing CJ as a complex figure of racial resistance and one who also endorses a white narrative prevents a reading of CJ as a radical black figure of subjectivity.

In contrast to the textual rendering of CJ and the novel's complicity with the myth of Western settlement, the narrative unambiguously represents Five Points as a space for multiple expressions of black identity. In fact, the representation of the black suburb Signifies upon a white appropriation of the black space in Jack Kerouac's 1955 novel *On the Road*. This famous white road narrative which reworks the Frontier Myth and performs its own literary cartography of the West functions as a 'hypotext' for Greer's portrayal of Five Points. Interestingly, Greer refers to *On the Road* in his 2010 prequel *First of State.* Petey Greene, who does some surveillance work for CJ before being murdered, had "sold two first-edition copies of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*" (182). Greer's novel re-appropriates Kerouac's misappropriation of Five Points and its black community. In *On the Road*, Sal Paradise visits Denver in the spring of 1949. One "lilac evening", he visits Five Points:

> I walked with every muscle aching among the lights of 27th and Welton in the Denver colored section, wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night. . . . I passed the dark porches of Mexican and Negro homes; soft voices were there, occasionally the dusky knee of some mysterious sensuous gal. . . . Little children sat like sages in ancient rocking chairs . . . I was only myself, Sal Paradise . . . wishing I could exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America. (180)

Kerouac mythologises the social, cultural and economic space of Five Points giving it a pastoral quality that belies the social and economic reality of African American urban life. His erasure of the neighbourhood's poverty and oppression dehistoricises Five Points and facilitates the stereotyped images of black people that white people wanted to see. In its unacknowledged affirmation of a racialist discourse of white superiority and black inferiority, the passage above illustrates how space, according to Wrede, is "shaped by dominant power structures and forms of knowledge" (11). In an act of "motivated Signifyin(g)" (Gates, Introduction xxvi), Greer's novel responds to and subverts Kerouac's reductive representations of the "predominantly black" neighbourhood (Greer 27). Five Points becomes a literary black space of radical openness, of struggle and resistance to the hegemonic Othering performed by Kerouac's text. In re-writing the marginal space of Five Points and its people, the racial project of the narrative projects a black knowledge of the urban space that was not available to Kerouac and undermines a historical and cultural white monolithic and hegemonic claim to and experience of Western landscapes. Unlike elsewhere in the novel where the racial project of the narrative is to insert a black presence into white spaces and forms, Greer's novel reclaims Five Points as a cultural black space from a white literary misappropriation. As a consequence of the novel's literary Signification, the historical, literary, and social marginal spatiality of Five Points is renamed, to borrow from hooks, "as a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives" ("Choosing" 149).

Significantly, it is in Greer's construction of homeless characters Dittier and Morgan that a textual concern with how alternative ways of living within urban marginal spaces can challenge white hegemonic discourses is expressed. In contrast to Kerouac's stereotyped portrayals of poor African Americans, Dittier and Morgan who now live as "street people" collecting aluminium cans for money are the unlikely heroes of Greer's novel (225). They provide CJ with vital information that helps him recognise who Brenda's murderer is and they save his life at the end of the novel. Although geographically, economically, socially and culturally marginal figures, their role in transforming the plot bestows an agency on them. Nevertheless, their homeless status represents an extreme form of dispossession and alienation from the national narrative of belonging. Vulnerable and doubly marginalised because of class and race, their spatial positioning is an acute example of living on a "profound edge".

With their old shopping trolley, portable house and bedding, Morgan and Dittier's presence within the institutionalised space of the business district of Denver challenges a dominant ideological urban narrative of competitive individualism and consumerism that excludes them from its discourse. From a space of economic and social deprivation, Morgan and Dittier's use of city spaces and their resourcefulness resists a dominant urban project that seeks to control and contain how city spaces are used and experienced. Like the official map of Colorado that imposes how the landscape is read, "[T]he discourses that ideologise the city" and that construct the city as a "panoptic power", according to Michel de Certeau, present a city that is "planned and readable" (95, 92). In his essay "Walking in the City", de Certeau sees the act of walking in the city as creating spatial discourses of resistance. His pedestrians, those "ordinary practitioners of the city" who are "outside the reach of panoptic power" use and experience city spaces in ways that go beyond the purpose for which those spaces were intended, and which simultaneously transform the meaning of those spaces (93, 95). For Morgan and Dittier whose very existence is peripatetic because they have no permanent home, their repurposing of "spaces that cannot be seen" (de Certeau 93),

such as the "alleys behind the high-rise office buildings" (Greer 241) expresses a

subversive racial project. Thus, the alleyways of downtown Denver become "prime

locations for Morgan Williams and Dittier Atkins to enjoy a good night's sleep and not

have to watch out for the police or for thugs to rob them of their last quarter" (241).

Existing therefore within an urban frontier of the disenfranchised and dispossessed,

Dittier and Morgan transgress the socio-spatial boundaries of the city. In the alleyways,

they can:

> prop up their cardboard houses in the back doorway of one of the businesses,
> then stuff the corners with newspapers and rags to block out the wind, pull out
> their bedrolls, and settle in for the night. There were easy pickings in the trash
> Dumpsters too. The business world didn't place the same value on aluminium
> cans as Morgan and Dittier. (241)

The narrative of Dittier and Morgan's fragile existence and their transformative

occupation of marginal spaces resists what Soja describes as the "representations of

power and ideology, of control and surveillance" (67). We can therefore read Morgan

and Dittier's movements around the city and their use of urban spaces as a challenge

to a hegemonic urban discourse that presents the city as a knowable and stable spatial

entity. The men's appropriation of an abandoned building in the sports complex where

they "thumbed-tacked" to the walls" black and white photographs "of Morgan riding two-

thousand-pound bulls" (236) illustrates their autonomy as they re-purpose the public

building into an informal black space that also celebrates their past. Their creative use

of different city spaces shows as Wrede argues that "space is never neutral" (11), but

always "contested and unstable", underlining their own precarious marginal positioning

(Rao 116). Greer's construction of Dittier and Morgan as black, middle-aged, and

homeless ex-rodeo riders expresses a different kind of black Western subjectivity that

is informed by exclusion and loss. Yet Greer's narrative also suggests the potential for

radical subjectivity. In being able to live below the radar of white authority and

regulations, they achieve a level of autonomy and freedom over their lives that is not

available to CJ. Worryingly however, this freedom comes at the extreme cost of

displacement and marginalisation. Therefore, while the novel presents Dittier and Morgan as subversive black figures who use marginal spaces as sites for self-determination, this expression of radical identity can only be realised within an urban frontier of the dispossessed and outside mainstream dominant discourses.

The prevailing theme of exclusion as evoked by the trope of the devil's hatband and the narrative's racial project to insert a black presence into white discourses and spaces is explored in the novel's engagement with an environmental Western narrative. In the final pages of the novel, Rosie makes a political statement: "Don't nobody I know around the Points or nowhere else that's black give a shit about cow-grazing rights or any of that other environmental shit. It's hard enough for most people around here to make ends meet" (333). Rosie's comment coming at the end of the novel indicates a historical, cultural and economic positioning of African Americans that has placed them outside an environmental discourse. "The history of American environmentalism", according to Dorceta Taylor, "is generally limited to the perspective of White middle-class male environmental activism" (qtd. in Ruffin 6). But Rosie's statement also functions as a meta-comment to indirectly express a critical tension towards CJ's role and place within, as Rosie remarks, that "environmental shit". The tension surrounding the relationship between nature and African Americans is signalled in the opening chapter which presents a landscape of aspen forest whose "bright green aspen leaves of summer started to turn Colorado high country autumn gold" (1). The narrative appropriates the white American pastoral tradition in its eulogy of the landscape and Brenda's emotional response to nature. Greer describes how "The aspen were mature and tall. Their slender white trunks reached skyward until their branches formed a translucent canopy that filtered the sunlight into geometric beams that danced through the forest like light from a strobe" (1). There are "crystal clear alpine lakes" in this "flat-topped wilderness boasting the oldest mountains in the state" (3). And Brenda "often walked in the woods alone. It was her private time, moments stolen for herself" (2). Brenda's initial relationship with this landscape is presented as

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one of solitude and reflection and suggests a sense of belonging. However, and in accordance with the American pastoral tradition, within this idyllic landscape there appears, to borrow from Leo Marx, "the interruption of the machine" in a "delicate blend of myth and reality". Instead of the whistle of a train,[56] it is strip-mining that destroys the tranquil beauty of the landscape and on Brenda's walks "During the long warm days of summer she had heard blasting that she knew was loosening the precious overburden of earth above the seam of coal" (3). In Signifyin(g) on the pastoral tradition, the narrative inserts a black female presence into a historically white male "symbolic landscape" (Marx) and presents a potentially transgressive narrative in its gendered and racial revision of the pastoral.

Nevertheless, a black sub-text of displacement prevents the narrative from realising this possibility and Brenda is murdered before the end of chapter one. In its racial, gendered and environmental othering of Brenda, the narrative erasure of her presence underscores the marginal status of black females within a white literary tradition where historically African Americans "have had no entitlement to speak for or about nature" (Ruffin 1). In fact, in the first paragraph Brenda's anomalous position within the landscape (and literary form) is signalled by a physical intolerance to the natural environment manifested in the allergies she suffers from which peak just as summer turns to autumn (Ray 2). Her removal from the storyline while necessary for a conventional detective plot is problematic for the narrative in terms of the relationship between gender, race, and the Western landscape. Critically, it means that the text presents a rural landscape that is only inhabited by men and which is only seen through a male perspective. Brenda may initially be presented as the leader of the Grand River Tribe, but once she is murdered, it is the two white men Albert Copley and Thomas Deere who control things. As a result, the opportunity to create a radical subjectivity for a black female character is lost. Instead, the novel reformulates the old

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[56] Leo Marx explores the idea of the machine in the garden through the written work of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry David Thoreau.

contest over land and resources as a contest between men with CJ acting as a kind of ecological agent in his role of protecting the cattle industry. This conventional and conservative line of narrative which returns power to the cattle industry is complicit with the genre's advocacy of the hunter-turned-cowboy as the agent of civilisation.

Problematically, *The Devil's Hatband* does not offer a serious challenge to an ideologically white landscape. The narrative presents a culturally white male rural landscape in terms of its historical references (barring the two examples of black Western history discussed in the first section), while a sub-text of power struggles for land between settlers and Native Americans haunts the narrative in the signifier Grand River Tribe. The novel does not interrogate the hegemonic white myth of Western settlement. As a consequence, the white spaces of the West are not transformed by CJ's presence. While CJ's car symbolises movement and agency, the roads that CJ follows are marked out spaces. They delineate, separate and connect spaces. In driving along these roads, CJ's experience of the landscape is as an observer – he travels across it, but he does not live in it. The sub-text of CJ's physical separation alludes to the black trope of the devil's hatband illustrating African American exclusion from myth and form. *The Devil's Hatband* demonstrates that engagement with the environment is fraught with racial and gender issues and reveals the contradictory relationship African Americans have with the Western landscape.

Conclusion

"[A] land of exaggeration" (Greer 2)

The Devil's Hatband reimagines the tradition of the white heroic frontiersman of the West by presenting Western experiences from black perspectives. There are moments of resistance to dominant white discourses, but these moments sit within a narrative that overall is complicit with the discourses of the Frontier myth and Western literary form. Problematically, the novel maintains an image of the rural Western landscape as monolithically white – socially, culturally, and historically. It is especially troubling that other minorities are erased in the textual construction of the rural West. As a piece of popular fiction, the novel does not worry the traditional narrative of Western settlement.

The novel's compliance with myth and form ultimately inhibits the text's ability to transcend a conventional Western narrative of identity and construct a radical black identity for CJ. Although CJ's attempts at self-fashioning suggest the possibility of a freedom to construct an alternative (radical) black identity, this potential is thwarted by the textual adherence to the conventions of the form. While CJ does not articulate a radical black identity, he does transgress racial and social borders by subverting white-black power relations. For example, he refuses to help the police and it is as a black bounty-hunter that he hunts down the two white men Deere and Copley. As a consequence, a critical tension runs through the narrative between the construction of a self-determined black subjectivity and a textual engagement with the form's dominant motifs and valorisation of white masculinity. Significantly, it is only within informal black spaces – spaces of racial consciousness – where the opportunities for a black independent subjectivity can be fully realised by Greer's protagonist.

The narrative displays a keen interest in the themes of exclusion and displacement – both from the mythic national narrative of American identity and a contemporary narrative of national belonging. This exclusion is expressed in the

profound marginalisation of black ex-rodeo riders Morgan and Dittier. Greer's

incorporation and development of two poor and homeless black characters significantly

expands the literary frontier of the form. The narrative reveals that Morgan and Dittier's

profound spatial positioning frees them from the constraints and regulations of

dominant society and facilitates the construction of radical black subjectivities. It is

troublesome however, that such identities can only be achieved it seems at the cost of

exclusion from the national narratives of identity. *The Devil's Hatband* suggests that the

construction of black Western identities that are oppositional and liberatory is

incompatible with the hegemonic white narratives of national identity.

The following chapter examines Walter Mosely's first novel, *Devil in a Blue*

Dress. Mosley also employs the conventions and tropes of the detective genre in his

Western narrative. Greer's work has frequently and mistakenly been compared to

Mosley's; a comparison that Greer denies: "I'm not like Mosley. We both write about

black characters, that's all" (Husted). I argue that Mosley's novel is a further move

forward in the creative transformation of the black Western. Nevertheless, the racial

project of the narrative also struggles to realise a radical black identity for its

protagonist.

Chapter Four: "I don't belong to anybody" (108), Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress*

Introduction

"I'm just asking you to find a girl" (Mosley 27)

Devil in a Blue Dress (*Devil*) is Walter Mosley's first novel in a series of fifteen which features African American private investigator and landlord, Easy Rawlins. Set in the black suburb of Watts in Los Angeles in 1948, the story is told from the first-person perspective of Easy. On losing his job at the Champion aircraft factory, Easy's home is at risk if he does not make the mortgage repayments. He therefore accepts the offer of a job from white Southern ex-lawyer DeWitt Albright to find a woman named Daphne Monet. With the help of life-long friend, Mouse, Easy saves Daphne from murder. Easy's investigation takes him into an urban world of corruption and betrayal – a world in which his identity as a free and autonomous black man is frequently threatened.

The series charts Easy's transformation from accidental private investigator in the first novel, receiving his official investigator's licence in the third, to co-owning a detective agency in the penultimate instalment. After the publication of *A Red Death* in 1991, Mosley told an interviewer that "Easy's not really a detective and he doesn't see himself as a detective" (Snowdon). This comment opens a creative space for an alternative reading of Easy. The novel does not immediately stand out as a Western narrative. However, I argue that while the genre of hard-boiled fiction heavily influences the structure of the narrative and its plot, thematically a less explicit narrative Signifies on the Frontier Myth and in the representations of Easy and Mouse constructs alternative black Frontiersmen. It is this latent narrative that essentially offers a discursive space for the construction of Easy and Mouse as potentially subversive Western characters. Consequently, *Devil* further expands the creative transformation of

the black Western literary form and simultaneously contests the white discursive and cultural spaces of the Western. The narrative encodes a blackness that is not just culturally expressed but which is also linked to a spatial positioning that hooks would describe as critically conscious and which challenges racialist thinking.

The perilous position that Easy occupies as a black man in a white world signals the narrative's racial project to contest a hegemonic urban narrative by exploring how the characters experience and respond to a spatial, economic, racial, and gendered positioning that locates them on hooks' "profound edge" ("Choosing" 149). The racially dangerous world that Easy inhabits is more palpable in *Devil* than in the narratives of Beckwourth, Love, Micheaux and Greer. Similar to Greer's text, the consequence of white hostility towards African Americans is expressed through a white racialisation of space which, according to John W. Frazier, "governs the use of space, often restricting access to places and resources to preserve the privilege of the controlling group" (16).

In blurring the boundaries between the two genres, Mosley engages in a literary "intertextual revision" of both the hard-boiled genre and the Western literary form, to "revise key tropes and rhetorical strategies received from . . . precursory texts" (Gates, "Blackness" 692). Hence, the narrative employs both the heroic figure of the Private Investigator and the yeoman Frontiersman in the construction of Easy. In Signifyin(g) on both black and white literary and mythic discourses, the double-voiced quality of the narrative reveals textual tensions that are manifested in the dichotomies between containment and movement and between black and white. The novel's concern with these thematic oppositions found within the Western literary form performs a signifyin(g) thread to the other texts within this study. Furthermore, I show how Mosley appropriates form to challenge prevailing racial attitudes with the consequence that there is a blurring between the critical categories of the Western literary form and the racial project.

Mosley presents "*an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings*" that expresses the possibility of an authentic self-determination in the way one lives (Omi & Winant 125; emphasis in original). By 'authentic' I do not mean some black essence. I am mindful of hooks' caveat that we must critique essentialism while "emphasising the significance of 'the authority of experience' which "has been specifically constituted in the experience of exile and struggle" ("Postmodern" 29). In using the term 'authentic' I wish to highlight the importance of personal experiences and memories in the formation of a race critical consciousness. The personal dimension of self, as Appiah would argue, facilitates the construction of multiple black identities that resist racial stereotyping and the accompanying limited scripts for identity formation. However, this aspect of self also reveals the tension between identity and identification. Mosley illustrates the problematical nature of authentic identity construction in the critically complex characters of Easy, Mouse and Daphne.

The Frontier Myth

"California was like heaven for the southern negro" (Mosley 34)

Devil in a Blue Dress appropriates the mythic narrative of the Frontier as both an ideological[57] narrative of progress, freedom and individualism and as a narrative of "spatial confinement and surveillance" (Kennedy 136). The former narrative is explored through the themes of home ownership, self-transformation, settlement, and the relationship between nature and self-renewal. The spatial narrative is explored through representations of cartographic and racial borders and draws upon Lape's

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[57] Crooks identifies three ways in which Turner uses the Frontier: as place "where European-American settlement . . . ends"; as conceptual space – "a shifting no-man's land between European and Native American cultures"; and ideologically as a "meeting point between savagery and civilisation" (68). I have found Crooks' labels useful for categorising my own use of the term Frontier.

contemporary notion of "multiple frontiers . . . occupied by diverse cultural groups at disparate geographical points" (3). The contemporary shift away from the linear Frontier of Turner allows for the novel's exploration into the construction and transgression of boundaries within the temporal moment of 1948 and signals its status as a Post-Frontier text.

In drawing upon the ideological narrative of the myth, *Devil* also engages with the mythical discourse of Los Angeles. In the early nineteenth century, as we saw in chapter two, Beckwourth describes California as a primitive place where society "was in the worst condition to be found, probably, in any part of the world, to call it civilised" (506). By the 1860s and 1870s, Los Angeles is considered "the most violent town in the West" for non-whites (Davis 26). Mike Davis explains how this violent history is suppressed by a narrative of myth-making and literary output that at the turn of the twentieth century promotes Southern California as the promised land (26)[58] and Los Angeles as "the city of dreams" (Hunt & Ramón 4). Between 1940 and 1970, it is the image of an "urban utopia and the American Dream" which attracts, according to Allen J. Scott and Edward W. Soja, approximately 600,000 African Americans to Los Angeles and creates "the country's first large suburban ghetto in what has come to be called South Central Los Angeles" (10). With its promise of better living and economic conditions, Los Angeles was "an object of black enchantment" (Anderson 337). The possibility of being a part of the American Dream was such a powerful magnet for poor and dispossessed black Southerners that Gerald Nash describes the city as "a mecca" for African Americans (89).

Mosley locates the novel within this mythic Western narrative of Los Angeles and in the tradition of noir writers he uses the city to challenge the myth of California (Davis 37).[59] In an interview with Charles L. P. Silet in 1993, Mosley recognises that the

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[58] For further discussion, see Davis' discussion of the two principal figures behind this myth making: Charles Fletcher Lummis and Colonel Harrison Gray Otis in his Chapter "Sunshine or Noir?", pp. 24-30.
[59] See the above chapter by Davis on the development of the noir genre.

setting of the novel "was a time of incredible hope" (33). However, Easy's observations about life for Southern black folk in Los Angeles subverts the mythical narrative of the city as an urban utopia:

> California was like heaven for the southern Negro. People told stories of how you could eat fruit right off the trees and get enough work to retire one day. The stories were true for the most part but the truth wasn't like the dream. Life was still hard in L.A. and if you worked hard every day you still found yourself at the bottom. (34)

Easy's comment draws attention to how the black urban experience of marginalisation compromises the narrative of personal progress embedded in the Frontier Myth as well as a national narrative of post-war economic prosperity. Mosley's novel uncovers and recognises the social, cultural and political forces that marginalised African Americans in 1948. The temporality of 1948 also functions to imply a second temporal moment of 1965 and the Watts Uprising. Furthermore, for the post-1992 reader the novel can also be read as an unconscious prophetic telling of the Los Angeles Uprising of 1992. The relation of the book's historical temporal moment to its contemporary production is important. It suggests a history of black disaffection and exclusion from a national narrative of belonging that the novel is unable to resolve.

Mosley challenges this black exclusion by locating his protagonist within the Frontier narrative of individualism and progress. This narrative of agency is complemented by the social and racial mobility of Easy. The alignment of Easy's racial project with this ideological narrative is illustrated in the themes of home ownership and settlement via appropriation of the economic and social status of "landowner" given to Easy (40). "I felt that I was just as good as any white man", Easy tells the reader, "But if I didn't even own my front door then people would look at me just like another poor beggar, with his hand outstretched" (16). Melvin Dixon notes that since slavery "issues of home, self, and shelter have loomed paramount in the black imagination" (2). By the end of the novel, Easy has also acquired his first rental property. Ownership of property becomes a symbolic index to racial and social mobility as we witness Easy aspire to

and negotiate a middle-class African American identity. By the end of the third novel, *White Butterfly*, Easy has "bought a small house in an area near West Los Angeles called View Park. Middle-class families had started colonising the neighbourhood" (271). Nevertheless, Easy's identification with middle-class white aspirations impedes the construction of him as a potentially radical Frontier figure. Firstly, his ambitions and values support a white mythic discourse of progress; and secondly, they involve Easy moving away from the black community of poor Southern folk to a black middle-class community. Robert Crooks argues that this separation of classes divides the interests of African Americans and demonstrates that Easy has bought into the discourse of white capitalism, manifested as individualism in his desire to be a homeowner (11). The importance of home for African Americans is a signifyin(g) thread that runs through the contemporary texts. And like Devereaux and CJ Floyd, the significance of a home for Easy indicates the aspiration for inclusion within a narrative of American citizenship. Importantly, Mosley shows that Easy's desire involves an acceptance of white values in return for economic and personal progress. hooks argues that for African Americans the home has historically been a space of resistance and nurture ("Homeplace"). Mosley's narrative embraces this idea of home but complicates it by revealing that Easy's ambition is the material acquisition of property.

Easy's status as a landowner reflects a desire to settle down. Dixon considers how journeys, conquered spaces, imagined havens and places of refuge have produced "a transformation from rootlessness to rootedness" (3). Easy's movement from the South to the European war front and then to the "imagined haven" that is Los Angeles marks this transition from rootlessness to rootedness. As a black man in a white world where home ownership is a status and privilege historically not accorded to African Americans, Easy's home symbolises settlement, black freedom, autonomy, and entry into the white world as a person. For Liam Kennedy, Easy's house marks "the desire for 'ordinariness'" and is an "implicit claim to normative citizenship" (142). However, the narrative resists Easy's desire to belong by emphasising his fragile

position within the urban landscape. Thus, his home is broken into by DeWitt revealing the "difficulty" a black man faces in "creating a safe place in a dangerous world" (Bailey 85). Easy's vulnerable position is further emphasised by the fact that he has a mortgage. His mortgage symbolises the historical process of commodification of the Frontier whereby banks controlled the speculative value of the land. Easy's tenuous spatial and economic positioning shows the difficulty of reconciling the tensions inherent in the adoption of a white myth for a black protagonist. The difficulty in reconciling the two aspects is not, however, completely disabling for the construction of an authentic black self. In assimilating Easy's racial project of personal progress with that of the nation, the narrative disrupts the whiteness of the myth by Signifyin(g) on the mythic discourse of the West as "the Garden of the World" (Smith 123). Henry Nash Smith writes that this "master symbol of the garden embraced a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth" and "all centering about the heroic figure of the idealised farmer with that supreme agrarian weapon, the sacred plow" (125). Easy's cultivation of his garden Signifies on Turner's white settler figure. Easy describes his front yard:

> There was an apple tree and an avocado in the front yard, surrounded by thick St. Augustine grass. At the side of the house I had a pomegranate tree that bore more than thirty fruit every season and a banana tree that never produced a thing. There were dahlias and wild roses in beds around the fence and African violets that I kept in a big jar on the front porch. (19)

The narrative repeats Turner's motif, but the reference to the flowers disrupts the conventional masculinity associated with the frontiersman. This narrative shift is a literary modernisation of Western gendered subjectivity which I explore later in this chapter. In chapter six, Butler takes the idea of fluid Western subjectivity further in the gender-passing of her protagonist and consequently creates greater narrative opportunities for the construction of a radical identity. Easy's front yard symbolises "an abstraction of the presence of nature" and also, to borrow from Richard S. Weinstein, "represents a subjugation of nature to the rule of civilisation . . . it is nature known and tamed" (26). There is further textual support for a reading of Easy as the black settler

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figure who tames nature in that he was born onto a share-cropping farm in the South and has worked as a gardener in the past (19, 182). Additionally, Easy's visit to his friend Primo's place illustrates what Weinstein describes as a "persistent yearning in the American character for a redemptive contact with nature represented by the West" (28-29). Seeking temporary refuge, Easy takes Daphne with him to Primo's house which is a long way from South Central Los Angeles:

> We drove a long way. I wanted far from Watts and Compton so we went to East L.A.; what they call El Barrio today. Back then it was just another Jewish neighbourhood, recently taken over by the Mexicans. We drove past hundreds of poor houses, sad palm trees, and thousands of children playing and hollering in the streets. We finally came to a dilapidated old house that used to be a mansion. (181)

The description of Primo's house locates it geographically, economically and socially on the margin – a place "on the edge"[60] of the white world. Its isolation is apparent in Primo's question to Easy, "You get lost out here?" (181). The text draws a distinction between nature that is cultivated and settled as in Easy's place, and nature that is allowed to be untamed as in Primo's place. This is significant because in line with the Myth of the Frontier it is only through contact with the wilderness that transformation of the individual is possible. The narrative describes an Edenic wilderness that surrounds the little dilapidated house that Easy and Daphne rent. Easy observes on their arrival:

> The first thing we saw was a mass of flowering bushes with honeysuckle, snapdragons, and passion fruit weaving through. A jagged, man-sized hole was hacked from the branches. Past that doorway was a small building like a coach house or the gardener's quarters on a big estate. (183)

It is in this place of nature that Easy is physically and emotionally renewed. Although it is Daphne who physically heals Easy's body and soothes his mind, the placing of their lovemaking within this Edenic space engages with the transformative potential of

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[60] The expression "on the edge" is borrowed from bell hooks who describes her childhood as "Living as we did – on the edge – we developed a particular way of looking at reality" ("Choosing" 149).

nature. While she washes his body (an erotic act which also reveals the vulnerability of Easy), Easy acknowledges that a change takes place within him:

> Most beautiful women made me feel like I want to touch them, own them. Daphne made me look inside myself. She'd whisper sweet words and I was brought back to the first time I felt love and loss. I was remembering my mother's death. (185-6)

The cleansing of Easy's body is presented as a symbolic act of redemption evident a page later when he explains that "Daphne was like a door that had been closed all my life; a door that all of a sudden flung open and let me in" (187). The shift in Easy's being gives him "a new location from which to articulate" his individual and personal "sense of the world", and one which connects him to his mother and therefore his black heritage ("Choosing" 153). The appropriation of the Frontier Myth's transformative potential through nature creates a space for Easy to experience a sense of identity that is authentic in that it emerges out of a personal black history and is an affirmation of his being.

The marginal positioning of Primo's place is part of a spatial narrative of racial geography which is played out in the novel's cityscape of Los Angeles. Mosley's text re-creates a racial cartography of Los Angeles that reflects the cultural, social, and racial frontiers of the city in the 1940s. According to Scott and Soja, by the 1920s Los Angeles had already become "the most racially diverse – and racially segregated – of Pacific Coast cities" (6). Cartographic borders operate as racial borders in the text with the result that Easy finds himself operating in an environment where space is racially organised. Hence, there is the black neighbourhood of Watts, the white neighbourhoods of Santa Monica and Malibu, and the Jewish area of East Los Angeles "recently taken over by the Mexicans" (181). There is also the Japanese borderland between South Central Los Angeles and Santa Monica where the Japanese American farmers have been spatially confined to the roadside margins to sell their produce. The narrative's engagement with a contemporary reformulation of Frontier into multiple

frontiers recognises the "highly asymmetrical relations of dominance and subordination" that have continued into the twentieth century (Pratt 4); frontiers which are maintained through containment and surveillance.

According to Crooks, *Devil* presents an "urban manifestation of Frontier ideology" (2). He argues that Frontier ideology in its transition from rural Western space to urban cityscape has been reconceptualised in geographical terms. This has led to fixed racial lines which ensure the purity and order of European-American culture and the containment of 'others'. The latter, Crooks explains, now form "in mainstream European-American ideology pockets of racial intrusion" (4). The notion of containment is conveyed in the novel via the black ghetto of Watts within the wider black suburb of South Central Los Angeles. According to Susan Anderson, in order to "keep the neighbourhood(s) white" racial containment was enforced in the 1940s through the practice of racially restricted covenants which prevented African Americans from living in other neighbourhoods outside Central Avenue and Watts (343).[61] Therefore, socially, economically and racially marginalised, Watts is a place of contained difference. A place which, according to Kennedy, offers its black inhabitants a "relative cultural security" (141).

Kennedy's use of the word 'relative' is pertinent because as a racially contained space Watts' frontiers need to be patrolled. Within the novel, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) are the "space police" (Davis 250). According to Mike Davis, in the 1920s the LAPD "pioneered the replacement of the flatfoot or mounted officer with the radio patrol car" (251). In a landscape patrolled and surveyed by police cars, Easy's freedom of movement is curtailed and he is aware of his vulnerable status as a black man in a hostile white world. On leaving the police station he tells the reader, "I left the station at a fast walk but I wanted to run, . . . I knew that a patrol car would arrest any sprinting Negro they encountered" (83). Reminiscent of both the white southern patrols

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[61] According to Anderson, by the 1980s and into the 1990s "redlining replaced housing covenants as the main form of segregation" (345).

and the United States army patrols in the West, the radio patrol car functions, to borrow from Tally, as a "spatial practice" to control how space is used and by whom (*Spatiality* 114). The patrol car symbolises the need and desire of a hegemonic white urban racial project which under the cover of law and order asserts its dominance and confines the movements of racial 'others'. Mosley's text reveals how power relations and racial power are inscribed onto the city and surrounding landscape and crucially that the transgression of cartographic racial frontiers is potentially dangerous for a black man in 1948 Los Angeles. Nevertheless, the fact that such spaces need surveillance strongly suggests that these racial frontiers are spaces of power struggles where the hegemonic control of space is constantly being challenged. We can therefore refine spatial, economic, racial, and gendered frontiers to incorporate Lape's idea of "open frontiers" which are "ambiguous, contradictory, subversive, pluralistic, and resistant . . . to Anglo dominance" (13). In its contemporary revision of Turner's monolithic white Frontier and in its incorporation of multiple ethnic identities and voices in the narrative, *Devil* is a Post-Frontier text.

Simultaneously, the text appropriates the ideological and spatial narratives of the Frontier myth to demonstrate the profound edge that Easy inhabits. This positioning manifests geographically in that the location of his home on 116th Street (51) is also the terminus for various transport routes in South Central Los Angeles. This location places Easy on the outer edge urban frontier of Westward movement.[62] Additionally, Easy's marginal positioning is intensified by the physical and verbal violations on his body and home. Easy acknowledges that effacement of self is a possible outcome in a world where things can get "so bad that I want to take my car and drive it into a wall" (104). Problematically however, the exclusion from the historical fable of the American nation and American 'personhood' only exacerbates the desire to belong. Thus, the critical stance of the narrative is countered by an affirmation of the myth in the textual revision

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[62] See maps (figures 2 and 3) at end of chapter.

of Easy as a black Frontiersman. Crucially, the narrative does not challenge the origin story of the American nation. In fact, it is through the mythic narrative of the West as a site for personal redemption that Easy is able to realise an authentic self via a reconnection with memories of his mother. The critical contradictions of these textual positions illustrate the struggle to reconcile black self-determination with white mythic narratives.

The Western Literary Form

"Nobody was telling me what to do. I was acting on my own" (Mosley 131)

Mosley appropriates and revises the hard-boiled genre in terms of plot, narrative perspective and setting which he merges with a revision of the thematic content of the Western literary form. A substantial element of Mosley's revisions embeds black experiences and the black vernacular within the forms. Mosley's use of Signifyin(g) brings a black difference to the text, creating a critical dialogue that contests and disrupts the borders of the Western form and simultaneously furthers its evolution. Consequently, the double-voiced narrative presents a creative space of potential radical openness for the expression of radical black subjectivities that challenge the ethnocentric masculinised narrative of American identity. These textual features establish the novel as a Post-Western text.

In a challenge to white hegemonic narratives that have silenced or misrepresented non-white voices and experiences, the 1990s sees not only a renaissance in revisionist Westerns but also, according to Dorothea Fischer-Hurnung and Monika Mueller, "the emergence of countless ethnic crime fighters" (14). Mosley's novel Signifies on both a white and black literary tradition of crime fiction, and especially the white fiction of Raymond Chandler.[63] And while Mosley has said that he

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[63] Mosley also lists Dashiell Hammett and Ross MacDonald as influences on his writing.

learnt more from the work of Raymond Chandler (Davis), *Devil* can also be located within a black tradition of detective fiction established by Rudolph Fisher and Chester Himes. Mosley's use of black tropes, such as Signifyin(g); the black vernacular; and double-consciousness creates a black difference, or what Stephen Soitos has described as a common feature of black crime fiction – a "blackground" (35-36). Interwoven with these white and black discourses is the overlap between the heroic figure of the Frontiersman and the solitary heroic figure of the detective. According to Nicolas S. Witschi, Raymond Chandler (and Dashiell Hammett) show "evidence of the American West's vital role in the development of the genre" and in the representation of "the quasi-cowboy figure who investigates crime" and who is "the lone figure of retributive justice" (384, 383).

Mosley presents a racial project that re-imagines the white Los Angeles of Chandler's work and centres a black voice to express black Western experiences while white voices are placed on the periphery of the text. Furthermore, Mosley both inverts and subverts the conventional noir text by establishing Easy as the black figure of justice and the white characters as criminals. Significantly, the effect of this inversion of centres and margins is to challenge the assumptions and expectations of white readers of the genre who find themselves displaced from the world of the text. Mosley has been explicit about the purpose of his writing, stating that it:

> is driven by the belief that if people do not exist in literature they do not exist at all. Because nobody in America reads history so I wanted to write about my father's family, and the black people living in Los Angeles, building Los Angeles, oppressed by Los Angeles.[64]

In a later interview Mosley stated that "An identity has been misplaced, and that's one of the things I'm a small part of. Everything that happens to black people in America is

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[64] Official Author's website:
http://www.waltermosley.com/author-walter-mosley-talks-about-creating-killing-and-reviving-easy-rawlins/

not talked about. So we lose it. It's not written down".[65] Significantly, Mosley employs a "usable past" to counter the invisibility of black life and has said that "Easy is a kind of concretised invisible man" (Coate 81). "Usable implies the active engagement of a user", Lois Parkinson Zamora explains, "through whose agency collective and personal histories are constituted". Therefore, "What is deemed usable is valuable; what is valuable is constituted according to specific cultural and personal needs and desires" (ix). Mosley's use of a usable past is at a vernacular level which he demonstrates by grounding *Devil* in the black tradition of call and response. In retelling and recasting his father's stories, the narrative draws upon vernacular memory which, according to Marnier Gauthier, is local and comes from the grassroots of a community (9). Importantly, vernacular memory can function as "counter-memory" and "counter-history" in that it challenges official memory which as a hegemonic cultural practice functions to promote a desirable unified past and an official historical discourse (Gauthier 28). Consequently, Mosley's rhetorical strategy of Signifyin(g) on his father's stories embeds a black oral tradition within white literary traditions and inserts a personal discourse into a national mythic narrative to challenge the belief that "black suburbanites remain 'a people without a history'" (Wolfe qtd. in Weise 2).[66]

Moreover, Mosley's Signifyin(g) double-voiced narrative challenges the hegemonic "discrete discursive spaces"[67] of, for example, official maps and covenants that have literally inscribed and visualised the marginal positioning of African Americans. Indicative of the racial-spatial politics of the historical moment of the novel, Joseph Jacinta Mora's 1942 historical and recreational map of Los Angeles presents a contemporaneous pictorial history of settlement and progress that marginalises a black

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[65] Lynell George "Walter Mosley's Secret Stories"
[66] Andrew Weise cites Wolfe in *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanisation in the Twentieth Century*. U Chicago Press, 2004. Eric Wolfe *Europe and the People Without a History*. Berkeley, 1982.
[67] This adapts Liam Kennedy's "discrete social spaces" (141) in his discussion of Mosley's novel.

presence (fig. 1).[68] The four African American figures evident on the map are depicted as caricatured black figures. In a visual narrative that depicts Los Angeles as white space, Mora's map ignores the Great Migration from the South that began in 1910 and the emergence of Watts as a "new black ghetto" in the 1940s (Frazier et al 76). The "Spanish-speaking black settlers" who, according to Quintard Taylor, in 1781 "comprised a majority of the founders of what was to become the greatest of the region's cities, Los Angeles" are also under-represented ("Esteban" 4).

Set against Mora's historical backdrop to1940s Los Angeles, Mosley's racial project can be read as one which seeks to re-centre black Western history within the hegemonic historical narrative of the American West. To emphasise the contributions African Americans have made to the growth of Los Angeles, Mosley chooses to set his first novel within the period of mass black migration from the South to the North and West. By placing Easy within the diaspora of the Second Great Migration of African Americans, Mosley Signifies on the African American trope of movement as well as the Frontier trope of westward advancement.

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[68] I am grateful to the Los Angeles Public Library for allowing me to use this image from their TESSA Digital Collections of the Los Angeles Public Library, Map Collections: Map of Historical and Recreational Los Angeles, 1942 :: Map Collection (lapl.org)
"Map of Historical and Recreational Los Angeles, 1942" by Jacinto Mora. Accessed 10 June 2017 and 14 Apr. 2021.

Figure 1

Mosley's novel notably revises the genre's convention of using a crime to signal a disruption to the social order. The initial crime that is committed – Daphne's theft of $30,000 from businessman Todd Carter – is not important. Carter does not care about the money. He loves Daphne and just wants her back. Instead, Daphne is the 'mystery' of the story that needs to be solved. At the same time, the construction of Daphne as agent of transformation for Easy – revealed in the scene at Primo's place – locates her within a Western tradition established by Wister in which the female's role is a means to an end in the facilitation of Western manhood. A mixed-race figure who passes as white, Daphne is a threat to hegemonic social order. Mosley uses the generic conventions of mystery and suspense to delay the revelation of Daphne's true racial identity until the end of the novel. This use of convention allows Easy to be a potentially transgressive figure for longer in the text. However, the exposure of Daphne's identity (by Mouse) and the subsequent return to social order is problematic in terms of the representation of both Easy and Mouse. Not only does it undermine the representation of Easy as a transgressive figure, but unwittingly their actions support hegemonic power. Likewise, the revelation of Daphne's racial identity leads her to return to the racial ghetto of Watts; an act which also restores the racialised social order of Los Angeles. Mosley's novel reveals how white racial power is perpetuated even by those who are excluded from its privileges. And although DeWitt is killed by Mouse at the end of the novel, this transgressive act does not challenge the status quo. What it does do however is to affirm Mouse's masculinity.

An important overlap between the two genres is their use of the same paradigm of masculinity for the construction of the heroic male figure. According to Christopher Breu, the masculinities that emerged during the early part of the twentieth century focused on a more active and violent conception of masculinity because "manhood was no longer a moral quality but a physical attribute" (6). Moreover, this paradigm of masculinity conflated manhood with whiteness (163). We can see that as early as Beckwourth's text, black Western narratives are engaging with mythic Frontier

narratives that advocate action and violence as qualities of the Frontiersman. The construction of Mouse (Raymond Alexander) Signifies on this long Western literary tradition of presenting masculinity as primarily a physical force. Reminiscent of Cormac McCarthy's description of his anti-heroic figure, The Kid, in *Blood Meridian* whose birth killed his mother and who "with in him broods already a taste for mindless violence" (3), Mouse tells Easy that "I'as born wit' a knife in my teefs" (162). By locating Mouse within a Western literary tradition of violent anti-heroes, the narrative appropriates the cultural figure of the cowboy. This reading of Mouse is first indicated at the end of chapter four when he tells Easy, "I got the streets tame by now" (38). Mouse's language comes out of the saloons of the West; he tells Easy that there "Ain't a man in Texas who could outdraw me" (174). At one point when Mouse has had too much to drink, he tells Easy "Go fo' your gun. Les see who gets kilt" (174). Mouse's violence is spontaneous and without remorse; he "could put a knife in a man's stomach and ten minutes later sit down to a plate of spaghetti" (55). His murder of criminals Frank Green, Joppy, and DeWitt establishes Mouse as a figure of retributive and restorative violence. And in this role, the narrative aligns him with the image of the cowboy as protector. Fiercely loyal towards Easy (a reason why he kills Frank), Mouse is presented as the kind of individual you need on your side in a violent world. His actions remove the 'bad guys' from the plot and bring closure to the narrative.

The critical contradictions in the representation of Mouse are in part a response to the mythologising and normalising of violence in the Western literary form, and in part a response to the form's central value of individualism. While McCarthy provides no explanation for The Kid's violence, significantly Mosley's construction of Mouse seeks to resist a reductive racialist reading of Mouse as just a dangerous black man. The narrative achieves this by highlighting the thorny relationship between the narratives of violence and individualism. In the figure of Mouse, violence merges with an extreme individualism. Mouse may accuse Easy of wanting to be white, but Mouse's actions are also complicit with a white discourse of capitalism manifested in his single-

minded pursuit of money. Easy acknowledges to himself that if Mouse "got a whiff of

that thirty thousand dollars I knew that nothing would hold him back. He would have

killed *me* for that much money" (161; emphasis in original). On the one hand, Mouse is

presented as the white racial stereotype of a violent immoral black man. However,

Mosley gets us to rethink our interpretation of Mouse. First, the text reveals that

Mouse's psychopathy stems from a childhood of abuse. The reader learns that his

stepfather, whom he later kills, "beat me four ways from sundown my whole life" (40).

The violence that Mouse experiences as a child from a father who should be protecting

him signals an extreme marginalisation and vulnerability. Mouse's use of violence as

an adult can be read therefore as an act of resistance to authority – a counter-

hegemonic performance. Rather than a one-dimensional racial stereotype, Mouse is

presented as a complex character. Consequently, Mosley's construction of Mouse

challenges expectations of the forms' conventions of violence and the white male

figure. The narrative highlights that Mouse is an intricate figure in that he draws

attention to form and racial identity.

Fundamentally, the rhetorical strategy of Signifyin(g) on the cowboy figure in the

construction of Mouse subverts the mythic hero of the Frontier and also subverts the

form's use of violence as a means of furthering the hegemonic Western racial project of

white supremacy and national progress. At the same time, the revision of the cowboy

figure as a kind of one-man vigilante bringing retributive and restorative violence to the

streets with an illicit financial reward at the end positions Mouse more centrally in the

narrative and presents an alternative Frontiersman figure to that of Easy. Moreover,

Mouse's violence allows Easy to ascend materially. In Mosley's second novel, *A Red*

Death, Easy is the landlord of three properties. This material progression is morally

troubling for the construction of Easy because it is funded from a share of the stolen

money taken from Todd Carter. Mosley's construction of Mouse neutralises the racial

conventions of the form by replacing a racial essentialism with the genre's convention

of the heroic frontiersman. This complex revision to the Western creates a discursive

space of radical openness that enables a potentially oppositional and liberating script for Mouse's identity.

Easy shows a critical ambivalence towards his friendship with Mouse. He explains that Mouse is the reason why he joined the army: "I ran away from Mouse and Texas to go into the army and then later to L.A" (54). But in the same passage Easy admits that "the only time in my life that I had ever been completely free from fear was when I ran with Mouse" (55). If Mouse's Western masculinity conforms to the paradigm of masculinity as a physical attribute played out through violence, then Easy's masculinity is constructed more fluidly. Unlike Mouse, Easy does not kill or hurt anyone within the timeframe of the novel. But in alignment with both genres, it is imperative that the narrative establishes Easy as a man of action. Similar to the Western's construction of the Frontier hero, the hard-boiled genre also "requires that the hard-boiled male be in motion" (Breu 130). The form's convention of a man in action is exemplified in the role of soldier. In Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, the protagonist, Philip Marlowe, is frequently referred to as "soldier" by "Top-flight racketeer" Eddie Mars (72, 76). Marlowe's status as a war veteran confirms his masculinity and his potential as a heroic figure.

We learn early in the story that Easy is a veteran of World War Two. He initially subscribes to the national symbolism of American identity and masculinity conveyed in the military narrative by declaring that he joined the army "to prove to myself that I was a man" (54). With the 'Wild West' long vanished, the battleground of Normandy is a substitute for the American Frontier as a testing ground for masculinity and the site for Easy's self-transformation. It is in the hostile environment of the battleground, in the clash between cultures that Easy proves he can "survive like a man" (106). The process of becoming a man in an alien environment is fully in keeping with the generic conventions of the Western literary form. It could be argued that Easy's move to join the army is motivated by an accommodationist attitude and that his role puts him in service to the white oppressor in World War Two. But Easy's vernacular memories of

the war also offer a counter-memory and therefore a counter-history to the official historiography of the war and its racialisation of black servicemen.

In his discussion on restoring black military history to historical memory (361), Hayward 'Woody' Farrar explains that "According to the high commands of the Armed Forces, African Americans were too lazy, stupid, and cowardly to make good soldiers" (349). This institutional stereotyping and marginalisation of black males is revealed by Easy who laments, "When I joined up I was proud because I believed what they said in the papers and newsreels. I believed that I was part of the hope of the world. But then I found that the army was segregated just like the South" (104). Both spatially and discursively, Mosley's narrative resists racialist stereotyping of black masculinity. "[H]egemonic power", Soja argues, "*produces and reproduces difference* as a key strategy to create modes of spatial and social division that are advantageous to its continued empowerment and authority" (87; emphasis in original). *Devil* presents a counter-military history of the war arena by placing Easy in combat within the white European arena of the Battle of Normandy and with General Patton at the Battle of the Bulge. Additionally, the novel confronts the discursive spatial marginality of African American soldiers by having Joppy refer to Easy as "a war hero" (12). And Easy confirms his own bravery when he says, "I was frightened but I fought. I fought despite the fear" (54). The text's transgression of the racial boundaries established by the hegemonic military narrative locates Easy "as moving out of one's place" (hooks, "Choosing" 145) and presents a potentially radical Western identity for the character.

However, the double-voicedness of the narrative, that is the incorporation of a white discourse of military heroism and the recasting of that discourse within a black experience creates a tension in the construction of a black Western masculinity that the narrative is unable to resolve. The novel demonstrates the continuous struggle Easy faces in seeking to affirm his right to belong to a narrative of American identity and nation which resists his inclusion. Mosley's Signifyin(g) on a discourse of military heroism creates a textual "battleground for opposing intentions" (Bakhtin 185). In its

attempt to interweave a black discourse of self-determination within a white discourse of prejudice and racialism, the narrative offers an explicit textual criticism of the dominant military narrative, exemplifying Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of narrative parody as used by Gates. By inscribing a black consciousness into the white narrative of military heroism, Mosley presents "an intention which is directly opposed to the original one" and which, according to Bakhtin, "forces the original to serve directly opposite aims" ("Discourse" 185). The insertion of a black man into a discourse that did not valorise black men "disorders, disrupts, and transgresses the centre-periphery relationships" (*Thirdspace* 84). Moreover, Mosley has Easy perform the ultimate transgression in the killing of white men. Although narrated as an act of survival during the war, this transgression may be read as the symbolic threat to white masculinity and subversion of white power as Easy recounts that "I killed enough blue-eyed young men to know they were just as afraid to die as I was" (9). Easy's transformation from accommodation to cynicism becomes a narrative of resistance. Furthermore, his narrative takes place within the black space of Watts and establishes Watts as the central narrative space in the text with white space pushed to the margins of Easy's narrative.

Central to Easy's transformation is 'the voice', and it is as a soldier under attack in Normandy that Easy first hears this inner voice. This voice is not only necessary to Easy's survival, but it also enables a new self-consciousness and inner strength that informs an oppositional stance. Easy explains to the reader that "The voice has no lust. He never told me to rape or steal. He just tells me how it is if I want to survive. Survive like a man" (106). While the voice is literally Easy's second voice in the novel, it is also the voice of the hard-boiled genre. Trapped in a barn with his two friends who have already been killed by a sniper, Easy's voice tells him to:

> 'get off yo' butt when the sun comes down an' kill that motherfucker. Kill him an' rip off his fuckin' face with yo' bayonet, man. You cain't let him do that to you. Even if he lets you live you be scared the rest'a yo' life. Kill that motherfucker', he told me. And I did. (105-6)

According to Mosley in his essay "Poisonville", hard-boiled language "cuts to the bone because it is the idiom of survival, of that moment when it's all or nothing" (599). However, the narrative complicates this reading of the voice. *Devil* Signifies on the white language of the hard-boiled genre by recasting it in African American English. I relocate the discussion to show that "a new sematic orientation" is inserted into the above discourse by using African American English (Bakhtin qtd. in Gates 55). In using the black vernacular, a narrative of resistance is suggested that extends beyond the geographical, historical and temporal moment of the white European war front to the specific racialised society of 1948 Los Angeles. Easy's voice becomes a metaphor for double-voicedness and through what Gates defines as "a complex process of signification" (254), the voice brings a black difference to the text which further subverts the form and simultaneously emphasises Easy's connection to the Black tradition and the construction of an authentic black Western identity. The knowledge of self that Easy acquires as a soldier enables him to survive on the streets of Los Angeles. Aligned with the Western literary form, this knowledge that can only be acquired under hostile conditions, confers upon Easy an authority that legitimises his status as Western hero. The transformation from boy to man, from lack of self-knowledge to self-awareness, aligns Easy with the white male hero of the Western literary form. And the notion of self-transformation from boyhood to manhood so central to the form is underlined by other transformations of the self that Easy experiences; for example, from Southerner to Westerner, from employee to self-employed, and from sharecropper's son to war hero to landowner.

Black men have been victimised and dehumanised by stereotypes since the nineteenth century. hooks argues that these stereotypes hold "sway over the minds and imaginations of citizens of this nation in the present day" (*Real* xii). She goes on to argue that the price of visibility in the contemporary world of white supremacy is that black identity be defined in relation to the stereotype whether by embodying it or seeking to be other than it (*Real* xii). The discussion so far has aligned Easy with a

model of Western masculinity that emphasises physical force, movement and action. But the text deviates from this representation in its depiction of Easy's relationship with his house. Neil Campbell has identified an anomaly in Western writing between mobility and migration on the one hand – "lines of flight" – and settlement "rootedness" on the other. "The desire for fixity, belonging and integration", he argues, "has an impressive presence in the narratives of the West" (*Rhizomatic* 1-2). Within the context of the conflict identified by Campbell, Easy's need for a place of his own does not seem at odds with the Western literary form nor with the Black tradition. Historically, the home has been the site where African Americans could, according to hooks, "strive to be subjects not objects . . . where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world" ("Homeplace" 42). In the Black tradition, the homeplace has traditionally been the site for female domesticity and a potentially subversive place ("Homeplace" 47).

Mosley harnesses this black discourse of the homeplace for Easy in order to suggest an alternative black Western masculinity that is informed by a traditionally black feminised 'narrative of nurture' and which potentially subverts the monolithic white masculinised discourse of the Frontiersman. This construction of Easy is given further weight in his later unofficial adoption of two unwanted children. Therefore, in a narrative that contests the cultural and racial frontiers of the literary form, *Devil* also challenges the gendered frontier in its development of the heroic Western figure and presents a fluid Western masculinity for its protagonist. This transformation in the heroic figure is underlined by a radical evolution in the Western literary form. A traditional plot convention has been the requirement that the hero rescues a female from a situation where her life is in danger. But Mosley complicates this convention in the representation and significance of Easy's home. Easy reveals that his "beautiful home" (89):

> Meant more to me than any woman I ever knew. I loved her and I was jealous of her and if the bank sent the county marshal to take her from me I might have to come at him with a rifle rather than to give her up. (20)

The feminisation of his home and his need to protect 'her' is the catalyst of the plot and not Daphne. The textual emphasis on Easy's home Signifies on a black trope of vertical ascent and a white Western narrative where land acquisition is the primary indicator of the self-made man. Mosley shows that Easy is primarily motivated by the need to claim 'personhood' within the white masculinised discourse of nation-building. Problematically, the appropriation of white values complicates the construction of a radical black identity for Easy and raises the question as to whether such identities are possible in the highly racialised historical moment of 1948 Los Angeles.

Racial Identity and the Racial Project

"She look like she white and you think like you white" (Mosley 209)

Mosley's novel illustrates the difficulty of "invoking the autonomy of the personal dimension" (Bui 634) to establish an authentic and potentially radical black self-determination within a hostile white hegemonic patriarchal society. Through the rhetorical and thematic strategies of Signifyin(g), Mosley constructs what Appiah would describe as "fluid" identities which are dialogically constructed from various labels and identities ("Synthesis" 94). Fundamentally, these identities resist essentialist representations of African Americans while simultaneously revealing the impact of environment on the ability to construct oppositional and liberatory identities. The effect is that the radical potential of these identities is emphasised or diminished as the narrative progresses.

Mosley's challenge to Western and Southern hegemonic narratives of black marginality is further demonstrated in his use of Houston. Early in the narrative, readers learn that Texas is "back home" for Easy (28, 34). Easy's memories of Houston surface to reveal a sense of nostalgia for the Southern city:

> Looking out of the window is different in Los Angeles, than it is in Houston. No matter where you live in a southern city (even a wild and violent place like Fifth Ward, Houston) you see almost everybody you know by just looking out your window. Every day it is a parade of relatives and old friends and lovers you once had, and maybe you'd be lovers again one day. (55)

Easy recognises that for some, like Sophie Anderson, "the slower life of the South" where people "have the time to stop for a while and say hello" is preferable to Los Angeles where "people don't have time to stop" (55). Easy's memories of community in Houston form counter-memories to a historical discourse of the South as a place of black oppression and dehumanisation. For hooks, and for Mosley too, resistance to white hegemony "is sustained by remembrance of the past" ("Choosing" 150). In establishing Texas as a positive black source for Easy's identity formation, the text articulates an authentic black identity forged out of unique black experiences. The double-voiced historical discourse of Texas as both a slave owning state and as part of the Great Plains, the state of the iconic cowboy,[69] contains within itself two oppositional meanings – oppression/confinement and freedom/movement – and illustrates how the South in black writing is understood in contradictory ways. These irreconcilable differences are played out in South Central Los Angeles and Signified linguistically; for example, through a language of slavery as in Easy's description of Junior as "a foul-tempered field hand" whom if you "feed him some ale and let him tell a few tall tales" is happy (37).

Consequently, the white world of the text – in particular white authority and power – places Easy, Mouse and Daphne on a racial, gendered, cultural and social 'profound edge'. The narrative engages in a struggle to dislodge the hierarchy of whiteness through cultural and linguistic expressions of blackness. Told through the first-person point-of-view of Easy, the novel's racial project decentres the dominant white perspective of both literary forms and significantly challenges the normality of whiteness expressed through the racial representations of white masculinity in the

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[69] Glasrud and Braithwaite 2009

characters of DeWitt Albright, Todd Carter and Matthew Teran. In its portrayals of white masculinity, the narrative is at its most radical. Mosley clearly signals his intention in the opening scene of the novel. DeWitt Albright (whose first name means blond or the white one) walks into the all-black bar of Joppy's. Easy observes that:

> he wore an off-white linen suit and shirt with a Panama straw hat and bone shoes over flashing white silk socks. His skin was smooth and pale with just a few freckles. One lick of strawberry blond hair escaped the band of his hat. He . . . surveyed the room with pale eyes. (9)

Later in the chapter Easy describes DeWitt's grip, "Like a snake coiled around my hand" and that his eyes "were the color of robin's eggs: matte and dull" (10). In drawing attention to DeWitt's race, Mosley achieves two things. Firstly, his opening scene Signifies on Raymond Chandler's racialised opening scene to *Farewell, My Lovely* (1939). Standing outside the all-black "dice-emporium called Florian's" (146), Chandler's protagonist Philip Marlowe witnesses a black youth being thrown out of the bar:

> Something sailed across the sidewalk and landed in the gutter between two parked cars. It landed on its hands and knees, and made a high keening noise like a cornered rat. It got up slowly, retrieved its hat and stepped back on to the sidewalk. . . . It kept its mouth open and whinnied for a moment. (145-6)

On entering the bar, Marlow observes that "Heads turned slowly and the eyes in them glistened and stared in the dead, alien silence of another race" (147). In writing back[70] to Chandler's Othering of African Americans, Mosley inverts the racialist paradigm of white normality and black strangeness and Signifies on a language that has its roots in the slave markets where "slave bodies were made racially legible" (Johnson qtd. in Omi & Winant 18n19). Secondly, Mosley's explicit racialisation of Albright, Carter and Teran requires readers, to borrow from Richard Dyer, to look at whiteness (542). The point of which, Richard Dyer argues, "is to dislodge it from its centrality and authority, not to

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[70] I use this term in its postcolonial meaning to address the dominant hegemonic discourses of the coloniser – read here white American.

reinstate it" (542). This subversive narrative strategy continues in the representation of Todd Carter who is described as "some strange being. Like a baby who grows to mansize and terrorises his poor parents with his strength and stupidity" (126). And in the representation of Matthew Teran who is running for Mayor and tells Easy, "I'm a powerful man" (87). Teran uses that power to keep and sexually abuse a young Mexican boy (87). Easy describes Teran as "a fat white man" with "lips that were fat and red . . . like swollen wounds" (85). Mosley's construction of white masculinity as morally and physically repugnant ironises a discourse of white male superiority (further symbolised by the deaths of DeWitt and Teran at the hands of Mouse and Daphne respectively) and inverts a historical racialised discourse that has emasculated black men and perpetuated the false notion that the United States is a "white man's country" (Omi & Winant 77). The double-voiced narrative uses the black voice of Easy to transgress a hegemonic system of racial classification and creates potential narrative "spaces of radical openness" for the expression of black identities.

The representation of DeWitt as a textual construction of whiteness has its textual binary racial opposite in the character of Frank Green. When Frank attacks Easy, Easy tells the reader that Frank "was wearing a dark blue suit, so dark that you might have mistaken it for black. He wore a black shirt. His black shoe was on the cushion next to my head. There was a short-rimmed black Stetson on his head. His face was as black as the rest of him" (152). The descriptions of DeWitt and Frank illustrate the visibility of race and the narrative's complicity with the notion that race, as Omi and Winant argue, is "located on the body" and that "Racial phenotypes such as black and white have been constructed and encoded through the language of race" (247,13). Mosley deliberately presents the reader with racial identities that are visual and visible in order to subvert the idea that race is stable. In between these two poles of black and white, the narrative places Daphne whose passing challenges the ability of language to define and contain race. Within the highly racialised context of 1940s Los Angeles, Daphne who is half-sister to Frank symbolises the ultimate act of racial,

social, cultural and political transgression that is miscegenation and shows that the labels of black and white are inadequate to express authentic identities.

As narrator-protagonist, we expect Easy to be a transgressive figure and the narrative does initially suggest this as we witness him violate cartographic, racial, social, and linguistic borders. Easy frequently transgresses the borders that separate and confine African Americans. Problematically however, these transgressions into white spaces present a threat to Easy's sense of self physically, and more importantly psychologically. Easy's struggle between navigating white spaces and mediating his identity illustrates the connection identified by Foucault between space, knowledge, power and cultural politics that can be "both oppressive and enabling" (Soja 87). This critical tension is exemplified in the scene where Easy visits DeWitt's office. Within the white space of DeWitt's office building, Easy is acutely aware of himself as a black man in a white environment that socially and culturally positions him as Other. On visiting DeWitt's office, "a little white man" asks Easy "Who are you looking for?" (21). In response, Easy's voice is described as "strained and cracked" (21). He replies:

> 'I'm looking for, um . . . ah . . . , ' I stuttered. I forgot the name. [. . .] It was a habit I developed in Texas when I was boy. Sometimes, when a white man of authority would catch me off my guard, I'd empty my head of everything so I was unable to say anything'. (21)

His response reveals the difficulty of achieving an authentic black self within a white space. Easy informs the reader, "I hated myself . . . but I also hated white people and colored people too, for making me that way" (21). Easy's initial response illustrates a heightened awareness that he is "expected", in the words of Frantz Fanon, "to behave like a black man – or at least like a nigger . . . [and] told to stay within bounds, to go back where I belonged" (87). However, as Du Bois' argued, double-conscious simultaneously gifts the individual with a second-sight (2). Mosley shows that Easy's second-sight is the knowledge that white expectations require that he behaves like a black man in a white space. Consequently, when 'little white man' asks Easy, "Did he

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give you a note saying you're to come in here after hours?" (22), Easy exclaims,

"Forget it man . . . You tell him that the next time he better give me a note because you

cain't be lettin' no street niggahs comin' in yo' place wit' no notes!" (22). Mosley has

Easy slip into the black vernacular, not to conform to this white racial ascription but to

disrupt its authority most evident in his use of 'note'. Easy gives the word a new

semantic orientation that Signifies on the language of slavery and the passes issued by

slave masters to allow slaves to travel off the plantation. Mosley employs a historical

subtext of spatial confinement and oppression to challenge the implicit racialist stance

of the white man and to assert Easy's black autonomy in the face of white power.

The profound edge that Easy inhabits as a black man in a white world is

violently demonstrated in the police station scenes. He admits to feeling "some fear"

and being worried because Miller and Mason "didn't follow the routine . . . the game of

cops and nigger" (76). After being picked up by the police outside his house, Easy says

that he has a right to know if he is being arrested, to which Mason replies, "You got a

right to fall down and break your face, nigger. You got a right to die", and later Mason

tells Easy that "we can take your black ass out behind the station and put a bullet in

your head" (75, 78). Unlike the scene at DeWitt's office, Easy's autonomy is severely

restricted and is physically represented in the spatial confinement of the police cell and

psychologically depicted in his desire "to become the darkness" and efface the self

(80). The narrative depicts the continuous struggle Easy must endure resulting from the

failure of white society to recognise the humanity of the black man as a man.[71] This

failure surfaces in the narrative through less violent responses towards the black body.

Within the white space of Todd Carter's office, Carter speaks openly to Easy about his

intimate feelings for Daphne Monet. Easy realises that Carter can do this because he

"didn't even consider me in human terms" (126). Recognising this as "the worst kind of

racism", the narrative resists an assault upon Easy's identity by describing Carter as

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[71] Fanon's essay "The Fact of Blackness" explores the consequences of this lack of recognition upon the black man's sense of self.

"some strange being" (126) and inverting African Americans' "assigned Otherness" (Soja 87). According to Liam Kennedy, Mosley uses these "discrete social spaces" to "mediate his protagonist's understanding of relations between knowledge and power, morality and justice, in a world in which he is denied 'rights'" (141-42).

An outsider to the privileges of white society, Easy's name is a rhetorical device Signifyin(g) that life is in no way easy for a black man in 1940s Los Angeles. Easy's resistance to the racialist discourses of 1940s Los Angeles is evident in his ability to code-switch from Standard American English to African American English depending on the racial space that he finds himself within. His ability to cross linguistic boundaries enables him to resist and confound racial stereotypes and racial expectations of him as a black man. In particular, Easy's use of African American English in white spaces reveals an ability to use double-consciousness as a strategy to empower the self and informs an oppositional stance to white control and authority. An example of this is in chapter seventeen when he metaphorically and linguistically crosses the color-line on entering the office building of Lion Investments. Within this white environment, Easy disrupts the social and linguistic conventions of white authority. In the dialogue with Mr Baxter, Easy reverts to black language and through this black speech gets access to Todd Carter, President of Lion Investments.

Mary Young reads Easy as the trickster figure who uses the "'uneducated' dialect" of his upbringing to mask or "conceal or disguise the true self" (145). Not only does Easy's use of the black vernacular make him unknowable to Baxter, but Baxter is unable to respond to the rhetorical games and verbal dexterity of Easy. In his use of indirection and irony, Easy Signifies upon Baxter and makes the point that Baxter's own racism prevents him from treating Easy as an equal. Interestingly, Young does not mention Signifyin(g), but it is clear that by placing Easy within Lion Investments, Mosley is himself also Signifyin(g) upon the trickster tradition of the Signifyin(g) Monkey. From early in the narrative, Easy admits that he can only "truly express" himself in the black vernacular, but he also reveals that he had "always tried to speak proper English" (17).

The tension between the two languages can be found in the preferred use of Standard American English for the narrative voice of an older Easy. This narrative strategy also helps to establish a narrative distance between the historical younger Easy and the contemporary older Easy. Easy's linguistic flexibility facilitates his movement across both racial cartographic and temporal boundaries. His ability to code-switch is a source of self-empowerment while also revealing a sensitivity to the unstable position a black man occupies in a white world. Moreover, code-switching is an indication of what Genie Giaimo describes as the "fluid role that language plays in Easy's identity formation" (237). But language, as bell hooks identifies, "is also a place of struggle" ("Choosing" 145). Easy's masking of his thoughts and intentions are a necessary act of self-preservation when he crosses over the boundaries into white space, whereas the masking he displays in the black community is a necessary act as an investigator. Both contexts reveal Easy's ability to dissemble and in the tradition of the trickster "to discombobulate established power relations among races, [and] classes . . ." (Morgan 11).

Easy's transgressions may be seen to challenge the racialist discourses and practices of segregation, but the radical potential of his transgressions is not only diminished by the revelation that Daphne is black, but is also tempered by Mouse's observation that:

> You learn stuff and you be thinkin' like white men be thinkin'. You be thinkin' that what's right fo' them is right fo' you. . . . you think like you white. . . . And a nigger ain't never gonna be happy 'less he accept what he is. (209)

At the end of the novel, Mosley has Mouse offer the text's most insightful intervention. In telling Easy that you can buy into white values, but you sacrifice something of yourself to do this, Mouse recognises, in the words of bell hooks, that "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy is an interrelated system of domination that will never fully empower black men" (*Real* xiii). Easy seeks assimilation into the white world and in his desire to prove himself as equal to a white man he has internalised white values.

It is this internalisation that creates the tension between identity and identification and provides an obstacle to his being a fully transgressive figure. Significantly, it is from the mouth of Mouse that the novel makes its most political statements on race. The consequence of Mouse's observation is that the narrative flips readers' expectations of Easy as the radical character and emphasises the radical potential of Mouse.

Readers familiar with the hard-boiled genre may read Mouse as the amoral conscienceless black gangster but, as I have argued, Mosley dismantles that assumption and places Mouse within both black and white traditions of heroic men. In fact, Mosley views Mouse as a heroic rather than mythic figure (Hahn 2001). However, in my discussion of the multiple identities of Mouse I reposition him as a central mythic figure in the text. His identity as a black vernacular mythic figure emerges importantly out of a collective black experience of struggle and exile. The violence of Mouse's childhood conforms to the black mythological anti-hero who, Bryant argues, has "violence . . . in his blood" (6). Young reads Mouse as the "bad black man" of African American folklore (143). I argue that Mouse is a particular type of bad black man and that he is in fact drawn from the black vernacular mythological figure of Stackolee: "the badman hero who stands outside the law" (Baker 37). According to Houston Baker, the mythological figure of Stackolee comes out of the urban scene – a world of pimps, prostitutes, gambling, drinking, fighting and death. Baker distinguishes between the trickster who uses guile and banter and Stackolee whose weapons are arrogance and disdain. In defying conventions, he is "the eternal man in revolt, the devil" (Baker 37). There are different versions of what happens to Stackolee. The most relevant version for this analysis is Patricia A. Turner's account of the story where Stackolee loses his beloved Stetson while gambling and engages in a gun battle with a black man called Billy Lyons (377). As a black cowboy who is king of the streets in Houston, the construction of Mouse Signifies on this black outlaw figure.

Exploring Mouse from this perspective moves the character from a supporting if motivating presence in the text to a more central position. Within the novel, he saves

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Easy's life twice and always turns up at the right time in difficult situations. Easy admits to only ever feeling free from fear when he is with Mouse (55). "In my mind", Easy tells the reader, "he had such power that I felt I had to do whatever he wanted" (55). At the same time, the meaning of his name Raymond – protector and counsellor – indicates his relationship to Easy and tells us that Mouse is more than just a violent killer. He has a clarity of vision that allows him to be free of delusions. He holds a non-conventional moral code that makes Easy uncomfortable because it informs and is informed by a defiant black masculinity that is non-conformist. In a world where there are boundaries, Mouse is the ultimate transgressor. And like the figure of Stackolee, the narrative associates Mouse with the devil. In chapter seven, Mouse recounts to Easy that after being shot in the chest by his stepbrother, Mouse saw death who asks him if he is scared. His response is to challenge death by replying that he sent his (Mouse's) stepfather to hell and "I sent his son after 'im, so Satan stay wit' me and I whip your ass too" (40). In *White Butterfly*, the association of Mouse as a powerful supernatural force is evident when Easy remarks that "For the desperate souls in us all, Mouse was the savior. He brought out the dreams you had as a baby. He made you believe in magic again. He was the kind of devil you'd sell your soul to and never regret the deal" (208-9). Within the segregated racialised world of Los Angeles, Mosley creates Mouse as the voice of a radical blackness and resistance. Within black vernacular mythology, the bad black man "for the most part" is "relatively unconcerned with a white presence" (Bryant 6). Hence, Mouse tells Easy that the problem with Easy and Daphne is that "you don't know that you both poor niggers" (209). Mosley's construction of Mouse as a transgressive figure who combines multiple and contradictory ways of being permits him a freedom that is not accessible to Easy.

Passing, in confounding racial ascription, disrupts the hierarchy of whiteness and can therefore be understood as potentially oppositional and liberatory for the individual. Born Ruby Hanks, Daphne's corporeal fairness allows her to pass as white and gives her access to the same privileges and resources that white women have.

Unlike the strange whiteness of the male characters, Daphne is described in terms of conventional female beauty. Easy observes how "Her face was beautiful. More beautiful than the photograph. Wavy hair so light brown that you might have called it blond from a distance, and eyes that were either green or blue depending on how she held her head" (96). This physical description of Daphne is influenced by the conventions of the detective genre, but her function within the narrative is more complicated (as indicated by her name). Passing signals the precarious racial, social, and gendered space that Daphne inhabits in the text. In crossing the color-line, Sinead Moynihan describes how:

> The passer *simultaneously* subverts and reinforces the racial binary. S/he subverts it by exposing its constructedness, its permeability, its instability. But in the very act of passing, s/he also reinforces it by granting authority and credibility to the mythical 'color line' as a real and true boundary to be transgressed. (9; emphasis in original)

Thus, Daphne's passing is both complicit with and resistant to white patriarchal hegemony. This paradoxical positioning locates the character in a liminal space where her marginality and vulnerability are compounded by gender. We may initially read Daphne as the femme fatale of the detective genre, but she also has a longer historical precedent as the tragic mulatta figure. Referring to African American minstrel performers and the carnivalesque practices of Election Day, Teresa Zackodnik points out that within the Black tradition the confusion of "authentic with counterfeit is longstanding" (11). Daphne's passing as white expresses this idea of masking and reveals an acute tension between identity and identification. Mosley constructs her racial project as one which has internalised white values and kept her black lineage a secret. Her doubleness is explicitly expressed when she tells Easy, "I'm two people. I'm her *and* I'm me" (208; emphasis in original). Although this is said within the context of having just told Easy that her white father sexually abused her when she was fourteen and relates to the trauma of this abuse, we can also read her duality as a marker of the racial and gendered in-between spaces that she occupies. Mosley's construction of

Daphne shows, as Zackodnik might argue, "the ambivalence of passing in ways that go beyond the simple duality of subversive versus complicit acts" (9).

The "ambivalence of passing" creates a critical contradiction in the construction of Daphne's identity. Moreover, complicit with the convention's representation of the femme fatale in hard-boiled fiction, Daphne's beauty makes her a commodity. Her monetary value is illustrated when Carter offers Easy "a thousand dollars" to find her (126). Within this narrative thread, Daphne's status as an object to be either bought by Carter, murdered by DeWitt, or saved by Easy reduces the potential for a radical black Western female subjectivity. However, Daphne, like Mouse, is also constructed to disrupt readers' expectations of racial identities and genre conventions and, ultimately, to resist categorisation. As if to emphasise her liminal status, appearing as she does "on the edge or just beyond existing borders, classification" (Hynes & Doty 34), the potential to construct a radical subjectivity for Daphne can only be expressed in the sub-text of the narrative.

Fundamentally, passing for white is the ultimate transgressive act of shape-shifting. Mosley appropriates and Signifies on the black male trickster figure for his female character creating a black discursive space within the narrative for the expression of a potential radical black female identity. Mosley's narrative strategy anticipates the full development of this black vernacular figure in Morrison's and Butler's works. Daphne's recognition of her doubleness illustrates Winnifred Morgan's point that trickster figures "are 'both/and' creatures" (5). The name 'Daphne' signifies a dualism as it means both nymph and place of refuge and signals her relationship to Easy in the novel as both seductress and healer. This complexity surrounding the transgressive figure is further accentuated by the fact that, according to William J. Hynes, "every time the trickster breaks a taboo or boundary, the same taboo or boundary is underlined for non-tricksters. Thus, the process is both disruptive and confirmatory" (207-8).

As a consequence, a critical tension surfaces in the attempt to read Daphne as a black subversive figure. Her desire to be accepted as white makes her complicit with white hegemony and the white American value of individualism. Mouse recognises the conflict that this identification induces for identity construction and points out to Easy that "She wanna be white. . . . So she pretend and then she lose it all. She can love a white man but all he can love is the white girl he think she is" (209). Initially the sexual relationship between Easy and Daphne challenges the segregation practices of the United States as both the reader and Easy believe Daphne to be white. But towards the end of the novel, the radical potential of this illicit relationship is diminished by the revelation that Daphne is black despite Easy's insistence that "I looked at her to see the truth. But it wasn't there. . . . Daphne was a white woman" (205). Consistent with the trickster figure, Daphne "throws doubt on the concept of truth itself" (Vecsey 106). In keeping with the temporal moment of the story, the narrative is unable to follow through the subversive potential of a black man's relationship with a white woman and fully transgress social and racial boundaries. Significantly, Easy's radical potential is negated when the novel reveals that Daphne is black. What it does reveal however is that in Easy, Mosley constructs a character who is willing to transgress the ultimate taboo of miscegenation in American society. Furthermore, in telling Daphne that "You ain't no different than me. We both just people" (208), Easy's racial politics are shown to be based on a humanism more aligned with contemporary racial politics than the 1940s' racialist discourses and practices of segregation.

The narrative's construction of Easy is complex. The text aligns him with a narrative of individualism which resists the collective black ethos of black communities. But this construction is countered by the strong ties Easy has with the black community of Watts through shared experiences of life in Texas and the migration West. His blackness emerges out of a strongly felt connection to his mother, his connection to black culture, his Southern experiences and memories, and his use of the black vernacular. Langston Hughes writing about an authentic black identity in 1926 locates it

within the "low-down folks" who "still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardisation" (1312). Easy may belong to the black common folk, but he has middle-class aspirations and measures his success by "Nordic" values, as Langston Hughes would put it.[72] This accommodationism precludes the possibilities of a radical black subjectivity for Easy. At the same time, Mosley constructs Easy's identity as constrained by the socio-cultural environment of the 1940s.

In its construction of Mouse as a mythical figure based on African American folklore, the narrative overcomes the temporal restraint to present Mouse as a radical black identity. Interestingly, it is Mouse who provides the most insightful comments on race and identity. Mouse recognises that Easy and Daphne's aspiration to be white is self-destructive. This conformity to white America values and ideals, described by Hughes as "the racial mountain", is challenged by the construction of Mouse (1311). His identity is informed by a specific black cultural hero, Stackolee. In Signifyin(g) on this figure, the text represents Mouse as a boundary- and taboo-breaker. He lives by his own rules and his opposition to convention provides him with a freedom not accessible to Easy. Mouse exploits his marginal position as an invisible black man in a white world to reject white power and white knowledge. The construction of Mouse also exemplifies the narrative's double-voiced quality as Mosley draws upon both white and black constructions of masculinity in the figure of the cowboy and Stackolee.

The construction of Daphne's identity is perhaps the most complicated out of the three characters. Her desire to be white and live in the white world is made possible by the lightness of her skin. In taking advantage of her corporeality, Daphne, to borrow from Hughes' again, "run[s] away spiritually from [her] race" (1311). This rejection of her blackness prevents the establishment of an authentic black identity and prohibits the possibility of constructing a radical black subjectivity. Daphne as a symbol of miscegenation is the most transgressive figure in the text, but her crossing of the color-line does not empower her nor does it free her. Instead, passing requires her to

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[72] Hughes also uses the phrase "Caucasian patterns" (1311-12).

sacrifice the black part of herself. In the construction of Easy, the tension between

being black and identifying with white values does not completely prohibit his self-

determination, whereas in Daphne this tension is manifested in a fragmentation of self

as she struggles to reconcile her black self with a white self.

Conclusion

"[P]eople thought they saw me but what they really saw was an illusion of me,
something that wasn't real" (Mosley 135)

Devil in a Blue Dress presents a complex picture of identity formation that exposes the

struggle of articulating a black self-determination when one is located on a profound

edge. Consequently, neither Easy, Mouse nor Daphne are as they first appear. Mouse

cannot be stereotyped as a violent predatory black man; Daphne is not the clichéd

femme fatale of the hard-boiled genre; and Easy is not a replication of the conventional

hard-boiled detective. Instead, they can be understood as representing different ways

in which black individuals navigate a hostile white world that seeks to deny their

humanity. Their survival in such a world requires an understanding of the relations

between space, knowledge and power and an ability to manipulate that relationship to

challenge dominant white ideologies. This chapter has demonstrated that Mosley's

narrative is sympathetic to the struggle of all three characters.

In creating a narrative of black Los Angeles, Mosley's racial project is three-fold.

One strand is to re-imagine and revise Chandler's literary Los Angeles from a black

perspective. A second strand is to retell his father's stories and to redress the absence

of black people in the history of settlement of Los Angeles. The third is to explore the

possibilities of creating radical or authentic black identities using a white mythic

narrative and white forms. The novel challenges narrow and essentialist constructions

of black identities and successfully subverts a system of racial classification that ranks

white masculinity at the top. Critically however, despite the murder of DeWitt at the end of the novel and the characters' transgressions of racial, gendered, cartographic, social, cultural and linguistic borders, the narrative does not upend the social order and hegemonic authority. Instead, the text ends rather conservatively with Daphne's return to the black community; Easy's self-employment as a private investigator for the black community; and Mouse's return to Houston. Similar to Greer's novel, *Devil in a Blue Dress* is not able to fully resist the pull of both myth and form, the effect of which is a narrative where the dichotomies between confinement and freedom, and black and white within the historical temporal moment of the text inhibit the narrative from fully realising the potential of the "spaces of radical openness" that it creates through a textual and rhetorical Signifyin(g). Mosley's novel may challenge the racial and cultural frontiers of the form in its representations of Easy and Daphne, but ultimately the narrative is wedded to a masculinised view of the West.

Building on Mosley's use of the trickster figure for Mouse, I argue in the following chapter that Toni Morrison's novel is instrumental in expanding the black Western literary form further by creating *Paradise* as a trickster text that incorporates black vernacular mythology. With its "trickster energy"[73] *Paradise* becomes itself a "space[s] of radical openness" ("Choosing" 149). This positioning leads to a more critical stance towards the ethnocentric masculinised narratives of Western myths and form, and significantly it offers more promising opportunities for the construction of potential radical black Western identities than has hitherto been presented.

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[73] Term used by Elizabeth Ammons. Introduction. *Tricksterism in Turn-of-the-Century Literature: A Multicultural Perspective*, edited by Elizabeth Ammons and Annette White-Parks. UP New England, 1994, p. xi.

Figure 2 *Los Angeles Transit Lines*, circa 1948. Highlighted 116th Street
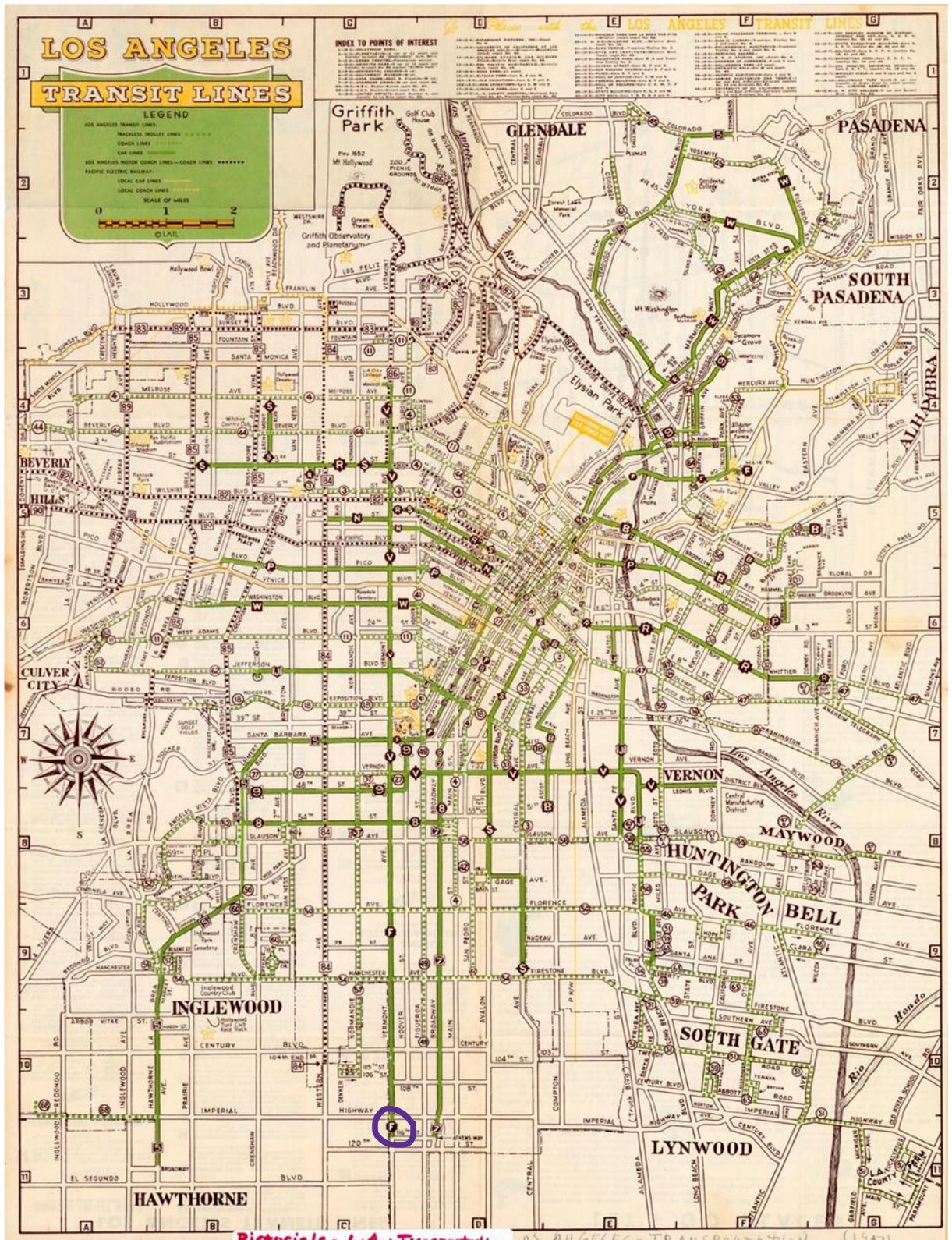
Figure 3 *Route Map Los Angeles Railway: Electric Car and Bus Routes,* circa 1947/48.[74]
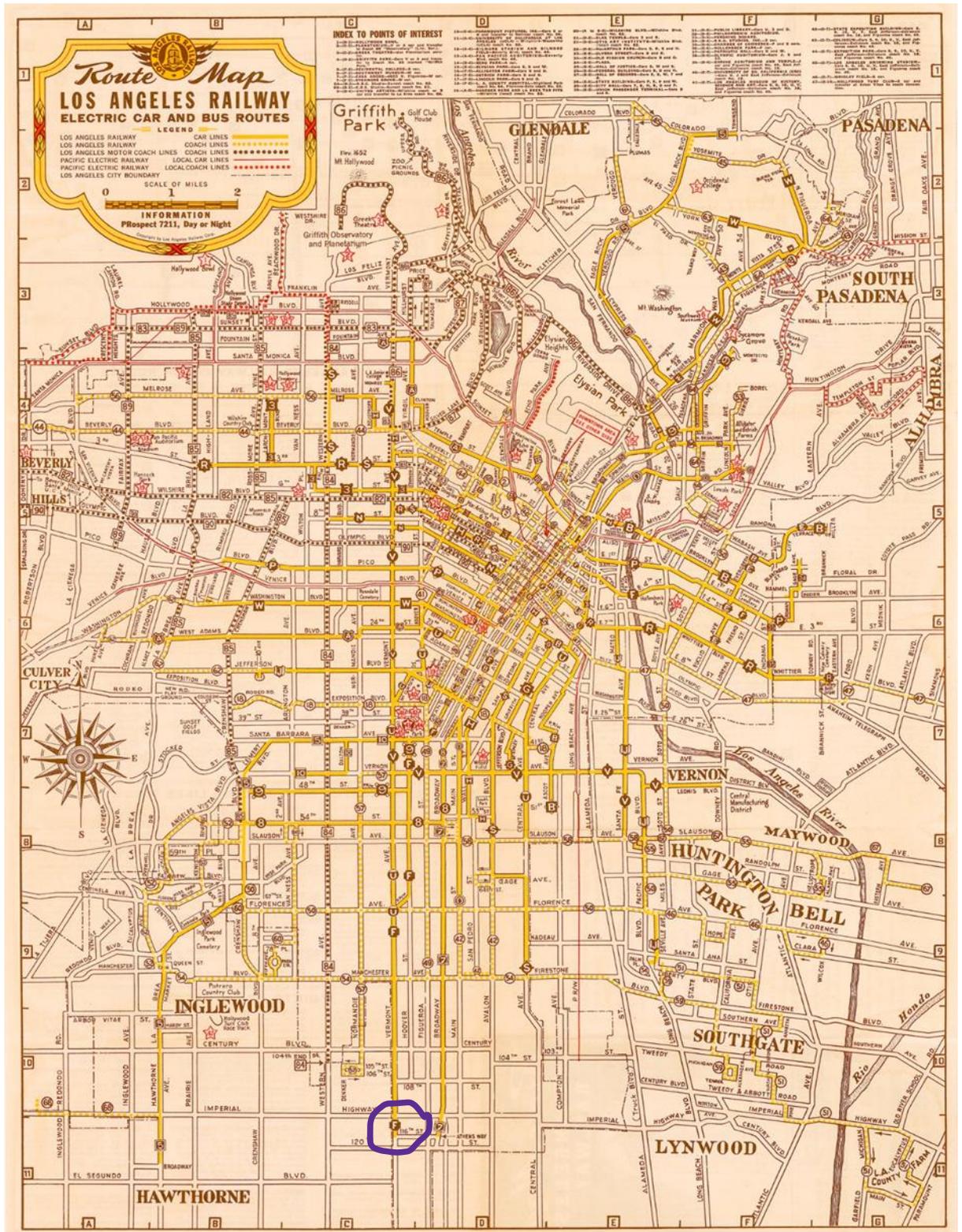
Chapter Five: "A backward noplace" (308), *Paradise* by Toni Morrison

Introduction

"Come Prepared or Not at All" (Morrison 13)

First published in 1997, *Paradise* is set in Oklahoma and opens and closes in 1976. Within this structural frame, the contemporary narrative spans 1968-1976, but recollections of stories told, and memories of the past, span a wider historical period dating back to 1889. Presenting multiple points-of-view, the novel explores the tensions between the all-black town of Ruby and its neighbour, the Convent, which in the contemporary narrative is now home to a group of dispossessed and displaced women who have sought refuge there. The tensions between the two communities have their origins in the earlier temporal narrative where the Old Fathers (the grandfathers and fathers of the families now in Ruby) leave the South and migrate West in search of an all-black town. However, "Turned away by rich Choctaw and poor whites", the group of racially pure black ex-slaves are "nevertheless unprepared for the aggressive discouragement they received from Negro towns already being built" (13). Called the Disallowing, this rejection informs the 'creation story' of Ruby and is mythologised each year in the children's performance of the Nativity. In establishing two very different communities, Morrison's novel engages with the contemporary notion of frontier as a cultural contact zone where, and as argued in chapter one, Pratt argues that "disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (4). The murder of the Convent women by the Patriarchs of Ruby "because they *could*" is the critical consequence of a narrative which inverts and interrogates the racial project of the Frontier Myth (297; emphasis in original).

As a Post-Frontier narrative, *Paradise* Signifies on Turner's dichotomy of civilisation versus wilderness and the spatial practice of exclusion to interrogate "the problematic legacy of Western myths" (Rio and Hestetun, par. 3). Morrison's novel draws attention to the complexity of constructing potentially radical black Western identities in a narrative that is haunted by a colonial mentality. This narrative of subjugation points to a reading of Ruby as a kind of "fourthspace" where, according to James R. Giles, "mythological dimensions" become an oppressive rather than a liberating force (13). Importantly, Morrison's use of the Frontier Myth contrasts significantly with that of Beckwourth, Love and Micheaux. For these earlier Western writers, the Frontier's mythology, and in particular the narrative of 'regeneration through violence', provides them with a spatial and discursive opportunity to create black protagonists as heroic frontiersmen. And although the contemporary texts of Greer and, certainly, Mosley are more critical of the West's mythic narratives, both novels are complicit in the notion of violence as a progressive and restorative force. However, in *Paradise* (and *Parable* as I discuss in the next chapter) the mythological dimension of Western violence as a positive force is subverted. Instead of a textual affirmation of regeneration though violence, *Paradise* presents violence as a destructive discursive and physical force of male oppression. At the same time, the novel expresses a narrative of confinement and conformity which is revealed through what Edward W. Soja would describe as "the spatialization of patriarchal power" and the subsequent struggle over the right to be different (*Thirdspace* 110). Consequently, spiritual, gendered, racial and cultural borders are contested and crossed as characters seek self-determination.

In the novel's interrogation of the values and conventions of white mythic narratives, *Paradise* is the most subversive Western text in this study. Not only does the novel demonstrates that black identification with hegemonic white discourses profoundly inhibits expressions of radical identities, but significantly, *Paradise* itself contests the hegemonic discursive spaces of the Western literary form. Morrison uses

her marginal positioning as a black female writer working within hegemonic white masculinised narratives of Western identity to create a radical Post-Western text that is dialogic and critically complex. Mark A. Tabone has called the novel a "notoriously elusive text" (129). My argument locates the narrative's 'undecidability', to use Gates's word,[75] firmly within the black vernacular and African American folklore, or black vernacular mythology as I term the latter. Significantly, I argue that the novel's incorporation of the features of "parody, irony, . . . indeterminacy, open-endedness, ambiguity, . . . uncertainty, disruption" positions *Paradise* as a 'trickster' text (*Signifying* 7).[76] Hence, Morrison's novel presents a signifyin(g) thread to what I described in Chapter two as Beckwourth's 'trickster tale'. Both texts obscure meaning and truth, but Morrison's contemporary narrative is much more complex and layered in its signifyin(g) practices as I shall subsequently argue. The novel also illustrates a significant creative transformation of the form in its critical shift from an exploration of the trickster character that we see in Love's and Mosley's narratives to the establishment of a category of trickster text. As a consequence, I show that Morrison's narrative generates spaces of radical openness within the literary history of the Western form that suggests the possibility of articulating new kinds of Western racial and gendered identities. Morrison recovers the traditional black male trickster figure for black women and unlike the previous texts explored, she locates the potential for radical identities in her female characters – individuals who historically have been doubly marginalised by colonial discourses because of their race and gender and who therefore occupy the 'profound edge' of patriarchal and national discourses. The novel's transition in emphasis from constructions of purely black Western male subjectivities to constructions of black and/or female Western subjectivities anticipates the creation of Butler's activistic female protagonist.

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[75] In his discussion of the Signifying Monkey poems, Gates writes that within the poems the "set of skewed relationships creates a measure of undecidability within the discourse, such that it must be interpreted or decoded by careful attention to its play of differences" (*Signifying* 58).
[76] See Gates's discussion of trickster qualities (*Signifying* 7*)*.

The Frontier Myth

"extravagant space . . . freedom without borders . . . freedom was a test administered by the natural world that a man had to take for himself everyday" (Morrison 98)

The story of the Old Fathers' migration and founding of Haven Signifies on the black Exoduster Movement of the late nineteenth century which sought to establish all-black Western townships. For many African Americans, Oklahoma Territory, according to Quintard Taylor, "was more than a homesteading opportunity. It represented a concerted effort to create towns and colonies where black people would be free to exercise their political rights without interference" (*In Search* 144). Taylor explains that this opportunity was possible because "Surplus lands" had been made available to homesteaders by reducing Native American reservation land after the "famous 'run' for land claims on April 22, 1889" (144).[77] Morrison inserts the Old Fathers and their families into this historical moment describing how they "walked to the 'Run'. Walked from Mississippi and Louisiana to Oklahoma and got to the place described in advertisements" (194). Historically then, the Western opportunity to acquire land and freedom in the late nineteenth century and the rhetoric that accompanied settlement of the West converges with an African American desire to escape from a white supremacist South where the lynching of black men peaked in the 1890s.

The novel's appropriation of the Turnerian idea of the West as "the presence of practically free land into which men might escape from the oppression or inequalities which burdened them in the older settlements" offers the opportunity for more positive constructions of an African American identity than the narrative of Post-Reconstruction (Turner, "The West" 274). Steward Morgan remembers the stories that he heard from his grandfather and father:

> Coming from lush vegetation to extravagant space . . . signalled luxury – an amplitude of soul and stature that was freedom without borders and without

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[77] According to the United States Bureau of Census, by 1890 there were 18,636 African Americans settled in Oklahoma Territory (Taylor, *In Search* 135).

deep menacing woods where enemies could hide. Here freedom was not entertainment, like a carnival or a hoe down that you can count on once a year. Nor was it the table droppings from the entitled. Here freedom was a test administered by the natural world that a man had to take for himself every day. And if he passed enough tests long enough, he was king. (99)

Steward's recollection interweaves a black vernacular consciousness of freedom with a white mythic discourse of settlement. For the Old Fathers, the West promises to be everything that the South is not. But the narrative quickly dismisses the notion of "freedom without borders" through the "Disallowing". Turned away from Fairly and other all-black towns because they are "too poor, too bedraggled-looking to enter, let alone reside in, the communities that were soliciting Negro homesteaders" (14), the Old Fathers also discover that colorism existed within the wider black community. There was "a new separation: light-skinned against black" in which "the sign of racial purity they had taken for granted had become a stain" (194). As a "spatial practice" to signal black exclusion from the mythic discourse of nation-building (Tally, *Spatiality* 114), the Disallowing performs a Signifyin(g) parallel to Greer's trope of the devil's hatband. However, Morrison uses her black trope to also signal intra-racial exclusion and consequently her novel is much more critical of the implications the Disallowing has for the construction of alternative (radical) black identities.

Naming the rejection as 'the Disallowing' encodes a personal and communal experience that signals black difference and stands as a synecdoche for the black experience of marginalisation in America. Significantly, this black experience of rejection is inscribed on to the Nativity narrative and dramatized each year into a ritualised display of black racial and religious purity that mythologises the founding of Haven. Problematically however, the Nativity play reinforces and perpetuates a mythology that serves to maintain a hierarchy of power and wealth in the town and enables the New Fathers to pursue a racial project of control and censure. Whereas the novel's Signifyin(g) on a black vernacular mythology provides a positive resource for the construction of the Convent women, Ruby's black mythology is informed by the

colonial narrative of Manifest Destiny to the extent that the Patriarchs are divorced from the grassroot concerns of the community. Ironically, the play also gestures towards the demise of Ruby in that only seven founding families, or as Richard Misner calls them "Seven holy families", out of the original nine are now represented in the play (211). The diminishing black community hints at Ruby's impermanency as a black racial Western space and is a direct consequence of the Patriarchs' unwillingness to accept difference. The temporality of a black Western space mirrors the removal or 'disallowing' of Native Americans from their Western homelands. The Old Fathers and their families find themselves victims of exclusion, but paradoxically they themselves are agents in a process of indigenous spatial and cultural displacement. *Paradise* reveals that the Old Fathers built Haven on land which "belonged to a family of State Indians, and it took a year and four months of negotiation, of labor for land, to finally have it free and clear" (98). The contradictory positioning of African Americans within the narrative of Western advancement symbolises the tensions between the mythic narrative and the reality of settlement. Therefore, the original nine founding families occupy the same role as colonising white settlers in facilitating the displacement of indigenous peoples from the landscape. *Paradise* employs elements of the Frontier Myth only to diverge from and critique the myth.

The story of the Disallowing experienced by the Old Fathers is compounded by the contemporary "Disallowing, Part Two" (194) where African American soldiers returning home after the war are excluded from a patriotic narrative that celebrates its returning soldiers as heroes. Instead, African American soldiers hear about "the missing testicles of other colored soldiers; about medals being torn off by gangs of rednecks and Sons of the Confederacy. . . . It would have been like watching a parade banner that said "WAR-WEARY SOLDIERS! NOT WELCOME HOME!" (194; emphasis in original). For Ruby's Patriarchs, the exclusion of black veterans from a national narrative of military heroism is exacerbated by the knowledge that what lies "Out There: space, once beckoning and free" is now "unmonitored and seething" (16). The threat of

racial violence that informs this discursive and social marginalisation causes the Morgan twins – Steward and Deacon (Deek) – to "persuade other home boys to repeat what the Old Fathers had done in 1890" (16). It is this sense of persecution and vulnerability of being a black man in a white world that pushes them further West to finally settle on land "bought by their pooled discharge pay" and build the town of Ruby on Beaver's Creek where the grass is cheap because of the tornadoes of 1949 (16). The decision to settle far away from other communities is a radical act as it stands at odds with the move towards racial integration evidenced by the thousands of African Americans who migrated North and West to the cities during the mid-twentieth century.

Built in the Oklahoma wilderness with "nothing for ninety miles around" (8), Ruby's location is symbolic of the New Fathers' desire to choose marginality as the site from which to resist the hegemonic discursive and cultural narratives of white America. Elizabeth Jones reminds us that space is "inherently intertwined with power relations and hierarchies" (39). At the same time, Morrison's cartographic placing of Ruby within the Western wilderness engages with the traditional metaphor of the Frontier as the place where Euro-American settlement ended and which, as Crooks argues, "denote[s] a relatively fixed line of defence for purity and order of the Euro-American culture" (70). Morrison flips this metaphor to present a black town whose existence challenges the integrationist policies of American and whose borders protect a black patriarchal space. Jones reminds us that "spaces can be used both to marginalise, and to resist, as well as a multiplicity of positions in between" (39). Problematically, it is the masculine spatial and ideological discursive underpinnings of the town that lead to the massacre at the Convent. Steward's spatial narrative of Ruby and its surrounding area draws on black and white expressions of Western freedom:

> From the beginning its people were free and protected. A sleepless woman could always rise from her bed, wrap a shawl around her shoulders and sit on the steps in the moonlight. And if she felt like it she could walk out the yard and on down the road. No lamp and no fear. A hiss-crackle from the side of the road would never scare her because whatever it was that made that sound, it wasn't something creeping up on her. Nothing for ninety miles around thought she was prey. (8)

Although this scene may suggest a utopian spatial freedom for Ruby's women, the narrative reveals that spatial, social, racial, and sexual freedom for women is policed and contained by Ruby's Patriarchs. Ironically, Morrison places the above passage within the murder scene at the Convent, which I name the Disallowing, Part Three. In contrast to the masculine bounded space of Ruby, the feminine space of the Convent is open and liberal. Within this feminine space, the Convent women dress, behave, speak and live as they wish. In their rejection of a hegemonic patriarchal discourse of femininity they are, for Steward, "women like none he knew" (8). The men's murder of these women and subsequent erasure of a feminine space ensures that "nothing inside or out rots the one all-black town worth the pain" (5). Moreover, the massacre maintains Soja's "spatialization of patriarchal power" (*Thirdspace* 110). In contrast to the previous texts where a monolithic male Western space is uncritically accepted, Morrison's narrative shifts attention to the dichotomy between male and female spaces.

"The concept of dichotomy", Leslie Kanes Weisman argues, is essential in understanding the "structuring of the patriarchal symbolic universe" (19) where "the dichotomisation of cities, metaphorically associated with 'man' and civilisation, and "the wilderness landscape, metaphorically associated with woman and danger, is at the epicentre of a male-centered cosmogony" (20). Weisman continues to say that throughout antiquity "the building of cities and towns was a sacred religious act that separated man from the world of nature" and that "the wilderness that lay outside the security of city walls was personified as female, profane, and savage". Importantly, this "ancient dichotomy continued to structure attitudes toward the environment in the 'New World'" (Weisman 20). Consequently, Anglo-American Western discourse has traditionally read the Western natural landscape as female – an entity that needs to be conquered, possessed, and tamed. This masculinised colonial narrative has its corollary in the subjugation of women. In *Paradise*, the migration of the families and the Disallowing, the construction of Ruby, and the separate construction and history of the

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Convent fit within a narrative of "city of man versus mother nature" (Weisman 20). Situated within the wilderness, the thematic connections between nature, the untamed, and the unruly feminine are established. The literary mapping of Ruby and the Convent (which is seventeen miles north of Ruby) engages with Turner's spatial dichotomy of civilisation versus wilderness. Within that mythic narrative, Ruby as a Frontier town symbolises the line of settlement. The Convent on the other hand and its female inhabitants are geographically placed beyond the town within the Oklahoma wilderness, symbolising the women's status as Other within the novel and associating them with that which needs to be controlled. Therefore, the Convent's location illustrates that in the racial project of the Frontier Myth, Western spaces were "dichotomously spatialised" into 'us' and 'them' (Soja, *Thirdspace* 87).

The Convent is originally built as an embezzler's folly. Bought by a wealthy woman and named Christ the King School, it becomes "an asylum/boarding school for Indian girls in some desolate part of the North American West" (224). The State preferred Protestant schools which is why "Catholic churches and schools in Oklahoma were rare as fish pockets" (227). Located on a profound geographical and cultural edge, the Convent originally operated as a hegemonic colonial discursive space in its re-education of the Other. Such places claimed to be well-intentioned, aiming to Christianise and educate Native Americans. Instead, they led to cultural erasure and detribalisation. Colonial discourses and practices functioned to ensure that certain people occupied certain spaces. Readers learn that the benefactress bought the mansion because:

> It was an opportunity to intervene at the heart of the problem: to bring God and language to natives who were assumed to have neither; to alter their diets, their clothes, their minds; to help them despise everything that had once made their lives worthwhile and to offer them instead the privilege of knowing the one and only God and a chance, thereby, for redemption. (227)

Paradise explicitly challenges Christianity as an imperialist tool and the ideological discourse of Manifest Destiny. Described by Joy Porter as a "doctrine of conquest",

Manifest Destiny "legitimated . . . seizure of Indian lands peacefully or militarily for 'just' cause according to Christian 'civilised' criteria' (46). Winona LaDuke, in her indictment of a government that has failed in the past and the present to protect Native American cultures, writes that "Papal law was the foundation of colonialism; the church served as handmaiden to military, economic, and spiritual genocide and domination" (11-12). The Convent/boarding school may have been a female space, but it was one characterised by servitude to masculine power in the form of religion. To use the words of Soja, the Convent functioned as "a storehouse of epistemological power" (*Thirdspace* 67). The women challenge this symbolic organisation by using the space of the Convent to practise an African derived spirituality while also attending to their own emotional and sexual needs and desires. In transgressing the original symbolic space that the Convent represented, the Convent becomes a counter-hegemonic space and a counter-patriarchal space. Within my study, it is this dimension of an oppositional gendered and heteronormative subjectivity that signals a critical shift in the development of the black Western form and advances Greer's representation of the homeless figure with its transgressive and transformative literary potential.

The extreme marginal space that the Convent women occupy in terms of their gender, morality and spirituality is, to quote hooks, "not a safe place" ("Choosing" 149). This vulnerability is literally demonstrated by the nine men's invasion of their home and is intensified when the men fail to 'read' the domestic space properly. As an example of Henri Lefebvre's spaces of representation and what Soja defines as Thirdspace, the Convent embodies "complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not" which are "linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life" (Lefebvre 33). Lucille P. Fultz identifies that when the men enter the Convent, "they focus overwhelmingly on domestic details" (30). I argue however that crucially the men are unable to decode the complex symbolisms and misread the domestic details as evidence of a womanhood that contests Ruby's established ideal of femininity. As the men search the building, the reader is told that "there are strange things nailed or taped to the walls or propped in a

corner. A 1968 calendar, large X's marking various dates (April 4, July 19); a letter written in blood so smeary its satanic message cannot be deciphered" (7). These signs and marks resist patriarchal interpretation, and their illegibility provides a counter-narrative which destabilises the dominant meanings and authority of the Convent and asserts a different kind of feminine and spiritual knowledge. Unable to read the latent messages behind these signs, the men read them literally, interpreting the Convent as a diseased place where a "female malice . . . hides" (4). The men's inability to decode this female language of Signifyin(g) – they interpret the writings and artefacts as examples of witchery – results in tragic consequences. Gretchen Martin writes that Signifyin(g) "operates in a variety of linguistic and non-verbal devices" (3). The women's re-inscription of the Convent "subvert[s] the oppressor-oppressed paradigm" and challenges the original political ideology of the Convent as a vehicle for colonial power and Christian authority (Wrede 10). The Convent is a complex and contradictory space existing on both sides of the Frontier. It is both a conventional space in that as a colonial space it symbolised hegemonic patriarchal values and it is a radical space in that it is the home to untamed and unorthodox women. The spatial and metaphorical positioning of the Convent Signifies on the 'ancient' discourse of the wilderness as female, profane and savage and on Turner's concept of the Frontier as a "meeting-point between savagery and civilisation" which "lies at the hither edge of free land" ("Significance" 7, 8). Significantly, the Convent and its female inhabitants challenge the historical formulation of fixed and 'natural' spatial and ideological boundaries.

Although the 8-rock Patriarchs attempt to establish an ideological and moral border between Ruby and the Convent, the road that connects the two places physically represents the impossibility of maintaining such a frontier. Over the years, according to the local mid-wife Lone, several women from Ruby have walked the road to the Convent seeking advice, help, or peppers and melons from the garden. In fact, more individuals have walked from Ruby to the Convent than the other way round. Importantly, Lone's counter-memories challenge the official discourse of Ruby and

reveals that for many of Ruby's townsfolk the Convent has been a space of comfort and forms of self-expression prohibited in Ruby. Free from male influence the Convent offers Ruby's women an escape from the patriarchal authority and expectations of Ruby. It also allows them to witness different kinds of womanhood that are not constrained by a patriarchal ideology of domesticity. For Deacon and K.D., it is the sexual freedom of the Convent and the men's desire for the Other that leads them to transgress their own rigid moral values. Not only do these transgressions of metaphorical and geographical borders reveal the instability of such borders, but the border-crossings intimate that perhaps the Convent's allure is that, as thirdspace, the issues of race and gender that dominate Ruby are not privileged in the Convent.[78] Therefore, located geographically, culturally, and socially on a profound edge, the Convent functions as a liberatory space for the expression of different kinds of Western subjectivities that are potentially subversive.

In contrast to the potentially liberating and transforming space of Thirdspace, James R. Giles' concept of 'fourthspace' suggests a way of understanding Ruby and the Patriarchs' unconscionable actions towards the Convent women. In his exploration of violence in fiction, Giles argues that "Fourthspace assumes the existence of Soja's firstspace, secondspace, and thirdspace but projects another spatial dimension in which the liberation inherent in thirdspace has been co-opted and is no longer possible" (13). The consequence is that the 'radical' subjectivity of the characters has been "infiltrated and co-opted either by debased mythologies or by oppressive elements in the capitalist culture or in American history or in all these ways" (13). The New Fathers appropriate a hegemonic white Western mythic narrative of exclusion and violence to justify their own positions of power and authority in Ruby. They are unable or unwilling to see that they perpetuate the very abuses and injustices that their grandfathers sought to escape from. The oppressive racial and gendered public discourses seek to

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[78] Soja argues that Thirdspace is a space where issues of race, gender and class can be addressed simultaneously without privileging one over the other (5).

ensure that spatially Ruby inhibits any attempts at self-expression that reside outside these discourses. Giles explains that within fourthspace "the margins, whether physical, mental, social, or cultural, offer no escape, no affirmation, no hope of redemption" (13). This is because "the mythological dimensions" in fourthspace "are inherently oppressive; ritual violence leads to oppression, not transcendence" (13-14). Fourthspace is exploited in the domestic violence against women that takes place behind closed doors in Ruby. It is manifested in the communal space at the Oven where the men plan to attack the Convent women. Whereas Soja's Thirdspace seeks to break down binaries and dichotomies, Giles' fourthspace perpetuates and reinforces polarisation. Therefore, *Paradise* presents a critically complex relationship between racial representation and the Frontier experience and demonstrates the difficulty of reconciling "dominant ideologies and alternative communities" (Reutter 205).

The Western Literary Form

 "With God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby" (Morrison 18)

Paradise Signifies on and creatively expands the Western form to express a radical black Post-Western narrative. A number of scholars have discussed the idea that Morrison's novel engages with mythic narratives of the Frontier,[79] but explorations of *Paradise* employing the Western genre have been less numerous and explicit. While Blake Allmendinger identifies the novel in his list of African American writers who "reinvent genres such as Westerns", his focus is on examining the communities of Ruby and the Convent (*Imagining* xviii). Cheli Reutter (2009) explores the novel's engagement with and critique of the principle of Manifest Destiny. Reutter introduces *Paradise* as "unique among narratives of the American West" (197) in that it engages

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[79] Dalsgård 2001; Johnson 2002; Gauthier 2005; Reutter 2009; Schell 2014 (to name a few).

with the myths of the West, but it "is also not . . . [a] western" (198). Susan Neal Mayberry (2010) argues that the masculinity of the men of Ruby is "fixed" by Western concepts of masculinity that are associated with American cowboy culture and she later refers to the massacre as "the gunfight at Morrison's O.K. Corral" (84, 99), but the novel's appropriation of the Western form is not explicitly explored. One can speculate that because Morrison's novel does not initially read as belonging to the Western literary form, this aspect of the novel's construction has tended to go unexamined. Nonetheless, these discussions importantly position *Paradise* as black Western writing.

Specifically, I explore *Paradise* as a Post-Western narrative. In his discussion of Post-Western cinema, Neil Campbell describes the genre as being "preoccupied with *the remains of what remains* from the action the Western represented; its dark inheritance and ghostly consequences" ("Post-Western" 412; emphasis in original). Morrison's novel is deeply concerned with the consequences of hegemonic forms of knowledge and practice upon the construction of gendered Western identities. Rooted in a colonial past, these discourses and practices result in a narrative where the present temporal moment of the text is constantly disrupted and haunted by past temporal events. Significantly, the tension that results from this narrative strategy creates a textual space for the articulation of potential radical Western identities. *Paradise* Signifies on some familiar tropes of the conventional white literary form: Frontier violence; the encounter with the Other; self-transformation; and redemption, which are interwoven with the black cultural trope of vertical ascent, but Morrison re-presents these tropes in a narrative that resists the realism of the form. In its creative approach to the Western form, *Paradise*, to borrow from Campbell, can be described as a "generic mutation[s] of sorts" which means that it "'participate[s]' in many of the formal, thematic and tropic discourses of the genre whilst 'not belonging' entirely within its borders". In contesting the generic frontiers, the double-voiced narrative critically presents "a challenge through interruption" ("Defining" 5).

One of the ways in which this challenge to the conventional Western takes place is in the novel's literary intertextuality with Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Micheaux's *The Conquest*. Morrison's novel Signifies on Hurston's in its use of free indirect discourse and construction of black masculinity. Morrison uses free indirect discourse extensively within the novel to present multiple consciousnesses. The use of free indirect discourse along with the black vernacular and black mythology inserts a blackness into the Western form that revises its white literary convention of realism and disrupts the traditional Anglo-American point of view. Morrison's representation of Steward and Deek Morgan has literary echoes of Hurston's construction of Joe/Jody Starks. For Starks, black manhood is defined by being a "big voice" in the community and having a 'lady' as a wife (48). His quick rise to the status of town mayor asserts his dominance in the all-black community of Eatonville and that dominance extends to his wife, Janie. He seeks to impose physical and mental borders upon Janie by confining her spatially, insisting that "she's uh woman and her place is in de home" (69) and by controlling her self-expression, "Joe had forbidden her to indulge" in the porch conversations (85). While Hurston illustrates some of the difficulties black women faced in defining self within black patriarchal communities, her focus was upon Janie's journey of self-expression. In an act of what Gates would describe as unmotivated literary signification (Introduction xxvii), *Paradise* offers a contemporary response to the impact of black patriarchy upon black women's construction of self. It revises the theme of black male power by shifting the focus from a single 'big voice' to a black leadership of 'big voices' and embeds black male patriarchy within white and black hegemonic discourses of nation-building and identity construction.

The novel's concern with how black Western manhood is expressed is also a signifyin(g) thread to Micheaux's protagonist. Like Deveraux, the Patriarchs in their obsession to maintain the town's black racial purity demonstrate a race-consciousness that merely inverts but does not subvert the hegemonic racial hierarchy. The uncritical

acceptance of a racial hierarchy is exacerbated by an equally uncritical internalisation of a mythical white heterosexual Western masculinity. While both narratives demonstrate that this complicity with white patriarchal values inhibits the possibility of finding alternative radical ways of being for the black male characters, Morrison's novel explores the consequences of these masculinities for the wider community and illustrates a contemporaneous concern of the 1990s with the "sense of breakage, or rupture . . . in gender relations" (hooks, "Black Women" 206).

A further significant disruption to the literary form occurs in the literary echo of the American Adam figure. An image of "adventure", "promise and possibility", this "authentic American", according to R.W.B. Lewis, was "a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history" (1). In the novel's depiction of the Old Fathers who had walked from Mississippi to Oklahoma Territory and who were "Smart, strong, and eager to work their own land" and who had "believed . . . they were destined" (14), the narrative parodies the authentic American Adam figure of white mythology to illustrate the incompatibility of this Frontier hero for representations of black Western masculinity. Thus, unlike the new white hero of adventure who is "emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race" (Lewis 5), Morrison's construction of the Old Fathers presents characters who are defined by their "spectacular history" (14). Steward recalls of his ancestors that "They were extraordinary. They had served, picked, plowed and traded in Louisiana since 1755. . . . They had kept the issue of their loins fruitful for more than two hundred years" (99). The subsequent humiliation of being turned away from all-black towns because of their skin colour and poverty challenges the authenticity of the identity and Western experience of the white Adamic American figure and highlights the exclusion of black masculinity from constructions of heroic Western masculinity.[80]

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[80] The consequences of this exclusion for black fiction extends to American fiction in general. According to Lewis, "The evolution of the hero as Adam in the fiction of the New World . . .

"Western narratives of adventurous mountain-men, self-sufficient pioneers, and honest, hard-working cowboys", Dan Moos tells us, have "provided the building blocks for a story of American exceptionalism and bolstered the immanence of a distinctly masculinist American Manifest Destiny" (2). The Morgan brothers appropriate the narrative of American exceptionalism and a masculinist narrative of progress to re-write their narrative of rejection. In so doing, their Western masculinities are aligned with the defining principles of white "male dominance, patriarchy, masculinism, machismo, heterosexism" (Worden 2). One of the ways in which the text aligns black masculinity to this environment and shapes black manhood according to the myth is through the presentation of Steward and Deacon as black cowboys. Ranch-owning Steward's "preference was to mount around four a.m. and ride Night till sunrise. He loved to roam the pastures, where everything was in the open" (95). This literary signification draws on the idyllic fable of the freedom-loving cowboy that the vast open spaces of the Western landscape offer him. Yet this mythic narrative of manhood is undercut by the preceding passages where Steward recollects his older brother's story of seeing two white men beat a black woman unconscious. Steward does not challenge Elder's assumption that she was "a streetwalking woman", but whereas his brother heroically rushes to the defence of the woman and fights the white men, Steward "did not sympathise with the whitemen, but he could see their point, could even feel the adrenaline, imagining the fist was his own" (95). The blatant misogyny expressed by Steward subverts the notion of the cowboy as the heroic defender of the vulnerable and foreshadows the violence that he will commit against the Convent women.

As for Deacon, it is Connie's memory of him that places Deek within the fabled narrative of Western manhood. She remembers accompanying Mary Magna on a trip to Ruby in 1954 to buy some provisions. What Connie does not know is that it is the

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coincides . . . with the evolution of *the* hero in American fiction generally" (91; emphasis in original).

day of Ruby's legendary horse derby. While she waits outside the pharmacist for Mary

Magna, Connie sees Deacon for the first time:

> A lean young man astride one horse, leading another. His khaki shirt was
> soaked with sweat, and at some point he removed his wide flat hat to wipe
> perspiration from his forehead. His hips were rocking in the saddle, back and
> forth, back and forth. Sha sha sha. Sha sha sha. Consolata saw his profile, and
> the wing of a feathered thing, undead, fluttered in her stomach. (226)

Connie's memory of Deacon expresses the virility of the cowboy figure and presents

him as an object of desire. I argue that in this scene the narrative reveals an

intertextuality with the scene in Wister's 1902 novel, *The Virginian*, where the

greenhorn narrator first sees the Virginian. In Wister's first chapter, 'Enter the Man', the

inexperienced Eastern narrator sees the Virginian for the first time climbing down from

the high gate of the corral "with the undulations of a tiger, smooth and easy, as if his

muscles flowed beneath his skin" (1). Two pages on the narrator observes the

Virginian, "a slim young giant, more beautiful than pictures" and admits to the reader

that "Had I been the bride, I should have taken the giant, dust and all" (3). In

Signifyin(g) on Wister's description, the narrative aligns Deacon with the mythic

narrative surrounding the cowboy figure only to revise such a reading. Like the

Virginian, Deacon becomes a landowner and businessman conforming to the genre's

expectation that the Western landscape offers opportunities for the self-made man.

Stephen McVeigh argues that Wister "discerns a 'code of the West' that presents "a set

of values and practices which have little to do with institutional law and government but

rather have grown out of the social and cultural circumstances of the West" (45). The

example he provides is the community's methods of peacekeeping and justice. But

whereas the Virginian's use of vigilante justice conforms to the 'code', Deacon's use of

violence against the Convent women parodies the code of the West revealing that

vigilante justice as restorative violence was a tool for defending the borders of the privileged.[81]

In his analysis of Wister's novel, McVeigh argues that it is women who pose a threat to the code of the West "in so far as they are symbolic of civilisation, and everything that goes with it" (45).[82] Morrison's novel repeats and revises this Western trope of the female threat to Western manhood by inverting the notion that the Convent women are symbolic of civilisation and instead constructs them as Other. To maintain the black social order of Ruby, women have a strict script for identity formation. A script which affirms that a woman's place is within the domestic setting of the home and family. Based on a Victorian ideology of 'true womanhood', this script for female identity merges with the genre's conventional roles for women where women are contained within domestic spaces as respectable women, or as disreputable women in saloons and brothels. There is no place within the traditional genre for such a community of uninhibited women who live free from male control, or as Deacon describes them, "this new and obscene breed of female" (279). In discussing Sam Peckinpah's 1969 film *The Wild Bunch*, Richard Slotkin writes that that there is an "insane logic" to the Western's code of romantic love, arguing that "if women are not virgins, objects worthy of blind worship and rescue, then they must be whores, legitimate objects of violence" (604). *Paradise* engages with and challenges this idea that there are certain kinds of women, "awful women", who are legitimate objects of violence (11). The language used by the men validates their views of the women as appropriate prey and dehumanises the women who are "after all, . . . detritus: throwaway people" (4). In their final discussion before leaving for the Convent, the men describe the women as "[b]itches. More like witches . . . heifers . . . sluts" (276). When they enter the Convent, they see that "each woman sleeps not in a bed, like normal people, but in a hammock" (7) and

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[81] In Wister's novel, the Virginian – acting on behalf of the community – seeks out and lynches his old friend and now cattle rustler, Steve. The narrative justifies this form of vigilante violence by advocating it as a form of restorative violence. The privileged in Wister's novel are the wealthy land-owning ranchers.

[82] Things like "law and order, police, justice systems, schools, children, domesticity" (McVeigh 45).

that there is "not a cross of Jesus anywhere" (7). Convinced that they are right and "With God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby" (18).

As aforementioned, Mayberry refers to the massacre as "the gunfight at Morrison's O.K. Corral" (99). However, a gunfight suggests that both parties are armed. Instead, I read the men as forming a posse whose intention is to 'hunt' down the women. Like Deek's hunting of quail, the men need stealth to find their human prey. It is dawn when they arrive at the Convent, having "walked the final miles" because they did not want "engine hum or headlights to ruin their cover of darkness" (18). In their final act of shooting the women, *Paradise* clearly re-enacts a subversion of the sacred hunter myth.[83] As the men take aim, the women "are like panicked does leaping toward the sun that has finished burning off the mist and now pours its holy oil over the hides of game" (18). The textual subversion of the sacred hunter myth undermines the notion of regeneration through violence and demonstrates that any opportunities for liberal identities has been destroyed. The massacre highlights just how troublesome the genre's convention is of linking Western manhood with violence. And significantly, *Paradise* makes its most radical statement in this violent act which expresses a subversive refutation of the patriarchal Frontier discourses that offer freedom for the individual.

The mythical narrative of 'savage war' – the encounter and confrontation – between whites and Native Americans that informed Roosevelt's thesis on the settlement of the West lies at the at the heart of the genre (Fielder 21). Morrison rewrites the indigenous figure as the dispossessed female Other to challenge a narrative of national identity that is founded on values that embrace a mythologizing of masculinity and violence. Most Western novels, Jane Tomkins argues, "accomplish the destruction of female authority" (39). The murder of the Convent women would appear to conform to this traditional trope of the genre, revealing that the genre "devalue(s)

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[83] I am borrowing the idea of the subversion of the sacred hunter myth from Sara Spurgeon's essay on Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*.

women's lives" and "pay(s) no attention to the female experience" (Tompkins 41). But *Paradise* uses the female figure to suggest the possibility of an alternative West where men can prove their manhood through less violent means and to suggest an alternative Ruby which is open to and accepting of difference. The appearance of Mavis in 1968 – the first female stranger in Ruby – borrows from the form's trope of the encounter with the Other. Crucially, this is a decisive moment for the community of Ruby. Unbeknownst to the Patriarchs, her arrival is a 'turning-point' where they are given a choice in how they respond to the presence of the Other. Their murder of the women fulfils the expectations of the genre by removing the presence of the Other; an act which tellingly undermines the possibility of transformation of self for many of those perpetrators of the crime. Morrison employs a traditional Western trope only to subvert the concept of Frontier violence and its values. The disappearance of the women's bodies at the end of the novel suggests erasure from the landscape of both Native Americans and the atrocities committed against them. Ruby becomes the microcosm for exploring the forming of a nation and its ideals, and what the novel reveals is that a nation formed at the boundary of civilisation and wilderness pays a high price for 'Americanising' the landscape and its indigenous peoples.

Furthermore, *Paradise* undermines the idea of redemption and therefore transformation that emerges out of conflict. The men's reasons for murdering a group of vulnerable women are morally reprehensible. Patricia Best Cato comes closest to the truth when she realises that "nine 8-rocks murdered five harmless women (a) because the women were impure (not 8-rock); (b) because the women were unholy (fornicators at the least, abortionists at the most); and (c) because they could – which was what being an 8-rock meant to them" (297). What emerges in the story is a refusal by people to confront this truth and Lone becomes "unhinged by the way the story was being retold; how people were changing it to make themselves look good" (297). The men invent narratives that support the notion of a 'frontier justice' that re-casts them in a heroic light as protectors of the Ruby. While the absence of remorse or

transformation within the wider community of Ruby undermines the mythic notion of 'regeneration through violence', it paradoxically asserts restorative order which re-establishes the prevailing order of Ruby. In fact, with the exceptions of Deacon and Wisdom Poole, when the other men learn that "there were no dead to report, transport or bury, relief was so great they began to forget what they'd actually done or seen" (298).

A signifyin(g) thread throughout this study is the texts' embrace of the Western theme of movement and the black trope of what Gates has described as "vertical ascent" from the South to the West (or North) which creates a double-voiced discourse around the theme of movement and journeys (Introduction xxv). Morrison's use of the motif of a journey from the rural South to the West employs "a persistent theme" in African American writing of "escape from the closed world of the Southern plantation-ghetto" (Andrews 146). William L. Andrews, in his discussion on the idea of progress in Ernest J. Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, writes that "Founded on the idea of escape from the South" is a "faith in individual fulfilment and social progress" (146). However, the Patriarchs' internalisation of a colonial mentality seriously compromises the spatial and psychological freedom that the black trope implies by revealing that the mythic black narrative is also one "of alienation and loss" (Gates, *Future* 3). As a Post-Western text, *Paradise* appears to play out this pessimism in that the Patriarchs are stuck in a historical moment which leads to cycles of repeated behaviour and thought. The implications of this are a fear of change and a conservatism that leads the men to view the presence of the Convent women as a sacrilege against what their forebears have struggled against and achieved. The women's unruly presence disrupts and disturbs the mythic narrative of Ruby and Ruby's isolation from the rest of the United States. Deacon "could not abide them for sullying his personal history with their streetwalker's clothes and whores' appetites" (279). Cornel West argues that:

The idea of black people closing ranks against hostile white Americans reinforces black male power exercised over black women (e.g. to protect, regulate, subordinate, and hence usually, though not always, to use and abuse women) in order to preserve black social order under circumstances of white literal attack and symbolic assault. (*Race* 37)

In a complex revision of the Western, the narrative provides recognisable elements of the form only to disrupt them and combine them with other discourses. The internalisation of a white hegemonic masculinity exists alongside a sub-text of political and cultural rhetoric on the Civil Rights slogan of 1968 "I am a man" (Berger et al. 1). These two discourses of white patriarchy and black manhood conflict with each other because, as hooks points out, black men need to "critique patriarchy" and at the same time "offer strategies of resistance" (*Real* xiv, xv). The incompatibility of these masculinist discourses leads to a conservative representation of Western manhood in the characters of the Morgan twins.

The Morgan twins represent the detrimental effect upon the black self when black men uncritically live their lives by white values of materialism and a certain kind of masculinity that rests on dominance and possession of people, things, and land. "It's sort of his town, wouldn't you say?", Reverend Misner critically observes to Anna, "His and Steward's?" (115). Dovey Morgan, Steward's wife, considers that "Almost always these nights" she "thought about her husband . . . in terms of what he had lost . . . Contrary to his (and all of Ruby's assessment), the more Steward acquired, the more visible his losses" (82). Although hooks recognises that it is difficult to break away from hegemonic modes of thinking (*Black* 2), she is critical of black men who have aligned themselves with white patriarchal values. She argues that "Insistence on patriarchal values, on equating black liberation with black men gaining access to male privilege that would enable them to assert power over black women, was one of the most significant forces undermining radical struggle" ("Politics" 16). Nevertheless, not all the male characters have aligned themselves with this way of thinking; Reverend Richard Misner is the notable exception. Younger, tolerant, and open to difference, and

importantly aware of the zeitgeist in African American communities, Misner represents the positive possibilities for black masculinity and the black community. The problem is that despite his status within Ruby as the Baptist Reverend of the largest congregation, his power is limited in so far as "the Morgans sorted through Reverend Misner's opinions carefully to judge which were recommendations easily ignored and which were orders they ought to obey" (57). The fact that Misner is out of town on the day of the massacre means the Patriarchs' actions are unchecked.

Paradise challenges how "in dominant national discourse, the American West", according to Susan Kollin, "has been imagined and celebrated largely for its status as 'pre' – for its position as a pre-lapsarian, pre-social, and pre-modern space" ("Postwestern Studies" xiii). The title 'Paradise' echoes this pre-lapsarian state, but the first line of the novel – "They shoot the white girl first" (3) – disputes such a notion, and there is to quote Comer's description of the Post-Western genre "a notable refusal of optimism" in the novel ("New West" 255). With the murder of the Convent women, the narrative critiques the idea that out of conflict comes civilisation or redemption. The novel constructs black Western identities that in terms of their compliance with, or divergence from the genre sit on a spectrum with the Morgan twins at one end acting out a masculinity that is closest to white hegemonic Western masculinity and the women of the Convent furthest away from the genre's traditional constructions of femininity in their performance of a Western femininity.

Racial Identity and the Racial Project

"'God bless the pure and holy' indeed. That was their purity" (Morrison 217)

The novel's opening sentence, "They shoot the white girl first" (3), is a deliberate authorial intent to challenge readers' assumptions and expectations. In an interview with Paul Gray of *Time Magazine*, Morrison says, "I did that on purpose . . . I wanted

the readers to wonder about the race of those girls until those readers understood that their race didn't matter". According to Dana A. Williams, Morrison's obscuring of race enables her "to critique American identity construction and to show that both blackness and whiteness are produced social constructions, not fixed biological categories" (182). Although I agree that Morrison's racial project is a contemporary concern with the constructed nature of race, I argue that the text is not able to fully realise the idea that race does not matter in its treatment of the Convent women. I demonstrate that Morrison's construction of the Convent women is informed by a black vernacular mythology. It is the appropriation of this cultural resource that underpins the racial project of the narrative. Specifically, Morrison recovers the black male trickster figure for black women, and she also appropriates the powerful figure of the female conjurer for the mid-wife of Ruby, Lone. In employing the black vernacular figures of the trickster and conjurer, Morrison demonstrates the radical potential of black discourses to create what Appiah calls "positive life scripts" (98). For Appiah, positive life scripts are central to the collective dimensions of self and can enable a "form of healing of the self" that involves "learning to see these collective identities not as sources of limitation and insult but as a valuable part of what they centrally are" (98). Morrison's use of a black non-realist narrative strategy is therefore a significant part of identity formation. In the final scene of the novel where Consolata sits on a seashore with Piedade, Morrison Signifies on the first scene in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and juxtaposes the image of a slave ship with Columbus's founding myth to further complicate readings of the female figure. Along with the disappearance of the Convent women after the massacre, I argue that the end of the novel fully expresses a black vernacular mythology that enables the construction of liberated radical female subjectivities and which, importantly, also recognises the critical complexities of these subject positions and establishes *Paradise* itself as a black female trickster text.

In Signifyin(g) on historical and contemporary discursive spaces, the novel suggests ways in which African Americans as individuals and communities can heal

from the wounds of the past and move forward to construct radical Western identities that are life-affirming. The title of the novel performs a literary signification upon the decade out of which it emerges. Popularly seen as the 'best' decade for the United States,[84] Morrison's novel seeks to challenge this contemporary utopian myth by narrating a story of exclusion and loss. The 1990s may have been an economically prosperous decade for the United States, but amongst other high-profile violent events,[85] it was also the decade of the Los Angeles riots motivated by the acquittal of four white policemen for their attack on Rodney King. Within this contemporary social and racial context, the fact that the 8-rock men get away with the murder of the Convent women is both an inversion and subversion of contemporary white violence against African Americans where "whites are *ten times* more likely", according to Martha Cutter, "to be able to kill a black stranger with impunity in the name of 'self-defense' than if these racial roles are reversed" (7; emphasis in original). The Patriarchs' violence is an indictment of the prosaic violence in contemporary America, but this textual criticism does not lead to radical 8-rock male identities. This is because the construction of radical identities needs to be a conscious act. hooks explains that one can choose to position oneself with the colonising mentality or one can stand in political resistance with the oppressed. The violence of Ruby's men produces a signifyin(g) thread to Mouse's prophetic statement to Easy in Mosley's novel. Mouse warns Easy that "You learn stuff and you be thinkin' like white men be thinkin'. You be thinkin' that what's right fo' them is right fo' you. . . . And a nigger ain't never gonna be happy 'less he accepts what he is" (209). The outward expression of hate and violence towards the Convent women is the potential outcome of decades of an uncritical internalisation of white hegemonic patriarchal values with its subsequent sense of

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[84] Kurt Anderson writing in the *New York Times* describes it as "the best decade ever" (06/02/15). See https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/08/opinion/sunday/the-best-decade-ever-the-1990s-obviously.html
Whilst Douglas Coupland describes it as "a darned good decade" (23/04/19 see: https://www.history.com/news/1990s-the-good-decade
Also see:
[85] For example: the First Iraq War; the Waco Siege; O. J. Simpson's murder of his ex-wife, Nicole Simpson Brown, and her friend, Ron Goldman; the Oklahoma City bombings. https://americasbesthistory.com/abhtimeline1990.html

inferiority and inability to "envision new, alternative, oppositional aesthetic acts" for expressions of black masculinity (hooks, "Choosing" 145).

Morrison inverts a convention of the Western form to show that the potential for personal growth and heroic status lies with women and not men. She has described the Convent women as "outlaw women".[86] The usurpation of the male outlaw figure of the Western places the women outside the traditional and expected scripts for female identity, and therefore they pose a threat to the black patriarchal order of Ruby and to the black narratives behind the founding of Ruby and its predecessor Haven. Free from an imposition of black patriarchy, the Convent women live in a house which is "permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters" (177). A marginal space, the Convent becomes a politically defiant and radical location for alternative and subversive female identities. Within this space and with the help of Connie, the women practise self-healing. This is achieved through loud-dreaming and the creation of body templates. There on the cellar floor, they share their stories which "rose in that place. Half-tales and the never-dreamed escaped from their lips to soar high above glittering candles" and where "They spoke to each other about what had been dreamed and what had been drawn" (264, 265). Their learning to see "collective identities not as sources of limitation and insult but as a valuable part of what they centrally are" (Appiah 98) enables a positive reformulation of their gendered identities to the extent that "the Convent women were no longer haunted" (266).

The ability to construct alternative female Western life-scripts challenges the historical institutionalised space of the Convent/boarding school and re-inscribes an alternative narrative for female identity. But the narrative is unable to maintain the women's oppositional and liberatory stance, which ultimately can only exist within the marginal and bounded space of the Convent. The erasure of the Convent women not only signals the erasure of the Other, but it is also a sub-text that indicates the marginalisation and powerlessness of the female presence in the myth and form which

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[86] See interview with Kirsty Wark.

have traditionally centred the male experience and male endeavour. Opportunities for female agency appear restricted within these white discourses. Furthermore, the erasure of the women places them within a tradition of black literary female victims and undermines their status as active agents. There is, however, an alternative way of reading the Convent women which entails locating them with African American vernacular mythology and which provides a significant disruption to the whiteness of the Western form. Reading them through this black cultural lens gives the women an agency denied by the discourses of national mythology and the Western form. Vernacular mythology is life-affirming, fluid and spontaneous. It is a grassroots narrative that celebrates difference and other ways of being and is influenced by diverse cultural and spiritual elements. Vernacular mythology functions to show an alternative form of Western identification for the characters and challenges the cultural and literary frontiers of the Western. As both displaced individuals and disruptive influences, the construction of the Convent women Signifies on the black vernacular trickster figure which, according to Ayana Smith, can be found "under various guises" in African American literature (180). The narrative appropriates the cultural and discursive character traits of the marginal trickster figure to challenge the essentialist ideology of the Patriarchs and to offer the opportunity to create new histories for future generations of Ruby.

The Convent as Soja's thirdspace is a suitable space for a trickster character. Soja's vision of thirdspace as "realandimagined", according to Giles, "extends the concept of space beyond the physical and the mental to the metaphoric". Soja "believes that thirdspace is most easily found at the borders of urban cultures . . . borders of neighbourhoods, borders between races and genders, borders between heterosexuality and homosexuality" (Giles 12). It is within this marginal space of resistance that the trickster figure can be found. I am therefore proposing that the Convent women offer Ruby a chance to redeem itself, to become accepting of difference, to show kindness and empathy to all, and to reject the white hegemonic

discourse of dominant masculinity. Trickster figures draw attention to "the contradictions between American ideals and practice" particularly in the social upheaval and civil unrest of the 1960's (Morgan 10). The timely arrival of Mavis suggests the possibility of an alternative outcome to the violence that has defined the creation of Haven and Ruby. William J. Hynes and William G. Doty write that trickster figures "challenge the accepted ways of doing things, highlighting the possibilities within a society for creative reflection or a change of society's meanings" (8). The notion of potential transformation is echoed by Morgan who argues that trickster figures challenge the status quo by transgressing borders and violating society's rules and that they "represent freedom from all restraints" (4).

The women's sexual and gender border-crossing is illustrated in their attendance at the celebrations of K.D and Arnette's wedding in Ruby. With the exception of Connie who does not attend, the women are described as dressed "like go-go girls: pink shorts, skimpy tops, see-through skirts; painted eyes, no lipstick; obviously no underwear, no stockings" and "dancing nasty" (156, 158). Reverend Pulliam observes that these "fun-obsessed adults were clear signs of already advanced decay" (157). Told to "Get on out of here" by "men in suits", the women's transgressive behaviour at the wedding is the tipping point for the men of the town (158). What seems to particularly upset the men and Alice Pulliam, wife of the Reverend, is the unrestrained and provocative physicality of the women. The narrative describes them as "dancing; throwing their arms over their heads, they do this, they do that and then the other" (157); after which they borrow bikes and ride "down Central Avenue with no regard for what the breeze does to their long flowered skirts or how pumping pedals plumped their breasts" (158). It is the freedom to control their own bodies, to express themselves as they wish which presents the greatest threat to Ruby's patriarchal authority and control. The women's uninhibited and self-absorbed behaviour leads Reverend Pulliam to describe them as "Like children, always on the lookout for fun" (157).

Having control over one's body along with a self-serving nature are part of the trickster's character. Thus, Connie notices that "Not only did they [the Convent women] do nothing except the absolutely necessary, they had no plans to do anything. Instead of plans they had wishes – foolish baby girl wishes" (222). According to Morgan, trickster figures are "emotionally childish" and they have a strong connection to the feminine through a mother or grandmother bond (36). The narrative describes Connie as their "ideal parent, friend, companion in whose company they were safe from harm . . . this perfect landlord who charged nothing and welcomed anybody" (262). Connie's influence helps these women to heal, but there are signs of the narrative also drawing upon the trickster figure in its construction of Connie. She shapeshifts into:

> [A] person they do not recognise. She has the features of dear Connie, but they are sculpted somehow – higher cheekbones, stronger chin. Had her eyebrows always been that thick, her teeth that pearly white? Her hair shows no gray. Her skin is smooth as peach. Why is she talking that way? (262)

Consolata's role is not only to help heal the women of the Convent but to also heal a "damaged nation of tarnished ideals and betrayed promises".[87] In the construction of Consolata, the narrative Signifies on the trickster's ability to exist in the human and divine world (Vecsey 106). I argue that Consolata is constructed as a vernacular response to the colonial discourse of the West as an "earthly paradise" first articulated by Columbus in his letters to the King of Spain.[88] This reading of Connie is explicitly demonstrated on the final page. Morrison concludes her novel with an alternative and radical vernacular mythology that offers a nation, whose origin story is rooted in narratives of violent colonial conquest of people and land, the opportunity for redemption. Importantly, the novel's final scene Signifies on three discourses: the historical discourses of conquest and slavery, and the literary discourse of Hurston's opening paragraph to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. These interweave with one

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[87] I am borrowing from Jim Kitses and his analysis of the film *Brokeback Mountain* – "All that Brokeback Allows". *Film Quarterly,* vol. 60, no. 3, 2007, pp 22-27.
[88] See Lape's summary on the evolution of America's national mythology (16).

another to create a complex double-voiced conclusion. Morrison shows Consolata sitting on the shore with Piedade – "a woman black as firewood" whose "Ruined fingers troll the tea brown hair [of Consolata]" and whose "black face is framed in cerulean blue" (318). The metaphorical language resists the realism of the Western and inserts into the form a divine and ancient feminine blackness in the figure of Piedade (whose name means mercy). The two women's presence contrasts with the image that "Around them on the beach, sea trash gleams. Discarded bottle caps sparkle near a broken sandal. A small dead radio plays the quiet surf" (318). This detritus is symbolic of a disregard for the humanity of other peoples and the landscape in the pursuit of European nation building that began with the arrival of Columbus. Yet amidst the rubbish, Connie and Piedade wait for "Another ship, perhaps" coming to shore with "crew and passengers, lost and saved, atremble, for they have been disconsolate for some time". And who will need to rest "before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise" (318). It is in these lines that the narrative presents the opportunity to make amends for the past. In a complex layering of meanings, the image of a ship with its disconsolate passengers is haunted by the historical discourse of the Middle Passage. At the same time, Morrison's ending has a literary echo to the first few opening lines of *Their Eyes* where Hurston Signifies on the trope of the slave ship:

> Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men. (9)

Morrison rewrites the male perspective and the sense of loss that Hurston's scene conveys to create an alternative beginning to the founding of the nation. Significantly, the intertextual interweaving of discourses creates a literary and cultural space of radical openness in which Morrison presents two subversive female figures whose 'Otherness' in terms of race, gender and cultural tradition offers the opportunity to rewrite the white masculinised narrative of nation-building and national identity.

By re-reading the construction of the Convent women as influenced by the mythological vernacular figure of the trickster, the narrative provides another conceptual avenue through which to critique the settler colonial mentality of the Patriarchs of Ruby and the narrative of Manifest Destiny, and to also show the disparity between the ideals of American exceptionalism and the reality of the Western experience for minority peoples. The Convent women "like the men and women in African trickster and morality tales, represent[s] society's displaced individuals and illustrate[s] the horrific consequences of humanity's loss of the ability to feel" (Wilcots 692).[89] At the same time, reading the women within the trickster tradition demonstrates that the traditional male narrative of Ruby cannot contain the women as the women transgress the temporal and discursive borders of Ruby. The women's trickster identities are fluid and offer the possibilities for an alternative way of being that exists outside the masculinised narrative of Western identities.

In the construction of Lone, *Paradise* Signifies on the "literary folk heroine" who, according to Kameelah L. Martin, is a trope of African American fiction (3). Notably, Morrison uses Lone to convey the idea of cultural loss. Lone's name signals her marginal and single status in Ruby. A cultural, social and gendered spatial marginality which is confirmed by her mentor, the older mid-wife Fairy, who tells her that because of Lone's "secret skill" as a mid-wife, "Men scared of us, always will be" (272). Lone's marginality becomes more evident as the narrative reveals that her skills are no longer needed by the women of the community who prefer to deliver their babies in hospital. The fact that "nobody wanted her craft" is coupled with "the suspicion that she was bad luck" (270, 271). Martin contends that "the conjure woman is often an autonomous persona who disrupts the ideas of gender and femininity, [and] exercises self-determination" (11). Martin uses conjurer "as an umbrella term that encompasses the individual vocations of root worker, fortune-teller, mid-wife, herbalist . . . and others

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[89] Wilcots (1992) is describing Morrison's third novel *Sula* here, but her statement has equal relevance to Morrison's later work of *Paradise.*

who are gifted with verbal and/or visual communication with the invisible world" (K. Martin 2). Mid-wife and herbalist, Lone's ability to 'step in' to people's minds also establishes her as a conjurer and therefore a woman of a different kind of knowledge to that of the Patriarchs and townsfolk of Ruby. In twentieth-century African American fiction, according to Martin, "[I]ncreasingly, it has been the conjure woman who bears . . . vital cultural responsibilities" (K. Martin 3). Not only has Lone a practical responsibility of helping mothers deliver healthy babies, but as a conjurer figure she brings different forms of knowledge into the text of African based spiritualities and healing that challenges the dominant discourses of Christianity and Patriarchy.

Continuing in the literary tradition of Zora Neal Hurston,[90] Morrison gives the conjurer woman positive meaning. Conjurers are "almost without exception", according to Lindsey Tucker, "especially gifted with psychic abilities, or are known to have second-sight" (176). Like the trickster figure, the conjurer woman represents a world view in which boundaries between the sacred and the secular, the living and the dead, reality and non-reality are blurred. Lone's movements between Ruby and the Convent show her potential as the figure to mediate between the two spaces (unlike the trickster women whose intent is to provoke and disrupt). Lone may exist on the margins of Ruby, but from that profound edge she also brings Ruby the opportunity for redemption. She recognises that the problem with Ruby is a crisis of its black leadership. Her belief that Ruby "was changing in intolerable ways" which could be fixed "by extending a hand of fellowship or love" (275) is the antidote to "the pure oil of hatred" (4) that emanates from the nine men who murder the Convent women. It is, to borrow from Cornel West, a "love ethic" – an "affirmation of one's own worth – an affirmation fuelled by the concern of others . . . self-love and love of others" (*Race* 29). Lone's way of looking at the world – a discursive space of radical openness to

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[90] See Tucker (1994)

difference – recuperates this love and compassion that has been sacrificed in the Patriarchs' pursuit of a utopian black town. Problematically however, there is no-one in Ruby for Lone to pass her legacy onto. Instead through the figure of Lone, the narrative ironically highlights cultural loss as the legacy of the town's embrace of a patriarchal, colonial and ethnocentric value system and reveals the critical contradictions within the double-voiced discourse of the narrative.

The significance of this loss for constructing oppositional and liberatory black identities is symbolised by the Oven. Built by the Old Fathers once they had founded Haven, and then dismantled and put back together by the New Fathers when they established Ruby, the Oven is a symbolic space ideologically weighted with the stories of struggle, migration, the search for a new homeland, and the Disallowings. During the time of the Old Fathers, the Oven was the core of the community, symbolising unity, resilience, and independence because importantly it served as the functional "community kitchen" (99). In the contemporary narrative, the Oven's traditional function is defunct, instead its value is as a symbolic site where, under the guardianship of the Patriarchs, vernacular history and memories interweave and fossilise to become oppressive discourses. It is therefore no surprise that it is when the men are gathered around the Oven that Lone overhears them plotting their attack on the Convent.

The younger generation of Ruby however challenge the Patriarchs' racial project. Written upon the Oven is the wording ". . . the Furrow of his Brow" (86; ellipsis in original). The Morgan twins and their allies believe it should say, 'Beware the Furrow of his Brow', whereas the younger generation argue instead that it is, 'Be the Furrow of his Brow'. The debate on the meaning of the motto and therefore the Oven's significance and value within the community is an opportunity for the elders to give a new lease of mythical life to the Oven. Significantly, it is also an opportunity to provide alternative references for the young people to use for their life-scripts and enable them to find relevant meaning in the stories of their founding fathers. This opportunity however is not taken. In the discussion that ensues one of the young men, Royal

Beauchamp, tells Deek, "It's our history too, sir. Not just yours" (86), to which Deek replies, "Then act like it. I just told you. The Oven already has a history. It doesn't need you to fix it" (86). Problematically, vernacular memory is transformed into a rigid mythic narrative of the past with the consequence that the elders reject any progressive view of African American history and fail to acknowledge a political and cultural context where black consciousness and expressions of black identities are undergoing a sea-change. The emergence of the Black Power movement and Black nationalism were offering new ways of defining black experiences and new scripts for racial identity. Unwilling and unable to consider alternative narratives of blackness, the town's leaders' insistence on how the Oven should be read represents another form of exclusion. By not allowing the young people to contribute to creating new ways of understanding the past and remembering it, the Patriarchs perform their own 'disallowing'. The appearance of a "fist, jet black with red fingernails, painted on the back wall of the Oven", however, rejects Steward's attempt to completely control the symbolic value of the Oven (101). The 'minority voices' of the young find artistic expression in the radical symbol of the feminised black fist of the Black Power Movement. While this image transforms the symbolic space of the Oven into a site of counter-discourse, importantly the feminisation of the black fist also Signifies on the masculinised discourse of Black Power and disrupts the dominance of male voices in both national and local discourses by inserting a feminised presence. *Paradise* draws upon the genre's construction of Western masculinity and the Civil Rights' narrative of manhood to offer a critique of both and to show historically that the opportunity to redefine an alternative black manhood was a lost opportunity. hooks writes that in re-examining the black struggle for liberation, it is apparent that "ideas about 'freedom' were informed by efforts to imitate the behaviour, lifestyles, and most importantly the values and consciousness of white colonisers" and coupled with this "sexism . . . diminished the power of all black liberation struggles" ("Politics" 15,16).The image of a feminised Black Power offers an alternative script for identity to that of black male protest; and one which "people can use in shaping their life plans and in telling their life stories" (Appiah 97). The conflicting

interpretations of the legacy of the Oven point to the necessity of having a "usable past" that has a cultural value for all to draw upon in the construction of viable life-scripts (Zamora ix).

I have demonstrated that the Convent women function as figures of potential redemption for Ruby. Consequently, Deacon's epiphany and transformation in the penultimate chapter of *Paradise* suggests a slim possibility that the leadership of Ruby will be more open to and accepting of different racial and gender scripts for identity formation. In contrast, the novel's coda is problematical in terms of our understanding of the disappearance and reappearance of the women. Discussions range from reading the Convent women as spectral "ghosted" figures who in the final pages achieve a "balanced, liminal state" (Anderson, *Spectrality* 82), women who are "resurrected figures" each "getting on with her future" (Roynon 181), to characters who undergo a "magical transformation" in which they "experience the final cycle of healing, regenerating themselves" (Moore 270), or women who, as Shirley Stave writes, "do die at the end of the novel" (116). While the notion of transformation is central to these readings, in contrast, I argue that following the massacre, the narrative presents a critical dialogue between the Western trope of transformation and the black mythological trope of the trickster.

As a consequence, this double-voicedness fully expresses *Paradise* as a trickster text. As such, the novel resides at what Gates describes as a "crossroads, where black and white semantic fields collide" (*Signifying* 55). The textual "indeterminacy" which results from this critical interaction is an "unavoidable aspect of acts of interpretation" (*Signifying* 27). Significantly, Morrison uses the image of a portal to signal the open-endedness of the text. Reverend Richard Misner and Anna Flood visit the Convent two days after the massacre because they "doubted the convenient mass disappearance of the victims" (303). While they are looking around the garden, they see something, "Or sensed it rather, for there was nothing to see. A door she said later. 'No, a window,' he said. . . . They knew it was there. . . . What would be on the

other side? What on earth would it be? What on earth?" (305). I argue that importantly in this scene Morrison rhetorically signifies on the 'undecipherability' of the trickster figure. The reappearance of the women in the lives of their family members underlines their mythological status. Thus, in the words of Jean on the appearances of her daughter, Seneca, they appear "at such odd moments and in such strange places" (316). Morrison narrates an intangibility about these sights. There is no visible contact and when there is as in the case of Sally and her mother Mavis, Sally "felt as though her mother was sliding away" (313). Dee Dee can only make strange sounds when she sees Pallas because "Something was wrong with her tongue" (311). Absent and present, secular and divine, literal and figurative, the contradictory nature and doubleness of the narrative and its trickster women creates confusion for characters and readers alike who are unable to decode meaning. Morrison's racial project locates *Paradise* within the black oral tradition of the Signifying Monkey tales which it recovers for a black female Western trickster narrative.[91]

Conclusion

"She hoped with all her heart that the women were out there" (Morrison 308)

I have argued that the black essentialism at the centre of the New Fathers' racial consciousness and their rigid adherence to a national mythology inhibits the construction of radical black Western identities. The limited scripts for identity that their adherence entails are juxtaposed with the flexible scripts for identity embraced by the Convent women who, along with Lone, are aligned with a more liberating African American vernacular mythology. Throughout the novel the potential for radical subjectivity lies with these women. Doubly displaced and alienated because of their

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[91] I again borrow from Gates who in discussing the Signifying tales of the Monkey, the Lion and the Elephant in the jungle writes that it is the "relationship between the literal and the figurative, and the dire consequences of their confusion, which is the most striking repeated element of these tales" (*Signifying* 61).

race and gender, their existence is precarious. On the one hand, the construction of these unruly women challenges the conservatism of the form; on the other, the form cannot contain them and the narrative device of the massacre expels them from the secular world. Their return along with Consolata's at the end illustrates their status as culture heroes of a black vernacular mythology. In the figure of Consolata, the novel presents a vernacular counter-narrative of possible redemption for the nation. The ending of the novel Signifies on a masculinised colonial mythology of the New World as an Edenic space and transforms our reading of myth.

The intertextuality of *Paradise* as Gates might argue, "functions to redress an imbalance of power, to clear a space, rhetorically" within the hegemonic narratives of myth and form with the purpose of constructing alternative black Western identities (*Signifying* 134). At the same time, *Paradise* possesses a textual fluidity that not only contests the cultural frontiers of the form, but which also resists being discursively bounded by a conclusive interpretation. Its double-voiced discourse which draws upon black and white cultural, literary, social and spatial discourses creates a narrative that abounds with intertextuality and complex ways of meaning. A trickster text that rejects the realism of the form and monologic mythic narrative of the West, the elusive ending of the novel suggests that change is possible for the nation, communities, and individuals. Of the Western texts examined so far in this study, it is the most postmodern example of black Western writing.

As African American writers contest the frontiers of the form, it appears that textual opportunities for constructing alternative (radical) black Western identities also grows. Although *Parable of the Sower* was published four years before *Paradise*, I argue that Butler takes the creative transformation of the black Western form further and creates a radical black female Frontier hero in her protagonist Lauren.

Chapter Six: "There has to be more . . . a better destiny that we can shape. Another place. Another way" (76), *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia E. Butler

Introduction

"Something new is beginning" (Butler 118)

Octavia Butler's 1993 novel, *Parable of the Sower*, is set in the near future of 2024. Written as a series of journal entries beginning when Lauren turns fifteen, it follows four years in the life of protagonist, Lauren Oya Olamina. The world that Lauren inhabits is one of social, economic and environmental chaos, social displacement and dispossession. Her journal recounts her experiences of living in a walled neighbourhood in Robledo, California with her family. In response to a changing world, Lauren creates her own religion called Earthseed. It is not long before outside forces destroy the community killing Lauren's family. Having anticipated the collapse of her community and having already made up a survival pack, Lauren collects this and decides to travel North West to find a safe place to settle. On her journey, she meets up with other migrants who have also lost homes and families. They, too, become followers of Earthseed and with Lauren they establish the settlement of Acorn at the end of the novel.

Parable may not strike the reader initially as a novel that can be described as a Western. Although a number of scholars have identified the novel as engaging with Western history and themes, they have done so from the perspective of emphasising the novel as science fiction or dystopian fiction.[92] This chapter repositions Butler's novel within the Western literary form to argue that *Parable* appropriates and interrogates those mythic narratives of new beginnings that underpin the creation story

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[92] See the section on the Western literary form for further discussion on the use of genre.

of American national identity. I therefore argue that the novel can be examined as a Post-Western text. *Parable* Signifies on white and black literary forms to contest the white male Anglo-American frontier of the Western. My discussion focuses on the intersecting and contesting frontiers of the Western form which, I argue, enable Butler to generate a new black Western form. These zones of contact include the female settler journal, the black female spiritual narrative, the eco-narrative, and Afrofuturism. Significantly, Butler's creative use of these forms facilitates a development in the Western, particularly an eco-critical development that foreshadows the Western eco-narratives of the twenty-first century. Butler's engagement with these forms is reflective of the contemporaneous shift in Western history in the late 1980s and 1990s that sought to challenge the "monologic account of US national progress" (Goldberg 22).

The themes of movement, displacement and rootlessness at the centre of its story form signifyin(g) threads from *Parable* to the narratives of Morrison and Mosley, especially in the notion of the home as a vulnerable marginal space. At the same time, in its construction of Lauren and Earthseed, *Parable* rewrites the negative relationship between the black female and the landscape that Greer presented in his novel with the brutal removal of Brenda from a rural environment.

Parable appropriates and inverts the hegemonic white racial project of the Frontier Myth to challenge the traditional idea of Western identities and places as stable and homogenous. Butler's revision of a white discourse is interwoven with her use of black vernacular mythology in the construction of her female protagonist. Butler uses the double-voiced discourse of her narrative to explore a contemporary re-imagining of the origin story of the American nation. Her creative transformation informs and is informed by the construction of her protagonist. In contrast to the young white male heroic figures of conventional Westerns, Lauren – young, black and female – is a subversive and disruptive figure in the narrative. Constructed through different discourses, the multi-dimensional textual presence of Lauren within the literary space of the Western form is transformative, progressive and, fundamentally, radical.

Butler's narrative, like Morrison's, explores the possibility of establishing a community that provides a safe place for people. However, the communities of Acorn and Ruby are very different. Although both texts depict the fragile nature of safe havens and the difficulties of establishing a homeplace for marginalised groups of people, each presents a different outcome particularly in terms of the kind of homeplace that is constructed. Ruby offers little hope for an alternative way of living within the margins because the community ends up practising those very same oppressive structures which they had initially escaped from. Acorn, on the other hand, with Lauren as its leader and her alternative religious belief system, becomes "a space of radical openness" where ways of living and being depend, as hooks argues, on the "ability to conceptualise alternatives" ("Choosing" 149). It is within a literary space of radical openness that the racial project of *Parable of the Sower* achieves a new kind of Western identity that is oppositional and liberatory, transgressive and transforming.

The Frontier Myth

"Maybe we can start again, in the new rich land – in California, where the fruit grows" (Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 95)

John Steinbeck's acclaimed 1939 novel presents California as the promised land and a place of opportunity. Over fifty years later, Butler's novel significantly revises Steinbeck's representation by presenting a California that has degenerated. California in *Parable of the Sower* now resembles more the California described by Beckwourth in the early part of the nineteenth century as a primitive place where society, to quote Beckwourth again, "was in the worst condition to be found, probably, in any part of the world, to call it civilised" (506). In fact, *Parable's* description of Los Angeles, which has regressed from "the city of dreams" (Hunt & Ramón 4) in the twentieth century to "an oozing sore" and "a carcass covered with too many maggots" in 2024, the novel

presents an inversion of the Frontier narrative of settlement and progress (*Parable* 109, 9).

Similar to Morrison's construction of Ruby, Butler presents both California and Los Angeles as "fourthspace" (Giles 13); that is, spaces in which the mythic narrative of progress has been corrupted and the opportunity for self-renewal and liberation is either extremely limited or impossible. The eventual collapse of Robledo further symbolises the debasement of the Frontier myth. A suburb "20 miles from Los Angeles" and "once a rich, green, unwalled little city" (10), Robledo is now a mix of walled and unwalled neighbourhoods. Lauren observes that it is "Crazy to live without a wall to protect you" (10). Beyond the wall, there is a hostile and violent environment "where things are so dangerous and crazy" (7). Within the wider landscape of California, Robledo is a marginalised space, or "squeezed", as Abbott argues, "between the privileged and the desperate. The rich live in protected communities or mansions protected by many walls, while the poor squat in burned-out houses" (*Frontiers* 145). As a marginal space, the walled cul-de-sac where Lauren lives, seeks to protect itself from the external forces of social anarchy that threaten its security and existence by maintaining a sense of community cohesion through the role of the church and schooling. Lauren's father is the Baptist minister and has also taken on the role of unofficial community leader. The walled neighbourhood is depicted as one of the last bastions of civilisation. In effect, Lauren's walled community may be understood as a Frontier town in that it represents, to quote again from Crooks, the "place where European-American settlement or colonization of North America ends" (68). Nonetheless, the fragile status of this civilised community, located as it is on "a profound edge" is clearly under threat. Butler shows that the seeds of corruption are already evident in the little community with the rape of twelve year-old Tracey by her Uncle Derek and the subsequent birth of an unloved and uncared for Amy; and in the figure of Richard Moss who has his own "version of slavery", whereby he picks up "young homeless women and live[s] with them in polygymous relationships" (37, 36).

The destruction of Lauren's community however does not just symbolise the corruption of a myth which involved "winning a wilderness" and advancing American society (Turner, "Significance" 2), but it is also a rejection of a specifically social and religious patriarchal dominance which maintains the walled community as a conservative space. Lauren tells her friend Joanne that the adults of their community are "anchored in the past, waiting for the good old days to come back. But things have changed a lot" (57). Lauren's father and the other members of the community are unwilling or unable to push against the oppressive boundaries of tradition in order to "envision new, alternative, oppositional aesthetic acts" ("Choosing" 145). Thus, her father finds "the whole business" of Lauren's mother's drug addiction and Lauren's hyperempathy "shameful" and something that is not talked about outside the family (12). Lauren is also convinced that her father thinks she needs "more humility" (14). Lauren challenges her father's authority, noting in her journal that "A tree/Cannot grow/In its parents' shadows" (82). Importantly, her resistance is articulated through her creation of Earthseed and demonstrates, as Edward Soja would argue, that those who are:

> territorially subjugated have two inherent choices: either accept their imposed differentiation and division, making the best of it; or mobilise to resist. . . . These choices are inherently spatial responses, individual and collective reactions to the workings of power in perceived, conceived, and lived spaces. (*Thirdspace* 87)

Unlike her father, Lauren is able to conceive of a different way of living and importantly one that gives her individual agency and fosters a self-determination. Psychologically and intellectually, she resists the religious orthodoxy of her father's belief system and creates an alternative belief system in Earthseed. She also survives her father who disappears in the violent landscape outside the community. His death marks the demise of a patriarchal perspective and position in the text, especially the idea that "A lot of people seem to believe in a big-daddy-God or a big-cop God or a big-king-God" (15). Significantly, the fact that an alternate faith system originates in the walled

community illustrates the idea that even oppressive spaces have the potential to become a "counterspace" (Soja, *Thirdspace* 67-68). Lauren's discursive and intellectual response to the power structures within the community informs her spatial resistance as she makes the decision to leave the community when she turns eighteen. In its mantra of 'God is Change' and 'Embrace diversity', Earthseed rejects fixed positions.

For Turner, the closure of the Frontier was achieved through heroic and progressive settlement that involved taming the wilderness. Yet, the 'closure' of Lauren's walled community is achieved through extermination, subverting Turner's progressive narrative. In reconceptualising Turner's Frontier into frontiers, Noreen Groover Lape explains that:

> As human spaces where cultures meet, frontiers close when one group can no longer rule and define itself because another group exercises control over it. The sociological factors that indicate the closing of a frontier are extermination, assimilation, exclusion, and/or expulsion, although in some cases there may be an impasse between the groups. (10)

The notion that different kinds of frontiers exist within the narrative is confirmed when Lauren's father reveals that Oregon, Washington, and Canada are all closed borders maintained through exclusion, telling Lauren that "People get shot everyday trying to sneak into Canada. Nobody wants California trash" (82). In re-imagining California, *Parable* performs a textual subversion of the myth of California as the 'Golden land' in Steinbeck's novel. For the Oklahoma family of the Joads, California represents "the golden time in the West" (206). Called 'Okies', which "use' ta mean you was from Oklahoma. Now it means you're a dirty son-of-a-bitch", the Joad family, along with hundreds of other migrants from Oklahoma, are not wanted in California (218). The novel's latent intertextuality with Steinbeck's novel and *Parable's* inversion of the Frontier Myth illustrates the arbitrary and fluid nature of constructing an American national identity, dependent as it is upon race, class, and regional ethnicity. The instability of Western identity is accompanied also by a textual revision of where the

'West' is. The novel recognises, to quote Campbell, that "Spaces are always far more complex than the East-West frontiers defined by Turner" (*Rhizomatic* 7). *Parable* reflects a turn in late twentieth century Western fiction whereby Westerns invert the mythic trope of Western migration from the East to the West. Thus, Lauren cannot go further West, because she is already in the West; instead, she must go North. Humboldt County, the place where the new community of Acorn is established, becomes a 'New West'.[93]

Allmendinger describes Acorn as "the first post-apocalyptic frontier town" (*Imagining* 126). While the establishment of Acorn converges with the foundational myth of the West as a site for social rebirth, Acorn is also an alternative version of white settlement and American national identity. In its inclusion of racial, sexual, gendered, social and cultural differences, Acorn is potentially a site of redemption for the American spirit and nation. By that, I mean a place where American national identity can be reformed as heterogenous and open to difference. Paradoxically, Acorn spatially and discursively symbolises a conventional Western narrative of progress whilst simultaneously resisting the hegemonic whiteness of the Frontier Myth and Western settlement. Acorn's subversion results from its ability to re-create not just a different way of living but also a different belief system to underpin the new community; a quality that Robledo lacks. As a diverse, flexible and oppositional space, Lape would argue that Acorn is an open frontier, because "open frontiers are ambiguous, contradictory, subversive, pluralistic, and resistant", and they "indicate the continuation of intercultural relations and resistance to Anglo dominance" (13). Not only does *Parable* resist the Turnerian concept of Frontier, but the textual challenge to fixed positions is paralleled by the construction of homeplace as unstable. *Parable* resists "the mythic Western quest for rootedness" and homeplace (Campbell, *Rhizomatic* 1). The instability of a homeplace is illustrated in the erasure of Robledo and in the

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[93] Butler is not the only writer to re-imagine a New West. Cormac McCarthy, one of the most celebrated contemporary Western authors, situates his Border Trilogy within the South West.

destruction of Bankole's land, his sister and her family. And in Butler's second book, *Parable of the Talents*, the attack on Acorn and its takeover by the Christian Crusaders shows that a safe place is only an illusion. The fragility of safe places and the difficulty in establishing a permanent homeplace demonstrates, as Campbell argues, that Western "identity is 'spatial' and fluid, formed by the 'routes' it travels and the contacts it makes" (*Rhizomatic* 27). This Western reading of homeplace converges with a specific sub-text of African American historical experiences, where within a white racist society they have struggled to construct homeplaces which are not, according to hooks, "fragile and transitional" and "subject to violation and destruction" ("Homeplace" 47).

The textual resistance to a mythic narrative of a stable Western homeplace and Western identity is underlined further via the novel's engagement with the Frontier's central mythic component of movement. Lauren's journey North West involves her navigating a violent and hostile landscape, where spaces could be described, according to Eleanor Rao, as "contested and unstable" (116). Lauren's navigation is aided by her grandparents' maps. However, the inaccuracy of the forty-year-old maps means there is a mismatch between what is visually represented and what is actually seen and experienced by the characters. This disjuncture between representation and reality illustrates the way the landscape is rapidly remade under conditions of severe social upheaval. But this mismatch also signals that the initial structures of civilisation are breaking down. The maps symbolise the inversion of Turner's narrative whereby savagery is overcome by the superior forces of civilisation. As records of a landscape that has been surveyed, settled, controlled, the maps belong to a previous temporal moment and their presence resists a mythical narrative of the West as unsettled virgin land. In both its inversion and subversion of the Frontier Myth, *Parable* overlays different temporal, historical and mythic moments to present a palimpsest West, reminding us that "the West is a multicultural, multiaccented, multi-layered space" (Campbell, *Cultures* 2).

Lauren's journey North West Signifies on the Great Migration of the early twentieth century, interweaving a unique African American experience of migration with a nineteenth century American narrative of Westward advancement. The double-voiced feature of the text's engagement with the migration North West inscribes an African American experience into the foundational story of American national identity in order to disrupt the whiteness of that narrative. *Parable* Signifies on the black thematic trope of vertical ascent established by writers such as Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington. A recurrent Signifyin(g) trope in black writing, the notion of racial uplift symbolises overcoming racial (and for Lauren, gendered) boundaries to achieve spiritual, psychological and economic progress for the individual or the community.[94] Locating Lauren's physical, spiritual and intellectual journey within the Black tradition brings a black difference to the national narrative of Westward migration. Similarly, the whiteness of the racial project of the Frontier Myth is resisted by highlighting the racially diverse communities of people in the West. The freeway 118 "is a heterogenous mass – black and white, Asian and Latin, whole families are on the move with babies on backs or perched atop loads in carts, wagons or bicycle baskets, sometimes along with an old or handicapped person" (176-177). This diaspora of people, described by Lauren as "a broad river of people walking west on the freeway" (176), signals the immense human movement and displacement that the mythical narrative of the Frontier has ignored. Turner's narrative naturalised a certain kind of Western identity in defining the West, according to Campbell, "as a 'natural' homeland where America's essential and authentic being was formed" (*Rhizomatic* 27). The image of a moving mass of racially and ethnically diverse peoples challenges this dominant Anglo-American construction of Western identity as fixed and monocultural.

Yet, in spite of its dystopian Western setting and the collapse of society, *Parable* is more concerned with beginnings than endings. The novel's appropriation of

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[94] Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*; Booker T. Washington's 1901 *Up From Slavery.*

the myth of the West as Garden and the myth of Johnny Appleseed reveals a keen interest in the "creation myth" of the United States.[95] These two narratives were used to construct a pastoral and agrarian West that emphasises agricultural settlement. However, we have already seen that the mythic narrative of taming and civilising the landscape in creating the nation is severely tested in Butler's novel. I have already argued in chapter four that the pastoral idyll of the West as "Garden of the World" was, according to Henry Nash Smith, a dominant symbol of nineteenth century American society which "defined the promise of American life" (123). Smith explains that the emphasis of the Frontier narrative on:

> agricultural settlement places it clearly within the stream of agrarian theory that flows from eighteenth-century England and France through Jefferson to the men who elaborated the ideal of a society of yeomen farmers in the Northwest from which Turner sprang. (251)

Therefore, in the novel's creation of a new religion called Earthseed and a black female protagonist who carries with her seeds for future propagation, the narrative appropriates the old myth of agrarianism that informed Turner's thesis. After Lauren and her group have walked through "grim land" (271), there is a moment of literary signification which echoes this older temporal narrative, overlaying the present with a mythic past:

> The country we walked through was even beautiful in some places – green trees and rolling hills; golden dried grasses and tiny communities; farms, many overgrown and abandoned, and abandoned houses. Nice country, and compared to Southern California, rich country. More water, more food, more room. (272)

The merging of temporal spaces conveys textual glimpses of a lost mythic and real Western landscape. Among the descriptions of a "charred overgrown wilderness" (197); a "barren and ugly" landscape (215); and "dying towns, withering roadside

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[95] Limerick, *Legacy* 323

communities" (227), there are moments of a landscape where pines, sycamores and palms grow; "a glint of water . . . visible in the distance through the trees and bushes" can be seen (263); and where trees moving in the evening breeze appear (269). These images present a visual haunting of a past West that textually sits next to contemporary scenes of violence and human savagery. Hence, the scene above of the countryside occurs immediately after Lauren, Zahra, and Harry have stumbled across four dirty children roasting a human leg. The juxtaposition of scenes is jarring and underlines the corruption of the West as garden. This corruption spills over into the novel's treatment of the domestic garden. As discussed in chapter four, the domestic garden is a symbol of taming the landscape. It is therefore not surprising that in *Parable*, where civilised society teeters on the edge of extinction, there are a number of references to ruined gardens. Early in the novel, "Garden thieves" get into the walled community where they "stripped citrus trees of fruit in the Hsu yard and the Talcott garden" (68). Later, after Robledo is destroyed by the pyros, Lauren goes back to her home to see what she can salvage. She surprises herself:

> by almost crying at the sight of Cory's big, well-tended back garden, trampled into the ground. Peppers, tomatoes, squashes, carrots, cucumbers, lettuce, melons, sunflowers, beans, corn. . . . Much of it wasn't ripe yet, but what hadn't been stolen had been destroyed. (161)

The novel's inversion of Turner's narrative via the destruction of the garden symbol is indicative of the wider social, economic, and environmental regression that takes place.

Pivotal to my argument is that *Parable* inverts the mythic narrative in order to resurrect it in the historically marginal figure of a female African American and her racially mixed, ethnically diverse band of followers. At the end of the novel, Lauren writes that "There's a huge, half-ruined garden plus citrus trees full of unripe fruit. We've already been pulling carrots and digging potatoes here. There are plenty of other fruit and nut trees plus wild pines, redwoods, and Douglas firs . . . and we can plant more" (318). The group will prepare a winter garden, demonstrating their decision

to settle the land. Structurally, the novel replicates the chronology of Turner's Western development from the Frontier phase to the settler/domestication phase. Nevertheless, in re-appropriating the garden motif for an African American character and placing the theme within a multi-racial community, Butler re-writes and recontextualises the narrative of progress, imbuing it with a black difference that resists the whiteness of the myth. Moreover, as shown later, the garden motif inscribes an African American figure into the white dominated space of the natural landscape.

The text's re-appropriation of a progressive Frontier narrative is continued in Butler's construction of Lauren. In naming Lauren's new religion as Earthseed, the novel performs a contemporary revision of the agrarian foundation myth of the United States. Lauren writes of 'Earthseed', "I found the name, found it while I was weeding the back garden and thinking about the way plants seed themselves, windborne, animalborne, waterborne, far from their parent plants" (77). By associating Lauren with planting, *Parable* Signifies on the mid-nineteenth century American white folklore hero, Johnny Appleseed, described by Carl Abbott as "the harbinger of agricultural settlement" ("Homesteading" 242). William Kerrigan explores the transformation of John Chapman, "the apple-tree-planting evangelist", into the folklore figure of Appleseed (609):

> The Johnny Appleseed myth that began to emerge in the years after his death became part of the national origin story. And that story was essentially a celebration of American empire — the transformation of a continent from savage to civilized . . . Johnny Appleseed, too, became part of this celebration of the nation's origins, but his story was free from the taint of that violence. (616)

As a black female revision of a white male folk hero, the novel's appropriation performs "a motivated . . . revision" (Gates, *Signifying* 102) in that it centres a black Western experience and an alternative way of looking at the world that still envisions progress, but one based on a communal as opposed to an individualist ethos. Chapman was also, according to Kerrigan, "an energetic promoter of the writings of the Swedish

mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, whose English and American followers had organized themselves into The Church of the New Jerusalem" (608). The novel's white intertextuality serves as a critique of the white male-centric focus of the Frontier myth and Western history. A critique that is further emphasised by a black intertextuality that links Lauren to a black tradition of Western preachers and missionaries.

Not only is her father a Baptist minister, but as a Western migrant disseminating Earthseed to her small band of followers, Lauren can be located within a black literary history of peripatetic preachers. The first journal by a black ordained minister was written by John Marrant in 1785 who, in leaving his hometown and venturing out into an unfamiliar rural landscape, chose to "croffes the fence, which marked the boundary between the wildernefs and the cultivated country" (Preface iv). The construction of Lauren within a black homiletic tradition is illustrated in her journal entries. Early on she writes, "I believe in something that I think my dying, denying, backward-looking people need" (25). Later, after deciding to gather her verses together into one book, she writes that "someday when people are able to pay more attention to what I say than to how old I am, I'll use these verses to pry them loose from the rotting past, and maybe push them into saving themselves and building a future that makes sense" (79). The merging of black and white contexts disrupts a reading of Western history, identity, and culture as homogenous and mono-voiced. *Parable* harnesses the narrative of progress but rewrites it with a racial and gendered difference.

It is therefore not surprising that Butler also re-imagines the contemporary frontier of space exploration. In the verse: "The destiny of Earthseed/ Is to take root among the stars" (84-85), Butler appropriates a common science fiction motif of space exploration in order to resist a historical and scientific discourse of space dominated by male pioneers. In chapter three, the narrative recounts the death of the female astronaut, Alicia Catalina Godinez Leal. Leal's ethnicity (her name suggests Hispanic or Latina) and gender challenges the white male 'frontier' of space. As an alternative heroic figure of space exploration, it is significant that it is Leal who becomes Lauren's

role model and not Lauren's father. Leal's status enables the narrative to signal early

on its intention to dismantle dominant white patriarchal spaces and discourses. Lauren

laments the astronaut's death:

> She was a chemist. I intend to remember her. I think she can be a kind of role
> model for me. She spent her life heading for Mars – preparing herself,
> becoming an astronaut, getting on a Mars crew; going to Mars, beginning to
> figure out how to terraform Mars, beginning to create sheltered places where
> people can live and work. (21)

The contemporary reformulation of the Frontier rewrites the idea that the West was a

"predetermined entity with static borders and boundaries" (Kollin, *Postwestern* xi).

Using the words of Krista Comer to describe the Post-Western, *Parable* "takes for

granted a traveling West as well as a West of borders, outsides, and internal

irresolution" (Introduction 11). Space as the Final Frontier is a cultural cliché, but as a

Post-Frontier narrative *Parable* presents Mars as a potentially female space that is

non-Anglo-American. In engaging with the mythic narrative of the Frontier, *Parable*

cannot help but be haunted by the past. But as a Post-Frontier text, it challenges the

hegemonic white Eurocentric and patriarchal discourses of the West. The novel's

inversion of the Frontier Myth also works to critique the legacy of a mythic discourse

which has continued to exclude the female subaltern figure from the foundational myth

of American national identity.

The Western Literary Form

"If you got a gun, you're somebody. If you don't, you're shit" (Butler 109)

In *What is a Western? Region, Genre, Imagination* (2019), Josh Garrett-Davis writes

that "Often declared dead, the genre lives on in many revivals and playful adaptations

that may look quite unlike the Westerns of old" (4). Lee Clark Mitchell has also affirmed

that "the genre has again shifted to a less obviously recognisable form" (*Late* xi).

Butler's novel is one such example of a revision of the form in its convergence of the futuristic elements of science fiction with the Western form. As genres that can be grouped under the broader category of the adventure genre, the merging of science fiction with the Western is not unusual. Furthermore, Butler structures the novel as a series of journal entries by Lauren. In so doing, the narrative contests the gendered frontiers of both science fiction and the Western by Signifyin(g) on the genre of female settler journals. Simultaneously, this literary signification displaces the dominant whiteness of the female Western form. Significantly, Butler's narrative approach creates an open literary space which enables her to present an unmediated black female point of view that disrupts the traditional male discursive space of the genre.

David Mogen (1982) explores the relationship between science fiction and Westerns in order to give credibility to science fiction Westerns. "Western themes", he argues, "have consistently been transformed and reimagined in certain forms of science fiction" (16). In general, "much science fiction", according to Mogen, "deals with the theme of the last frontier", and therefore a great deal of "the expressive power of American science fiction results from the metaphorical and symbolic potency of the frontier myths it evokes" (16, 34). Carl Abbott, writing in the twenty-first century, makes a significant contribution in *Frontiers Past and Present* to exploring a selection of science fiction novels which intersect with Western history and genre. He explains that his focus is upon "projected narratives of the American West", and in exploring "one of many ways in which historical thinking figures in visions of the future" (2), Abbott offers an examination of images of the West in science fiction. Although scholars like Abbott, Gregory J. Hampton, and Christa Grewe-Volpp recognise Western generic and mythic influences in *Parable*, their primary focus is upon reading the novel as science fiction or dystopian fiction.

Butler's novel is frequently labelled as science fiction (Menne 2011; Allen 2009). Her cultural strategy of employing sci-fi and black cultural forms has also meant

that *Parable* is explored as an example of Afrofuturism.[96] Nevertheless, Butler has

described *Parable of the Sower* as "un-science fiction-y" (Butler et al. 68). Her

reservations about labelling the novel in this way opens a discursive space which, I

argue, recognises that the novel is "a mixture and negotiation of genres" and facilitates

a reading of the novel that foregrounds the Western form (1116).[97] Significantly,

Parable illustrates the Western form as a series of contesting contact zones and

demonstrates how the form itself mirrors the contemporary Post-Western interpretation

of frontiers as multiple and shifting. As a Post-Western, *Parable of the Sower* is shaped

by generic features and conventions of the Western which Butler re-imagines in the

figure of Lauren and the dystopian Western landscape that she inhabits. Thus, the

novel can be described as a 'critical dystopian Post-Western' – borrowing labels from

Frauke Uhlenbruch, Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini. Dystopias, according to

Uhlenbruch:

> make references to developments in the contemporary world, possibly
> containing a utopian hope of averting catastrophic outcomes of unchecked
> exploitation of resources and (human) beings or unethical treatment of scientific
> progress. Many contemporary dystopias are haunting responses to tendencies
> in contemporary culture to which the author seeks to draw attention. (8)

As a site for social and economic protest, the dystopian genre also provides a space

for a critical commentary of race and gender. Within this dystopian world, the narrative

engages with and revises the following common mythic tropes of the Western literary

form: Frontier violence, the heroic Western figure, the potential of the Western

landscape, and the idea of the self-made individual. But at the same time, and as

Gregory J. Hampton rightly points out, "The not-so-futurist world that Lauren and her

family exist in is something short of the Old West; it is reminiscent of a present-day

inner-city Los Angeles or any contemporary urban ghetto" (59). Hampton's view of the

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[96] See Winchester et al., 2020; Jones, "Africana" 2016; Yaszek 2015 for further discussions on Butler's work as Afrofuturist.
[97] Maria Holmgren Troy uses this expression in her discussion of Butler's novel *Survivor* as a science fiction novel which also engages with the Indian captivity narrative. Butler clearly has an interest in the merging of genres.

novel as "both a travelogue narrative and a sort of bible all in one" (57) does not address why the world of the text is not quite the Old West. It is "not quite the Old West", I argue, because the novel presents a palimpsest West; a West in which different temporal, discursive, historical and spatial Wests interweave and overlay each other. The result is a late twentieth century West that overlays different processes that are similar but different. For example, the narrative echoes nineteenth century sharecropping with a contemporary form of debt slavery, and particularly the second text, *Parable of the Talents,* overlays an older form of American chattel slavery with a modern collared slavery. It also overlays earlier forms of Western migration with the contemporary journey that Lauren and her group takes. These earlier discourses and Western spaces reverberate through the contemporary narrative creating a Post-Western narrative that is "dialogic and heteroglossic" (Campbell, "Post-Western" 411) and involves "speaking at the same time several times – and in several voices" (Derrida qtd. in "Post-Western" 411).

An example of an older discourse existing within the contemporary temporal moment of the text is in the novel's depiction of the Paints, or Pyros as they are also called. *Parable* re-imagines the Frontier violence of the Old West between the frontiersman/settler and the hostile Indian. The presence of the Paints engages with an older thematic dichotomy of civilisation versus savagery within the narrative. Keith, Lauren's brother, describes how the Paints "shave off all their hair – even their eyebrows – and they paint their skin green or blue or red or yellow. They eat fire and kill rich people" (110). Within the text's Western landscape, the Paints' name and their body painting perform a historical Signifyin(g) echoing the face and body painting of Native American tribes. In a textual appropriation of the conventional Western Other, *Parable* constructs a contemporary hostile Other. In their destruction of Robledo, the Paints are responsible for the downfall of civilisation. They may inhabit the margins of the narrative, but evidence of their existence is ubiquitous. As Lauren's group travel northwards, the menace of the Paints is visible in the fires that consume the landscape

and communities, with "addicts . . . running wild" (246). When Lauren and her group arrive at Bankole's land, they find only "bones and ashes" (314). Lauren might note that "Bankole owns this land, free and clear" (318), but the text suggests otherwise. The strong possibility of the Paints' presence prior to the group's arrival indicates that Western spaces are, and always have been, spaces of conflict where ownership and control of land are contested.

The violence that is done to the Western landscape as a result of human conflict and contest over Western spaces consequently informs the novel's dystopian Western setting and Anthropocene focus. Importantly, I read *Parable* as an eco-critical development of the black Western form. A development that also within my study forms a signifyin(g) thread to Greer's novel. Whereas CJ's actions preserve a predominantly white economic system and way of life, Butler's novel illustrates the consequences of a legacy of aggressive Western competitive individualism. Butler's novel reflects an increased concern over the exploitation of the Western landscape during the 1980s and 1990s.[98] In an interview in 1997 Butler said, "I had tapes of Nova and other programs that I had taped – books as well – about ecological problems, because those play a big part in *Parable of the Sower*. The ecology, especially global warming, is almost a character in *Parable of the Sower*" (Rowell 61). *Parable* exposes the consequences of what Goldberg describes as a "tale of national progress" that hides "a story of resource exploitation" (22). "People have changed the climate of the world", Lauren informs her friend Joanne (57), after Lauren lists a series of disasters that have hit the country:

> There's cholera spreading in southern Mississippi and Louisiana. . . . There are too many poor people – illiterate, jobless, homeless, without decent sanitation or clean water. They have plenty of water down there, but a lot of it is polluted. And you know that drug that makes people want to set fires? . . . it's spreading

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[98] Brøgger, Fredrik Chr. "Wallace Stegner and the Western Environment: Hydraulics, Placelessness, and (Lack of) Identity." *European Journal of American Studies,* vol. 6, no. 3, 2011. *OpenEdition Journals,* http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/9302; DOI: 10.4000/ejas.9302. Accessed 16 Dec. 2019.

again. It was on the east coast. Now it's in Chicago . . . tornadoes are smashing hell out of Alabama, Kentucky, Tennessee, and two or three other states. Three hundred people dead so far. And there's a blizzard freezing the northern Midwest, killing even more people. In New York and New Jersey, a measles epidemic is killing people. (53-54)

The contemporary ecological disasters that befall Lauren's world echo a historic theme of environmental, economic and social crises that impacts the Western landscape in the mid to late nineteenth century. Severe rains followed by a drought in Southern California in 1863-64 caused the cattle industry in that region to collapse, while blizzards on the Southern Plains in 1884-5 and on the Northern Plains in 1886-7 led to further loss of cattle and livelihoods (Isenberg 85-86). In the 1930s, settlement and farming practices along with severe droughts and high winds in Oklahoma led to the migration of thousands of famers to California (as recounted in *The Grapes of Wrath*). In its depiction of environmental degradation, *Parable* suggests that far from taming the landscape, Western settlement involved exploitation of the land and its resources.

The scarcity and cost of water in *Parable* is a perennial theme of the genre. The novel shows "how unnatural and precarious the West's system of water supply is" (Hertsgaard). Access to water and the ability to irrigate one's land and water animals is an integral part of the Western trope of taming, cultivating and domesticating the landscape. Access to and use of water in both the imagined and real West is a symbolic site over which racial, gendered, and class hierarchies are contested. In *Parable*, water is a rare and expensive commodity exemplified by the too few commercial water stations where "you draw whatever you pay for – and not a drop more" (201). This represents an extreme form of the commodification of the West that began in the nineteenth century and implies a sub-narrative that is critical of the historical and contemporary context of an unchecked greed to exploit the natural resources of the Western landscape. *Parable* offers a contemporary take on the legacy of the nineteenth-century notion of the machine in the garden. Taking the legacy to its extreme conclusion, the novel depicts how the forces of urbanisation, capitalism,

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industrialisation and technology resulted in the corruption of the Garden – that symbol of promise and possibility – by the City. *Parable* inserts itself with a Western literary tradition in which, Leo Marx argues, "For more than a century our most gifted writers have dwelt upon the contradiction between rural myth and technological fact" (195).

Structurally, the plot of *Parable* adheres to the Western theme of the rite of passage, whereby a young male of orphaned status (literal or metaphorical) leaves home and sets out West to make a new life for himself. A maturation story, the genre traditionally presents a male hero who embarks upon an "adventurous life in the open spaces of the West or on the road" and who, according to Grewe-Volpp, in "following an old American promise, conquers empty space to give it significance and meaning" (222). Within the historical fable of the West, mobility has been the domain of men and not, according to Virginia Scharff, a key plot line for women (3). *Parable* flips this convention and centres Lauren's migration as a "spatial practice" of resistance to conservative patriarchal structures and ideologies (Tally, *Spatiality* 114). "Escape for Black women/men", Carole Boyce Davies argues, "has necessarily involved the seeking out of protective spaces, or concealment at some points, as the logic of 'underground railroad" implies' (97). The novel plays on the nineteenth century American Western motif of 'Go West young man'.[99] Lauren loses both her parents, her siblings and her home. She is thus propelled out into an unfamiliar and dangerous landscape. Her journey becomes a rite of passage and self-transformation where she proves herself adept at survival. Lauren's ability to use a gun establishes her as protector of the group. This is alongside her role as nurturer symbolised in the seeds she carries and teaching Zahra to read and write.

R.W.B. Lewis writes that in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, a new kind of American hero emerged (5). This hero, according to Lewis, was:

> an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever

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[99] Phrase attributed to Horace Greeley in his editorial in the New York Tribune, 1865

awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources. It was not surprising, in a Bible-reading generation, that the new hero . . . was most easily identified with Adam before the Fall. (5)

In the construction of Lauren, the narrative significantly rewrites this mythic figure as an American Eve figure. "I intend to survive" (58), she tells Joanne, and to this end she reads books on survival, on edible plants, and puts together a survival bag. Lauren's resourcefulness is at the heart of her ability to survive. Her possession of maps, seeds, knowledge, money, and a gun along with her mobility give her an autonomy and agency that traditionally has been the preserve of Western male figures. Initially, *Parable* appears to associate the gun – the symbol of Frontier Violence – with male authority. Lauren's father is described as wearing "a nine-millimetre automatic pistol whenever he leaves the neighbourhood. He carries it on his hip where people can see it" (38). And Lauren's brother, Keith, boasts to her that "If you got a gun, you're somebody. If you don't, you're shit" (109). Depicted as both protector and nurturer, Butler's protagonist usurps the traditional masculine authority figure of the genre. She tells Harry, "Out here, you adapt to your surroundings or you get killed" (182). To which Harry replies, "You damn sure talk macho enough to be a guy" (182). At times, Lauren does sound like the clichéd Western hero. Two days into being on the road, and the group's camp is approached by two men:

> Two big, dirty-looking guys were standing near-by, watching us, watching Zahra in particular. I stood up, feeling the others stand with me, flanking me. These guys were too close to us. They meant to be too close. As I stood up, I put my hand on the gun. 'Yeah?' I said. 'What do you want?'. 'Not a thing', one of them said, smiling at Zahra. Both wore big holstered knives which they fingered. I drew the gun. 'Good deal,' I said. Their smiles vanished. 'What, you going to shoot us for standing here?' the talkative one said. I thumbed the safety. I would shoot the talker, the leader. The other one would run away. (183)

Yet the familiarity of this scene and the language used, reminiscent of Western stand-offs, is significant. By giving Lauren these actions and words and not Harry, the narrative subverts the idea of the white male as the protector of civilisation. It is Lauren, a young black woman, who leads a modern-day wagon train of men, women and

children across a savage landscape and who establishes the beginnings of a new community. A critical consequence of inserting Lauren into this Western space of discourse and action is that it establishes her as the harbinger of civilisation. Within the form, such scenes also establish Lauren's credibility as leader. Unlike traditional Westerns, men's voices (once her father is removed from the narrative) do not dominate the novel.

The construction of Lauren as an African American female Western heroic figure is emphasised through the narrative technique of journal writing. Lauren's entries empower her as they require her to engage in an act of self-creation as she writes herself onto the page, paralleling the "creation stories" of Beckwourth, Love and Micheaux (Walsh 12). Importantly, this textual act of agency inserts the character into a Western discursive space that has excluded the black female voice. The narrative technique of using journal writing further genders the narrative because, historically, journal writing has been seen mainly as a female genre. "Along with letters", according to Harriet Blodgett, "diaries have been women's most common form of writing in English over the centuries" (187). Although Blodgett points out that the diary form is not specific to women and performs a comparable office for men, "it has been especially important to females in patriarchal societies" (188). In recording Lauren's thoughts as she travels North West, the narrative technique of the journal signals the ability of the form historically to resist patriarchal ideology, and it also echoes the genre's popularity during the period of English settlement and colonisation of America.[100] By presenting her novel as a series of journal entries, Butler aligns the novel with contemporaneous concerns of New Western History in its representation of an unmediated subaltern voice. While in Beckwourth and Love's texts, both narrators desire to align their personal narrative of progress with that of a national narrative of identity and progress, Butler instead offers a subversive narrative because it challenges the national

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[100] We see early colonial writers like William Byrd, Mary Williamson, and Benjamin Franklin using the journal as a means to record their experiences and travels across the country.

narrative. The voice of a young black female preacher symbolises the "profound edge" that black women have occupied in the historical, cultural and literary discursive spaces of the West, including journals of the journey West and life on the wagon trains.

Unlike the narratives of Beckwourth and Love, Lauren's journal records the domestic details of her preparation to travel and the domestic details of the journey. These include sleeping arrangements, hygiene, and looking after children, but also guarding the camp and killing those who threaten the safety of the group. Her journal reveals that the lives of Western female pioneers are complex and involved crossing gender boundaries. Within the tradition of nineteenth century pioneer diaries, Gayle R. Davis argues that "The very act of keeping a diary can be explored as a significant coping mechanism, through which the women adjusted to the hardships, freedom, and challenges of the frontier" (5). Davis goes on to say that diary writing also indicated "a desire for control, organisation, and continuity in a foreign environment where her former stable routines of life were unknown" (12). Keeping a journal becomes a necessity in Butler's second novel, *Parable of the Talents.* As a prisoner and a slave, Lauren writes of the "need to write" (212, 232) in order to feel that not everything has been lost and "to give some order to my scattered thoughts" (208). In *Parable of the Sower*, journal writing is a means of navigating and attempting to make sense of the world that Lauren encounters. At the same time, journal writing reveals what Gioia Woods would describe as "the self-in-construction" which within the context of the Western form resonates with the idea of the self-made individual (336).

Lillian Schlissel, who has been described as undertaking "Pioneering feminist revision work" (Woods 341), has argued that the nineteenth century female diary and journal of Westward migration and settlement "is something like a family history, a souvenir meant to be shared like a Bible, handed down through generations" (Schlissel 10). In *Parable of Talents*, we learn that most of Lauren's journals survive her death and are read by Asha Vere (born Larkin) – her estranged daughter. Asha Vere tells the reader that she looks to her mother's writings, because "In order for me to understand

who I am, I must begin to understand who she was" (2). Whereas this quotation suggests that the journal form functions in the novel as a "shaper[s] of family" (Schlissel 11), Lauren's daughter concludes at the end of the second novel that "All of Earthseed was her family. We never really were" (405). In fact, Butler rewrites the traditional domestic discourse of female Western journal writing to show Lauren both administering domestic duties and creating a new community.

Furthermore, the argument that the novel is proposing an alternative idea about what family and therefore community is, finds expression in the destroyed homes and ruined chimneys of Robledo. When Lauren goes back to Robledo after it is destroyed, she sees that Richard Moss's house has been "burned to the ground" and that "Only the chimney stuck up blackened and naked from the rubble" (162, 163). This image is repeated at the end of the novel when the group arrives at Bankole's land:

> There was no house. There were no buildings. There was almost nothing: A broad black smear on the hillside; a few charred planks sticking up from the rubble, some leaning against others; and a tall brick chimney, standing black and solitary like a tombstone in a picture of an old-style graveyard. (314)

Within the Western, the chimney is a contradictory image. On the one hand, it symbolises settlement. It also represents the hearth, the fireplace, the cooking place – the centre of domestic life which historically has been female space. But equally, the popular Western image of a ruined chimney is symbolic of the struggle to tame a hostile environment. The narrative therefore employs this complex image to problematise conventional notions of a permanent settlement and homeplace. As a consequence, it also foreshadows the destruction of Acorn in the second book.

Butler's narrative reveals the repetition and revision inherent in the writings of the West – a literary Signifyin(g) that facilitates the revisions of an ever-evolving Western genre. Within the discursive space of the Western literary form, the novel carves out a black female literary space in centring a black female perspective which is unusual in the traditional literary history of Western writing. This locates the novel

within a black female literary history of writers who have written Western narratives, including Pauline E. Hopkins, Lillian Jones Horace, Era Bell Thompson, Pearle Cleage, and Toni Morrison.

Racial Identity and the Racial Project

"There aren't many black people up that way, are there?" (Butler 274)

In the creative re-articulation of the Western heroic figure and Western community, the racial project of *Parable of the Sower* contests the gendered, racial and cultural frontiers of the Western form more successfully than the other texts in my study. This section explores the extent to which an appropriation and revision of white patriarchal narratives enable or limit Butler's construction of alternative black Western gendered identities. My discussion therefore takes to task the idea that race is not a significant thematic concern in the novel. In his analysis of Butler as "political theologian" (449), Vincent Lloyd downplays the importance of race arguing that:

> race does not figure significantly in her work with the exception of *Kindred*, a neo-slave narrative. Indeed, the significance of race in Butler's writing is most often in its presence but unimportance . . . (It is only halfway through *Parable of the Sower* that readers learn that the protagonist is black.). (451)

In a footnote to the above, Lloyd clarifies that discussions of ethnicity and race are not "entirely absent, just that they are not freighted with the narrative significance that characterises race in a US context" (451). Lloyd's statements are problematic. First, the reader is informed early in the novel that "The Garfields and the Balters are white, and the rest of us are black. That can be dangerous these days. On the street, people are expected to fear and hate everyone but their own kind" (36). More importantly however is the way in which race exists, to borrow an expression from Michael Omi and Howard Winant, "as a *master category* of oppression and resistance" within the novel (245; emphasis in original). The narrative shows how race organises society with explicit

references to racial inequality. Lauren's father describes the racialised space of Robledo as "too big, too poor, too black, and too Hispanic to be of interest to anyone" (120). The consequence of this ghettoization for non-white families like the Olaminas is the limited economic opportunities. "I doubt that Olivar is looking for families of blacks and Hispanics", he tells Lauren's step-mother, "the Balters or the Garfields or even some of the Dunns might get in, but I don't think we would" (122). The existence of the color-line within this futuristic world is evident in the explicit textual examples of racism and its accompanying threat of violence. On leaving the ruins of their community, Zahra warns Lauren that "Mixed couples catch hell whether people think they're gay or straight. Harry'll piss off all the blacks and you'll piss off all the whites" (172). And Bankole says of his brother-in-law that "He knew plumbing, carpentry, electrical work, and motor vehicle mechanics. Of course, it didn't help that he was black. Being white might help you win people over faster" (320).

The critical consequence of this textual racial consciousness reveals that "the racism of the past is still active in the present" and this is nowhere more obvious than in the novel's story of slavery (Omi and Winant 249). Butler does not present us with a post-racial futuristic world. Instead, the narrative is haunted by the history of slavery which surfaces in the novel's contemporary context of forced abduction, labour and imprisonment. The latter system operates on two levels. One is the system of debt slavery that overlays the nineteenth-century system of sharecropping, and the other system is collared slavery which is akin to earlier forms of chattel slavery. During the journey north west, the initial group of Lauren, Harry and Zahra grows "to become the crew of a modern underground railroad" (292) and includes those who have been slaves, for example: Grayson Mora, "a tall, thin, black Latino" (290); or those like Travis Douglas, a man with an "unusual deep-black complexion" (211), whose mother was a live-in cook and taught Travis to read and write by sneaking books from her owner's library. As Lauren remarks, "Slaves did that two hundred years ago. They sneaked around and educated themselves as best they could" (218). The scene in which Travis

recounts how his mother had to persuade the man she worked for to let Travis marry Natividad and then the old man "decided he wanted Natividad" (219), is reminiscent of historical multiple encounters between white masters and black slaves and signals the continued existence of a "monolithic racial order" within the world of the text (Omi & Winant 143). A world in which slavery, Lauren observes, is "even worse than my father thought" (292).

Consequently, the insertion of a black narrative of oppression and resistance into a Western discursive and geographical space subverts the mythic idea of the West as a place of opportunity and liberty along with the misconception that slavery was confined purely to the Southern states. Bankole remembers hearing stories in the early 1990s "of growers . . . holding people against their wills and forcing them to work without pay. Latins in California, blacks and Latins in the South" (292). At the same time, the incorporation of the slave narrative with its theme of vertical ascent aligns with the Western theme of movement north and brings a unique black experience to the form's theme of movement and progress. The presence of a slave narrative and Bankole's reference to the 1990s also serves to illustrate that the color-line exists across different temporal spaces. *Parable* may present a contemporary world that on the surface is ethnically diverse, but the novel challenges the idea that such diversity is synonymous with racial equality. The despair and anger that social chaos has engendered perpetuates racialist behaviour. "People are setting fires", Lauren writes in her journal, "to get rid of whomever they dislike from personal enemies to anyone who looks or sounds foreign or racially different" (143). In presenting the theme of contemporary slavery, the racial project of *Parable* critiques the white hegemonic discourses and practices that have informed the colonisation and oppression of non-white peoples within the American West.

The textual challenge and resistance to white hegemonic Western narratives of identity is further achieved by locating Lauren within a black American history and an African heritage. On the title page to Lauren's journal, we learn that her full name is

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Lauren Oya Olamina. When Lauren first talks with Bankole, she discovers that his name is Taylor Francis Bankole and explains that:

> Our last names were an instant bond between us. We're both descended from men who assumed African surnames back during the 1960s. His father and my grandfather had had their names legally changed, and both had chosen Yoruba replacement names. (230)

The paternal adoption of Nigerian surnames references a historical black nationalist/Pan-Africanist racial consciousness and importantly inserts Lauren into a cultural heritage of black resistance to white. In the second book, *Parable of the Talents*, Lauren's daughter Asha Vere reveals that "'Oya' is the name of a Nigerian Orisha – goddess – of the Yoruba people. In fact, the original Oya was the goddess of the Niger River, a dynamic dangerous entity. She was also goddess of the wind, fire, and death, more bringers of great change" (48). This explicit intertextuality with African culture brings a powerful female blackness into Anglo-American geographical and cultural spaces and disrupts the male-centric whiteness of these spaces. The construction of Lauren as founder of a new religion and a new community at Acorn is underpinned by this intertextual blackness which significantly revises the absence of African American women in the creation story of America. By having an African American woman found the community in Humboldt County, on the coast near Cape Mendocino in the mountains of northern California (the Pacific Northwest), the novel Signifies on the Puritan ideal of the 'city on the hill' and the narrative of the Founding Fathers.[101]

On arriving at Bankole's land, Lauren observes that:

> The land surrounding us, however, is as empty and wild as any I've seen. It's covered with dry brush, trees, and tree stumps, all far removed from any city, and a long, hilly walk from the little towns that line the highway. There's farming around here, and logging, and just plain isolated living. (313)

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[101] Francis J. John Winthrop, one of the Puritan Founding Fathers, in his 1630 sermon aboard the Arbella which was on its way to the Massachusetts Bay Colony said, "For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all the people are upon us . . ." (*The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, vol. A, W. W. Norton, 2012, p. 177).

Situated within a wilderness, isolated and geographically elevated, Acorn's symbolism as a contemporary 'city on a hill' is offered as a critique of what is a white male myth of the founding of America. A myth that also ignores the fact that the land was not empty. This critique is evident in the 'tree stumps' which suggests prior settlement. Lauren's central role reminds us, as Emory Elliot argues, that women also played a critical role in the settlement of the West (30). The narrative's subversion of patriarchal hegemony is cemented at the beginning of chapter two when Lauren writes in her journal that "At least three years ago, my father's God stopped being my God . . . My God has another name" (7). This statement creates a discursive and social space that enables Butler to explore a narrative of being that is more open to and accepting of difference. "Fundamental to the process of decentering the oppressive other and claiming our right to subjectivity", bell hooks argues, "is the insistence that we must determine how we will be" ("Liberation" 22). Butler constructs Lauren as selecting those aspects of her personal history which will best inform a strong sense of self. Lauren embraces her African black paternal roots, but she rejects that part of her paternal heritage – "my father's God" – that justified colonisation of the West via the doctrine of Manifest Destiny and establishes her own religion and theocratic community (15).

Butler's interrogation of patriarchal hegemonic narratives continues in the appropriation of the African American female spiritual narrative which emerged in the ante-bellum period and the cultural positioning of Lauren within an African American history of female black preachers that, according to Kenyatta R. Gilbert, goes back to 1808 with a Methodist preacher called Elizabeth. In Signifyin(g) on the figure of the black female preacher in its creation of Lauren, the narrative performs a radical revision and displacement of the traditional male heroic frontier figure while simultaneously contesting the secularism of the Western. The form "evolves out of an evangelical literary tradition" (430), Ben Nadler argues, and the historical context of the proliferation of free churches that occurred at the end of the eighteenth century in the United States

(412). However, according to Nadler, *The Virginian* and subsequent Westerns regarded religion with contempt, viewing it as "a controlling and feminising force to be escaped by venturing into the free, homosocial frontier" (415). Therefore, the "homiletic strain" of *Parable* (409) evident in Lauren's journal entries and the construct of Lauren as a young black preacher inform a subversive textual racial project that transforms conventional constructions of Western identity and at the same time contests the cultural and gendered frontiers of the Western.

Combined with Lauren's first-person journal entries, *Parable* is a reminder that, in the words of Nellie McKay, "Afro-American prose writings begin with autobiography" (139). Butler's novel also belongs to a black literary tradition which emphasises the importance of the Church to African American communities. As with the authors of female spiritual narratives, Lauren has a calling. In her discussion on nineteenth century female spiritual autobiographies, McKay writes that this "mission . . . transcended the mundane activities of their daily lives and manifested their first loyalties to a being more powerful than humans". It also "demanded they overcome formidable personal and societal hindrances in the process" (142). Like her historical and literary predecessor, Jarena Lee,[102] who travelled "across border states, Ohio and Canada" mostly on foot (143), Lauren walks hundreds of miles taking her spiritual message with her. She carries with her the beginnings of a new society that offers alternative values and ways of living. Values that are founded on communal responsibility and respect as opposed to the ethos of individualism which is so central to the construction of Western identity within both myth and form.

Butler's construction of Lauren as a new kind of heroic Western figure also draws on black vernacular mythology. Although not used extensively in the novel, those moments where it does occur function to further locate Lauren within a sub-text of African American cultural heritage. The novel opens on Lauren remembering a

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[102] Born in 1778, Jarena Lee was an itinerant preacher of the African Methodist Church. In 1835, Lee travelled over seven hundred miles "to dispense her message" (McKay 143).

recurring dream which begins with her learning to fly "dream lesson by dream lesson" and ends with her looking up at the stars (4). Butler's employment of the African American trope of flying conveys "the double meaning of flight as ascent and escape" (Gates & Tatar 68). Lauren's dream symbolises her defiance of the conservative patriarchal order of Robledo and her desire to escape and establish a better community elsewhere. It therefore foreshadows the migratory journey she will undertake in her search for personal freedom and self-determination.

Lauren may only be fifteen at the start of *Parable* and eighteen at the end, but Butler has her articulate thoughts and ideas of an adult. Importantly, Lauren's duality or 'doubleness' Signifies on the mythological vernacular figure of the trickster. Like Morrison, Butler re-appropriates the subversive potential of the male trickster for a female character. Barbara Babcock-Abrahams lists commonly accepted characteristics of the black vernacular figure, some of which have relevance to the figure of Lauren. These include showing some kind of mental and/or physical 'abnormality', being of indeterminate physical stature and portrayed as both young and old and having the ability to disguise themselves (qtd. in Morgan 176). As a trickster figure, the multifaceted nature of Lauren's character along with her resilience and cleverness facilitates a challenge to the traditional power relations between race and gender in order "to transcend the oppressive social order" (Schramm and Jeffries 19). It seems therefore only natural that Lauren's God is also a trickster. She writes:

> God is Pliable –
> Trickster,
> Teacher,
> Chaos,
> Clay. (25)

The God of Earthseed is black and has its origins (it is neither male nor female) in black vernacular mythology. As with all trickster figures, its purpose is to challenge the current status quo by showing alternative ways of living in and understanding the world

and to instruct and educate.[103] In the Foreword to the 2019 edition of *Parable of the Sower*, N.K. Jemisin notes that Butler's third book in the trilogy was to be called *Parable of the Trickster* (xii).[104] It is evident that Butler's racial project is to challenge white hegemonic narratives by deliberately Signifyin(g) on black vernacular mythology to underpin a radical black female identity.

Inscribing Lauren into this black oral tradition reveals that the construction of a black radical subjectivity within a white mythic framework and genre is only possible by drawing upon alternative narratives. bell hooks writes of the African American experience that "Part of our struggle for radical black subjectivity is the quest to find ways to construct self and identity that are oppositional and liberatory" (29). Lauren's gender passing signals that the text will present alternative scripts for the construction of her identity and Signifies on both Western literary tropes and African traditions. Jane Caputi in a brief exploration of alternative communities and spiritualities in Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* locates Lauren within a tradition of older African deities whose doubleness informs their divinity:

> Oya is a Warrior, fierce and sometimes bearded. Like many of the oldest deities in Africa and the Americas, she incorporates masculinity. We spot her when Olamina passes as male, fights physically, and experiences attraction for and from women as well as men. . . .
>
> One of the open secrets of Butler's *Parables* is the power of the living Oya archetype to upend the established order, to revolutionize consciousness and culture. (177)

The doubling, dissembling, and disrupting nature of Oya the Warrior strongly points to reading the divine mythological figure as a female trickster. Butler's engagement with African spiritual and African American vernacular contexts consequently creates a cultural and discursive space of black female difference, which itself is located within geographical, historical and social places that have sought to exclude and marginalise that black difference/experience.

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[103] See Hynes and Doty (2009); Schramm and Jeffries (2000)
[104] Butler planned a third novel but was unable to complete it (Jemisin xii).

Importantly, Lauren's passing not only inserts her into an African heritage, but it also firmly places her within a "neglected history of female masculinity in literature of the American West" (Worden 19). Butler's construction of Lauren draws upon a device of dime novel writing that dates back to the 1860s whereby female Western heroines were disguised in male clothing to protect their genteel natures (Smith 112). Daniel Worden observes that "In popular dime novels featuring Deadwood Dick, for example, Calamity Jane is a recurring character who dresses, fights, and curses like a man" (19). Passing disrupts the social order and challenges assumptions surrounding gender ascription and behaviour. According to Worden, in the late nineteenth century there exists "a proliferation of masculinities that are not bound to a legible male body" (19). Worden goes on to say that the adoption of masculinity, or "masculine self-fashioning" within dime novels becomes a means by which "dime novels critique patriarchal dominance and industrial oppression" (33). Lauren's androgynous looks facilitate her passing but as discussed earlier in this chapter, Lauren also possesses characteristics that are traditionally associated with the heroic male Western figure. She is a good shot; she rescues the vulnerable; she has the necessary knowledge and skills for survival; and she possesses a gun and maps. She is also courageous and physically strong. Butler's construction of Lauren presents a critical interaction between the heroic qualities of the white frontiersman and the African American features of the trickster figure that resists and interrogates the expectations of both myth and form for homogenous Western identities. Lauren's status as a disruptive figure is illustrated in Natividad's remark on discovering her gender that "You're tall and strong, but . . . I don't know. You don't have a man's face" (212).

Critically, the trope of Western movement across vast and shifting Western landscapes historically and metaphorically enables and sustains flexible identities – identities that cannot easily be pinned down as the mythic narratives of the Frontier would suggest. Movement, as Virginia Scharff argues, reveals that "Manliness and womanliness and racial identity can be particularly unstable and important along

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boundaries like frontiers" (71). The narrative links an adaptable and fluid identity with survival in a hostile Western landscape. Those characters who, like Lauren's father, are unable to open up to other ways of being, who are unable to construct alternative life scripts for themselves will fail. Notably, *Parable* thus denies men the agency to effect change in the narrative.

Through the creation of Earthseed and the textual associations of Lauren with nature and growth, the narrative promotes her as a positive agent of transformation upon the landscape. Her desire to "plant more" oak trees (318) on their arrival at Acorn is the first step in countering the destruction of the natural landscape. The fact that Acorn is more like a pre-industrial agrarian community strongly suggests a more responsible and intimate relationship between people and nature. By firmly placing Lauren within an environmental context, *Parable* seeks to reverse the "persistent stereotype" which, according to Dianne D. Glave, insists "that African Americans are physically and spiritually detached from the environment" (2). Butler's environmental discourse forms a signifyin(g) thread to the male Eurocentric environmental discourse of Greer's novel in that Butler rewrites the African American female experience of the Western landscape. The textual insertion of Lauren, who creates a belief system that is rooted in nature and God, into a Western landscape which historically has been violated in the name of settlement and progress subverts African American exclusion from the narrative of environmentalism and their perceived limited role as agents of ecological change (Ruffin 18). Lauren's connection to and respect for the non-human world aligns with an ecofeminist position and places Butler's novel, as Ruffin would argue, within a history of African American eco writing (14). According to ecocritical scholars Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy, literary ecofeminism is an approach which:

> offers a critique of the many forms of oppression and advocates the centrality of
> human diversity and biodiversity to our survival on this planet . . . it emphasises
> the urgency of political action aimed at dismantling institutions of oppression
> and building egalitarian and ecocentric networks in their place. (12)

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As a consequence, the appropriation of an eco-narrative for Lauren works to contest the mythic and generic constructions of the Western natural landscape as "white-only space" (Outka 3). At the same time, the employment of an eco-narrative challenges the Frontier triumphalist narrative of settlement that "often effaced the environmental harm resulting from the exploitation and management of resources central to the idealised West" (Goldberg 24).

Acorn, located as it is on the top of a hill, is that profound edge that hooks refers to. It is a space of radical openness – a marginal space – where ways of living and being depend, as hooks argues, on the "ability to conceptualise alternatives" ("Choosing" 149). Acorn stands as an attempt to build a more diverse, inclusive and egalitarian community. In so doing, it becomes the "central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse" which hooks defines as one "that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives" ("Choosing" 149). As Acorn's founder, Lauren symbolises the possibility of that alternative existence. Within a violent patriarchal and racialist world, Butler creates a discursive, intellectual and geographical space which facilitates her character's self-transformation to spiritual leader and constructs her as a catalyst of change. Significantly therefore, Butler's narrative succeeds in creating a radical new black Western gendered identity for its protagonist.

Conclusion

"Afterward, we . . . decided to call this place Acorn" (Butler 328)

The racial project of *Parable of the Sower* presents a palimpsest West where black and white historical, cultural and literary discourses merge to create Western identities and Western spaces that are complex and continually evolving. Within this double-voiced narrative, Butler constructs an alternative and radical Western Frontier hero whose

literary existence contests the racial, gendered and cultural frontiers of the Western form. Butler's central character is transformed by her Western experiences. At the same time, the fluidity of Lauren's identity is transgressive. Critically, it is only through a textual re-imagining of "alternative, oppositional aesthetic acts" that the novel is able to successfully realise different ways of being that foster a radical black subjectivity ("Choosing" 145). In an inversion and re-imagining of the historical fables of the West, the narrative privileges the voice of the black subaltern female and elevates her status to one of active and activating agent.

This subversive narrative strategy is paralleled by Butler's navigation of different genres which challenges the frontiers of the Western form. Significantly therefore, *Parable of the Sower* demonstrates how African American writers are expanding the Western literary form and taking it outside its conventional formula so that it eludes neat categorisation, while at the same time still engaging with and significantly revising traditional concepts and themes linked to the American West and its narratives. Consequently, readers recognise Lauren as the ultimate self-made Western individual. The fire that burns her home and community is the catalyst for the rite of passage that she undertakes and her self-transformation. From her marginal status as a young African American female, Lauren's character challenges patriarchal, gendered, and racial Western spaces and discourses. And importantly, she accomplishes change in others. Ultimately, her little group of twelve will become her apostles sharing and teaching Earthseed – a nurturing, inclusive narrative of divine power that subverts the patriarchal oppressive authority of Christianity.

Transgressive and transforming, Lauren overcomes the racial, cultural and gendered ascriptions and limitations placed on her. She is a figure who, according to Caputi, "upend[s] the established order, to revolutionize consciousness and culture" (177). It is problematic, however, that established order is restored in *Parable of the Talents* to emphasise the vulnerable profound edge that Lauren and her community inhabit and the shifting nature of Western spaces. Notwithstanding this change of

circumstances, Butler's interrogation and appropriation of dominant mythic, historical, and religious discourses in *Parable of the Sower* succeeds in contesting the white patriarchal authority of these discourses. In so doing, she creates a narrative of American national identity that is informed by difference and resistance and which creatively transforms the black Western literary form.

Conclusion

Seed to tree,
Tree to forest;
Rain to river,
River to sea; (*Parable* 315)

"[S]he told them of a place where white sidewalks met the sea and fish the color of plums swam alongside children" (*Paradise* 263)

The focus of this study has been to critically interrogate the extent to which a textual engagement with the historic and contemporary formulations of Frontier and the conventions and structure of the Western form complicate and problematise literary representations of black Western subjectivities. Pivotal to my argument has been to show how the critical interaction between the contesting frontiers of the Western, the appropriation of hegemonic white Western discourses, and the appropriation of black cultural resources for identity formation intersect to inform racial projects that range from conservative to radical interpretations of black identity and which, I contend, importantly, reposition these African American Western texts as agents of evolution of the black Western. Furthermore, my argument illustrates that the mythic narratives of the West and its Frontier still hold a popular cultural value[105] for my writers whose communities have historically been denied access to the originary narrative of American selfhood and who in the 1990s witnessed the legacy of a narrative of white nation-building and supremacy in the acquittal of four white policemen for severely beating up a black motorist.

The use of 'ends of centuries' as a structural device to frame and inform the organisation of my study and the choice of texts creates a discursive space where attention is drawn to the significance of the early texts as 'hypotexts' in the evolution of

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[105] Challenges to the cultural value of the Frontier continue today (particularly in cinematic productions); for example Scott Frank's 2017 miniseries *Godless* which features an all-female Western town; Jeymes Samuel's 2021 black Western *The Harder They Fall* which is disappointingly ahistorical; and Jane Campion's excellent 2021 *The Power of the Dog* (based on Thomas savage's 1967 novel by the same name) which features a gay protagonist.

the black Western form. Chapter Two serves as a literary, cultural, and thematic bridge to the contemporary texts and informs the internal signifyin(g) threads that weave through my study, such as black Western masculinity, black vernacular mythology, and the trickster figure. To varying degrees, the three early texts achieve a textual blackness through the intertextual and rhetorical strategies of Signifyin(g). However, these subversive textual elements can only be expressed within the latent sub-texts of the narratives. Overall, any challenges to the racial construct of the Western heroic figure is countered by the narratives' complicity with white patriarchal, ethnocentric, masculinist discourses and values that prevent the narratives from fully realising radical subjectivities for their protagonists. For the texts to be commercially viable, blackness is either obscured (Beckwourth), recedes to the background (Love), or is presented as an acceptable blackness (Micheaux). Constrained by the racial, social, and commercial climate in which they are written, the three early Western narratives comply with a narrative of Manifest Destiny and nation-building. Together, they express a textual desire to inscribe their protagonists into the narrative of American selfhood and create new scripts for black Western masculinities that resist and challenge the contemporaneous stereotypes of black men.

In moving from a historical chronology in Chapter Two to a discursive chronology for the analysis of the contemporary texts, I argued that the ability to construct autonomous, self-determining and oppositional black Western identities is determined by the extent to which the texts can resist the gravitational pull of the Western form and contest its frontiers. My study has demonstrated that *The Devil's Hatband* is the closest of the contemporary novels to a textual adherence to the conventions of form in the construction of the black bounty-hunter and bail-bondsman CJ and the employment of Frontier themes. Both *The Devil's Hatband* and *Devil in a Blue Dress* engage with black and white literary and cultural influences to contest the racial, cultural and literary frontiers of the form and create discursive "'spaces of radical openness" where opportunities for "oppositional and liberatory" identities can be formed

(hooks, "Choosing" 149; "Postmodern" 29). As a consequence, the texts participate in the evolution of the black Western. However, both narratives fall short in exploiting the potential for identity construction that arises from creating 'spaces of radical openness'. In fact, Greer's and Mosley's novels show that Signifyin(g) alone is not enough to create Western radical subjectivities. There also needs to a decentring of white and black patriarchal hegemonic belief systems.

Of the four contemporary texts, my study has shown that the evolution of the black Western literary form takes significant steps forward in the texts of Morrison and Butler. *Paradise* and *Parable* are able to successfully create "spaces of radical openness" (hooks, "Choosing" 149) and consequently realise radical black western subjectivities for their female characters. Both narratives merge the physical, historical, cultural, racial, and gendered profound edges that their characters reside in and re-articulate these marginal spaces as sites for the expression of oppositional, self-determining, and liberatory identities which undermine the masculinised heteronormative discourses of Western identity. Morrison's and Butler's novels demonstrate the necessity of clearing rhetorical/narrative space[106] that allows for the expression of different ways of being and living informed by non-white values, traditions, and vernacular mythologies. It is this re-imagining of the way one lives and the values one holds that the texts of Greer and Mosley are unable to fully achieve because they are not able to completely resist the gravitational pull of the form. Pivotal to my argument has been to show that *Paradise* and *Parable* creatively transform and evolve the black literary Western. In doing so, the narratives create new mythic stories that transform our reading of the historical fables of the West.

The geography of the West has been an important feature in the texts under consideration. And while my argument has proposed that the novels of Greer and Butler engage with an environmental Western discourse, it has been beyond the scope

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[106] See Gates discussion on how intertextuality can clear a rhetorical space for contesting narratives (*Signifying* 134)

of this study to fully explore an ecocritical reading of the texts. Nevertheless, my discussion points to a potential further line of enquiry that explores the critical intersection between environment, race, and literary form. I have shown that a feature of the texts is the way in which they engage with, challenge or subvert Turner's Frontier dichotomy of civilisation versus savagery in a society where, as Michael K. Johnson has argued, African Americans have been historically racialised as primitive beings (*Black* 240). A productive analysis would entail an exploration of how the narratives respond to the environmental othering that is an implicit discursive strand of the racial project of the Frontier Myth. The texts' attempts to construct positive self-transformative relationships between identity formation and the Western landscape raises questions about how the authors navigate and interrogate a racialised discourse that associated African Americans with the natural and, therefore, non-human world. And the extent to which the double-voiced discourses of the texts enable a successful challenge to the white narrative of environmental exclusion. My argument has already intimated that the writers approach the problem differently. For example, the early Western texts and those of Greer and Mosley appear to appropriate and comply with the mythic notion of the will of man over the landscape and the subsequent hierarchy of man over nature. Nonetheless, Beckwourth's construction of his protagonist as a "curious looking object" (379) and Greer's erasure of a female presence from the landscape problematise readings of a black agency within the natural world.

Sarah Jaquette Ray has defined non-white Western women as "the ecological other" (2). Historically and culturally therefore, black Western women have been marginalised threefold – by the environmental, racial and gendered discourses of the Frontier Myth and literary form. A feminist eco-critical reading of Morrison's and Butler's challenge to the profound edge of black Western women's environmental positioning would draw on the authors' appropriation of black cultural resources as a critical subversive narrative strategy. For example, Morrison employs black vernacular mythology to interrogate conventional notions of the Western landscape and to

demonstrate that the geographic borders of the West co-exist with less tangible environmental Western spaces. *Paradise* locates the Convent and its female inhabitants in the wilderness of Oklahoma to underline the women's environmental othering. Simultaneously, this positioning is resisted through a black sub-text that locates the women, and especially Consolata, within a narrative of potential environmental recovery and regeneration. In contrast, Butler mixes the Western form with Afrofuturism to provide a critical creative space in which the *Parable* series contest the geographic frontiers of the West as we witness Lauren send her "Earthseed family" into space (*Talents* 405). Lauren's status as a propagator of life and ecological agent is however not without its critical tensions. I suggest that Lauren's belief that "'Space could be our future,' . . . space exploration and colonisation" problematically utilises the language of imperialism and challenges the textual positioning of Lauren as an ecological agent for good. (*Parable* 20). Additionally, I suggest that a further line of enquiry results from a reading of Butler's novel that would involve exploring the intertextualities of the narrative with the earlier black female Western narrative of Lillian Jones Horace. Her 1916 *Five Generations Hence*, according to Karen Kossie-Chernyshev, is "the earliest novel on record by a black woman from Texas and the earliest utopian novel by a black woman before 1950" (1).

It therefore seems fitting to end my study on the complexities of literary expressions of Western blackness with the powerful Signifyin(g) image of black female agency on the urban streets of Oakland, California – a black Western space where historical and contemporary temporal moments of black resistance overlap. In June 2020, African American Brianna Noble rode her horse "Dapper Dan" calmly amidst the Black Lives Matter protest over the murder of George Floyd. Noble's subversive act performed a double-voiced Signifyin(g). Not only did the image of a black woman on a horse signify on the LAPD Mounted Platoon as a symbol of historic and contemporary hegemonic white masculinised discourses of oppression, but she also signified on the conventional image of the white male cowboy. Whether this was intentional or not,

Noble's critical race consciousness is evident in the naming of her ranch, 'Mulatto Meadows', and illustrates the necessity one hundred and twenty-eight years after Turner's paper to continue to decolonise white racial attitudes. Of the word 'Mulatto', she says: "We can take a word that has a derogatory history and turn it into something we instead associate with beauty".[107] Noble's renaming is a conscious position of critical resistance which hooks would applaud in "its call to all of us to link personal passion with political quest" (Preface xiii).

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[107] Home | Mulatto Meadows. Accessed 28 July 2021.

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